
C.E. Ruthenberg

by William Z. Foster

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The death of C.E. Ruthenberg removes from the ranks of the working class one of its best fighters and leaders. In the movement for labor defense, the unflagging interest of Comrade Ruthenberg will make his departure a special loss. He approached the subject of labor defense not only as one who understood the political significance of it in a general way but from the standpoint of one who has personally had an extended experience as a political prisoner.

Comrade Ruthenberg was one of the most often indicted and imprisoned workers in the American movement. He served 10 months in Canton, Ohio jail for anti-war activities, and two years in Sing Sing for his activities in the formation of the Left Wing in 1919. At the time of his death he had hanging over his head a sentence of from 5 to 10 years in Jackson Penitentiary for participation in the Communist convention in Bridgman, Michigan.

I was associated with him in the latter case. Comrade Ruthenberg regarded this whole affair as an unavoidable part of the struggle to which he was giving his life. He planned his actions in court with the thought in mind that his defense was a part of the strategy of the working class movement in its battle against the ruling class for freedom.

In this trial, as in his others, the cards were stacked against him. The judge was unsympathetic, the prosecuting attorney was determined to "get" Ruthenberg at all costs, irrespective of the merits of the case or the validity of the charges. The jury was composed of conservative, backward farmers, who knew little if anything of the working class struggle, who had deep-seated prejudices on social and political questions, who were ignorant of the great social theories and movements that are stirring the entire world and shaking empires to the dust. The charge made against Ruthenberg, that of assembling with advocates of violence, was in plain violation of the provisions of

the United States Constitution, which did not disturb the prosecution in the least.

Ruthenberg made his defense like a true proletarian fighter. He made no effort to evade the question or to seek refuge in legal trickery. He made a clean-cut defense of the left wing movement. From the witness stand, in which Ruthenberg put hours of the time of the trial, he outlined the position of the party, its attitude toward the questions of the day, its role in the labor movement, its aims and its methods. His thoughtful analysis was itself a challenge and a warning to the capitalist court that while it was likely that he would be convicted, the historic movement which he represented at the trial could not possibly be imprisoned or defeated, since it had its roots in the soil of the society in which it was growing, and which continued to nourish it.

To offset this valiant defense of the working class position the prosecution resorted to the usual chicanery and demagoguery. They carefully calculated upon what points in the case would present themselves most unfavorably to the reactionary jury and they played upon these points for all they were worth. The rigid religious attacks of the prosecutors upon the revolutionary program of the Communist Party. The inevitable result of the complex of factors making up the trial situation was the conviction of Ruthenberg. It was a typical class verdict in a capitalist court, such as hundreds of workers have come to learn in the United States within the past 10 years.

Ruthenberg was the spokesman of the movement he led. He asked no quarter and gave none. He took as a matter of course this temporary victory of the enemy. His case was appealed to the United States Supreme Court, after his sentence had been affirmed by the Supreme Court of Michigan. At the time of his death, he was momentarily expecting a decision by the United States Supreme Court. Already the word had been passed out sub-rosa that this reactionary court would sustain his conviction. Only his untimely death prevented Ruthenberg from going to the penitentiary once more.

Throughout his life Ruthenberg bore himself as a true soldier of the revolution. His name will live in the annals of the American working class along with those of other brave fighters of the labor movement.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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