

The Story of William Z. Foster

A Tribute on the Occasion of His Fifty-fourth Birthday

By JOHN HOWARD LAWSON

I DOUBT if William Z. Foster pauses on his birthday to look back over the past; he is too closely preoccupied with the urgent problems of the present, the day-to-day struggles of the working class, to take any great interest in personal reminiscences.

When one reviews the events of Foster's career, one is struck by the fact that there is very little of a personal nature to report. I think the finest thing one can say about Foster is that it is difficult to write about him as an individual. His story is, in the deepest and simplest sense, the story of the American labor movement. His life is significant, not solely because he has been a great leader and fighter—but because for forty years his thoughts and actions have expressed the revolutionary development of his own class. Foster's history is the history of American labor.

He was born in Taunton, Mass., on Feb. 6, 1881. In 1887 his family moved to Philadelphia. During his childhood, the class struggle was developing to a new phase of intensity. The fight for the eight-hour day was at its height. In 1888, a Massachusetts judge issued the first labor injunction ever issued in this country. In 1892, the embattled steel workers made their first heroic stand against the steel trust in the bloody Homestead strike. In 1894 the Pullman strike was defeated by government forces in association with a hired army of thugs, gangsters and cut-throats. Homestead and Pullman ushered in the modern stage of industrial warfare: open collaboration of the state and big corporations, the use of lying publicity, military force and brutal murder for the suppression of workers' organizations.

Wage Slave at Age of 10

In 1896, Foster took his first militant step in the class struggle. At fifteen he had already been a worker for five long years, his family's desperate poverty having forced him to begin wage-slavery at the age of ten, after three years of schooling.

The Philadelphia street car workers were on strike in 1896. The fight was bitterly contested and the whole working class was stirred to active participation. At the height of the struggle, a protest march of strikers was organized.

Foster was in the crowd which cheered the men as they marched down Market Street to the City Hall, wearing their working uniforms and carrying brooms. The brooms were a popular political symbol, meaning "we intend to make a clean sweep." Police were hiding in the courtyards on either side of the street; armed with blackjacks and clubs, they made a sudden attack on the marchers. A bloody battle followed; the workers, after a stiff resistance, were forced to retreat into side streets and alleys. Foster, with some other workers, was cornered in a hallway and clubbed unmercifully.

On the following day the fifteen-year-old boy watched a fight raging around a trolley car. He realized the necessity of solidarity among all workers in preventing the activity of scabs. He organized twenty other youngsters. The group selected a corner and waited for a street car. The car was manned by scabs and protected by the police. But the boys stopped it. Half an hour later, police reserves had been called into the battle and ten thousand workers were holding the street. For six hours the proletarian army kept complete control of the thoroughfare.

This was Foster's first step. The quality which he showed at that time, the readiness to get into a fight and stay in it, has marked every action of his career.

A Family of Fighters

He came of the sturdy stock of toilers. His father was an Irish peasant, who had taken an active part in the Fenian movement and was forced to flee to America when the attempted rebellion failed. His mother was born in Carlisle, England, a textile town near the Scottish border. She was a weaver, and her family had been weavers for generations. Foster's grandmother on his mother's side had been a leader of the textile workers in those bitter uprisings in which the workers blindly destroyed the new machines which they thought were responsible for their suffering.

In Philadelphia Foster's father worked as a washer of hansom cabs in a livery stable. The large family lived on the very edge of starvation. At nine, little William went to Wannamaker's Department Store in search of a job as an errand boy. They sent him away, because they thought the pinched, undernourished child was lying when he claimed to be nine years old.

However, he found a job the next year. He went to work for a stone-cutter, where long hours, staggering work and an atmosphere of choking dust netted him a wage of one dollar per week. He spent three years on this job, his salary being



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raised to \$1.75 in the second year, and to \$2 per week in the third year.

A Hard Childhood

There was no day-dreaming, no sweet sadness of youth in Foster's adolescence. The round of jobs was endless: a type foundry, then paper mills, chemical factories, fertilizer plants, the White Lead Company (where most of the workers died of chemical poisoning before they could earn enough to pay for a coffin). At nineteen Foster was a qualified stationary engineer and steam-fitter—and, broken in health, threatened with consumption.

Told that he would die if he remained in the North, he went to Cuba in search of work. A little later he was employed in a fertilizer plant in Tampa, Fla.; then as a laborer for the Armor Company in Jacksonville; then North again, where he secured work as a brakeman on the Pennsylvania Railroad.

The next fifteen years were a saga of changing jobs: motorman on the New York street car lines; then a lumber camp on the West Coast; then three years before the mast on a square-rigger; then many years of railroad work.

Became Socialist

But these years were also crowded

with economic and political activity. In 1899, at the age of eighteen, he became a Socialist. He reached this decision because of a speech he heard at a street meeting, at the corner of Broad and South Streets in Philadelphia. He received a leaflet at this gathering, on the cover of which was a cartoon showing a huge muscular worker cowering under the lash of a puny capitalist. Foster still speaks of this picture, which powerfully engraved on his mind the sense of the latent strength of the organized workers.

He labored ceaselessly to free the workers from the lash of the capitalists. In the Northwest, he fought to lead the Socialist Party out of the slough of opportunism onto the road of militant working class action. Failing in this, he joined the I. W. W. In 1908, at the time of his arrest in connection with the fight for free speech in Spokane, Wash., he was so severely beaten across the face by the police that he was almost totally blind, and was in danger of losing his sight for several years afterward.

Foster left the I. W. W. in 1912, because he disagreed with the policy of complete withdrawal from work inside the A. F. of L. unions.

He called this policy "a process which simply results in stripping the old unions of their militants and leaving those organizations in the hands of reactionaries." Perhaps Foster's greatest service to the working class has been his clear insistence on work inside the old unions, his persistent vision of the possibility of developing within these organizations powerful rank and file movements of mass struggle.

Meets Tom Mooney

In 1912, he entered into correspondence with a young left-wing Socialist in San Francisco who agreed with him on the urgent need of militant organization inside the A. F. of L. This was Tom Mooney. The two men first met in 1914, at the home of Lucy Parsons, wife of the legally-murdered Haymarket martyr.

When Mooney and Billings were framed in 1917, Foster was one of the first to enter the long fight for his release; he organized the first mass meeting ever held in protest against Mooney's arrest.

The Great Steel Strike

Foster's greatest and most spectacular fight took place in 1919: his magnificent leadership of the great steel strike is a matter of history.

Today, when the rank and file of the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers is preparing another battle against the power of the steel trust, the lessons of 1919 are particularly significant. The strike was preceded by a brilliant organizational campaign. The courage of the workers was unbelievable.

For the first three months the walk-out was ninety-eight per cent effective. The workers stood firm against wave after wave of brutal terror. The strike could have been won. Then, as now, the bureaucracy of the A. F. of L. worked hand in hand with an "impartial" government. Gompers, head of the Federation, connived with Woodrow Wilson and withdrew his entire support from the workers at the most critical moment. Wilson's brand of liberalism was just as murderous as Roosevelt's. Wilson appointed a National Industrial Conference on which the "impartial representative of the public" was John D. Rockefeller, Jr.

When members of the United Mine Workers of America joined the steel workers on Nov. 1, 1919, it looked as if victory were assured. The solidarity of mine workers and steel workers meant that both would win their demands. Wilson whined that "a strike under these circumstances is not only unjustifiable; it is unlawful."

On Nov. 11, John L. Lewis forced the miners to return to the mines, declaring, true to his life-long role of defender of the mine owners: "We are Americans, we cannot fight our government." This was followed by a fresh wave of terror, murder and arson—and Lewis, Gompers and Wilson had the satisfaction of seeing the strike defeated.

Lewis, Green and Tighe are playing the same tricks today. And they have the same conniving partnership with the suave gentleman in the White House.

Still in the Front Line

Today again the rank and file steel workers prepare for major struggles. Today again the class lines are drawn—and in the front line of the workers' ranks stands Foster—and the Communist Party of which he is chairman.

Foster, deeply grounded in experience of the class struggle, having analyzed and tested the weaknesses of social-democracy, De Leonism and syndicalism, was quick to learn the lessons of the Russian revolution. He attended the Third Congress of the Communist International and the First Congress of the Red International of Labor Unions in Moscow in 1921. He joined the Party in 1922. In 1924 he became chairman of the Party, being the Communist candidate for President of the United States in three successive elections.

Trade Union Organizer

His most far-reaching activity during this period has been in trade union work. He organized the Trade Union Educational League, which became the Trade Union Unity League, of which he has been the National Secretary since its foundation. In this capacity, he has played a leading role in the decisive industrial struggles of the past fifteen years. His influence has been a potent factor in the organization of militant rank and file work inside the A. F. of L. unions.

During the Presidential campaign of 1932, he continued his speaking tour in spite of a devastating illness which eventually forced him to retire from active work. Today, although he is not completely well, he is throwing himself with self-sacrificing vigor into the work of the Party.

Individualistic petty-bourgeois liberals, with an inordinate estimate of their own egos, concealing their hatred of Communism under glib phrases, have a pet objection which they repeat again and again: "Oh, the theory's not so bad," they say, "but Communists have no big men, no first-rate leaders!" Who of us has not heard this gag time and again from all types of intellectuals? It is clear that these liberals think of leadership in terms of theatricality and super-salesmanship. Curiously enough, the liberals were saying the same thing in Russia in 1917. They were convinced that Kerensky was a more dramatic figure than Lenin—until events proved the farcical weakness of their judgment.

A Brilliant Leader

The annals of the American working class show that they have been richly endowed with brilliant and devoted leaders. William Z. Foster by no means stands alone; he is one among the outstanding figures in the American revolutionary movement of all time, a veteran of the class struggle whose strength and worth have been proved in the heat of conflict. His strength lies in his closeness to the masses.

Today, on his fifty-fourth birthday, the American workers greet him with clenched fists and strong voices, as they march fearlessly and with iron determination—Toward Soviet America

More About 'Lady Macbeth'

By SERGEI RADAMSKY

CARL SANDS, in the Daily Worker of Feb. 18 and 19, has definitely exposed the baseness and misleading judgment of the musical critics of the New York press, in regard to the opera, "Lady Macbeth" by Dmitri Shostakovich. Not only is it the opinion of the outstanding musicians of the world that this is the most important opera produced in the last twenty years, but the critics themselves, while trying to confuse the issue, have admitted as much.

Mr. Olin Downes of the New York Times says: "It has been many a year since such a large and brilliant audience has been in the Metropolitan Opera House," and that "it had an immense success with the audience." But Mr. Downes cannot account for "the gales of applause that swept through the house."

Mr. Downes wishes us to trust to his personal taste and knowledge against almost every one else of the three thousand people gathered at the Metropolitan that night. After all, operas are not written just for musical critics, and those for whom it was intended have acclaimed it here, as well as in the Soviet Union.

Mr. Downes continues: "What would happen with a few repetitions of this work would probably be different." How then account for its unabated success with the public in Moscow and in Leningrad, many of whom hear it over and over again? I, for example, heard thirteen performances at the two different opera houses, and found my interest growing rather than abating. Mr. Downes admits that "the music has its lyrical and melodious passages . . . Katerina's Lament arouses some emotion . . . The music seldom fails to emphasize the doings on the stage . . . The crashing brass chords . . . are effective rhetoric . . . The

chorus of the exiled . . . stirs the imagination."

ON the sixth of February, Mr. Henderson wrote that the opera had "theatrical intensity and other excellent points . . . the music of Shostakovich is free and unconventional . . . his score is filled with rhythmic force and insistence . . . it is rich in orchestral device and the use of instrumental solo passages for decorative effects . . . transitions from moments of melodic charm, to others of crass ugliness . . . there is also the pressure of force and unrestrained impulse . . . the whole atmosphere of Wozzek." He admits, however, that "the style is different . . . the impression left at the close of the long work is that the production had been well worth while." It took several days for the learned gentleman to change his mind and call it a "bed-chamber opera."

We may concede that there were moments on the stage as well as sounds in the orchestra which might be offensive to our conservative friends, but the fault lies with the producers who were obviously anxious for sensational effects—in short, the "bed-chamber opera" was fabricated in America.

Mr. Pitts Sanborn in the Evening Telegram: "Lady Macbeth of Mzensk' is a genuine music drama . . . it is the expression of a vigorous talent which shows, moreover, a sure sense of the theatre . . . the music is fresh . . . stalwart music in its energy and free stride . . . music stark and unashamed . . . Acts III and IV are engrossing . . . the last act is singularly vital and moving . . . unquestionably, this 'Lady Macbeth' is one of the most important operas to reach the local stage in the last twenty years."

Mr. Liebling of the New York

American finds: "Arresting novelty with realism and sarcasm side by side . . . melody and poetical lovely lyricizing . . . orchestration masterful . . . effective in the highest degree . . . this Shostakovich is a tremendous craftsman with a vital message."

The greatest living conductor, Arturo Toscanini was deeply impressed by the "musical poetry" of the score.

In justice to Mr. Sanborn and Mr. Liebling, we wish to record that their acceptance of this opera as an outstanding work was unqualified.

WE may mention, at random, some of its musical values, when, for example, in the first act, the whole mood of Katerina's hopeless situation is established with the one phrase "but I am idle, filled with ennui, all alone I sit and brood."

The long, sustained lines of Katerina in the second act are imbued with lyrical beauty and pathos. The chorus and quintet, in the second scene of the first act, can be likened to the best pages in Verdi's "Falstaff," and Wagner's "Meistersingers." Shostakovich has not imitated these composers, resembling them only in form.

The quarrel between Katerina and her husband before the latter is strangled, is a gem of musical dialogue. The short scene between Sonetka and Sergei deriding Katerina is stark in its callousness.

The last aria of the heroine, the song of the old prisoner and the final chorus, have melodic line, breadth and emotional depth. The composer symphonically enfolds the drama, compelling the listener to follow his thought, from the first note to the last. All this he accomplishes with fluency, simplicity and in places with the economy and restraint of a master.