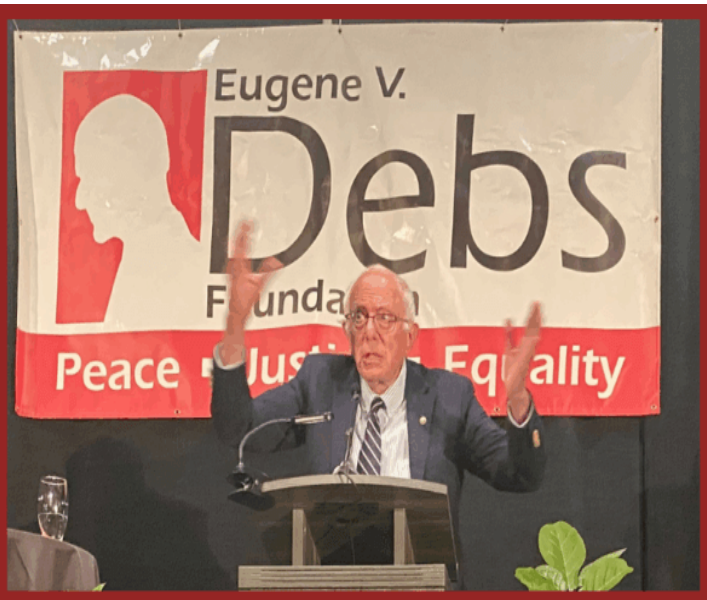


Welcome Home, Bernie!: Sanders is 2025 Eugene V. Debs Award Winner

Posted on November 1, 2025 by Rosemary Feurer

On October 25, 2025 Bernie Sanders received the 60th Eugene V. Debs Award. The Debs Foundation (where I serve as board member along with historians, archivists, activists and trade unionists) has hoped for a number of years to bring Sanders to Terre Haute. When Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez-N.Y. learned that Bernie was receiving the award, she eagerly agreed to come to Terre Haute to introduce Bernie. The entire proceedings of the award banquet is presented below in a video taped from the event. This was not the first time Sanders had visited Terre Haute. Bernie had given the award to Kurt Vonnegut at the 1981, just as he became Burlington's socialist mayor, and two years before that Sanders made a 16 mm. documentary on a shoestring budget about Debs using material from the museum. As he joked in his speech, that meant that Debs was rendered with a Brooklyn accent by himself, for which he "apologized to the people of Terre Haute."

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Bernie’s Special Visit to the Museum

Mark Dimondstein, the new President of the Debs Foundation (and soon to be retired president of the American Postal Workers Union), Sara Nelson, the 2024 Debs Award winner, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and Sanders made a special visit to the Eugene V. Debs Museum before the event. As Museum Director Allison Duerk showed some special artifacts that are there Sanders eagerly pulled out his prized possession, a Debs 1912 “Red Special” Key chain.



Bernie Sanders showed his prized possession: A key chain from the 1912 Debs Presidential Election. Credit: Allison Duerk

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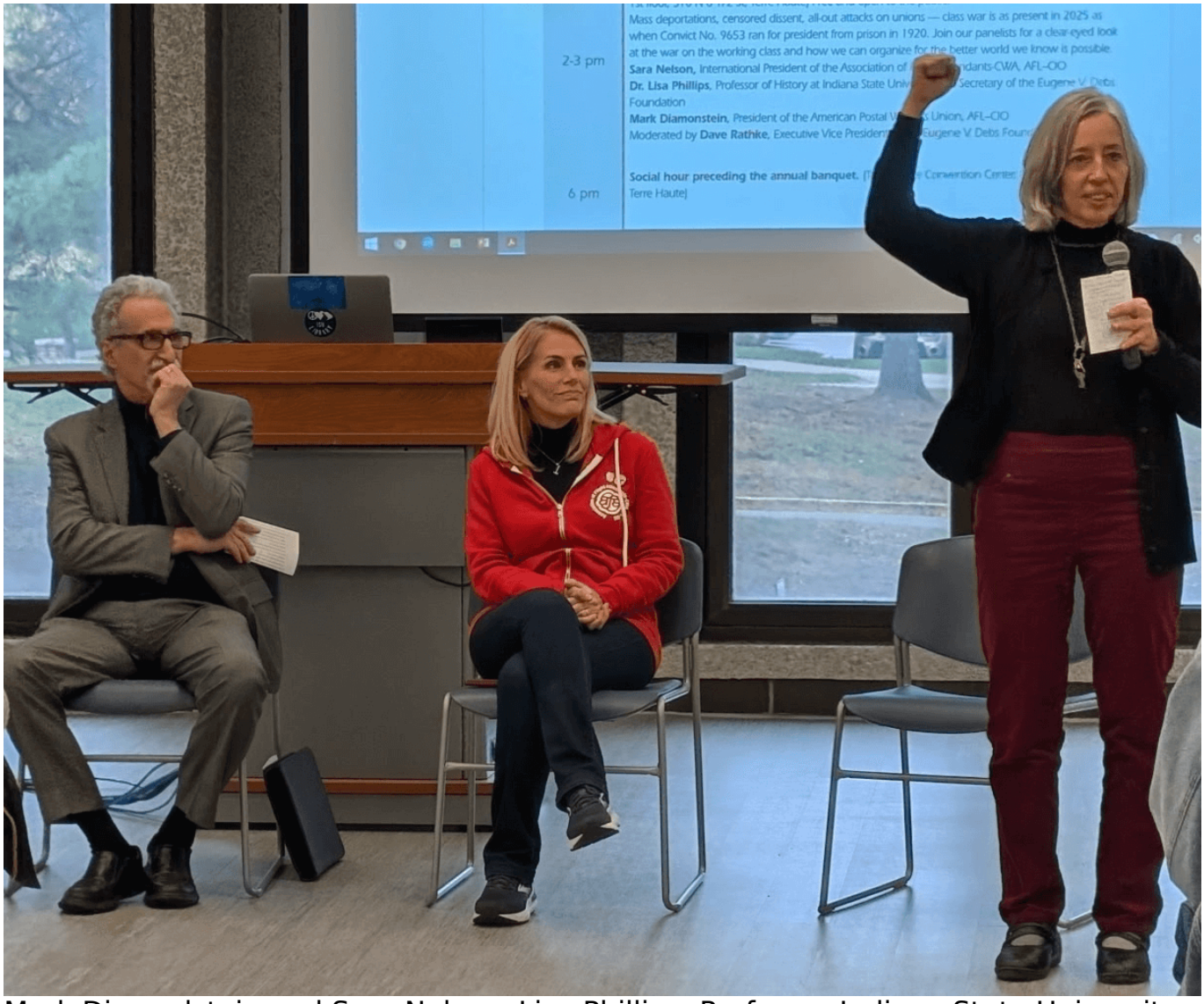


Bernie Sanders visits the Debs Museum with Museum Director Allison Duerk. It wasn't his first visit. He produced a documentary about Debs before he became Mayor of Burlington, Vermont. He joked at the dinner that his is the only documentary in which Debs has a Brooklyn accent. Credit: Alison Duerk

Class War and Our Response to It: Panel Discussion

Before the evening's event, Sara Nelson, International President of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, AFL–CIO, and Mark Dimondstein, President of the American Postal Workers Union, AFL-CIO and Lisa Phillips, Professor at Indiana State University, Secretary of the Debs Foundation and LAWCHA member, were part of a dynamic panel moderated by Dave Rathke, Executive VP of the Debs Foundation:

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Mark Dimondstein and Sara Nelson. Lisa Phillips, Professor Indiana State University, spoke of the attempt to terrorize academics into submission. Credit: Lisa Phillips.

Mark Dimondstein, president of the American Postal Workers' Union (APWU), stressed his pride with NOT going along with the AFL-CIO's official agenda: "It's important to "vote no," as I have, even if it means you're the only one." Sara Nelson, president of the Association of Flight Attendants, CWA, urged building toward general strikes of solidarity and reminded the audience that "We have to fight against against divisions– class, gender, race, all of it."

Lisa Phillips stressed how connected the attack on academic labor in Indiana has led to scrutiny and clampdown on gatherings, discussion, protests related to Israel and

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Palestine. Professors face post-tenure reviews, tying faculty members' continued employment to efforts to restrict free speech. Humanities and smaller regional campuses are being targeted. That includes destroying the Debs Fellowship for research in labor and social movements, in existence since the 1960s with hundreds of graduates who've gone on to pursue PhDs, who teach, who would not otherwise have had access to research and write history at a professional level.

Banquet and Awards

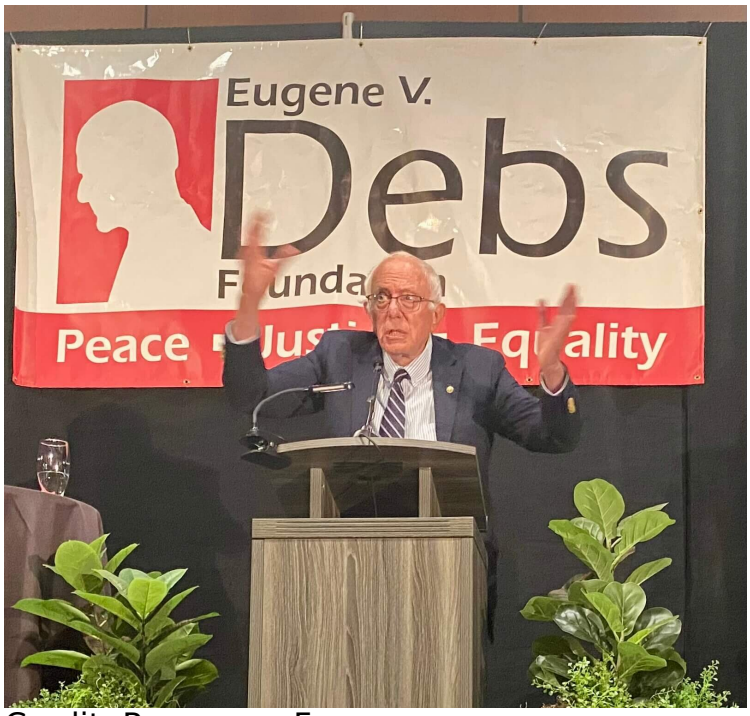


AOC introducing Sanders at the awards. Credit: Rosemary Feurer

In her remarks and introduction to Sanders below, AOC expressed how honored she was to be able to do that, and how much Debs meant to her because he had sparked the flame in Sanders, and Sanders had done the same for her. AOC noted that Debs "elevated our class consciousness to understand that the indignity that people experience is not necessary: It has a cause and thus it has an end." The light of that consciousness shone through to Sanders, she commented, and Bernie took that class consciousness to the state of Vermont, and carried that light into politics, first for 16 years as Mayor of Burlington, then to Congress. She stressed those years as lonely, reminding us of how Sanders often stood alone on the floor of Congress demanding labor rights, universal health care and other demands. Then, in 2016, he

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was able to resurrect the light of class consciousness in a Presidential campaign.



Credit: Rosemary Feurer

Sanders speech was largely wrapped around remembering quotes from Debs and connecting them to our time. “Debs frightened the ruling class when he was alive and he still frightens the ruling class.” Here are those he highlighted:

“In every age it has been the tyrant, the oppressor, and the exploiter who has wrapped himself in the cloak of patriotism, or religion, or both to deceive and overawe the people.”

‘I am opposing a social order in which it is possible for one man who does absolutely nothing that is useful to amass a fortune of hundreds of millions of dollars, while millions of men and women who work all the days of their lives secure barely enough for a wretched existence.’ Debs said that over 100 years ago,” Sanders thundered. “And the only thing that has changed is that instead of people on the top being worth hundreds of millions, they’re now worth hundreds of billions.”

“I have no country to fight for; my country is the earth; I am a citizen of the world.”

“Your Honor, years ago I recognized my kinship with all living beings, and I made up my mind that I was not one bit better than the meanest on earth. I said then, and I

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say now, that while there is a lower class, I am in it, and while there is a criminal element I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free."

"As long as he owns your tools he owns your job, and if he owns your job he is the master of your fate. You are in no sense a free man. You are subject to his interest and to his will. He decides whether you shall work or not. Therefore, he decides whether you shall live or die. And in that humiliating position any one who tries to persuade you that you are a free man is guilty of insulting your intelligence."

"To stir the masses, to appeal to their higher, better selves, to set them thinking for themselves, and to hold ever before them the ideal of mutual kindness and good will, based upon mutual interests, is to render real service to the cause of humanity."

"I am not a labor leader; I do not want you to follow me or anyone else; if you are looking for a Moses to lead you out of this capitalist wilderness, you will stay right where you are. I would not lead you into the promised land if I could, because if I led you in, some one else would lead you out. You must use your heads as well as your hands, and get yourself out of your present condition; as it is now the capitalists use your heads and your hands."

Sanders connected each quote to problems today. He concluded:

"What Debs talked about 100 years ago was right then and it's right today. So don't look at Debs as some kind of historical figure. Look at him as someone who is motivating us today…So that instead of spending a trillion dollars on the military, we feed our kids and provide health care for all. So Debs may have died . .. 99 years ago, but his vision, his analyses remain absolutely vital. Our job is to understand what he tried to do and take his message forward."

Dave Rathke, executive Vice President and emcee, commented, "The Debs Foundation has for a long time waited for this moment, to give this award to this person. Welcome home, Bernie"

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The largest audience in Terre Haute’s convention center history attended the event. Credit: Debs Foundation.

The Debs Foundation recently spent over $175,000 for needed repairs and maintenance on the Debs Home and Museum. We are still fundraising to pay for that, and we would like to make the Director’s position full time. I hope you consider a donation to that effort, at DebsFoundation.org.

Here is the video of the event, which starts at 42:41 with Local Honeys, a folk music duo from Kentucky.

AOC’s introduction begins at 1:04

Bernie Sanders speaks beginning at 1:19

Sarah Nelson leads singing Solidarity Forever at 1:47

Author

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