

The Steel Strike and Its Leader

Impressions of William Z. Foster and his description of the strike.

By J. S. P.

STILL WATERS RUN DEEP

"The workers who give their whole lives to industry should have at least as much to say about its management as the employers who give nothing and get everything. And I for one could go a whole lot further than that." The young man who spoke these words in Cooper Union the other night carries the burden of the steel strike. An American with a nasal twang and plenty of slang, a straight forward, mild-mannered man is William Z. Foster. He is no orator as Brutus is . . . but only speaks right out of what he does know. His countenance speaks faith and courage — frank blue eyes, firm mouth and lofty forehead. He is a man whom one could trust — without egotism, without self-conceit, seeking only the welfare of the workers and the triumph of labor.

To those whose conception of a revolutionary labor leader is a fire-eating orator William Z. Foster is a surprise. He has been trained in a school of labor organization where the watchword is action and not talk. He is a general of an army not a demagogue. And for that the more feared and hated.

"They do not love me in Pittsburgh," he said. "They are working for a chance to frame me up. They are only waiting to decide on the best method. Remember if you read that dynamite has been found in my house that I have told you it is a frame-up. That's what they did to Tom Mooney, and that's what they're trying to do to me." So speaks the calm young man and quietly goes about his duty.

A STRIKE WITHOUT MEETINGS

But the steel strike needs no co-workers for the simple reason that there are no meetings. The steel striker has no chance to meet with his fellows all day in big halls, with speakers to tell him the latest news, with a concert once in a while, for his entertainment. Such luxurious strikes have not been heard of in Pennsylvania. There the striker covers in his little hovel, fearful even to venture upon the street. Nor is he secure even within his own four walls. Some day he may look up to see the state constabulary, man and horse, riding into his kitchen and dragging him forth to prison.

No, there are no meetings in the steel strike. For Pennsylvania is the one spot on earth that is unsafe for democracy. The primal rights of free speech and free assembly do not exist in a community which is owned body and soul by the Steel Trust. "The Steel Trust owns everything in Pennsylvania," says Foster, "It owns the banks and the railroads, it owns the stores and the meeting places, it owns the churches and the schools, it owns the government." What is true of the United States in general, is especially and particularly true of Pennsylvania. It is the *Servile State* where all men are slaves, hand and brain, to an overbearing capitalism. Those great, black mills with the fiery furnaces within seem indeed

temples to the Moloch of Industry, where as to the evil god of old, human sacrifice is made. Hearts, hope, health, youth, life, are offered up by day and night to the great God of Steel.

Free speech does not exist in Pennsylvania. It is not without great efforts that the Steel Corporation has succeeded in holding down the lid in the steel industry for well nigh thirty years. Every method of repression and persecution known to modern capitalism and militarism has been used to keep the steel workers ignorant and divided. Circumstances favor the steel corporation. Their workers speak three languages, and cannot communicate with each other. They are burdened with large families, often seven to ten children and the sight of hungry little ones drives a man to accept slavery. They are under the domination of all sorts of false institutions and leaders, who use the appeal of nationalism or religion to still their aspirations for freedom. Many cannot read nor write in any language, few in English. The great majority are so underpaid that they have not the physical or moral strength to strike the scales from their own eyes. Friendless, speechless, blind, alone they struggle toward the light.

And now when these workers begin to see, more stringent measures are necessary to keep them down. They can hire no hall. The owners refuse to rent. The mayors refuse permits. Street meetings even of five are considered "riots" those who meet run the risk of being shot or clubbed by the cossacks. "Even the horses are trained," says Foster. "They throw the men to the horses who trample on them." The cossacks always ride on the sidewalks to terrorize the peaceful population and create "riots." They ride down upon peaceful meetings held in the open on land owned by the workers and drive them right and left unmercifully, cracking heads with their clubs. The survivors who remain in their hands are haled to court where they are held in \$3,000 bail and over and are fined and imprisoned for "inciting to riot."

THE TRAGIC DEATH OF FANNIE SELLINS

Fannie Sellins was a light burning in the darkness. Through her efforts in various trades an entire district had been organized. Then she threw her strength into the steel strike. Her energy and magnetism drew the steel workers together and the mills of Vandergrift, Breckenridge, New Kensington, Leechburg and Apollo were organized. But she had committed the deadly sin. She had sinned against the Steel Corporation. And she was marked for destruction.

There was bad blood between the deputy sheriffs and the miners in the plant of the Allegheny Steel Company. The sheriffs set out to "get" them. Loaded with drink and shot guns they rode into town down the main street. Encountering some strikers they began to shoot wildly. Fannie

Sellins was near. She saw children in the danger zone. With true mother's instinct (she herself was a grandmother) she rushed toward the children to guide them to a place of safety. And they shot her in the back. She fell — and they shot her again — and again. One leading man stood by, a pillar of society. He seized a gun and with the handle crushed in the skull of the unfortunate woman. The man who murdered Fannie Sellins is out on \$2,500 bail and capitalist justice finds the deceased "killed in a riot by persons unknown." She had loved the workers not wisely but too well!

HOW THEY WON FREE SPEECH IN DONORA

In the great steel town of Donora for example the steel corporation dominates every phase of life. The workers were finally driven to buy a couple of lots, so that they might have a place of their own where they could meet. Everything was done to keep the workers away. Counter attractions were started, band concerts and ball games. Then the meetings were picketed by foremen and hired thugs, to intimidate the men. But still they came! Then the workers decided to get even with Donora. Bill Ferney, their organizer, was a mine worker. At his request the miners of the neighborhood decided to boycott Donora. The merchants watched their sales going down. One after another shops were forced to close up. Then the tradesmen sent a plea to the miners. "Please come back to Donora!" And the miners replied "Not until there is free speech in Donora." And soon the halls began to open to the steel workers.

THE WEAPON OF THE DISCHARGE

The Steel Trust has a worse weapon than club or gun. That is starvation. In many towns any man who dared take out a union card or even attend a union meeting was discharged at once. Literally thousands of steel workers were so terrorized as the work of organization progressed. Gunmen and spies were lined up before meeting halls taking note of all who attended. And with diabolical cruelty the corporation always picked out for discharge those who were least able to endure it, the old, the fathers of families, the weak. There was the case of Charlie Seeger. He could not read nor write. Yet through years of patient effort he had worked himself up to a well-paying job. Then the work of organization began. Charlie Seeger could not hear but somehow he received the message of solidarity, and joined the union. The next day he was discharged. Where could he go, deaf mute that he was? What could he do to get a living for himself and his family. For weeks he wandered around well-nigh mad, until the organizer in pity sent a letter of resignation for him to the manager and secured his reinstatement. Thousands of other discharged steel workers are now face to face with the world with-

out much more equipment than Charlie Seeger.

WHAT THE STRIKE MEANS

The steel strike is of greater significance than even organized labor yet recognizes. It is the final test of strength with organized capitalism. It is a gigantic organization of labor fighting a gigantic force of entrenched property — twice as large a strike, says its leader, as has even been fought before. Between 300,000 and 400,000 men are out who with their families are a population of millions. This is a strike of the unskilled. The demands are for the eight hour day which the steel workers of England, France, Italy and Germany have already won. They demand also the reinstatement of those who have been discharged, one day's rest in seven, the abolition of the 24 hour shift every two weeks, an increase in wages to provide for a decent standard of living, double pay for overtime, the principle of seniority in hiring and firing, abolition of physical examinations on hiring. It is an industrial strike on a scale never before dreamed of in the history of the American Federation of Labor. Twenty-four craft unions are combining to issue the challenge to the Steel Corporation. Upon the result rests the decision as to whether American labor is to be slave or free. The workers of every other industry will feel the effect of the steel struggle. If the steel workers are defeated, reactionary employers in every other industry will take heart. If the steel workers win, their victory will increase the power and prestige of the entire American labor movement. The English steel workers have telegraphed their good wishes in these words: "You are asking for what we have had for many years."

FOSTER AND HIS IDEA

William Z. Foster is a man with a past. He was one of the followers of Bill Hayward in the I. W. W. and went to Europe in 1912 to study the labor movement. What he saw in France, Germany and other countries convinced him that the industrial struggle was the most vital conflict for the workers, and that emancipation could be achieved only through industrial organization and the industrial strike. As for the American labor movement, let him present his views in his own words:

"At Berlin a few months ago, Jouhaux, Secretary of the Confederation Generale du Travail, in a large public meeting advised them to give up their attempt to create a new movement and to get into the conservative unions where they could make their influence felt. At Budapest he extended the same advice to the I. W. W., via myself, and I am frank to say that it would be strictly good tactics for both movements to adopt it. I am satisfied from my observations that the only way for the I. W. W. to have the workers adopt and practice principles of revolutionary unionism . . . is to give up its attempt to create a new labor movement, turn itself into a propaganda league, get into the organized labor movement and, by building up better fighting machines within the old unions than those possessed by our reactionary enemies, revo-

lutionize those unions even as our French syndicalist fellow-workers have so successfully done with theirs.

"Among the syndicalists the sentiment is strong and growing ceaselessly, that the tactics are bad and that endeavors should be made inside of the A. F. of L.; that it is in the existing unions that the syndicalists must struggle without ceasing."

In a book on syndicalism published soon after his return in 1912 Foster gives an excellent account of the principles and practice of revolutionary trade-unionism. He is apparently now trying out his own theories, and has achieved astonishing success in the packing industry and the steel industry. He is not ashamed to work quietly, and achieves his ends by clear thinking and fundamental organization. It is a question whether the steel workers with such heavy odds against them can win in this struggle with the Colossus, but if victory is possible with any leader it is possible with William Z. Foster. He is indeed a man with a past. But in the words of Oscar Wilde we will hope that he still has a beautiful past in store for him in the future.