
Ruthenberg, the Fighter: The Passing of an American Pioneer

by James P. Cannon

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The great outpouring of the masses for the memorial meetings bears testimony to the fact that the name of Ruthenberg is highly honored already today. It is quite probable that much greater honor will be given to his memory in the future. For Ruthenberg was a pioneer in a great social movement which has the future on its side, and history deals generously with pioneers.

Most of us who had the opportunity of working hand in hand with Comrade Ruthenberg through many stormy years can pay an ungrudging tribute to those personal qualities which made him such an outstanding figure in the ranks of the American revolutionaries. He was steeled and strengthened by every test imposed upon him and remained a dauntless, unwavering fighter to the end. He died at his post in the prime of his powers, as befits a soldier.

We will not deny the shock of grief that his untimely death brought to every one of us, but just the same we could stand at his funeral with heads uplifted in pride that this man, who embodied so many of the highest qualities of soldier manhood, belonged to us.

We honor Ruthenberg for his long and valiant revolutionary record. I first met him in 1913 when he came to Akron to speak to striking rubber workers. He was already then a prominent figure in the Socialist Party and his speech had the ring of militancy which denotes the irreconcilable enemy of capitalism. We sized him up then as a fighter and later knowledge of his character, born of the closest association in common work, only strengthened and confirmed the first impression and estimate. "He was a fighter." Those words came spontaneously to the lips of his comrades-in-arms in the first moment we heard of his passing. What tribute can be higher?

He was no fly-by-night dabbler with the idea of revolution. His record goes back for many years. The proletarian revolutionaries who

fought on the side of Haywood remember with gratitude his support in the great battle which came to a climax in 1912. A consistent advocate of political action, he, nevertheless, even in those days fought against the current of reformist corruption in the Socialist Party and interpreted "politics" in the proletarian and revolutionary sense.

He fought the capitalist war. He carried the St. Louis Resolution out into the public streets of Cleveland and attempted to organize the laboring masses around it. The most prized picture of him which adorns this page shows Ruthenberg, the fighter, in action, speaking against the war on the Public Square of Cleveland. He paid the price for his courage with a year's imprisonment in the Canto Workhouse, that same workhouse within whose shadow Debs made his historic speech. Ruthenberg, [Alfred] Wagenknecht, and [Charles] Baker, prisoners there at the time, were the inspiration of that speech which rang 'round the world.

On his release from prison, Ruthenberg identified himself with the Left Wing of the Socialist Party which was taking shape under the influence of the Russian Revolution. He was the only one of the nationally prominent leaders of the party to come with the Left Wing and remain consistently through all the vicissitudes of the struggle. He was a follower of the Communist International since the first day its banner was raised. His vision of a great revolutionary organization on an international scale unfolded his powers and raised him far above the petty men whose conception of Socialism was distorted by narrow provincialism.

Ruthenberg, the fighter, stood up in the Capitalist Court of New York in 1920, facing a 10-year sentence, and hurled the scorn and defiance of a revolutionary class in the face of the Judge and Prosecutor. The young Communist Party was outlawed and driven underground, the reaction was everywhere triumphant, but this man arose from his seat in the courtroom and calmly informed all present that the cause which they sought to imprison would emerge triumphant and put its heel on all class oppression.

As one of the founders of the ILD [International Labor Defense] and a member of its National Committee from the first, Ruthenberg was a great believer in the idea of non-partisan labor defense on the basis of the class struggle. Himself a class war prisoner, he felt a close kinship with all workers who languish in the prison-hells of the masters. he was an enthusiastic supporter of the work of the ILD in help-

ing and defending all persecuted workers regardless of their views or affiliations.

Those who knew him best knew him as, above all, a Party Man. He was all for the party. He regarded the revolutionary party of the workers as the highest instrument history creates for the liberation of the enslaved masses of the world. He attached the greatest significance to every action or decision of the party and set an example of discipline and responsibility in all his work.

He was a tireless worker for the party. His great energies were given unsparingly to its service. In the literal sense of the word it can be said he lived for the party. Yes, and he died for it, too. For if he had spared himself a little and devoted even the minimal attention to his own health, there is no doubt that the fatal illness could have been warded off.

Ruthenberg was a soldier. He saw the cause for which he labored as a fighter to which one must bring the discipline and devotion of an army that never knows retreat. He was a soldier who had faith in his cause. He staked his head on that cause and gave his life for it.

The America of today reeks with cynicism and corruption. The Americans of energy and talent are in the service of the oppressors. America is money-mad. Brains and ability are bought and sold — nothing is given away. Those who see higher values than personal material gain are regarded as fools in our insane America. Corruption is the hallmark of our country.

Ruthenberg was an America who did not go that way. Money meant nothing to him and the “honors” which capitalism bestows upon its lackeys meant even less. His vision was a social one, the world was his country and the oppressed masses were his people. To the service of the oppressed masses he gave all his energies and talents without calculation or price. He lived a full and fruitful life of struggle and sacrifice for an imperishable ideal and died a soldier’s death.

The America of today had no time for Ruthenberg. For this splendid character, this valiant soldier of the revolution, the masters of America had no praise. They covered him with ignominy. They hounded him from one prison to another. At the time of his death the Honorable Judges of the Supreme Court had his latest conviction under review. Capitalist America made Ruthenberg an outlaw and a convict.

The America of Tomorrow will revise that judgment. That is already indicated by the attitude of the militant workers who are the

vanguard of the future. Ruthenberg was a Pioneer who broke a new path. The Americans of tomorrow will travel that path and give its highest honors to the Pioneers who broke it. The name of Ruthenberg will have a distinguished place in the list of Heroes and Pioneers of the American Revolution.

The ranks of the revolutionary working class movement in America are small and able and tested leaders are very few indeed. It would be foolish to deny that the death of a leader of the caliber of Ruthenberg represents a great loss to the proletarian cause. A recognition of the great role played by outstanding individuals of his type is no contradiction to the social theory upon which the whole activity of Ruthenberg as a revolutionary agitator was based.

But the revolutionary labor movement is driven forward by social forces which arise out of the very conditions of capitalism and make for its destruction. The men who inspire and lead the movement of working class revolt are themselves products of the conditions which bring the movement into existence. The loss of leaders may shake and weaken the ranks for a time, but the irrepressible needs of the movement call new forces from the ranks to fill the gap.

The work that Ruthenberg performed with such fidelity in his lifetime remains behind him. His example of courage, devotion, and self-sacrifice remains as an asset of the movement as a whole. His tradition as a revolutionary fighter will be treasured by every section of the militant labor movement. The new generation of militants will be influenced by that tradition and will carefully safeguard it.

Let the corrupt and decaying capitalist society have these heroes who typify it — the dollar-chasing exploiters, the blood-smearred generals, the lying, treacherous statesmen. Our movement, which is the herald of the new social order, claims proudly for its own the men of a different and immeasurably better type — the type of Ruthenberg.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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