

I Can Imagine Nothing To Change My Mind:
Letter to Victor L. Berger
(April 13, 1905)

Terre Haute, Ind., April 13th, 1905

My dear Victor:—

Your letter to Theodore was duly received by him and would have been acknowledged but for the fact that he expected my return and waited therefore to put it in my hands so that I could answer for myself. Theo wishes me to say for him that he appreciates very much the kind personal words your letter contains and that these are as warmly mutual as they always were in the old days.

As to arranging for a personal meeting, I would be glad to see you as I always have been, and always expect to be, but I can see little prospect during the next few weeks unless you can travel a long distance to strike me at some point in my route.¹ I am just leaving for Illinois to fill some appointments. My dates are somewhat uncertain so I cannot advise you definitely, but barring Peoria I have no engagement in the northern part of the state.² It is possible that I may get into Chicago the latter part of this month or the early part of next and in either case I will be glad to let you know so that we can have an hour together and a general talk over the situation. Of course, I shall be glad to have your views in regard to the new union, but I can imagine nothing you or anyone else could say to me that would change my mind that has been made up after long and careful deliberation.

You have already expressed yourself pretty freely in regard to the new union, perhaps too much for your good and the good of the party. I have had little to say aside from what has been necessary to state my position in response to inquiries, but I am as sure of my ground as you are of yours and I can conceive of no more dangerous position for a representative of our party than to be in the cesspools of pure and simple unionism with Belmont and his Christless gang in complete control. Don't tell me about rescuing the AF of L from the gang of pirate capitalists that are now running it. They and their lieutenants who are the nominal leaders simply make laughing stock of you. You were in a pitiable role at San Francisco,

you and your comrades, and it made my blood boil to see a man of your genius the sport and prey of a lot of five cent fakirs. Gompers has a better grip on the AF of L because of your opposition than if you had let him alone. He is strong in precisely the same way and for precisely the same reason that P. M. Arthur was strong with the engineers. I saw twenty years of efforts to dislodge the latter turn to nothing while at the last the opposition gave up and Arthur was triumphant by acclamation to the very last hour of his life.

If the new movement starts right, that is to say, with the right people and on the right basis, I shall be with it and shall put all of my strength into it, totally regardless of consequences. I shall be guided solely by what I believe will be best for the labor movement in general.

I have some letters saying that you had declared I would have nothing to do with it; that you would see that I kept out of it. I cannot believe that you have said anything of the sort for if you have it would imply that I had no will of my own and if that happens to be your estimate of me all I have to say is that you have still to know me. I have great respect for your judgment and there is no comrade to whose counsel I would rather listen, but when it comes to acting I act for myself.

Now, then, permit me to advise you a little along the same line that you advise me. Let the new movement alone until you know more about it than you do now. You have issued your "warning" and the *Herald* has done all that in its power lies to make it a stillborn affair, so you can afford to remain silent and let things take their course. you may commit yourself so far as to be embarrassing to you in the future. You little dream, seemingly, of the tremendous opposition to Gompers and Civic Federation rule. Thousands who are on the inside realize the hopelessness of escape from the constrictor grasp of the Belmont gang except through revolt, and I want to say to you that the revolt is brewing and that neither you nor any power can stay it and if the movement at Chicago starts right — and everything depends on that — it will tramp across the country with seven league boots and the best blood in the trade union movement will rush to its standard. The incident at New York, the subway strike, indicated clearly how fiercely the passion of revolt is already surging in the veins of the old movement. The rank and file are tired of their old leaders, have lost confidence in them, and not without good reason. These men ought to have had more encouragement from the socialist press than they received, our

editors evidently fearing that they might give offense to their eminent highnesses, the pure and simple leaders and their pure and simple unions.

It would be a curious thing to see you and Gompers fighting side by side — perhaps as curious to see DeLeon and myself fighting together — but in that sort of an alignment you will have to find yourself also fighting side by side with Belmont and Carnegie, the pirates, and Farley, the strike-breaker. That is the alignment to which your attitude will inevitably lead if you stick to it. I will find myself in no such dilemma. I may find myself pitted against some well-loved comrades, but whatever my position may impose upon me there will be no capitalist robbers and no labor fakirs and no professional strikebreakers fighting to sustain my side.

I will bear you in mind and the very first chance I have to get near enough for a personal interview I will let you know.³ I am getting scores of letters from men who want to see me personally on the same matter, some to urge me to do one thing, and some another, but I will see but a few of them. You are one to whom, for reasons not necessary to state, I shall always owe the deference of a respectful hearing, and I shall never forget the obligation.

Theodore joins me as do our families in warmest regards and most affectionate greetings and good wishes to you and Mrs. Berger and the little folks.⁴ Remember us also most kindly to Miss Thomas⁵ and comrades at the office.

Yours always,

E. V. Debs.

Typed letter-signed in *Victor L. Berger Papers, 1862-1980*, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, microfilm edition, reel 14, frames 34-35. Not published in Constantine (ed.), *Letters of Eugene V. Debs: Volume 1, 1874-1912*.

¹ Despite this intimation, Debs does not seem to have been booked on a lengthy tour to distant places at this juncture.

² While this statement may well be entirely accurate, no details of such speaking engagements have surfaced as of this writing. It is known that Debs filled various Illinois dates during the second half of May.

³ Debs seems to have speedily booked a one-off appearance at the Belle City Opera House in Racine, Wisconsin for Saturday, April 29, where he spoke to a crowd of about 600 on "Socialism and Economic Conditions of the Workingman." Afterwards he met with Victor

Berger and his right hand man, *Social Democratic Herald* editor Fred Heath, at the Hotel Racine, where they discussed the trade union issue that divided them. Debs does not seem to have departed on an extended lecture tour again until the second week of May.

⁴ Victor and Meta Berger had two daughters — Doris (b. 1898) and Elsa (b. 1900).

⁵ Elizabeth H. Thomas managed the office of the *Social Democratic Herald* and was the longtime state secretary of the Social Democratic Party of Wisconsin.