
Ruthenberg, Red Radical Leader, Dies: Cleveland Bookkeeper in Two Famous Trials Here for Communist and Anti-War Activities: Led Parade that Ended in 1919 May Day Riot: Sentenced for Obstructing Draft; Died Embittered and Alone

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Charles E. Ruthenberg, the West Side bookkeeper who became the “firebrand of the revolution,” died yesterday in Chicago, shattered and disillusioned.

He did not live to see the revolution, so his life’s work went for naught.

Ruthenberg, once a mild and doctrinaire Socialist, was several times a candidate for Mayor of Cleveland, once a candidate for Governor of Ohio, once a candidate for Congress from the 21st District, once a candidate for the United States Senate.

He flames across the Cleveland firmament as a red radical of the deepest dye following the May Day riots of 1919, and listed so far to the left that he parted with most of his early friends and most of his party.

Wrecked Socialist Party.

It is not stretching facts to say that Ruthenberg, more than any other one man in the United States, wrecked the Socialist Party that once polled nearly a million votes for Eugene V. Debs. At the time of his death he was General Secretary of the Workers Party, which preached communism, and he was entitled to sit on the Presidium of the Third International at Moscow.

One lifetime was too short to bring the peaceful revolution he advocated. He was not yet 45 when he was taken Sunday [Feb. 27, 1927] to a hospital in Chicago for an appendicitis operation from which peritonitis developed. And in ten years of intensive labor he had converted few workmen to communism.

Since 1912, he had lived the life of a man much harassed, frequently arrested, frequently in jail, frequently before courts of law, and three or four times in prison. The law, for all its activity, never succeeded in making a conventional American patriot of him. Adversity embittered him and deepened his conviction that “capitalistic society” would have to give way to a new order of “justice, equality, and fraternity.”

Born on West Side.

Ruthenberg, the son of a longshoreman, was born on the West Side near 8606 Clark Avenue SW, where his widow and son, Donald [*sic.*], 21, still live. He was educated in Lutheran parochial schools and was graduated from a West Side business college.

He held many jobs in his youth as factory worker, newspaper correspondent, clerk, editor of a Socialist paper, and bookkeeper. As a boy he became interested in Socialism, and in 1909, at the age of 27, he was made city organizer and Secretary of the party [local].

Socialism in those days was a mild doctrine. It preached state capitalism with Utopian flourishes. It denounced injustice and it was bitter against war, but war seemed remote and abstract.

The conflict that broke in 1914 put the party to its test, especially as American policy shaped up more and more toward entrance into the war. The break came in April 1917, and when Ruthenberg, running for mayor in the fall of the year, polled 21,378 first choice votes and a total of 27,645 on all choices, he carried with him not only the old doctrinaire Socialists, but some who were dissatisfied with Wilsonian policies.

Oppose War as “Murder.”

Ruthenberg refused to keep still about the war. The President’s signature was hardly dry on the declaration of hostilities before Ruthenberg was on a soapbox in Public Square denouncing the conflict as “mass murder.”

On May 27 [1917] he made a speech that started an incipient riot. With Alfred Wagenknecht and Charles Baker he was convicted of obstructing registration for the draft, and on June 27 he was sentenced to a year in the Canton workhouse. His campaign for mayor had to worry along without him.

It was on the day he went to visit Ruthenberg in prison that Eugene Debs was arrested for disloyalty.

The next spectacular flare in Ruthenberg's journey toward "the left" was the May Day riot of 1919. A week before the Socialists of the city rehearsed their demonstration, set for May 1, they marched downtown from the West Side. It is reported that the Federal Building custodian, believing a revolution was about to break, locked the Post Office doors.

The real parade came a week later. Ruthenberg, as grand marshal, marched at the head of the procession, flanked on one side by the American flag and on the other by the red flag. The parade was orderly and peaceful. It started from Acme Hall on E 9th Street and proceeded without incident to E 9th and Superior Avenue NE.

Red Flag Mobbed.

There the marchers found the streets packed with hostile crowds. Men who had been called in the draft, members of the Loyal American League, and even women lined the sidewalks. It was more than overwrought nerves could stand. Something had to give way and [it was] the self-control of the crowd that broke.

The mob swept in from the curbs, tore down the red flags, snatched red sashes from the women, and red neckties from the men. For a block the street was a grand free-for-all fist fight. Two men were killed and 200 injured. Instead of arresting those who had attacked the parade, the police arrested the marchers.

Ruthenberg went to trial in November [1919] before Dan R. Cull, then in the common pleas court, charged with assault to kill Patrolman Robert Hern. He was acquitted when Judge Cull directed verdict of not guilty.

Ruthenberg was now a radical in earnest. His future activities may be sketched in the following events, and though the list is long, it probably does not cover all of his arrests and indictments:

JULY 19, 1919. — Arrested in Royal Hall by order of Police Chief Frank W. Smith for a speech during which he was charged with violating the new state Freeman syndicalism law.

AUG. 27, 1919. — Arrested in a rad on Socialist headquarters, Prospect Avenue and Huron Road SE, by the Loyal American Legion.

OCT. 28, 1919. — Indicted by a Cleveland grand jury charged with violating the syndicalism law by offering a copy of *The Messenger*, a Socialist publication, for sale.

OCT. 30, 1919. — Indicted by the grand jury for selling a copy of *The Liberator* at a Socialist picnic at Palmer, Ohio on July 4.

NOVEMBER 1919. — Indicted in New York for publishing a manifesto of the Left Wing of the Socialist Party.

JAN. 23, 1920. — Indicted in Chicago for alleged violation of an Illinois criminal syndicalism law.

FEB. 19, 1920. — Arrested in Detroit for Illinois authorities.

AUG. 22, 1922. — Arrested at Bridgman, Mich., when federal and state authorities swooped down on a meeting of the Workers Party in the woods.

MARCH 1923. — Convicted under the Michigan syndicalism law.

Ruthenberg was sentenced to the Michigan State Penitentiary at Jackson to from 3 to 10 years and started serving his sentence. He was released 2 or 3 months later on bail pending appeal of his conviction to the United States Supreme Court, and this case is still undecided.

Left Workers Party.

It was Ruthenberg who helped more than any other to split the old Socialist Party into right and left wings. The left wing, in due time, gave birth to the Communist, United Communist, and Proletarian Parties. Ruthenberg was able to unite the first two of these in the Workers Party, which he led.

The Workers Party was never a numerous company, but it attracted attention out of all proportion to its influence because it arose at a time of national excitement, when Red raids were frequent, and when foreigners were being deported merely for membership in organizations held to be subversive.

As a stump speaker, Ruthenberg was always bitter and humorless. Or if he used humor, it was biting, sarcastic. He was an ineffective

propagandist; he antagonized more than he converted. It was said he never advocated violence.

Eulogized Lenin.

Eulogizing Lenin at a meeting in Madison Square Garden, New York, on Feb. 1, 1925, Ruthenberg, then fresh from prison, said:

“Prisons have only one effect on revolutionists. Prisons can only steel their will and increase their determination to strike blow after blow until the ugly capitalistic system, which puts men in prison, is swept out of existence.”

Ruthenberg’s bitterness alienated many of his friends. They could not march with him toward the communistic state.

His convictions may have cut the pattern of his domestic life, too, for his wife and son did not follow him to Chicago when he left Cleveland in 1919, and they are not communists.

Yesterday it was reported that they probably would go to Chicago to arrange for the funeral.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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