

Communists, Socialists and Hero Worship

An Answer to the Letter of a Sympathizer

By BERTRAM D. WOLFE

In The DAILY WORKER of April 26th was printed a letter from a sympathizer, S. Richarts, in which he objects to the amount of space given to Ruthenberg's life and work in The DAILY WORKER. He feels that it is beneath the Communist dignity of "grown-up scientifically-minded people." He compares it to "the Socialist Party slop about Debs. 'Tho jailed he speaketh.'" He feels that "this sort of thing has not helped the Socialist Party" and "will not help our cause."

Ruthenberg and Debs.

In the first place I think Comrade Richarts makes a big mistake in comparing our treatment of Ruthenberg with the Socialist Party's treatment of Debs. It was the fact that the rest of the paper contradicted Debs' words that marked the degeneracy of the Party he did not have the courage to break with. It was the contradiction between the militant spirit of struggle he stood for and the cringing spirit of class collaboration in which the officialdom of the S. P. is acting. It was the contrast between his "criminal" record and the Party's "respectability," his desire for unity of all labor forces and the S. P.'s splitting tactics; his friendship for the Russian revolution and the Oneal-Cahan hatred of it; his participation in united fronts and the S. P.'s sabotage of them—in short, it was the contrast between words and deeds that made the use of the heroic figure of poor old Debs as a fig-leaf to cover the S. P.'s naked betrayal of the class struggle so disgusting.

But as to honoring Debs, reprinting his speeches, commemorating his life, even we who see his weaknesses do that. And I think we will do more of it as the memory fades of his final failure to break with a degenerating and decaying party that was feeding on his name and reputation, and as the things he stood for—unity, solidarity, industrial unionism, struggle against war, uncompromising class struggle—stand out more and more.

Richarts Ignores History.

You say, Comrade Richarts, that "revolutionary parties, scientifically-minded people" don't do that. How about the Russian Party with its Lenin; the German Party with its Liebknecht and Luxemburg; the French Party with its heroes of the Commune? Surely the workingclass also

has its heroes, and greater than the heroes of the bourgeoisie. Greater, for they can think as well as fight (therein Debs was inferior to Ruthenberg) and greater because they serve not a class alone, but in the long run, all mankind.

Not Hero Worshipers.

True, we are not hero-worshippers in the sense that we do not believe that great men make history. But our theory of history does not do away with great men. On the contrary it explains them as the leaders of movements, as those who see clearest and therefore point the way, as those who march with surest and swiftest step and therefore march in front, as those who help to build the movement that in turn "builds" them. We know that without an army the greatest general is nothing but we know also that a good army needs a good general and without officers an army is no army.

But of what importance is a leader such as Debs or Ruthenberg after he is dead?

Tradition Plays a Part.

To answer that question, Comrade Richarts, you must understand the part that revolutionary tradition plays in the building of a revolutionary movement. The tradition of the Haymarket martyrs gave us May Day. The tradition of the French revolution and of '48 gave France the Paris Commune. The tradition of the Paris Commune gave Russia 1905 and the tradition of 1905 gave us 1917.

The bourgeoisie tries to make us forget our workingclass heroes and our workingclass traditions of struggle. It tries to tell us that "May Day is un-American" tho it originated in America. That "revolution is un-American" tho America was born of a revolution. It tries to make us forget the left wing of the American revolution, the Daniel Shays and Thomas Paines and those who are too prominent to be forgotten, the Patrick Henrys and Thomas Jeffersons—it conceals their revolutionary character. Because the master class controls the schools, the press, the church—our memory is painfully short. We must struggle to preserve the precious heritage of workingclass heroes and workingclass struggles. Without such a continuous and growing revolutionary tradition each generation must begin again from the beginning. Our class will grow in ripeness as we

learn to treasure that tradition and accumulate it and utilize it and spread it to all our class.

American Traditions.

In the new world war that is approaching the tradition of Debs and Ruthenberg—the tradition of struggle against imperialist war—will prove a priceless American heritage. Above all that of Ruthenberg, who, a far greater thinker than Debs, was the first American to clearly formulate the struggle to change imperialist war into class war, into civil war. It is our task to make the whole workingclass remember and understand and build upon that tradition. Let us conserve and spread the memory of it lest they tell us "Resistance to Imperialist War—the conversion of imperialist war into civil war—is 'un-American'."

And Ruthenberg represented much more than that. As great in courage as Debs, he was far greater in clarity. The constitution of our party is his work. Its most important theses were written by him. He saw our class as a whole, its allies and its enemies and its relation to other classes more clearly than any of the rest of us.

Pointing out and avoiding their errors, we must keep alive the memory of Debs and De Leon. Yes, and we must revive the memory of other American workingclass heroes (such as Sylvis) whom we have permitted to become nameless. But above all we must keep alive and carry to all our class the memory of Ruthenberg for he is the outstanding figure the American workingclass has so far produced. The DAILY WORKER talks too much about Ruthenberg? My complaint is that it does not talk about him enough.

Chicago Launches Drive to Increase Subscription List

CHICAGO, June 13.—A special committee, headed by S. T. Hammersmark, Chicago representative of The DAILY WORKER has issued a call for a subscription drive to increase the paper's circulation.