

Daniel De Leon

1852-1914

Birth: December 14, 1852

Death: May 11, 1914

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BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

De Leon, Daniel (Dec. 14, 1852 - May 11, 1914), Socialist advocate, was of Jewish stock, the son of Salomon and Sara (Jesurun) De Leon, and was born on the island of Curaçao. His early education was received at home, but was interrupted by the death of his father, a surgeon in the Dutch colonial army, when the boy was twelve years old. In 1866 he was sent to a gymnasium at Hildesheim, Germany, and he afterward studied at Amsterdam. The belief that he was a graduate of the University of Leyden is not borne out by the records of the institution, which do not reveal his name. About 1874 he came to the United States, making his home in New York City, where later his mother rejoined him. For a time he was associate editor of a Spanish paper advocating Cuban liberation and later taught school in Westchester County, N. Y. While thus employed he attended classes in law and political science at Columbia College, in 1878 receiving the degree of LL.B. After practising law for a time in Texas, he returned to New York City and in 1883 won a prize lectureship at Columbia in Latin-American diplomacy, which

he retained for two three-year terms, thereafter retiring from the college.

In the meantime he had become deeply interested in social questions. He actively supported the candidacy of Henry George for mayor in 1886; in 1888 he joined the Knights of Labor; about a year later he became affiliated with the Nationalist movement, founded by Edward Bellamy, and in October 1890, he joined the Socialist Labor party. His partisans have always asserted that his retirement from the college was forced by his radical activities, but the statement has been denied by competent authority, and it is evident that his lectureship expired by self-limitation. In 1891 he was appointed national lecturer of the party and later in the year was chosen as its candidate for governor of New York. About the beginning of 1892 he became the editor of its organ, *The People*, a weekly, to which a daily edition was added in 1900 but discontinued in February, 1914. He was again a candidate for governor in 1902 and several times conducted spirited but unsuccessful campaigns for the state Assembly and for Congress.

He early assumed a dominant position in the party, and despite repeated attempts to dislodge him maintained his leadership to the end. He took a strongly antagonistic attitude toward the existing trade unions, characterizing their leaders as "labor fakers," and demanding the reorganization of the unions on a frankly Socialist basis. In 1895 he led a seceding faction from the Knights of Labor and founded the Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance, and in the following year obtained its endorsement by the national convention of the party. An opposing faction, friendly to the old unions, now began to make headway, and charging De Leon with being a "doctrinaire" and a "dictator," gradually won to its side the greater part of the membership. In July 1899, failing to oust De Leon from his place, this faction withdrew and formed a new organization, which ultimately became the Socialist Party of America. From this loss of members and prestige his own party never recovered. At Chicago, in June 1905, De Leon took part in the formation of the Industrial Workers of the World, the Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance being immediately merged with it. The new organization, however, soon came under the control of the extreme "direct actionists," who rejected all political effort, and in the convention of 1908 De Leon was refused a seat. A few weeks later, at Paterson, N. J., his partisans organized a rival I. W. W., which subsequently changed its name to that of the Workers' International Industrial Union. To a greatly diminished following he continued during the next six years to expound his conception of Socialism and Socialist tactics and to excoriate those who disagreed with him. In 1913 he moved from New York City to Pleasantville, in Westchester County. He died in a hospital in New York City.

De Leon was twice married--on Aug. 2, 1882, to Sara Lobo (who died in April 1887); and on June

10, 1892, to Bertha Canary, who survived him. His character has been the subject of the most contradictory estimates. His opponents have assailed him as a disruptive fanatic, avid of power and an adept in dissimulation and intrigue. It is certain that in at least one matter he was uncandid, for despite the known facts regarding his ancestry, he professed among his intimates to be a "Venezuelan Catholic," of a wealthy and aristocratic family. His partisans have portrayed him as a man friendly in disposition, genial in temperament, and of incorruptible integrity, content in his single-minded devotion to the cause of the workers to live and die poor. The value of his contribution to social politics is also a matter of dispute. By his opponents he is held to have brought to the social movement nothing but turmoil and dissension. His followers, on the other hand, declare that his concept of a revolutionary working-class organization, formed by industries instead of by crafts, determined to "take and hold" and operate the means of production and distribution, is a prescient foreshadowing of the means by which society is some day to be reconstructed. Lenin, who became acquainted with his writings after the Bolshevik revolution, admired them greatly and declared that they incorporated the germ of the Soviet system. His literary product was mostly propaganda pamphlets such as *Two Pages from Roman History* (1903), *What Means This Strike?* (1898), *Socialist Reconstruction of Society* (1905), but he also translated Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* and seventeen of the nineteen historical romances in Eugène Sue's series, *The Mysteries of the People*; or *History of a Proletarian Family Across the Ages*.

FURTHER READINGS

[*Who's Who in America*, 1914-15; Daniel De Leon, *The Man and His Work. A Symposium* (1919); Olive M. Johnson, *Daniel De Leon* (pamphlet, 1923); *Annual Registers of Columbia College* (1883-89); records of the University of Leyden; recollections of the writer; information as to certain details from Sol. J. Delvalle of the Congregation Mikve Israel of Curaçao, Solon De Leon (the son of Daniel) and Arnold Petersen of New York City, J. M. L. Maduro of The Hague, and others.]