

# Remembering Charles E. Ruthenberg

by Jay Lovestone

## Introduction

To speak of the development of the American Communist movement is to speak of the role of C.E. Ruthenberg in the class struggle in the United States. Ruthenberg was the outstanding founder and the leader of the Communist Party in the most powerful imperialist country.

Ruthenberg was anathema to the bourgeoisie. To them his name and deeds are synonymous with all that the conscious, courageous, revolutionary workers, following the path of Marx and Lenin, are thinking and doing throughout the world. That is why Ruthenberg was the most feared and hated communist in the country.

Lenin once wrote: "The Communists of America prove by their long prison terms to which the bourgeoisie sentence them for communist agitation and propaganda, what capitalist democracy really means. They are tearing the masks from it and are exposing it as a reign of trust kings and speculators amid the subjection of the masses." Truly, no one symbolized this truth uttered by Lenin more than Ruthenberg did. He was thus often spoken of as the most arrested man in America.

What makes Ruthenberg a revolutionary figure of paramount importance is not merely his tremendous abilities as shown in his service in the class war against the American capitalist class, but the devotion, self-sacrifice, courage and Leninist clarity characterizing his activities. Ruthenberg always emphasized the role of the Party as the only revolutionary leader of the working class.

Characteristic of his fighting spirit is his statement in 1920 to the New York Court sentencing him to from five to ten years in Sing Sing Prison: "I have merely this to say for myself. I have in the past held certain ideals for a reorganization of society on a new basis. I have upheld those ideals and gone to prison for them when they were connected with the late war. I have stood by those principles in which I firmly believe and I still stand for those principles irrespective of the result of this particular trial. I expect in the future as in the past to uphold and fight for those principles until the time comes for those principles to triumph and a new society is built in place of the present social organization....I will accept the sentence in that same spirit of defiance, realizing that I go to prison because of support of a great principle that will triumph in spite of all the courts, in spite of all the organizations of the capitalist class."

If we examine the basic types of characteristics of leaders of great social movements, we will find them to be inspiration, intelligence and industry. In Ruthenberg's whole revolutionary career we find these three fundamental prerequisites of first-rank leadership standing out in bold relief.

Ruthenberg left no theoretical works that have become standard classics in the international labor movement. All of his writings are manuals of tactics for the revolutionary movement in the United States in its various stages. Thus we will find in his writings before the proletarian revolution in Russia some of the hazy concepts and shortcomings which characterized the most militant and genuine Marxian kernels in the various socialist parties. In fact, Ruthenberg more than any one else symbolized the developing stages of working-class militancy. He shows a constant growth in his clearness and understanding of the revolutionary struggle into the full Leninist, Bolshevik viewpoint.

We must keep in mind that the achievements and contributions of any individual revolutionary leader can be estimated properly and judged only on the basis of the conditions of his times and only in comparison with contemporary leaders in the same movement. It is here that Ruthenberg stood head and shoulder above the other leaders of the socialist movement in the pre-war days. It is here that Ruthenberg appears before the entire American working class as the outstanding expression of communism in the United States.

Ruthenberg learned much and quickly from the Russian Revolution and the proletarian State of the Soviet Union. His indefatigable mastery of the principles and strategy of Leninism has gone a long way towards accelerating the building of the Workers' (Communist) Party of America.

What have been Ruthenberg's main contributions to the American labor movement? One: He was the first man in the various left wing movements to realize the value of organization. Ruthenberg always emphasized organization in a concrete, positive manner. Two: His heroic fight against the imperialist war. Here Ruthenberg was a trail blazer for the American working class in a true Leninist sense. Third: He knew how to link up the smallest, immediate, most elementary everyday needs of the workers with the biggest, most fundamental and revolutionary objectives of the whole proletarian struggle. Fourth: He was the leading founder of the Communist Party in the United States.

#### Ruthenberg--The Organizer

Ruthenberg was an organizer *par excellence*. Immediately after he joined the Socialist Party in 1909, he assumed responsible organization work in the Cleveland organization as recording secretary of the City Central Committee. The Cleveland organization in the former Socialist Party symbolized strength, stability, and mass influence. Proportionately it far exceeded many local city organizations in this respect at the time. Ruthenberg was quick and able to utilize the local issues for the purpose of building a Cleveland section of the national movement.

It did not take long for Ruthenberg to become nationally known as an organization builder and an outstanding local political leader. From 1909 to 1912 he served as recording secretary of the Cleveland Central Committee of the Socialist Party. In 1910 he was Socialist candidate for State Treasurer of Ohio; in 1911, candidate for Mayor of Cleveland; in 1912, for Governor of Ohio. In 1913 Ruthenberg became the Secretary and City Organizer of the Cleveland organization; he was also candidate for United States Senator of Ohio during the same year; in 1915, candidate for Mayor; in 1916, candidate for Congress; in 1917, again candidate for Mayor. In the last campaign Ruthenberg ran especially on a platform of opposition to the imperialist war, while he was appealing against his conviction for anti-war activities, and received 27,000 out of a total of 100,000 votes cast in Cleveland. In 1918 Ruthenberg was candidate for Congress and in 1919 candidate for Mayor of Cleveland.

The Cleveland City Organization of the Socialist Party, under Ruthenberg's leadership, had at its height a membership in excess of the national membership of the Socialist Party to-day.

It was Ruthenberg who was primarily responsible for making the left wing in the Socialist Party nationally organization-conscious. There were many who were active propagandists for the then left wing socialism, but a few, if any in 1919, realized sufficiently the need of crystallizing a definite left wing organization on a national scale.

While he was still facing a charge of being accessory to murder, Ruthenberg assumed the arduous task of being the first secretary of the Communist Party of America. Under extremely difficult conditions he was infusing a spirit of drive and energy into the newly-born organization.

Immediately after his release from Sing Sing Prison on the reversal of the decision of conviction by the lower court by the New York State Court of Appeals, Ruthenberg became the second national secretary of the Workers' Party in 1922. Under his direction, the Workers' Party immediately made great progress in its membership rise and political influence. To the party membership, Ruthenberg appeared very clearly as the *party builder*. In every campaign of the party he was the dynamic force lending push, plan and momentum to it with his unbounded energy and inspiration. The drive for the Labor Party, the campaign to root the party in the trade unions, the efforts to win the Negro masses for the Workers' (Communist) Party, the first attempts to secure a firm foothold among the exploited agricultural masses, were all marked by Ruthenberg's intelligence and industry.

It is easily understandable then why the last words of Ruthenberg were: "Build the Party." As far back as 1912, in his first years even in the Socialist Party, when in an atmosphere of Social-Democratic haziness and confusion, Ruthenberg had a remarkably clear appreciation of the role of a revolutionary socialist party. For instance, in speaking of the treachery of Mayor Pape, elected as Socialist Mayor of Lorain, Ohio, Ruthenberg said:

"A socialist official, who, accepting the nomination for office, refuses after getting into office to act in accordance with the wishes of the organization which trusted him, becomes a traitor to the party he pledged himself to support, and is a man who should be dishonored in the eyes of every one but those representatives of capitalism who profit by such acts of perfidy... Capitalism may buy an individual; it cannot buy the Socialist Party."

#### Ruthenberg - the Enemy of Imperialist War

From a Leninist viewpoint, the St. Louis Anti-War Resolution of the Socialist Party, adopted immediately upon America's entrance into the war, suffered from many serious shortcomings, but it was a barometer of the intense opposition to the imperialist war on the part of the great masses of the rank and file of the Socialist Party. Ruthenberg was the prime mover in the formulation and adoption of all that was revolutionary in the St. Louis Anti-War platform. It was he who symbolized the revolt of the proletarian elements in the Socialist Party against the pro-Germanism of Berger, the Social-pacifism of Hillquit and the Social-chauvinism of the Spargos, Russells, Wallings, and others. His first imprisonment in the jail at Canton, Ohio, was for fighting the imperialist war and the measures taken by the American ruling class to drive America into the war. At the very outset, Ruthenberg understood the imperialist character of the last war. No illusions about democracy or "German Kultur" oppressed him. Ruthenberg declared:

"This is not a war for freedom. It is not a war for the principles of mankind. It is a war to secure the investments and profits of the ruling class of this country...."

"The only reason we are in this war now is because it is in the interests of the ruling class, the capitalist class of this country to have us in the war."

#### Ruthenberg - the Leninist

Not only in his opposition to the imperialist war did Ruthenberg develop the full Leninist line but also in his attitude and practice in the daily struggles of the working masses. He was a realist in the Marxist-Leninist sense of the word. The bourgeoisie were driving the masses into the imperialist war. Ruthenberg replied: "Down with the Imperialist War."

There was an election campaign in Cleveland. Ruthenberg said to the workers: "Make this election count in your fight." Ruthenberg did not suffer from parliamentary illusions. He was not a victim of parliamentary cretinism. In April, 1912, he said:

"We are not in the business of electing mayors. The election of a mayor or any other party official is merely an incident in our work. It registers the increase in our strength and that is about all."

By 1920 Ruthenberg's estimate of the official Socialist Party theory of capturing power by the ballot was this: "The Socialist Party emphasizes the participation in elections and the election of certain officials. It had become more or less a vote-getting machine to elect certain persons to public office rather than an organization which sought to bring about a fundamental change of the social system."

While acting as organizer in Cleveland, the struggle of the teachers for the right to organize, the fight of the streetcar workers for an increase in wages, the battle for better housing and living conditions, better educational opportunities for the children, consumed Ruthenberg's attention as effective means of building the Socialist Party. His Leninist viewpoint on the immediate struggles are thus clearly stated: "The policy of the Communist Party is to associate itself with the workers in the everyday struggles. The communists fight with wage workers and farmers in support of the demands which they make on the capitalists because it is in these struggles that the workers learn the character of the capitalist system, and there is developed a will to power of the workers, the determination to triumph over the enemy who exploits and oppresses them."

"The everyday struggles of the workers create the most favorable condition for establishing the influence and leadership of the Communist Party. The workers learn by experience the character of the capitalist system. They learn by their experience in the struggle that the government of the capitalist system is merely an instrument of the capitalists for maintaining the system of exploitation....While fighting with the workers to realize their immediate demands against the capitalists it is the part of the communists to point out to them, at every stage of the development of the struggle, that these immediate demands cannot solve their problem. It is in the process of struggle that the revolutionary will of the workers develops and through these struggles they are leading, step by step, to the final struggle of the proletarian revolution...."

As a Bolshevik, Ruthenberg always kept in the forefront the main objective of the communists in the class struggle - to revolutionize the minds and struggles of the masses and to build a powerful Communist Party to lead the workers to final victory. In all his numerous activities in the daily struggles of the workers, Ruthenberg never forgot that the primary purpose of the revolutionary working class movement in the United States is to overthrow American capitalism and to establish a proletarian dictatorship. Here Ruthenberg was a Leninist. He understood the science of the world revolution. He knew how to link up the smallest, immediate, most elementary everyday need of the workers with the biggest, most fundamental revolutionary objectives of the whole proletariat.

#### Ruthenberg - the Founder of the Communist Party

Ruthenberg was the founder of the Communist Party in the United States. His leadership of the militant proletarian forces in the Socialist Party, his revolutionary opposition to the imperialist war, the inspiration and industry characterizing his leadership of the left wing of the Socialist Party, the enthusiastic determination and energy with which he set about to build a strong Communist Party organization - all served to make him worthy of the title of "Founder of the American Communist Party."

Being one of the first working-class revolutionists in the United States to draw the logical conclusions from the experiences of the working class during the war for the purpose of applying them to the concrete situation of the class struggle in the United States, Ruthenberg did not hesitate to break definitely with the opportunists, the reformists and social traitors dominating the Socialist Party.

Ruthenberg's faith in the party was unbounded. In his tireless work for amalgamation of the craft unions into powerful militant industrial unions, and in his energetic direction of the Labor Party campaign, Ruthenberg never lost sight of the real role of the Communist Party. In Ruthenberg's eyes: "The amalgamation of the trade unions into industrial unions and the formation of a Labor Party to fight the political battles of the working masses of this country are the first steps towards the ultimate goal of the workers' government and the communist society...."

"It is because, after the first steps in the United States in the form of the organization of a Labor Party and the amalgamation of the trade unions, there will still remain these great tasks, that there must be a Communist Party - a separate distinct organization which will have in its ranks the best educated, disciplined and most militant workers such as the Workers' Party of America.

"The role of this party is to be the battalion at the front leading the working class hosts - industrial workers and farmers - forward against the enemy in spite of all persecution, in spite of the efforts of the capitalists to destroy it, until the victory of the workers is won."

Ruthenberg's courage in the class war was unbounded. Some of his best years were spent in jail. The splendid services Ruthenberg rendered to the American working class in his exemplary conduct in the Bridgeman trial in 1923 were the precipitating force for the "legalization," the right to work in the open, of communism in the United States. Ruthenberg died March 2, 1927, just as the United States Supreme Court was to pass judgement upon his conviction by the Michigan Courts for his participation in building the Communist Party.

The tremendous objective difficulties confronting the American working class in their struggles never dismayed Ruthenberg. They only steeled his revolutionary purpose, intensified his communist ardor and enhanced his Leninist clarity and determination to fight on towards the development of a mass Communist Party in the United States.

#### An Estimate of Ruthenberg

Ruthenberg hated capitalism with an immeasurable vengeance. He hated capitalism for what it meant for the workers. He always wrote about the meaning of capitalism and exploitation in simple but telling language. He wrote in 1912: "The capitalist system means the existence of a master class and a dependent class. The wealth which the workers produce but do not receive is paid to an idle, parasitic class in the shape of interest and dividends. The evils of the capitalist system which are everywhere apparent in the squalor and misery of the tenements in which millions exist, in the diseases result-

ing from poverty which yearly take the lives of thousands, with its consequent suffering for the unemployed and their families, in the general insecurity of the lives of those subject to the whims of the industrial masters, who know not whether on the morrow their means of livelihood may not be gone, are the by-products of the private ownership of industry and profit making through the exploitation of the workers."

In 1911 and 1912, while the Socialist official leadership was driving headlong to the right, Ruthenberg emphasized Leninist faith in the masses which was a welcome revolutionary antidote. "The rank and file are not subject to the influence which capitalism can bring to bear. They are the victims of capitalism. They suffer from capitalist institutions. They can be depended upon to remain an uncompromising opposition to capitalism until the organization which they are building up will have acquired the strength to transform existing social institutions into a new social organization which will realize the aim of socialism.

"We socialists have faith in the working class. We believe the workers have advanced too far and are too subject to industrial slavery and therefore are confident that they will assert their power to bring into existence the only alternative to capitalist despotism....The working class has the power and to save itself must establish socialism."

Ruthenberg was born at a time (July 9, 1882), when American imperialism was being reared. He imbibed the weaknesses, the haziness, as well as the spirit of militancy which characterized the early movements of opposition to the rule of monopoly capital in the United States. As imperialism grew, the clarity of revolutionary perspective and program of the most advanced workers grew. Ruthenberg symbolized this growth in all its stages. The selections from his speeches and writings arranged chronologically in this little volume bring in bold relief Ruthenberg's steady and continuous development. From the very moment of his accepting Marxism as his guiding principle, he progressed without any wavering or hesitation in his work of changing the Socialist Party into an effective and Marxian party of proletarian leadership. Unable to achieve this task, he became the leader in the foundation of the Communist Party. Vacillation, pessimism, lack of faith, temporary reversion to paths deviating from Marxism-Leninism are not to be found in Ruthenberg's inspiring revolutionary career. It can be said of Ruthenberg that he was the outstanding American proletarian revolutionary leader who followed the most consistent and logical line of revolutionary development throughout his participation in the revolutionary labor movement.

Ruthenberg lent a certain Bolshevik poise and confidence to the party work and to those associated with him in this work. As a Leninist he fought courageously and consistently for revolutionizing the American labor movement, for developing its basic organizations into militant organizations of the class war. His whole life is one of inspiration, intelligence, and industrious work and struggle in the interests of the revolutionary labor movement, in the interests of the whole proletariat.

Death removed Ruthenberg from his revolutionary post while he was still comparatively young - at the age of forty-four. These lines are being written on the eve of the first anniversary of his death. As the years go by and the American revolutionary movement of which he was so much a part broadens and deepens among the American working class, a proper appraisal will be made of his place in the American labor movement, and the quality of his leadership will become more pronounced. But he will not only be a part of the revolutionary traditions of the American labor movement. His incomparable services to the cause of the emancipation of the workers of the world have made him a part of the traditions of the world's proletariat. "We deeply grieve with you at the loss of Comrade Ruthenberg, leader of your party and of the international labor movement, whose ashes will rest beneath the Kremlin together with the heroes of the November Revolution," cabled the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union to the Workers' (Communist) Party of America, when they learned of Ruthenberg's untimely death. The revolutionary honor accorded his memory by burying his ashes in the Red Square in Moscow bespeaks the esteem in which the Russian workers held the activities of Ruthenberg in the revolutionary movement of the international proletariat.



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