

William Z. Foster Is Dead at 80; Ex-Head of Communists in U.S.

Illness Prevented His Trial Under Smith Act—Was in Moscow for Treatment

MOSCOW, Sept. 1 (UPI)—William Z. Foster, former head of the Communist party of the United States and three-time candidate for the United States Presidency, died here tonight in a sanatorium at the age of 80.

The cause of his death was not immediately made known.

Mr. Foster had been suffering for years from a heart ailment that had prevented his trial on charges of conspiracy to overthrow the United States Government by force and violence.

He had come to the Soviet Union early this year for medical treatment and was visited on his eightieth birthday, Feb. 25, by Premier Khrushchev.

He was paralyzed almost completely, a result of a stroke, when he arrived, but was reported slowly regaining the use of his limbs. His wife, the former Esther Abramovitch, was with him when he died.

Talent for Political Survival

Mr. Foster showed unusual talent for survival as one of the country's top Communists.

He maintained his leadership through bitter factional rows that shelved other Communist leaders, who then became heads of angry but futile splinter groups.

He glided neatly through the dark maze of the Communist party line. When he was a labor organizer he avoided being lynched, a fate that overtook Frank H. Little, a fellow organizer, at Butte, Mont., in 1917.

William Z. Foster was born in Taunton, Mass., on Feb. 25, 1881. The Z either stood for Zebulon or was simply a letter to add a little dash to a name that otherwise was easy to forget. Mr. Foster was reticent about this and other details of his life except where they concerned him as a child oppressed by poverty or a worker engaged in what he termed the war of "class against class."

Mr. Foster's father was a poor Irish immigrant who washed railroad cars. He took his family to Philadelphia when William was 6. William Foster's recollections of his early life in the slums around Philadelphia's Sixteenth and Kate Streets, as recounted in his memoirs, was an unrelieved story of filth, crime, horror and poverty. He was selling newspapers at 7.

Sailor, Fruit Picker, Miner

From 1897 to 1917, Mr. Foster was a deep-water sailor, lumber worker, fruit picker, streetcar motorman, worker in a chemical rendering plant, miner and circus canvas man, among other things.

The pattern in each job was the same. He was hired. He found working conditions terrible and pay low. He urged his fellow workers, sometimes with success, to organize. He was detected by company spies and dismissed.

In odd moments, in a windjammer fo'c'sle or a lumber camp bunkhouse, William Foster read the literature of the social revolution and practiced the pedestrian and didactic style of writing that was to characterize him.

Originally, he was a Socialist. In 1909 he became a member of the Industrial Workers of the World, the I. W. W., or "Wobblies." On freight trains in the West he took part in pitched battles between the Wobblies and the police as he hoboed from job to job. Sometimes the Wobblies won. Sometimes they were beaten and jailed.

Was A. F. L. Delegate

By the end of World War I, during which Mr. Foster had taken part in radical demonstrations and labor organizing drives in several parts of the country, he was a skilled union delegate of the American Federation of Labor.

He became nationally known when he organized the unskilled section of the steelworkers in the bitter but unsuccessful strike that started on Sept. 22, 1919.

Mr. Foster took part in the complicated internal squabbles that began when two Communist groups were formed from defecting left-wing Socialist groups in 1919 under the impetus of the October, 1917, Bolshevik revolution in Russia. From 1919 to 1930 Communist groups operated under titles with and without the name Communist.

Mr. Foster was the Communist party candidate for President in 1924, 1928 and 1932. The number of votes he polled rose from 33,316 in 1924 to 102,881 in 1932.

Jailed in 1930

On March 6, 1930, Mr. Foster, Robert Minor, Israel Amter and Harry Raymond were arrested after a demonstration in Union Square in favor of a "hunger march" on Washington. All served six months in New York City prisons.

Also in 1930, Mr. Foster was briefly general secretary of the Communist party, a post later occupied by Earl Browder. In 1945 Mr. Foster was one of the leaders of the movement that deposed Mr. Browder during a violent and unexpected shift in the party line as received from Moscow.

Gradually Mr. Foster became a sort of perpetual national chairman of the Communist party of the United States.

On July 20, 1948, he and eleven other members of the National Board of the Communist party were indicted under the Smith Act. It was charged that they had conspired to teach and advocate the overthrow of the Government by force and violence.

Because of his heart ailment, Mr. Foster was not brought to trial with the others, who were convicted and sentenced to prison. Mr. Foster continued to



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William Z. Foster

write articles and pamphlets for the Communist cause.

In 1956 he found little difficulty in explaining the complete change in the party line when Stalin was condemned by his successors in Moscow. Mr. Foster explained that the regular party members had been loyal to Stalin only to prevent a split in the party.

In April, 1956, it was disclosed that Mr. Foster was among Communist party members against whom the Government was moving to annul Social Security benefits. It was testified at hearings that Mr. Foster's salary as a party official had been about \$75 a week.

A subsequent ruling by a Government legal officer held that employes of the Communist party were eligible for Social Security benefits. Mr. Foster and his wife received payments of \$91.50 a month.

Denounced Party Shift

In the fall of 1956 Mr. Foster staged his last fight to maintain control of the American Communist party.

In September of that year he first voted a "qualified yes" on a draft resolution of the party's national committee to be submitted to the national convention the following February.

The statement confessed past errors and proposed an extensive party reform.

After a few days of reflection Mr. Foster changed his vote to "no" (making the count 12 to 1 in favor of the resolution) and criticized the party shift as a "strong Right tendency" to downgrade Lenin and to transform the Communist party into an "amorphous" Marxist party.

For all practical purposes that was the end. In February he was elected one of twenty members of the new national committee. But in May he was ushered into retirement with the title of chairman emeritus, a post to which he was re-elected two years later.

In October, 1957, he suffered a stroke but continued writing for the Communist press.

Two years later he went to court to try to get his indictments (for conspiring to teach and advocate violent overthrow of the Government and membership in the Communist party) lifted so that he could go to the Soviet Union for medical treatment.

Permission was twice denied but in December, 1960, the Government issued a passport to him and he prepared to leave the United States.