
William Z. Foster — Revolutionary Leader.

by John Pepper

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The American Face of Communism.

There are two outstanding features to the great Communist trial at St. Joseph, Michigan: 1. This trial afforded the first opportunity to present Communism, in its entity, before the entire American people. 2. This was the first occasion in the United States for the presentation of communism, openly, to the whole working class, by a typical American worker, a genuine trade union militant.

The capitalist government and press succeeded in their common effort to link the name of William Z. Foster with Communism in the eyes of the working masses — to make William Z. Foster and Communism synonymous to the American workers. In reply to the question, “What is a Red?”, one of the prospective jurors answered, at the outset of the trial, “An ignorant foreigner.” At the end of the trial, however, American public opinion was compelled to admit that a “Red” is, in reality, no one else but a militant American trade unionist, armed with the weapons of a scientific Marxian, Communist education. At the very moment when the state prosecution put William Z. Foster on trial, on the mere charge of being a Communist, it unintentionally presented full American citizenship to the hitherto foreign-labelled Communism.

Until this trial, the caricature mirrors of the Capitalist press could hide the face of Communism with the mask of “East Side Jew” or the “imported Russian Bolshevik.” The trial at St. Joseph has shown our working class the real face of Communism personified in the splendid, typical characteristics of the American workers composite in the Irish-American trade unionist, William Z. Foster. The capitalist prosecuting attorney baptized Communism “American” at the moment that he cited from Foster’s book the simple, masterly formula: “To me the Russian Revolution did not

seem difficult to understand. It is only our own labor movement carried to its logical conclusion.”

From Militant Worker to Communist.

William Z. Foster is the typical representative of the American militant workers. He narrated the story of his life to the Court. This story was a veritable picture of every phase of the life of the hard working proletariat. He started to work at the age of 10 as an apprentice to a sculptor and woodcutter. He then went to the type foundry; from the type foundry to the fertilizer factory; and from the fertilizer factory to the steam-fitter’s shop. En route West, he turned woodsman in Washington and Oregon. At 24 he took to sea, serving 3 years before the mast. Then a year or so in Europe studying languages and the labor movement. Coming back, Foster turned to railroading, joined the Railway Carmen’s Union, and soon rose to hold every office in the union.

Restless and impatient, he passed from craft to craft; went through all the trades of the American worker. As he went on he was able to learn ever more the various phases of the workers’ life. Slowly he rose from the limits of his own individual life to become the leader of the masses: Secretary of the Syndicalist League — officer of the Railway Carmen’s Union — 1917, Secretary of the Organization Committee in the Packing Industry — Secretary of the Organization Committee of the Steel Industry in 1918 — and in 1921, Organizer of the Trade Union Educational League.

And even in his political development, Foster portrays all the phases of the American militant worker — Socialist Party, Syndicalist League, Farmer-Labor Party, American Federation of Labor. He personally went through all the mistakes of our militant workers.

Along with the Socialist Party he urged the wrong evaluation of revolutionary tactics. Then he went astray with the Industrial Workers of the World, in their belief in the omnipotence of direct action. Here he went wrong with the Syndicalists in their denial of the role of the political party and the political revolution. There, along with the American Federation of Labor, he was mistaken in failing to consider the role of the initiated of the revolutionary minority. He experienced all these mistakes. However, these mistakes were never his own individual errors but always in quest of possible steps of advance for the American workers. Foster himself has always been honest and militant. He could testify before the Court with the greatest justification: “Ever since I had anything to do with the labor movement I sought to put power into the hands of the workers.”

In every movement in which he participated Foster picked up all that was good and worthwhile and left behind what was harmful and worthless. In the old Socialist Party he acquired an appreciation of the value of systematic propaganda. In the IWW he was imbued with the dynamic force of the method of “boring from within.” From the Syndicalists he learned to belittle the pure and simple parliamentarianism — parliamentary cretinism. In the American Federation of Labor he learned the great significance of the economic struggles of the workers. In the great Steel Strike, whose very guiding spirit he was, he mastered the art of directing great masses of workers. In Soviet Russia, during the sessions of the 3rd Congress of the Communist International [June 22-July 12, 1921], he acquired a thorough understanding of the dynamics of the proletarian revolution — the role of the Communist Party.

Field General of the Revolution.

In the trial at St. Joseph we live through a remarkable performance. Before our very eyes is born the leader of the American revolutionary workers. The capitalists, who are always the pacemakers of the proletarian revolution, have themselves made it possible through this trial for all the working masses to look up to Foster and recognize him as their leader. Even be-

fore this event the American workers knew Foster. They knew him as a former syndicalist leader; as the organizer of the great Steel Strike; as the founder of the Trade Union Educational League, but they did not know him as the Communist revolutionist, as the mortal enemy of the Capitalist system.

This is a great historical trial. For the first time there appears before the American workers a man who is at once blood of the blood, flesh of the flesh, of the working masses — a worker himself, a leader of the masses, a trade unionist, a revolutionist, a Marxian, and a Communist.

The bourgeois press must gnash its teeth, must grudgingly admit: “He gave the impression of sincerity and frankness... Foster gave the impression that he did not care much whether he went to jail or not.” There does not seem to be any doubt that he is willing to sacrifice himself for the cause he believes in. And at the same time, the same *New York Times* must pale and with teeth chattering with fear grant that “Foster made one think of the field general” of the revolution.

From every point of view the trial is a historical symbol. Foster, as the representative of the American militant workers, appears before the capitalist judiciary and a farmer jury will render the verdict on him. Here are arrayed before us the three most important classes of American society — the worker, the capitalist, and the farmer. The worker is the defendant; the capitalist is the prosecutor; and the farmer will give the verdict. A historical symbol truly reflecting the historical situation! The working masses march off as the active forces of the revolution. The capitalist oppress these masses ever more fiercely through the governmental powers of suppression. And the victory in this ever sharpening class conflict will go to that class which receives the support of the farmers.

We do not yet know whether in this first struggle between the advanced posts the farmers’ jury will convict Foster; whether capitalist conspiracy will be victorious; but Foster, free or jailed, the American revolutionary will, after St. Joseph, know that Foster is their leader. And the Workers Party salutes in his name its proud Red Flag of the Revolution!

Edited by Tim Davenport.

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