
Memories of C.E. Ruthenberg

by William W. Weinstone:

Excerpt from an Interview

Conducted by Oakley C. Johnson

and Ann Rivington, 1940

Handwritten notes in C.E. Ruthenberg Papers, Ohio Historical Society, Box 9, Folder 6, Microfilm reel 5. Very heavily edited by Tim Davenport.

I first met C.E. Ruthenberg as a delegate to the Left Wing Conference in June 1919.¹ The group's program was to knit together the Left Wing. There were there I.E. Ferguson and William Bross Lloyd and others from Chicago. Ruthenberg was from Ohio, which from 1912 had a marked left wing tradition — it was called “Red Ohio.”

Ruthenberg at the time symbolized more than anything else the unifying force of the Left Wing. He was from Ohio, an industrial area. His language was clear cut and uncompromising. He was an organizer. He had a strong personality and was American. He was physically well-built like a longshoreman — strong, handsome, graceful, and calm. He spoke in measured words. In a young Party he was a tower of strength. One felt *good* about having Ruthenberg there.

Once at the Left Wing Conference William Bross Lloyd, the chairman, was being assaulted from all sides over a ruling of the chair. He appealed to Ruthenberg for a ruling. C.E. replied in quiet phrases, like Robert's Rules of Order, straightening out the tangle. People felt “here is someone who is strong, on whom one could rely.” There was a dignity about him that everyone appreciated. He rarely raised his voice. In speaking he used one short, club-like gesture with his fist, striking downward and to one side.

At the time here was a limited, dogmatic conception in the young party. When speaking Ruthenberg would bring in images — like how a pond-lilly suddenly bursts forth, which he used to show the birth of the new society.

¹ Held in New York City from June 21 to 24, 1919.

Ruthenberg was a unifying force — not always in the formal programmatic sense, but in the sense that he embodied an unwavering support for revolutionary Marxism, which the Russian Revolution had brought to life. He thereby was appealing to the foreign political sections of the East. On the other hand, his own person being American was appealing to native Americans of the Midwest and West. Thus, because of his integrity and position, he had the confidence of all sections. He unified the foreign-born and American elements, the main split until 1921. There was no challenge of his leadership from any of the groupings. There was a recognition that he represented the political wing of the Socialist Party, which was necessary for a complete merger.

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Even when the majority was against Ruthenberg in 1924, they did not try to displace him. It was Lovestone in Ruthenberg's group that the Majority wanted to eliminate. The factional struggle was extremely distasteful to him — it went against his grain. He was above all an organizing force, and factions disorganize. The Ruthenberg group was referred to as the "Lovestone group" and the Foster group was referred to as the "Cannon group." Ruthenberg was accused at the time, by Lovestone particularly, of being "a man above the battle." C.E. and Foster both had a prestige that extended beyond the factional fight.

Ruthenberg had an utter contempt for James Cannon. Cannon was lazy and unproductive and this was why C.E. disliked him. Ruthenberg was a bit overstressed as an administrator and everything had to go in an orderly way. He spent Sunday balancing the books. The orderliness he learned from capitalist business. C.E. was in charge of the Party purse, and all had confidence in him.

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Ben Gitlow had been a Socialist Assemblyman. He had attended the June Left Wing Conference. Gitlow had a bull-like voice developed for public speaking. Between Gitlow and Ruthenberg there was no love lost. C.E. said to his friends a number of times that he did not get along well with Gitlow in jail. Factional struggle brought them together rather than anything else.

Ruthenberg never liked jail. He was an active person, a hard worker. The Party possessed him. He didn't like Sing Sing and even planned an escape. God damn, he sure didn't love it.

He was at Sing Sing with Ferguson from Chicago. Ferguson left the party. He was honest and likable but he could never become a Bolshevik.

C.E. also hated Louis Fraina — he regarded him as a God damned leftist. C.E. expelled him and would never let him back.

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C.E. — he was always referred to as “C.E.” by those close to him — used to travel and speak a great deal. I met him in a number of towns. He always had something with him to read. Once he had a book by William J. Locke, the novelist in his arm. He was fond of lyric poetry. He would quote Tennyson and Burns. He had an emotional restraint which hid a deep emotional well.

Ruthenberg used a lucid, straight, argumentative building up in his speeches. But he also had a deep, passionate feeling for life. Externally, he was not so warm at first. He seemed cold. But only outwardly.

He liked theater and he liked the movies — he often went to the movies. He liked to drive around and to chat with those with whom he worked.

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I was Assistant Secretary of the Workers Party to C.E. for a time.² Letters were destroyed in the underground days. Very few remain now. Ruthenberg was a good man for carrying out decisions, and he let me know what they were. C.E. went into all *details* of work.

He wrote leaflets on current events, such as one on the Steel Strike and another on the Miners' Strike. He always carried Marxist pamphlets and books. He read *all* of them — the *Communist Manifesto*, *Wage-Labor and Capital*, *Value, Price, and Profit*, *Capital*.... He

² Weinstone was the acting Executive Secretary of the Workers Party in 1923 during the period of Ruthenberg's legal embroilments in Michigan. He had previously served from Oct. 15, 1921 to Feb. 22, 1922 as Executive Secretary of the underground Communist Party of America.

had a splendid memory for formulations and was himself apt at formulating programs, and so on.

Ruthenberg's knowledge of Marxism was shown at the trials at Bridgman.³ He was perhaps a little mechanical in interpretation, a little narrow. He was good on principles, but limited on tactics.

At Bridgman, when Ruthenberg was fighting for Foster, he gave the finest presentation of Communism, the dignity of the movement, the virility of Communism, the scientific postulates. Ruthenberg certainly helped to save Foster at that time.

There is no doubt that Ruthenberg was moving in the direction of unity, of solidarity with all, with the moving out of factions. If he had lived he would have moved in that direction. C.E. was a Comintern man. He never had a doubt at any time, no matter what, he was with the Comintern. This was really an expression of the American proletariat passing over into Marxism, a realization of the great role America was destined to play, bound up with the international revolution. Ruthenberg had not a bit of the Midwest provincialism of Populism that others had. He was a granite rock for the Comintern. Never, never would C.E. be budged off of great esteem for the Russian Revolution and for Lenin.

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Ruthenberg was a fighter against revolutionary romanticism. He just had good common sense. Now and then he would be influenced by a mechanical verbalism, but by himself he walked away from it.

When C.E. was in jail he got Lenin's *Left Wing Communism, An Infantile Disorder*. He read it in jail in the spring of 1921. He took to the thesis — it was timely. He broke loose from the narrow bounds of the language federation groups, but he was never an American chauvinist — he remained very close to the foreign-language groups. He understood their value from his experience in Ohio.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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³ The trials of Foster and Ruthenberg were actually held in the neighboring town of St. Joseph, the county seat of Berrien County, Michigan. Bridgman was itself a tiny rural hamlet.