
Charles E. Ruthenberg: Fighter for Socialism

by Dan Ruthenberg

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In C.E. Ruthenberg's well-thumbed edition of Emerson's essays, the following sentences are carefully underlined:

"Whoso would be a man must be a non-conformist. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of our own mind. No law can be sacred to me but that of nature."

These words describe the life Ruthenberg lived, a life which spurned the well-worn grooves of conventional behavior, a life which scorned the easy rewards of acceptance, and a life which in true American style sought to blaze a pioneer trail in the jungle of capitalist society.

Charles Emil Ruthenberg was born July 9, 1882, in what is now the first house north of Loraine Avenue on the east side of West 85th Street [Cleveland]. Attending Lutheran School and Business College, he had early ambitions for the Lutheran ministry, but these were quickly quenched by his inability to obtain answers to some of the questions he fired at his pastor.

Politically, he became in early manhood a devoted follower of Tom L. Johnson and in the files of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* of 1908 one finds in the "Letters to the Editor" frequent interchanges between Ruthenberg and Robert Bandlow on subjects ranging from the street railway question to Socialism. A long correspondence with Bandlow culminated in the entry of "C.E." into the Socialist Party.

Frequently radicals are attacked for importing foreign ideas and are told to stick to good American ideas. But, if there was anyone in this country who idealized Americans, it was Ruthenberg. He not

only read great Americans but he believed with them and acted upon their principles.

He believed with Wendell Phillips, who proclaimed that labor, the creator of wealth, is entitled to all it creates; he believed with Mark Twain, who wrote that loyalty is loyalty to one's country, not to its institutions nor its office-holders; and he believed with Lincoln that Americans have a revolutionary right to dismember or overthrow the existing government.

From the first, Ruthenberg was a functionary of the Socialist Party — an active leader in its accomplishments. Surveying his long political career one might review the following as his contributions to left wing development:

In 1912 he was the first to expose and head the struggle against the right wing of the Socialist Party. He fought bitterly against the proposal leading to the expulsion of Bill Haywood.

In 1917 at the St. Louis Convention of the Socialist Party, he successfully carried through the adoption of the famous anti-war resolution of which he was the principal author.

In 1919 he became a leader of the left wing the Socialist Party, which opposed the inner reactionaries and finally broke away to found the Communist Party.

In 1923 his brilliant and fearless exposition of Communism in the Bridgman Case won legalization for the Party in the United States.

Ruthenberg had a long record of persecution by the courts of the country. Shortly after the United States joined the autocratic Tsar of Russia and the "liberty-loving" Mikado of Japan in the "Crusade for Democracy," Ruthenberg was before capitalism's bar of justice as a violator of the wartime espionage acts. It is very easy now to criticize events leading to the entrance of the United States into the war. But it took men of strong fiber to tell the truth in 1917.

Ruthenberg was jailed in 1918 for revealing why the country went to war. After the May Day riots of 1919, he was arrested, but acquitted when the courts found he had collected irrefutable evidence of the culpability of capitalist forces in the instigation of the riots. He was indicted for criminal anarchy in New York. He was arrested under the criminal syndicalism law of Ohio several times, and he was arrested in Michigan and convicted for "assembling with" (whatever the meaning) in 1922. From 1917 on there was not one year which did not find him under indictment or sentence. He was called "the

most arrested man in America,” and was arrested more times for “overthrowing the government of the United States” than any man in history.

The Americanism of C.E. Ruthenberg was not the Americanism of the dollar-chasing exploiters, of blood-smearing generals, of lying, treacherous statesmen, of swindling office-holders, or of tax-dodging capitalists. His Americanism was that of the Declaration of Independence, that of Thomas Paine, of Emerson, of Twain, and of Phillips, Lowell, and Whitman.

He lived and acted out his Americanism. regardless of personal danger, he stood true to the ideals in which he believed. When convicted for violating the espionage act, he said:

“I am not conscious of having committed any crime. The thing that I am conscious of is having endeavored to inspire higher ideals and nobler lives. If to do that is a crime in the eyes of the government, I am proud to have committed that crime!” ...

C.E. Ruthenberg died March 2, 1927. A dynamic personality, militant, uncompromising, and courageous, he represented the sharp fighting-edge of an instrument of battle whose hardness was for no cause other than that of the Party.

To the day of his death, C.E. Ruthenberg was, in the words Eugene V. Debs used earlier to characterize himself, “from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet, a Bolshevik.”

Edited by Tim Davenport

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