

AMERICAN SOCIALIST: THE LIFE & TIMES OF EUGENE VICTOR DEBS

A Film by Yale Strom

97 minutes, color, 2017, Documentary



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Synopsis:

Prolific filmmaker and ethnographer Yale Strom (*The Last Klezmer*, *Carpati*, *L'Chayim Comrade Stalin!* and others) has turned his attention to an early American political hero: Eugene Victor Debs. Most people in America don't know that the contemporary political movement to address income inequality began over 100 years ago with Debs.

American Socialist traces the history of American populism with the man who inspired progressive ideas – from FDR's New Deal to Bernie Sanders's presidential campaign. Here is an objective but passionate history of the movement as founded and championed by Debs, a movement that continues to have an impact on our lives today.

Director's Statement by Yale Strom:

100 years ago, populism in America was based on progressive and moral ideals... What happened?

“American Socialist: The Life and Times of Eugene Victor Debs” is the culmination of five years of research and production. This is an objective but passionate history of the American Socialist movement as championed and co-founded by Eugene Victor Debs, a movement that continues to have an impact on our daily lives today.

My inspiration began during the 2008 election cycle, when the word "socialist" became popular among political pundits as an epithet. And those reacting decried the threat of socialism as they enjoyed the benefits of programs like Social Security and Medicare - both ideas that began with Eugene Victor Debs and were adopted by Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The word "Socialist" remains an insult and an epithet in today's political landscape. This film defines the word, the history behind it and its contemporary relevance.

Principal Cast & Crew:



Director/Producer/Co-writer/Composer Yale Strom is an award-winning documentary filmmaker (“The Last Klezmer”, “L’Chayim, Comrade Stalin!”, plus eight more). He is also one of the world’s leading ethnographer-artists of klezmer and Romani music and history. He has been conducting extensive ethnographic research throughout Eastern Europe since 1981. Yale’s fifteen recordings with his ensemble, Yale Strom & Hot Pstromi, run the gamut from traditional klezmer to "new" Jewish jazz. He has also composed for theatre, film, radio, television and symphony orchestras. Strom has also written twelve books. He is currently artist-in-residence in the Jewish Studies Program at San Diego State University. Prior to this Strom taught at New York University, where he created a course in ethnography and art that is taught to this day.

Filmography:

- “American Socialist: The Life & Times of Eugene Victor Debs” (2017)
- “A Letter to Wedgwood” (2012)
- “A Great Day on Eldridge Street” (2009)
- “Romania, Romania” (2008 – *Executive Producer & Music*)
- “A Man From Munkacs: Gypsy Klezmer” (2005)
- “Klezmer on Fish Street” (2004)
- “L’Chayim, Comrade Stalin!” (2003)
- “Carpati: 50 Miles, 50 Years” (1997)
- “The Last Klezmer: Leopold Kozlowski, His Life & Music” (1994)
- “At the Crossroads: Jews in Eastern Europe Today” (1990, *co-director, writer, music*)



Narrator Amy Madigan is an American actress, producer, and singer. She was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress for the 1985 film *Twice in a Lifetime*. Her other film credits include *Love Child* (1982), *Places in the Heart* (1984), *Field of Dreams* (1989), *Uncle Buck* (1989), *The Dark Half* (1993), *Pollock* (2000), and *Gone Baby Gone* (2007). Madigan won the Golden Globe Award for Best Supporting Actress on Television and was nominated for the Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Miniseries or a Movie for her portrayal of Sarah Weddington in the 1989 television film *Roe vs. Wade*.



Executive Producer/co-writer Elizabeth Schwartz is a partner in BlackStream Films. Her film credits include the award-winning documentaries “Klezmer on Fish Street” (Producer), “L’Chayim, Comrade Stalin!” (writer, producer) and the children’s short film, “The Storyteller” (2000 Telly Award-winner). Schwartz co-wrote the audio drama “The Witches of Lublin”, starring Tovah Feldshuh, and the book “A Wandering Feast” with her husband and frequent collaborator, Yale Strom. She contributed a chapter on the technique of klezmer vocals for “Shpil: The Art of Playing Klezmer” (Scarecrow Press). Before becoming a vocalist, she was a Hollywood film executive - companies where she worked include Simpson-Bruckheimer Films, the Colleton Company and Morra-Brezner-Steinberg-Tenenbaum.

Editor & Co-Producer Luke Jungers was born in La Mesa, California, and has been interested in the audio, visual and graphics industry his entire life, and has been working as a cameraman, audio engineer and editor for the past twenty years. He has worked for Disney, Discovery, Twentieth Century Fox and Comic Con International. His most recent work besides “American Socialist” was “A Letter to Wedgewood”, also with Yale Strom. He currently lives in the San Diego area.

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Press Releases

MARCH 10, 2017

From Debs to Berlusconi: the Socially Relevant Film Festival

by LOUIS PROYECT, *COUNTERPUNCH*

Monday, March 13th is opening night for the Socially Relevant Film Festival in New York, an annual event I have been covering since 2014. Featuring both narrative and documentary films, it is the quintessential alternative to the sort of escapism embodied in Hollywood blockbuster films and especially relevant in the current period, when the president of the United States is mounting an assault on the humane and progressive values expressed in the festival's offerings. As you will see, the three films I have had a chance to preview amount to a rebuttal of the racist, xenophobic, corporatist and warmongering Trump administration.

American Socialist: The Life and Times of Eugene Victor Debs

This is a documentary about Eugene V. Debs made by Yale Strom, whose earlier work I first came across fourteen years ago. This was a witty and wise film titled "L'Chayim, Comrade Stalin" that told the story of Birobidzhan, the Jewish autonomist republic of the USSR.

Like that film, "American Socialist" is **a vastly entertaining and politically insightful look** at what might appear to be another somewhat Utopian experiment, namely the overthrow of American capitalism under the leadership of the most charismatic socialist politician in American history whose name and reputation cropped up in the 2016 primaries during his admirer Bernie Sanders's campaign. Indeed, Sanders directed his own much more modest 28-minute Debs documentary in 1979 that was made before he became a Democrat. While nobody could doubt that Sanders was preferable to Clinton or Trump, Debs was very clear about the two capitalist parties in a 1904 campaign speech: "The Republican and Democratic parties,

or, to be more exact, the Republican-Democratic party, represent the capitalist class in the class struggle. They are the political wings of the capitalist system and such differences as arise between them relate to spoils and not to principles.”

Although I am familiar with Debs’s speeches, I knew very little about his life and career, which “American Socialist” provides in detail. We learn that his parents were a major influence on him politically. His father used to read French social protest novels to him as a youngster. The young Debs was especially fond of “Les Miserables”.

As is the case with most people who become socialists, Debs did not spring out of his mother’s womb with fully developed ideas about class conflict. Indeed, as a young man with sympathy for the working class, he still mistakenly took the side of the railroad bosses in the epochal strike of 1877 when he was 22 years old.

Becoming more familiar with the one-sided war on labor as he grew older, especially by the railroad bosses, Debs became a co-founder of the American Railway Union in 1893, one of the first industrial unions in the USA. A year later, the union led a strike against Pullman, the sleeping car manufacturer whose workers lived in Pullman, Illinois—a hyper-exploitative company town founded by someone shameless enough to name it after himself. When George Pullman decided to maintain the price of rent after he had lowered the wages of 4,000 workers, they went out on strike. The strike took on political dimensions as the government falsely claimed that it impeded the delivery of mail and had to be crushed. In a way, it was the airline controllers strike of its day but on a much higher level. 80 workers were killed in confrontations with the police and army.

Using the technique pioneered by Ken Burns but with much more political acumen, Yale Strom draws upon photos of the battling Pullman strikers that really capture the intensity of the struggle. As a popular leader of the strikers, Debs was well on his way to becoming the tribune of the entire working class.

Drawing upon interviews with leftwing labor historians, including Nick Salvatore—the author of a Debs biography, Strom documents the remarkable geographical reach of both the IWW and the Socialist Party that Debs helped build. Debs was a contributor to

“Appeal to Reason”, a socialist magazine that had a circulation of over a half-million at its height. The magazine’s offices were in Girard, Kansas, a place we would now associate with Trump voters. Indeed, the IWW and the SP reached the most oppressed members of the working class (fruit pickers, longshoremen, miners, lumberjacks) in the boondocks. Oklahoma, a state most liberals would consider particularly retrograde, was fertile territory for the radical left at the turn of the 20th century.

Debs had an affinity for ordinary workers, who listened spellbound to his speeches even when they didn’t understand many of the words. We see a photo of Debs leaning forward characteristically from a platform speaking to adoring Polish factory workers with only a smattering of English.

My own grandfather, who I was named after, was chairman of the Socialist Party in my home town as well as head of the Workman’s Circle, a leftist benevolent society for Jewish workers. At the time, socialism was a massively popular movement as indicated by the six percent vote Debs received in the 1912 election.

While the exact social and economic conditions that led to the popularity of the Socialist Party cannot be repeated in an epoch of financialization and runaway shops, the sense of unfairness that led to such a massive Debs vote exists today. If Debs was up on a cloud in socialist heaven, I am sure he would be gladdened by the sight of Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matters, whose activists are seen marching down the streets in Strom’s film. History does not repeat itself but we are certainly moving toward a showdown with the beast that Debs spoke against in a [1900 speech](#) after the fashion of a biblical prophet:

The working class must get rid of the whole brood of masters and exploiters, and put themselves in possession and control of the means of production, that they may have steady employment without consulting a capitalist employer, large or small, and that they may get the wealth their labor produces, all of it, and enjoy with their families the fruits of their industry in comfortable and happy homes, abundant and wholesome food, proper clothing and all other things

necessary to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." It is therefore a question not of "reform," the mask of fraud, but of revolution. The capitalist system must be overthrown, class-rule abolished and wage-slavery supplanted by the coöperative industry.

As I have stated on many occasions, filmmakers such as those whose work can be seen at this film festival are a key part of the emerging vanguard of the coming American revolution.

Mark Bennett: Narrator Amy Madigan sees modern relevance in Terre Haute icon's message

Narrator Amy Madigan sees modern relevance in TH icon's message

- By Mark Bennett | Tribune-Star
- Mar 12, 2017



Director and the voice: Yale Strom directed the newly released documentary, "American Socialist: The Life and Times of Eugene Victor Debs." He enlisted Oscar nominee Amy Madigan to serve as its narrator. Here, Strom and Madigan pose on the film set last year. Courtesy Yale Strom

Amy Madigan fought injustice in a memorable scene from “Field of Dreams.”

Her character in that classic 1989 movie, farmer’s wife Annie Kinsella, spoke up to oppose the banning of a book at a local high school. When the PTA leader, Beulah, ridicules Annie’s husband, Ray, for building a baseball diamond in the middle of his Iowa cornfields and their exchange heats up. “At least he is not a book burner, you Nazi cow,” Annie responds.

Obviously agitated, Annie continues, asking the packed house for a show of hands, saying, “Who’s wants to burn books? Who wants to spit on the Constitution of the United States of America, anybody?”

Twenty-eight years later, Madigan serves as narrator of a new documentary on a Terre Haute native who spent his life battling social injustice. The subject of “American Socialist: The Life and Times of Eugene Debs” holds relevance today. So does that hilarious, but meaningful moment in “Field of Dreams.”

“The town hall speech is what is so funny, but [also] terribly important,” Madigan said in an email interview last month from London, where she’s performing in a musical with her husband, actor Ed Harris. “[It’s] free speech, not hate speech, not fake news, but what we are as a country and a people.”

Free speech, oppression, justice and the American dream grab the spotlight in “American Socialist,” as does Terre Haute. The film debuts Tuesday at the Socially Relevant Film Festival in New York City. San Diego filmmaker Yale Strom hopes to stage screenings in Terre Haute in late summer or fall.

Strom, also a musician and composer of klezmer and Yiddish songs, got inspired to tell Debs’ story in film a decade ago. Barack Obama, a Democratic senator from Illinois, was running for president. Opposition mounted quickly. Among the “epithets being thrown his way by some Republicans and arch-conservatives was that Obama was a socialist,” Strom recalled. The accusers didn’t understand the term, he said.

Strom determined to make the film, and ramped up the project in 2011, trekking to Terre Haute to research Debs’ roots. Six years later, “American Socialist” will premiere Tuesday at the Socially Relevant Film Festival in New York City.

Debs championed workers’ rights (many of whom were immigrants in the late 19th century and early 1900s), equality for women and minorities, Social Security

for seniors, and the 40-hour work week long before they became realities. Viewers of the film may see Debs differently, not as a radical agitator but perhaps as a principled guy who kept a portrait of Jesus on the wall of his cell in the Atlanta federal prison.

“They’re not crazy, wild ideas from the former Soviet Union. They have nothing to do with the former Soviet Union,” Strom said by phone from San Diego. “His followers were primarily working class and Christians, and many were Jews, too.” Some were the great-grandparents of present-day Republicans in places like Oklahoma, he added.

Strom’s wife, Elizabeth Schwartz, co-wrote the film’s script, sings “On the Banks of the Wabash, Far Away” in its soundtrack and serves as executive producer. Strom wanted a female narrator, and Schwartz recommended Madigan, who first read the script, then accepted. They got an Academy Award nominated actress who grew up in 1950s Chicago, the daughter of a longtime newsman who covered the McCarthy hearings in Washington, D.C. “He was called a ‘dirty Catholic,’” Madigan recalled.

“I grew up with news and opinion, right on the south side of Chicago,” she continued. “You either embrace this, or you don’t.”

Madigan sees a timeliness to the documentary. The 2016 presidential campaign vaulted billionaire Donald Trump into the White House and made a household name of Democratic candidate Bernie Sanders, who lost in the primaries to Hillary Clinton. Sanders, a Vermont senator who favors democratic socialism, illuminated the reality that America’s wealthiest 1 percent has reaped more than half of new income since the recession began in 2009.

In Debs’ era, the top two percent of the U.S. population owned 60 percent of its wealth. Byproducts of that inequality — suppressed wages and the working poor becoming entrenched in a cycle of poverty — became themes for Debs, who ran for president atop the Socialist Party ticket in 1900, 1904, 1908, 1912 and 1920.

“The idea of a person making a living wage is so in the radar, then and now,” Madigan said. “[Debs] fought for everyone being able to have dignity and for families. And the ironic thing is, that is where we are right now.”

Indeed, Sanders won Indiana’s Democratic presidential primary last year and carried Vigo County, nearly outpolling Trump’s Republican votes. “Bernie

Sanders inspired millions. Bernie Sanders inspired a generation,” Strom said. “But who inspired Bernie? Eugene Victor Debs.”

The economy in Debs’ home community has changed since his lifetime, from 1855 to 1926. Coal mining, farming, distilleries and breweries, and slaughterhouses provided most of the jobs then. Today, health care facilities, schools and colleges, trade unions and a select manufacturers employ most Terre Hauteans. Still, per capita wages here lag the state’s, and the state’s lag the nation’s.

Terre Haute shaped Debs, who went to work as a railroad fireman as a teenager, and later served as city clerk and state representative. As an elderly man, he was imprisoned for criticizing the power holders who were sending young Americans into World War I. President Warren G. Harding commuted his sentence in 1921. Debs walked out of Atlanta’s federal prison on Christmas Day. Incredibly, the warden allowed the 2,300 inmates out of their cells to bid farewell to Debs, who’d won over the prisoners and staff alike.

As they cheered, Debs turned around on a sidewalk and raised his hat in appreciation.

In the same way, the film may win over some folks with unfavorable perceptions of Debs. They’ll learn little-known elements of his family life, the fact that Helen Keller and Carl Sandburg called him a friend, and that Debs traveled hundreds of miles to small American towns and remote rural areas in support of working people.

A teachable moment, a century later.

“The documentary [American Socialist: The Life And Times of Eugene Victor Debs](#) poignantly captures the courage and conviction of one man driven by an all-consuming moral mission to elevate the masses, speak truth to power and change the world. And almost 100 years after his death, the ideas he was imprisoned and ridiculed for (by the establishment class), are fueling the progressive movement of the 21st century proving that a vision laced with truth and hope never dies.”

-Nina Turner, president, Our Revolution

Screening History (through January 2018)

Boston International Film Festival 2017

Washington Jewish Film Festival 2017

Socially Relevant Film Festival 2017

Workers Unite Film Festival 2017 (Winner, Audience Favorite Award)

San Francisco Labor Fest 2017

Madrid International Film Festival 2017

San Diego Jewish Film Festival 2018