

## EUGENE V. DEBS: INDUSTRIAL UNIONIST

Eugene V. Debs (1855-1926), born in Indiana to immigrant parents, was a prominent labor union organizer and socialist politician. He is best known for his leadership role in the Pullman Strike, his presidential campaigns in the early 1900s, and his opposition to World War I.

### THE PULLMAN STRIKE

As the economic crisis brought on by the **Panic of 1893** drove several railroads to bankruptcy, the Pullman Rail Car Company cut its workers' wages due to declining sales. However, Pullman did not reduce the rents that workers paid to live in their houses in the company town or lower prices at the company store. The result was a cost-of-living crisis for the workers, who went on strike to demand reduced rents and a restoration of their wages. Eugene V. Debs, as a leader of the American Railway Union, assumed leadership of the strike.



*A political cartoon shows Pullman workers trapped between low wages and high rent (1894)*

Tens of thousands of railroad workers joined the strike, refusing to handle Pullman cars or hitch other cars to them. Since the striking workers refused to handle mail cars, the federal government intervened against the strikers for stopping the delivery of the mail. President Grover Cleveland sent federal troops to break the strike. More than 30 people were killed in violent confrontations between strikers and troops. The government got a court order against Debs and other leaders. After Debs refused to end the strike, he was sentenced to prison.

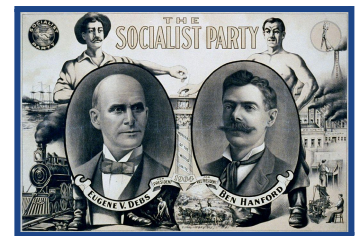
During his six-month sentence, Debs began reading books by Karl Marx and other socialist writers. After William Jennings Bryan, the champion of populism, lost the 1896 election, Debs gave up on the two-party system and proclaimed himself a socialist.

### INDUSTRIAL UNIONISM

Debs was an advocate of **industrial unionism**, which advocated that all laborers in an industry (e.g., railroads), regardless of skill level. This contrasted with **craft unionism**, in which laborers were organized by skill level (which gave greater benefit to skilled laborers). During the Pullman Strike, engineers and conductors, who belonged to craft unions, chose to stay on the job and not join the strikers. Debs tried unsuccessfully to get the all-white American Railway Union to welcome Black porters into their ranks.

### PERENNIAL PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE

In 1901, Debs founded the Socialist Party of America. He became the party's perennial presidential candidate in the early 1900s, receiving the party's nomination in 1904, 1908, 1912, and 1920. Debs saw his greatest electoral success in the tumultuous 1912 election, in which he won six percent of the popular vote. The 1912 Socialist Party Platform called for many radical reforms, including nationalization (government ownership) of the railroads, abolishing the United States Senate, and ending judicial review.



*Debs and his running mate on a campaign poster (1904)*

### ANTIWAR ACTIVISM

As a socialist, Debs opposed the United States' entry into World War I, believing that the war served the interests of capitalism and divided the working classes of warring nations. When he went so far as to encourage young men to resist the draft, he was arrested for violating the **Sedition Act of 1918**, which made it a crime to undermine military recruitment. He was sentenced to ten years in federal prison. His prison sentence did not stop him from running for president in 1920 (and receiving nearly a million votes). On Christmas Day, 1921, President Warren G. Harding commuted Debs' sentence and released him from prison.