

Foster's Leadership to the Needle Trades Workers

by Rose Wortis

I FIRST MET and heard Comrade Foster at a meeting in 1921 at Webster Hall. He had just returned from a trip to Europe, including the Soviet Union. He spoke of the problems of the European labor movement, the sharp differences between the class collaboration policies of the Social-Democrats and the class struggle policies of the Communists. And he stressed the urgent need for unity in the labor movement, on the basis of militant policies in the interests of the working class.

In his warm, intimate, conversational tone, in language familiar to the average American worker, he spoke of the world-shaking events which brought the Socialist Soviet Union into existence as only one could speak who had not only tasted the full measure of capitalist exploitation, but had acquired a deep insight into the class basis of that exploitation. All misrepresentations of events in the Soviet Union seemed to have faded away. It also seemed so simple. The workers had overthrown the Czar's regime and the corrupt Kerensky government.

They had taken power and were learning to run their country in the interests of the people.

What impressed me most were the lessons he drew from his experiences for the American labor movement. He pictured the paradise that our country with its highly developed industries could be if run in the interests of the common people. He spoke with great concern about the fallacies of the reactionary craft union policies of the A. F. of L., which were eating at the very vitals of the trade-union movement, leaving millions of workers in the mass production industries a prey to ruthless exploitation.

His concluding remarks dealt with the militancy of the American workers and the need for organizing and consolidating the progressive forces around a common program to lead the trade unions out of the morass they were in. This hit home. I had been active in the International Ladies Garment Workers Union for a number of years, both as a rank and filer and as an officer. Our union as well as other needle trade unions had been

born in sharp struggle against the sweat shop system. In the '20's however, the Social-Democratic leaders in their efforts to achieve "respectability" had through various class collaboration schemes, such as the "protocol" and the "governor's commission," gradually frittered away the workers' gains and substituted the policy of class peace for the policy of class struggle.

There was mass dissatisfaction with the leadership and policies of the union. However, the movement was not well organized, and had no definite program. Besides including some Communists, the leadership was in the hands of anarchists, syndicalists, and Social-Democrats. The movement was pulled in different directions. As a result, the spontaneous revolts which developed from time to time were either dissipated because of lack of leadership or put down by the ruling machine and its leaders bought over.

The Webster Hall meeting addressed by Comrade Foster marked a turning point in the work of the Left elements in the needle trades. We found common ground with workers in other industries in our struggle for clean, militant unions. With the organization of the Trade Union Educational League under Foster's leadership, the rank-and-file movement in our industries took on an organized character and evolved a comprehensive program based on the needs of the workers.

Our movement won mass support among the needle trade workers, at times reaching as high as 75 percent of the union membership (the 1925 convention of the I.L.G.W.U. in Philadelphia).

What was Comrade Foster's role in these momentous struggles which left their mark, not only on the needle trade unions, but on the general labor movement, exemplified especially by the International Fur and Leather Workers' Union, which is today playing a leading role as the outstanding progressive union in the country?

The fundamental lesson we learned from Comrade Foster was his confidence in the workers, confidence that when issues are clearly presented by the Party to the workers, and the rank and file is given an opportunity of formulating and executing union policies, the class-struggle character of the unions will be guaranteed and the support will go to those leaders and to that program which best represent their interests.

It was this confidence in the power and judgment of the rank and file, inspired by Comrade Foster, that gave the struggles in the needle trades their dramatic mass character. It enabled us to undertake unprecedented actions, such as the great Bronx Coliseum meeting in 1923 attended by 50 thousand workers, and the stoppage in the cloak and dress industry in

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1925, which brought tens of thousands of workers out into the streets in support of the militant Joint Action Committee. It enabled us to introduce mass picket lines to battle and defeat the professional gangsters hired by the employers and the reactionary union officials, and to achieve such victories as the agreement with the Sigman Administration in 1925, which brought the re-instatement of the expelled members, officers and locals, and substantial concessions on our program such as more adequate representation at the union bodies, etc. It helped the furriers to defeat the joint conspiracy of the Right-wing officials, employers and William Green to sell out the strike of 1925, with the result that the workers won their justified demands.

Even in those unions, as in the I.L.G.W.U., where the Left wing was later defeated, this was achieved only when the Right leadership demagogically adopted some of the basic planks of the Left-wing program. In the I.L.G.W.U. to this day the Left wing has retained the support of a considerable part of the membership, particularly in the larger centers.

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Another thing we learned from Comrade Foster was flexibility in tactics, but not at the expense of basic principles. To cite but one example during one period in the struggles of the needle trades work-

ers, when the terror of the bureaucracy against the rank and file became widespread, some of the militants began to think in terms of seeking the aid of the capitalist courts. Comrade Foster's advice was against such a course of action, in view of the strong tradition of the labor movement against intervention of capitalist courts in the internal affairs of trade unions. The only way to break the terror, said Comrade Foster, is to mobilize the rank and file. To win us to his position, he related some of his rich experiences in the labor movement and the role of the capitalist courts. The answer was obvious. We then proceeded to mobilize the workers and succeeded in driving the professional gangsters from the garment center.

To the needle trades workers, Foster was more than a progressive trade-union leader. To us he was champion of the unemployed, of the Negro people, of the Jewish people, of all minority groups. To us, he represented the most advanced leader of our class, the true proponent of Socialism in our country.

Their confidence in the Communist Party was greatly strengthened when Foster returned to his proper place at the helm of the Party. Thousands of progressive needle trade workers, together with others, will join in celebrating his 70th birthday. Today, when the forces

of reaction and fascism are preparing for a new war, when the reactionary trade-union leaders, betraying the interests of the workers are making common cause with the Wall Street warmongers and Nazi generals for a war against the Soviet Union and the People's Democracies, the clear, far-sighted leadership of Comrade Foster and the Party which he leads is needed more than ever before. It is the

only guarantee that the aspiration of the American people for peace and friendship with the people of the Soviet Union, China and other countries will be realized in a world free from the scourge of war.

Long life and good health to you, Comrade Foster, true son of the American working class and its leader in the struggle for peace, security, and Socialism.

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