The year 1912 marked a turning point in American history. Only a year earlier, a catastrophic fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company in New York City had caused the deaths of 146 men and women locked in to keep out union organizers. The tragedy galvanized public opinion against unsafe working conditions as little else in the thirty-year struggle for labor reform had done. The Progressive Era and its accompanying spirit of reform was sweeping the country, touching most Americans in some way. Progressives set out to humanize living and working conditions, which had grown increasingly harsh over a half-century of industrialization and urbanization.

There was a fundamental optimism about the possibilities of sweeping reform in the air: progressives believed that if they learned about a problem, informed the public about it, and brought pressure on government, they could find and enforce a solution. Believing that the world could be made better for most people, the progressives, appealing to the great mass of farmers, workers, and the growing middle class, swept everything before them.

By 1912, a Progressive tide overwhelmed the Democratic National Convention: after forty-six ballots, reform Governor Woodrow Wilson of New Jersey was nominated over machine politician Champ Clark. The Republican Party was split in a desperate fight between incumbent President William Howard Taft and former President Theodore Roosevelt, who formed a third party, the Progressives, or Bull Moose Party. The Socialists would draw a million voters away from traditional parties as labor leader Eugene V. Debs won the support of factory workers, disillusioned Populists, socialist intellectuals, tenant farmers, lumberjacks, and coal miners. With Socialist mayors in thirty-three cities, the Socialist Party had increased its votes tenfold in twelve years. Not content with the Victorian notion of human progress to bring about reform, the Socialists, sparked by their firebrand orator, Eugene V. Debs, were calling for radical changes that would redistribute wealth among the workers.
EUGENE VICTOR DEBS, the son of Alsatian immigrants who came to America immediately after the suppression of the Socialist revolts all over Europe in 1848, was born in Terre Haute, Indiana, on November 5, 1855. His parents, the French-born Jean Daniel and Marguerite Marie Debs, named their first son after two Romantic Era literary figures, Eugène Sue and Victor Hugo. And all through his childhood, young Debs loved to listen as his father read aloud to him from the works of Romantic writers such as Goethe and Victor Hugo, with their emphasis on individual, objective experience as the way to truth.

As a leader of Socialism who had already run for the Presidency at the beginning of the twentieth century and was to make it the strongest third party up to that time, Debs was to acknowledge his debt especially to Hugo, whose immortal Les Misérables and the Hunchback of Notre Dame had stressed the struggle of the oppressed against tyranny and injustice. “Victor Hugo prophesied that the present century (the twentieth) would abolish poverty,” Debs wrote in 1903. “He foresaw the day when all the earth would be fair and beautiful and all mortals brethren.” It was Debs’ assuming the mantle of the dead Romantic literary hero that so vexed other reformers as, with fiery words and jabbing finger, he crisscrossed the United States for thirty-five years, stirring the social conscience of the Industrial Age to action.

Born to a life in his father’s grocery business in Terre Haute, Debs never knew the poverty he preached against. His parents loved learning, and Eugene was known even as a child for his generosity and his readiness to help others. While he was well-liked, he was not interested in school, much preferring his father’s readings of Hugo, Goethe, Racine, and Corneille, writers who strongly influenced not only his social conscience but helped him develop his great oratorical skills and gave him a larder full of literary references for his speeches and writings.

Bored by the rote teaching of the “Three Rs” in school, he also found working after school in his father’s store stultifying. Like many boys his age, he was attracted to the romance of the railroads. At age fourteen, he left school and made his bookish parents unhappy by taking his first (and thoroughly unromantic) job on the Vandalia Railroad. It was his job to clean the grease from the trucks under passenger cars for fifty cents a day. Within the year, the hard-working, cheerful Debs was promoted to painter and then, in 1873, at only seventeen, he became a fireman, riding the rails and shovelling coal into the locomotive boiler all day. When he experienced his first and only layoff, the nightmare of the workingman, that year in the Panic of 1873, he left home and went to St. Louis, Missouri, where he found a job as a fireman. It was a dangerous job and, when a friend died under a locomotive’s wheels, Debs finally listened to his mother’s pleading and went home to Terre Haute, in 1874. He had seen not only hard work but, especially in St. Louis, poverty and suffering in urban squalor for the first time.

Reluctantly returning to the grocery business, Debs, now nineteen, worked as a billing clerk for the largest wholesale house in the Midwest. He hated the job and kept up his friendships with railroad workers. When the head of the national Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen came on a union-organizing trip to Indiana, Debs joined the Brotherhood and was elected secretary of the newly-formed Terre Haute lodge, at age twenty beginning his half-century association with the labor movement. He also kept up his lifelong habit of reading late in the night. He
founded a weekly debating society, the Occidental Literary Club, which sponsored the visits of famous guest lecturers who were to have an impact on his thinking, including the poet James Whitcomb Riley, who became his friend, and the agnostic orator Robert G. Ingersoll.

Debs’ popularity in Terre Haute led in 1879 at age twenty-four to his first brush with politics when he ran for and won the post of city clerk on the Democratic ticket. Reelected in 1881, he campaigned successfully in 1885 for the Indiana state legislature on a platform promising new laws to protect workers, but when he sponsored a bill requiring railroads to compensate workers for on-the-job injuries, he failed. So discouraging was his brief experience in Indiana’s thoroughly pro-business legislature that Debs declined to seek a second term.

Burning midnight oil, he had kept his political job while rising in union ranks, becoming assistant editor of the *Locomotive Firemen’s Magazine* in 1878, and editor two years later even as he became secretary-treasurer of the national union. He attained high union office in 1880 just as most of the Brotherhood’s delegates to the national convention were about to give up. Promising to expunge the union’s debt, he urged the union to give him one more year to reenliven the Brotherhood. Debs and his fellow officers succeeded, increasing membership, eliminating the debt, and making their magazine nationally read and respected. The tall, good-looking, friendly, twenty-five-year-old unionist was well on his way to the forefront of the labor movement.

At first an opponent of strikes, the idealistic young Debs predicted their number would decline and eschewed violence, in his magazine writings declaring “we do not believe in violence and strikes as means by which wages are to be regulated, but that all difference must be settled by mutual understanding arrived at by calm reasoning.” He also opposed the use of the boycott, “a terrible weapon to be used only when a terrible wrong exists.” He believed workers would prevail “by logic and law and by the intelligent use of the ballot.” After the failure of the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy strike of 1888 in which his union participated, he tempered his pacifism, now declaring the strike “the weapon of the oppressed.” By the mid-80s, too, he came to espouse unions that included all the various trades within one industry as opposed to the craft unions of the time. Craft unions were made up, like medieval guilds, only of the master craftsmen in one plant and excluded all less-skilled workers and other work sites within the trade, the prevailing style of union at the time. By 1886, he was calling editorially for “unity of action,” for the “engineer and fireman [to] stand together side by side.”

The fear of many union members at the time was that they would be “amalgamated,” swallowed up by such nationwide giants as the Knights of Labor. But that did not bar federations of unions. “If labor is ever to reach the goal of equality with capital in shaping policies,” he editorialized in 1887, “it will have to federate.” After the collapse of the Chicago and Burlington strike, Debs saw the need for labor federations as urgent: “If corporations and the press confederate to overwhelm workingmen when they demand redress of grievances, they too must federate.” He still believed the strikes could be avoided: “Instead of a strike there would be arbitration.” In June 1888, he called on all labor organizations in the United States to form a federation: “They would exert a moral power which would bear down all
opposition." By June 1893, his efforts had led to the formation of the American Railway Union, of which he was elected president at age thirty-eight. The union had its first victory in late 1893 over the Great Northern Railroad. But within a few months this early success led to utter failure in the great Pullman strike of 1894.

Workers of the Pullman Palace Car Company, because it operated a few miles of track near Chicago to switch its equipment, were eligible to join the new union. After the Panic of 1893, Pullman tried to cut workers' wages, which were already so low workers could hardly pay rent in company-owned housing and food in company stores. When Pullman workers struck, Debs ordered a sympathy ARU strike: 100,000 railroad workers nationwide refused to handle Pullman cars. A general railroad strike resulted. Declaring that the strikers were interfering with the United States mails, which traveled by rail, President Grover Cleveland sent in Federal troops. When they arrived in the Chicago area, violence erupted and much railroad property was destroyed over several days' time. Crowds of rioters gathered and fought with soldiers: several rioters were shot and many injured as hundreds of boxcars burned and railway switches were smashed.

After Debs ignored a Federal court injunction to end the boycott of mail-bearing trains, he and other ARU officers were arrested and charged with conspiracy to obstruct a mail train and contempt of a Federal court order. He was convicted of the contempt charge and jailed for six months in Woodstock, Illinois, where he was held in the home of the sheriff. His arrest had ended the Pullman strike and his imprisonment shattered the ARU. His jailing at age forty made him a national
union hero and he received hundreds of letters a day and large crowds of visitors. He also had time to write a weekly article for the Chicago Evening Press and edit the ARU's Railway Times. At this time, too, he announced his conversion to Socialism. It had not been a sudden conversion, however; as early as 1884, he wrote, "To take a man's money out of his pocket is larceny" and "it should be made impossible for one man or a few men to control the property and happiness of thousands of their fellow creatures." The Pullman strike and his arrest obviously precipitated Debs' public announcement. A decade later, in 1903, Debs wrote of his "blissful ignorance" and "utter failure to grasp the significance, scope, and character of the Socialist movement." Released from jail, Debs received a hero's welcome from a crowd of 100,000 in Chicago.

Abandoning the Democratic Party over Grover Cleveland's handling of the Pullman strike, Debs was very nearly nominated as a presidential candidate of the new People's Party in 1896 and gave many speeches supporting it. Enormously popular, he was also coming to be considered a threat at this time by other union leaders, especially Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor. Gompers had taken a strong dislike to Debs. In October 1897, he wrote to another union leader,

There can be no denying that Debs can say most pleasing things to one, and, yet, a short time before and after ascribe to that same person the most malevolent of designs, and even with all that he is not a bad fellow, I firmly believe, but brainy, bright—but the apostle of failure.

As Debs spoke out against craft unions in late 1897, Gompers again criticized him to a Boston labor leader for advocating "so very many different things."

What Gompers could not yet grasp was that Debs was in the process of transforming what was left of the American Railway Union into the Social Democratic Party of America. By the 1900 presidential election, Debs made his first of five unsuccessful bids for the Presidency, polling 96,116 votes. In 1901, he formally founded the Socialist Party of America; in 1904, it nominated Debs for President and he polled 402,321 votes, four times the 1900 total. He campaigned on the Red Special, a rented train that carried him to small towns and large cities nationwide. His "whistlestop" tour turned out enthusiastic crowds to see and hear the now-famous orator as he leaned far out toward the crowd, jabbed with a forefinger and berated the wealthy for the conditions the poor lived in. But his campaign war chest was usually so low his train nearly became stranded on the West Coast.

Between elections, Debs spent much of his time now in Girard, Kansas, waiting and editing the Socialist weekly, Appeal to Reason. Running again in 1908, he disappointed Socialists by receiving only 420,793 votes, half what they hoped for. By 1912, the party was split and its right wing tried to block his fourth bid, but he prevailed and conducted a vigorous campaign. His fiery reform-minded oratory may have turned out more voters for the liberal Democrat Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive "Bull Moose," Theodore Roosevelt, but when the votes were counted, Debs received 897,011, or six percent of the votes cast, the highest proportion of votes ever polled by an American Socialist candidate.

Nearly sixty now, Debs decided to retire and live from the income of his writings. He settled into a large house he had built many years earlier, where his wife
had often lived alone while he barnstormed the country. His retirement lasted two months because he couldn’t stand it. He took a job writing for the Socialist monthly, the National Rip-saw. As the United States invaded Mexico in 1914, Debs condemned President Wilson’s policies; when World War I broke out in Europe that same year, he called for complete neutrality. Debs declined to run for President in 1916 at the peak of the Progressive era reform tide, tacitly supporting Wilson, who promised neutrality. But when Wilson brought the United States into the war, Debs called for a general strike.

The manifesto of a Socialist national convention in April 1917 denounced the war and urged party members to oppose it by any means in their power. This bold attack on U.S. entry was enthusiastically endorsed by Debs, and reflected similar opposition to the war by European socialists. As the government carried out widespread arrests of pacifists and labor union members under a new Sedition Act, Debs, at a Socialist state convention in Canton, Ohio, on June 16, 1918, bitterly attacked the Wilson Administration. Four days later, a Federal grand jury in Cleveland indicted him for violating the Espionage Act. On September 14, 1918, he was convicted, after a trial that lasted only four days, and sentenced to ten years in prison.

Debs did not try hard to win acquittal. There was not much in the Canton speech he hadn’t said over and over for years. He had mentioned the war only once, but to speak out in opposition against the war at all had been declared seditious treason and that was enough to give the government the case it wanted. His position in court was that the speech was not a criminal act, that the Sedition Act itself violated the First Amendment guarantee of freedom of speech. But Debs refused to recant his speech and he called no defense witnesses. He told a packed courtroom:

From the beginning of the war to this day, I have never by word or act been guilty of the charges embraced in this indictment. If I have criticized, if I have condemned, it is because I believe it to be my duty, and that it was my right to do so under the laws of the land. This country has been in a number of wars and every one of them has been condemned by some of the people, among them some of the most eminent men of their time . . . .

The United States Supreme Court rejected Debs’s appeal in March 1919, and he was imprisoned in April at Moundsville, West Virginia, where he was assigned to work in the prison hospital. Transferred to the maximum security Federal penitentiary at Atlanta, Georgia, he worked in a prison clothing warehouse. The Socialists again nominated him to run for President in 1920; it was the first presidential campaign conducted behind bars. But the Socialists had split—the left wing supporting the Russian Revolution. Debs refused to join the Communists. He received 919,000 votes, only 3.5 percent of the total vote, even though women were voting for the first time. Nearly one million Americans had voted for a jailed radical, yet President Wilson refused a recommendation by his own attorney general to commute Deb’s sentence.

When President Warren G. Harding took office, he used his first Christmas pardon to commute Debs’ sentence; he also freed twenty-three other political prisoners, but he did not restore Debs’ citizenship. As he left the Atlanta prison, the other prisoners roared their support of him. In Walls and Bars, he wrote:
My own heart almost ceased to beat. I felt myself overwhelmed with painful and saddening emotions. The impulse again seized me to turn back. I had no right to leave. Those tearful, haunting faces, pressing against the barred windows—how they appealed to me—and accused me!

In his last five years of life, Debs championed prison reform, became national chairman of the Socialists in 1923—the first time he had accepted a paid party post—and became the American champion of the underdog. One of his last lost causes was the Sacco and Vanzetti case: with many others worldwide, he believed Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti had been condemned to death because of their political beliefs. He called for “a thousand protest meetings” and “a million letters of indignant resentment.”

But his years in prison had weakened him and his wife’s health, too. They sailed to Bermuda in March 1926, to recuperate. But his worries about their health only made matters worse and, on October 20, 1926, he suffered a fatal heart attack. The Chicago Evening Post put it for many of the wealthy and the poor who flocked to his funeral: “He loved his fellow man. We did not agree with him, but we could not help admiring him . . . He thought from the heart and his heart was always moved by the suffering and misfortunes of the underdog.”