

On the Death of Daniel DeLeon (July 11, 1914)

The death of Daniel DeLeon, editor of the New York *People* and leader of the Socialist Labor Party, marks the passing of a striking figure and an extraordinary character from the stage of revolutionary activity.¹ For a full quarter of a century, DeLeon has been a leader of Socialism in the United States, head and front of the Socialist Labor Party, making a name for himself that is known throughout the world. Gifted with a mind of unusual depth and brilliancy and educated in the leading colleges both here and abroad, he was fitted as perhaps no other American socialist for great work in the educational propaganda of the socialist movement.

Daniel DeLeon was a true disciple of Marx and Engels, and one of their ablest and most brilliant interpreters. His editorials in *The People* covered the whole range of economics, sociology, politics, history, and philosophy, and his versatile genius appears at its best in these columns.

He was an uncompromising champion of economic and political organization, believing that only through their economic and political solidarity could the workers emancipate themselves from wage-slavery. He fought the craft unions in and out of season, exposing without mercy their weakness and impotency, and he stood with equal insistence for revolutionary industrial organization. He was bold and pointed in his criticism, persistent in arguing his convictions, and tireless in fighting for what he believed to be right.

The speeches and writings of DeLeon evince keen insight and rare powers of analysis, clear thinking, and lucid expression. He had, in a remarkable degree, the faculty of making the most involved and abstruse propositions clear and understandable to his readers. As an editorial writer of clarity, brilliancy, and force he had no equal on the American socialist press and no superior anywhere. His versatility, range of mind, and felicity of treatment were, indeed, unsurpassed, and his death leaves a vacancy that never can be filled.

There is not a doubt that Daniel DeLeon, with all his wealth of intellectual endowment and his classical education and high culture could and would have ranked high in any profession he might have chosen, but when the light of socialism came into his life, it determined his destiny, and he plunged into the propaganda with a vigor and zeal which never abated, until his vital powers were exhausted and death put an end to his

activities. When the prodigious amount of work he did is taken into account, such as translating the classics of socialism and other standard works,² addressing propaganda meetings, holding debates, and making speaking tours, in addition to his editorial work on the *Daily* and *Weekly People*, it is not strange that he broke down prematurely and that, sad to tell, he literally worked himself to death.³

Whatever fault may be found with DeLeon, his personality, his methods, or his tactics, it cannot be gainsaid that his zeal, his energy, his very heart and soul were all with the working class, and that with a singleness of purpose as exalted as it was inspiring, he consecrated himself to their emancipation. He had his faults, as all men have but these will fade away in the light of his monumental services to the cause. He fought the good fight without flinching to the end, and left the world a heritage of light and hope and inspiration that will keep his name bright and his fame secure through the coming ages.

With deep regret and with sincere appreciation of his masterly services and his loyal devotion to the cause, we note the passing of our valiant comrade from the field of conflict to the realm of rest, and to his stricken widow and family we tender our heartfelt sympathy in their great bereavement.

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¹ According to a cover letter, published at the same time by *The People*, Debs originally wrote this brief tribute for the *National Rip-Saw*, a monthly, but "when the paper was made up it was inadvertently left out." It was then passed on to *The People*, official organ of the SLP, for more timely publication.

² Daniel DeLeon was a prolific newspaper editorialist but was far more active as a translator than a writer of long-form prose, translating more than 20 volumes by Eugène Sue from the French as well as works by Marx and Kautsky from the German.

³ There is a surprising lack of specificity in the literature as to the cause of Daniel DeLeon's death at the age of 61 on May 11, 1914. One short biography blandly indicates that his "weak heart stopped beating" (See: Stephen Coleman, *Daniel DeLeon*. Manchester University Press, 1990, p. 148), while two longer works (Carl Reeve, *The Life and Times of Daniel DeLeon* [1972]; L. Glen Seretan, *Daniel DeLeon: The Odyssey of an American Marxist* [1979]) avoid the question entirely. DeLeon's contemporary Rudolph Katz mentions in passing in a biographical portrait published in 1919 that DeLeon "was taken seriously ill" in his last days and was confined at Mt. Sinai Hospital shortly before his death. (See: Rudolph Katz, "With DeLeon Since '89" in *Daniel DeLeon: The Man and His Work: A Symposium*. New York: National Executive Committee, Socialist Labor Party, 1919, p. 163.) According to the SLP in an official 1990 biography, DeLeon suffered from subacute bacterial endocarditis, a bacterial infection of the heart muscle, which ultimately proved terminal in this era before penicillin. (See: *The People*, Dec. 1, 1990.)