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William Z. Foster: American Working-Class Leader*

By Gus Hall

ON THE AFTERNOON of September 1, the fighting heart of Comrade William Z. Foster ceased to beat. The honorable, meaningful life of a great American revolutionary came to a peaceful end.

Foster's death is a grievous loss to the Communist Party, to the American working class, to the international labor and Communist movement, and to our nation.

Millions of working people throughout the world mourn and pay tribute to this towering fighter for the people. Communist parties, government leaders, trade unionists—Communists and non-Communists—peace fighters, battlers for colonial freedom, intellectuals and artists have lowered their banners in honor of our dearly beloved comrade, for while Foster was American to the

core, he was a citizen of the world, a true internationalist.

It is a universal tribute to high service. It is also a tribute to the America he represented so well—the other America, the democratic America of the people that aspires to peace and brotherhood.

WORKER

Foster was a workingman through and through. He was born in Taunton, Massachusetts, on February 25, 1881. When he was six years of age, his family moved to Philadelphia, to a section of the city where the poorest of the poor lived.

Son of a worker, a carriage washer, he went to work at the age of ten, and he was a workingman who remained true to his class throughout his life. He dressed as a worker, lived modestly as a worker in a simple apartment, on a workingman's wage. He was never concerned with ma-

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terial wealth or fortune. During his long years of service, he never, not even for a moment, separated himself from his class. He never cut his ties with the trade unions nor from their struggles for a better livelihood.

He was a tireless worker all his life, never losing a moment, always on time, a model of self-discipline and exactness, the living embodiment of the best virtues of the working class. In one of his last works, *The Twilight of Capitalism*, he wrote:

From my earliest youth I have always felt a great pride in being a worker, and it has ever been a matter of the deepest satisfaction to me to be able to identify myself so closely with the struggles of the working class. If I were starting my life all over again, I would take the same course as I have done.

TRADE-UNION ORGANIZER

Foster was America's greatest trade-union organizer. He made profound and lasting contributions to the organization of the mass production industries. He takes his place in the front ranks of the true greats of American labor—the lofty range of honored trade-union fighters who gave their all to organize America's wage slaves—William Sylvis, Albert Parsons, Eugene Victor Debs, Bill Haywood, Joe Hill, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Mother Jones, Mother Bloor, Jack Johnstone, and many others. He left an indelible imprint on the American and world trade-union movement.

Foster achieved fame during World War I for successful organization of the packing-house workers. He then threw all his seething proletarian energy, skill, resourcefulness, and courage into one of the biggest battles of the century—the strike of the steel workers which began in September, 1919, and grew from 100,000 to 300,000 workers. It was a battle against the steel magnates — the worst and the cruelest exploiters of the country, the backbone of the open shop.

This great strike was battered by an army of thugs. Police and troops shot into the strikers. Homes were broken into and strikers were imprisoned and tortured. But the steel workers heroically fought this onslaught for three months under the courageous leadership of Bill Foster.

Foster proved in this epic struggle that the giant corporations could be organized. History will date the emancipation of the open-shop slaves in big industry from the steel strike of 1919.

In this battle and in his later work as head of the Trade Union Educational League, which he founded, and as leader of the Party, Foster and the Communist Party reared a whole generation of experienced fighters who became the best organizers in the famous drive which established the C.I.O. and expanded the A.F. of L. They helped bring the present-day trade union movement into existence. Foster had titanic

energy and had a genius for big movements and organization. Everything about Foster was big. Unforgettable were his crusading trips across the country in the 1920s and 1930s. He was a crusader for industrial unionism, for unionizing Negro workers, for Negro-white unity in the labor movement, for getting rid of class-collaboration ideas, and for the ideas of class struggle and socialism.

He ruthlessly exposed the misleaders of labor — the Gompers, the Meanys, the Dubinskys. He revealed fully their harmful class-collaborationist, capitalist-minded policies and urged militant fighting trade unionism and proved its success in practice.

Foster saw early that pure and simple trade unionism was not enough, and that labor would have to act as an independent political force, and to fight for socialism. He led the unemployed in the great crisis of the thirties, fought for unemployment insurance and social security, and helped the workers to make big material gains. He was shot at, imprisoned, reviled, and attacked in all these battles. But he did not falter.

Foster not only fought on the front lines of organization and strikes. He wrote about the workers' experiences. He was in fact the Tom Paine of the working class, and has left a storehouse of invaluable pamphlets and books on how to organize, how to strike, how to win, in the battle with

the ruling class.

Foster was ever close to the youth. He urged the older generation to give to youth all its aid, its experience, its counsel, to organize the youth, but he advised to respect and not to trample on its independent development and growth in doing so.

Foster was close to and organized the foreign-born, who made up the main body of the mass production industries. He was close to the Negro workers in packing and steel, whom he succeeded in organizing. He was a bitter enemy of racism, white chauvinism, anti-semitism. He realized that labor-Negro unity was a foundation stone, an indispensable condition for the advance of both. He wrote a history of the Negro people. Moreover, Foster was a front-line champion against colonial oppression, in the first place against U.S. imperialism.

FIGHTER FOR PEACE

Foster was for peace, but he vigorously supported the right of oppressed nations to fight for independence with all their power, as our country did in the struggle for independence in 1776. That is why he was regarded and loved as a warm friend by the peoples of Latin America, Asia and Africa.

Along with his trade union work, Foster stands out as a foremost advocate for peace. He was a tireless fighter for peaceful coexistence. He

wrote volumes about the benefits that the American people would derive from such a policy. He was a life-time advocate of the need for close and friendly ties between all peoples and especially between the peoples of the United States and the people of the Soviet Union.

Foster was an advanced and far-sighted thinker. On numerous occasions he projected basic lines of social development—the correctness of which life and experience have confirmed.

Years ago he forewarned of the serious consequences the American people would reap if the cold-war policies were continued.

He warned against the policy of rebuilding German militarism. In this he foresaw the coming of the crisis which now faces our people on the issue of Berlin.

However, this far-sighted warning of Foster has not been heeded. Serving the interests of the big business monopolies, the Government continues along the cold-war path, the path that leads to the brink of atomic disaster. Pressures mount from the big military brass in alliance with the war-crazed fascist-like fanatical fringe to drive us over that brink. Foster also warned that the brinkmanship policy has a point of no return. When we reach the point from which there is no return, humanity will be face to face with utter destruction. He warned of the dangers in this policy but he did not lose confidence in the peace forces

of the world. In his very last published article he wrote:

"It is possible to stop war. This depends to a decisive degree on the vigilance of the peace forces and their readiness to use their strength correctly and energetically for the prevention of war, which can be done."

To honor Foster is to fight for peace. For an end to all wars, for a world without armaments, without nuclear bombs or their testing; for a world co-existing in peace—these were some of the lofty life time goals of William Z. Foster.

In 1949, after an extended trip throughout Europe, he wrote his book, *Twilight of Capitalism*. His brilliant forecast of the sharp decline of capitalism and the demise of imperialism is now a fast developing reality. Here in broad terms he already then foresaw the historic epoch. He wrote:

"We are living in a great historic period, that of the replacement of capitalism by socialism, and very probably socialism has already become the most powerful of the two rival systems." Foster lived to see the realities of this new epoch—an epoch where the scales between the two sets of forces, capitalism and imperialism as against those of socialism, national and colonial liberation and peace—have tipped irrevocably to the side of the latter. Foster lived to see the day when imperialism as a force is dramatically on the way out and to see his life-long dream where socialism is the dominant factor in deter-

mining the direction of society.

One of his early conclusions from such an historic development was that it presented new and further possibilities for a peaceful transition to socialism.

STAUNCH COMMUNIST

Above all else William Z. Foster was a Communist—a student, a teacher, a theoretician of the science of Marxism-Leninism. He will be remembered and revered as one of the outstanding leaders of our Party. Once Comrade Foster reached the firm conviction that the next progressive step for civilization is socialism and that *his* class, the working class, has the historical responsibility of carrying all of society to this high plane, he dedicated his entire life to this great task at hand.

He never wavered from this conviction nor shirked his responsibilities in the task. He recognized from his experiences and study that to achieve socialism, the working class needed a political party of an advanced type—that is, a working-class party based on the great science of Marxism-Leninism, applied creatively to the American scene, a working-class party that proudly inscribed on its banners the achievements of socialist transformation, which was already beginning in the world, a Party that placed the interests of its class and downtrodden above all else in life.

In the infant Communist Party, Foster found such a party. After

joining its ranks, he never left it. He brought to the Communist Party a great heritage of American struggle. For as you know, like the roots of a great oak, the roots of William Z. Foster, while respected and honored in all parts of the world, are deep in the soil of the aspirations, hopes, and struggles of our people.

Foster was a man of the people. He was close to them. He had a deep concern for their welfare.

Foster was a union man. He was a disciplined member of the Communist Party. He vigorously fought for his ideas when he thought he was right. Once the question was resolved, then he became a militant champion for the ideas of the majority, for the policies of the Party.

He merged with the masses and grew with their struggles, retaining from each stage of struggle the best. From the struggles of the I.W.W. he retained its militancy and a closeness to the grass roots, from the mass production strikes a sweeping style of organization and struggle, from the early Socialist movement the ideals and dreams and agitation for a new society. And in the Communist Party he acquired fully the science of Marxism-Leninism, the great science and art of political leadership of the vast millions essential for victory, to which he made important contributions. This rich heritage he left to the Party. *We will treasure it!*

Foster was boundless in his loyalty to Marxism-Leninism to which he

made world-recognized contributions in his books, which have been translated into many languages. He fought for the purity of Marxist-Leninist principles, without which there can be no progress. He fought the enemy not only outside but inside the Party. He was the uncompromising enemy of all forms of opportunism, which are ever present as a result of capitalist pressures. He fought revisionism, sectarianism, and the acute danger of liquidationism—that is, the danger of renouncing the Party or curbing its great role of leadership.

It was characteristic of Foster that he never evaded a struggle, but like the mighty warrior he was, he was always in the thick of it, except when illness made it absolutely impossible.

Foster was the chairman of the Party through its most stormy years. Like C. E. Ruthenberg, the first secretary of the Party, he urged the Party not to fear difficulties and attacks. Difficulties are unavoidable in a class society and one grows strong in fighting and overcoming them. The capitalist class is brutal, but it is decaying and dying. *Defeats and set-backs are only temporary.*

During the cold-war years of McCarthyism, Foster and the Party urged iron resistance against the attacks. The Party was severely persecuted, but under Foster's and Gene Dennis's leadership, it fought staunchly against imperialism and war and in its own defense.

The Party suffered heavy losses, it is true, but it did not bow to McCarthyism. The Communist Party held high the banners of democracy. It helped to bring about the defeat of McCarthy and his fascist gang.

Once again McCarthyism is on the rise and the Communist Party is attacked under the McCarran Act. When this monstrous law was passed, Foster declared emphatically that the Party will not register and outlaw itself with the Hitlerite lie that it is a foreign conspiracy. It will not betray the fight for Constitutional liberties and the Bill of Rights. And in the spirit of Foster we have firmly declared *now* that we will defend democracy and our Party with all our might. We will not register. We will not give way to the multimillionaire monopolists. We will fight and build our ranks stronger than ever.

Foster's death leaves a great gap in our ranks which must be filled. Bill never talked about death in the years of his illness. He talked only of life, and I'm sure if he could, he would say, like the immortal Joe Hill, "Don't mourn; organize!" It is for all of us to fill the gap, work harder and better, redouble efforts, organize for the great cause for which Foster stood and fought. Militant workers, too, will fill the gap and join the ranks of Foster's Party. Foster's name is imperishable. We say farewell, Bill, farewell, dear beloved comrade. We shall never forget you.