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# Term Half Over:

## An Interview of Eugene V. Debs at Woodstock Jail, Aug. 22, 1895

Published as "Labor Leaders Set Free: Imprisoned ARU Directors Released at Woodstock," in *Chicago Chronicle*, Aug. 23, 1895. Copy preserved in Papers of Eugene V. Debs microfilm edition, reel 6, frame 0988.

Woodstock, Ill., Aug. 22 [1895].— At 6 o'clock this morning Sheriff [George] Eckert stepped to the barred door which for three months has stood between the President and Directors of the American Railway Union and liberty. The officer turned the big bolt and throwing open the heavy door said, "Boys, time is up."

A happy smile was on the face of the sheriff of McHenry County as he said these words and it was reflected on the features of the six men who have spent so many weary hours in jail.

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In the big cell room Eugene V. Debs was alone. Slowly he paced the floor, glancing now and then at the silent reminders of his faithful "boys," who had just gone, the chairs where each one sat in his favorite place, the books they studied during the long evenings, and the great pile of correspondence, which shows that Eugene V. Debs and his case are still fresh in the minds of people in every section of the country.

### **Leader Left Alone.**

Three months of confinement are before him. Three months of gazing at cell bars and heavy bolts, meant to confine criminals. The time ahead of him probably seems doubly hard, now that the boys who had cheered him on and helped to pass the days have gone forth to work for the cause. But the famous labor leader did not allow his

reflections on the future to depress his spirits. He grew even cheerful as the hours wore on and after sitting very quietly for some time he said:

I don't think I will be lonesome, although of course I will miss the boys at first. But I have work to do, lots of it, and I know they will be doing their work and that will help me to stand it. Then, you know, my wife is here and will be back and forth most of the time.

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We have a great work before us and we are going at it at once. For myself, it will take about two weeks for me to catch up on my correspondence. I get letters, hundreds of them, from all kinds of people, and they tend to show that there is something in the American which makes him side with the underdog when it has been abused too much. I see that in my own little case. There is a trend of popular feeling in our favor right along....

What we intend to do is to build up the American Railway Union and make it the strongest organization in the country. There are 880,000 railroad men in the country, and I know that seven-eighths of them are with us. But they do not speak their minds, attend meetings, or join the union for fear of the blacklist. the General Managers' Association has declared that no man who took part in the strike or who joins our union can work in this country and it passes the blacklist around, although there are a few laws against conspiracy, which, it seems, are intended only for labor unions, not managers' unions.

We are going to get around the blacklist simply by having a secret union. There will be no public meetings. No one will know who joins it and the man who denounces it to the company's agents may be a director. By Jan. 1 [1896] we will have agencies in all the principal cities of the union. [William] Burns will work in Chicago. [Roy] Goodwin is going to Winona and from there he will work out to the West. [Sylvester] Keliher will establish headquarters in Minneapolis, which is his home. [L.W.] Rogers is going to Pueblo, Colorado, [James] Hogan to Ogden, Utah, and [George] Elliott will work in the East. It is a gigantic task, but with the help of our friends we will succeed. Each district supervisor will have a lot of assistants, who will go to the houses of the men who desire to join and there enlist them in the union. It is the only way to overcome the system of espionage under which we constantly work.

I will doubtless be released from this place on Nov. 20, as that will make 180 days of service. As soon as I get out I will go to Terre Haute, and I expect it will take me a month or more to

straighten up affairs in the business office of the union. About Jan. 1 I will start on a tour of the country, speaking and organizing unions. I would not attempt a consolidation, merely a unification, a harmonizing. In all matters of general concern the labor unions of the country should be united — the general purpose of all is the same. It should be easy to make arrangements for all to work in conjunction, and I thin that the labor leaders of the country will get together and formulate a plan of [attack?].

### **Change in Public Mind.**

It is marvelous how public sentiment is changing. Had we done in 1886 what we did last year we would have been executed. But the execution of the anarchists, whom we call anarchists for want of a better name, although they are not anarchists, taught the people a lesson. To the hanging of those men we owe our lives and people are just beginning to see what a monstrous act that hanging was. Year from now, a hundred, perhaps, there will be more monuments to those men who were hanged because they raised their voices in indignation against police invasion of the people's rights to assemble peaceably in mass meeting. Those things grown upon the people slowly. John Brown was hanged in 1859, but now his name is honored and revered and a hundred years from now it may be placed beside that of Lincoln, as the original emancipator of the negro.

Governor [John] Altgeld, I think, is the greatest governor in the United States, although I have never seen the gentleman. His act in pardoning [Michael] Schwab, [Samuel] Fielden, and [Oscar] Neebe showed him to be a brave man. He has the ability of a statesman and the courage of a true man. His friends advised him that he was courting political death, but he was brave enough to do it for right's sake.

I do not regret the time I have spent in jail, nor do any of the boys. It has been well and profitably employed and I do not look forward to three months more of imprisonment with any misgivings. I shall keep to the old schedule of working 16 hours a day and I have enough mater promised to papers and magazines to keep me busy for a long while. Besides, my wife will be here quite often, and Sheriff Eckert makes it as pleasant as possible.

### **Pleads for Prisoners.**

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There is one thing that should be changed — that is the way they hold court in these country districts. Twice a year court con-

venes to try any persons who may be in jail or out on bail. Now, suppose a poor fellow is arrested on complaint of someone for stealing an old coat or a loaf of bread. He is bound over to the criminal court and if he has no friends and cannot give bonds he must go to jail. Now, if the court has just adjourned, if it is the day after court, that man, whom the law presumes to be innocent until a case is proved, must stay in jail here six months awaiting trial. Think of it! My God! It is awful. That is a sentence in itself, and, if after being locked up on prison fare for six months he is not guilty or if no one appears to prosecute, what redress has he? None. Deprived of his liberty on a mere suspicion, locked up six months or for three or four months, because he is poor and has no friend to sign a bond! And this is the land of liberty and freedom! In Japan, where we send missionaries, the courts sit all the time. This system is wrong, hideously wrong There should be a plan of taking the prisoners to where the court is sitting or some other way besides locking them up for months without a trial. In Chicago, of course, the volume of business causes delay, but here there is no court, no judge, no hope for months.

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*Edited by Tim Davenport*

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First Edition.