Philadelphia “Skittereen” and William Z. Foster: The Childhood of an American Communist

THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA OCCUPIES a central place in American history as the home and birthplace of a number of influential radicals and dissenters, but it is rarely remembered that the city shaped the early life of William Z. Foster, a prominent twentieth-century labor organizer and Communist leader. Although Foster was born in Taunton, Massachusetts, in 1881, his immigrant parents moved his family to a small Irish enclave in South Philadelphia, known to its inhabitants as “Skittereen,” in the winter of 1887. It was while living in this impoverished neighborhood that Foster gained his earliest introduction to industrial labor, unionism, and radical politics. He left Philadelphia in 1900 at the age of nineteen; from there the path was long and circuitous. Foster’s career as a socialist, Wobbly, anarcho-syndicalist, labor organizer, radical journalist, and Communist leader would span five decades. He joined the fledgling American Communist movement in 1921 at the age of forty, and he went on to become, perhaps, the single most influential political personality in the history of the party. When he died in Moscow in 1961 he was given a full state funeral attended by Leonid Brezhnev, Mikhail Suslov, and Nikita Khrushchev, and others prominent in the international Communist movement.1 Although his autobiographies left

1 The only complete biographical study of Foster is Arthur Zipser’s Workingclass Giant The Life of William Z. Foster (New York, 1981) Zipser, a former aide of Foster’s, puts forward a largely uncritical interpretation of Foster and his role in the Communist party. Because Foster was such a prominent figure in the party, it is inevitable that histories of American Communism contain discussions of his activities. Most thorough and insightful are the analyses of Theodore Draper in his The Roots of American Communism (New York, 1957) and American Communism and Soviet Russia (New York, 1960). Other discussions are contained in Harvey Klehr, The Heyday of American Communism (New York, 1984), Maurice Isserman, Which Side Were You On? (Middletown, 1982) and, If I Had a Hammer: The Decline of the Old Left and the Rise of the New (New York, 1988). Penetrating accounts by former acquaintances of Foster’s are in Joseph Starobin, American Communism in Crisis, 1943-1957 (Berkeley, 1972) and James P. Cannon, The First Ten Years of American Communism (New York, 1962). On Foster’s activities in the labor movement before he became a Communist, very little of a systematic nature has been written. The most complete is Philip S. Foner, History of the Labor Movement in the United States, vol 4 (9 vols, New York, 1965). On Foster’s work in the meatpacking and steel organizing campaigns during World War I, the most thorough treatments

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little room for a consideration of the subjective experiences of his childhood, there is no doubt that the circumstances of his early life, especially the poverty of the small neighborhood in Philadelphia in which he grew up, decisively shaped his political identity. When asked by a Senate committee investigating the great steel strike of 1919 to explain his political views, he began by asserting simply that “I am one who was raised in the slums.”

In considering his long and varied career, it has been difficult for historians to generalize about Foster. He was known above all as a political survivor in the Communist movement, an individual who “could abandon ideas with the greatest facility of any man I’ve ever met,” in the words of Earl Browder. As chairman of the Communist party from 1945 until his death in 1961, he worked assiduously to stifle reformist trends. Thus, his reputation is largely that of a hard-line party conservative who, despite his prominence, left little in the way of a political legacy for later generations of radicals. Few observers, however, would dispute that Foster’s career was characterized by a distinctive political style. He was, as his epitaph finally expressed, a “tireless fighter” for his vision of a socialist future. He exclaimed to a gathering of comrades at his seventy-fifth birthday that “I have hated capitalism all my life with every breath in my body!” When all the complexities of his personality and convictions are stripped away, what remains is a tenacious class warrior, driven by very deeply-held grievances against a social system he dedicated his life to destroying. Related to these intense feelings was his instinct always to distill rather than elaborate the Marxian idea of history as class struggle in his writings and speeches. What was important to him was the commit-

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Foster wrote two detailed autobiographies, *From Bryan to Stalin* (hereafter, BTS) (New York, 1937) and *Pages From a Worker's Life* (hereafter, PWL) (New York, 1939)

For an attempt to quantify the relative influence of party cadre, see Harvey Klehr, *Communist Cadre* (Stanford, 1978), 110

On Foster’s funeral in the Soviet Union, see “Foster Memorial Meeting in Moscow,” *Political Affairs* 40 (1961), 7-12

Theodore Draper interview with Earl Browder, Box 1, Folder 8, p 35, Theodore Draper Papers, Woodruff Library, Emory University

2 Senate Committee on Labor and Education, *Investigation of Strike in the Steel Industry, 66th Congress, 1st Sess, 1919*, 388 Although Foster moved from Philadelphia to Wyomissing (near Reading) in 1898, his autobiographies suggest that he visited his old neighborhood routinely see BTS, 23
ment and the struggle; the revolution would be brought about by a "militant minority" of dedicated combatants and a general staff of organizers, not intellectuals or theorists. Foster's autobiographical reflections strongly suggest that the origins of his rage can be traced at least partly to his childhood experiences in Philadelphia.4 Yet Foster's early life in Philadelphia and "Skittereen" endowed his personality with far more than a burning anger against the poverty in which his family lived. His own accounts suggest, but do not elaborate, a complex family dynamic that influenced his later radicalism. As a child and young man, William held an intense, if problematic, admiration for his father, a dedicated Fenian revolutionary. The character and style of William's politics as an adult, especially his essentially Leninist outlook, was partly an inheritance from his father's Irish radicalism. His relationship with his mother is far more difficult to ascertain; it must be carefully excavated from William's autobiographical fragments. Yet his final rejection of his mother's influence over his early life reverberated throughout Foster's political career. Foster's later definition of the place of family and religion in a revolutionary movement, as well as his overwhelming concern with organization, can be traced backward to his early attitudes towards this nearly anonymous woman.

In the introductions to the two autobiographies he wrote in the 1930s, Foster makes it clear that his narrative will be largely devoted to a consideration of the various "forces" that acted on him, causing him to "arrive at revolutionary conclusions, to become a Communist."5 In this article I will not only suggest a framework for understanding the connection between Foster's early family life and his later radicalism, I will also examine more fully the social and economic environment of which his family was an inextricable part. The influence of this milieu on Foster's later politics was profound, but more complex and mediated than he would perhaps admit. His most important memories in this regard revolve around not only the poverty and instability of the small enclave of Skittereen, but also around his first work experiences and the desperate environ-
ment created in Philadelphia by the Depression of the 1890s. Perhaps the salient event of Foster's youth was the social explosion surrounding Philadelphia's transit strike of 1895. Despite its ambiguous outcome, this strike was a formative experience for him. In a world of tenuous ethnic, family, and community cohesion, this strike and the violent protests it provoked in many Philadelphia neighborhoods represented for him a rare exercise in collective power and solidarity, his "earliest introduction to the class struggle," as he put it. It was a struggle to which he would devote himself unceasingly in his later life.

In Foster's portrayals of his childhood, only one personality emerges from the formidable welter of "forces" that influenced his life. His radicalism, he later reflected, was strongly influenced by the powerful revolutionary sentiments of his father, James. Even so, his father as well as his mother remain shadow figures, possessing neither complexity nor dimension in Foster's accounts. His reminiscences reveal no deep affection for either one, and he offers no elaboration at all when noting that both died while he was still in his teens. James was a militant Fenian who was twenty-seven years old when he arrived in the United States as a political refugee from Ireland in 1868. He had been identified as a seditionist in Ireland, agitating within the British garrison for armed revolt against British rule, and was forced to leave the country or face arrest.6

James's forced emigration brought him first to Taunton, where he worked as a carriage washer and shuffled his family between at least nine different addresses in the space of fifteen years. The elder Foster was a heavy drinker whose "special predilection" for fighting Irish policemen often landed him in jail. His wife, Elizabeth McLaughlin, was from Carlisle, England, and may have met James in Taunton. She was ten years younger than her husband and was a devout Catholic. While James professed his Catholicism, he was "somewhat negligent religiously." Neither James nor Elizabeth possessed any formal education. Of the two, Elizabeth had more experience as an industrial laborer; James, a stableman, was "of peasant stock." In the mid-nineteenth century, Elizabeth's family, which for generations had made their living producing

6 Foster, BTS, 9, 11-12; Foster, PWL, "Foreword"; Foster, "How I Became a Rebel," Labor Herald, July 1922; James's birthdate is from U.S. Bureau of the Census, Tenth Census of the U.S. for 1880, Taunton, Mass., Enumeration District 121.
textiles from the hand loom, experienced the terrifying deprivations that had attended the transition from the hand to the power loom in the British textile industry. Even though William recalled that Elizabeth's "political activities were nil," it is quite likely that his mother possessed at least some understanding of the traditions of labor unionism, which were well-developed in the English textile industry by the 1850s, particularly so in Carlisle.  

William Edward Foster (the Z was substituted much later) was born into a family where poverty often determined the failure of one of its most basic functions, reproduction. While it was not at all unusual for women to lose a number of children at birth in the nineteenth century, Elizabeth's children were especially vulnerable. Foster wrote of his mother that she bore twenty-three children during her lifetime, all but four of whom died in infancy. It is impossible to verify William's memory on this matter, but in Taunton between 1872 and 1887, Elizabeth gave birth to eight children, only three of whom survived into adulthood. Two children succumbed to respiratory infections common among the immigrant poor: croup and bronchitis. The details of James's and Elizabeth's relationship remains inscrutable to us, but the family raised one child whose baptismal record shows another woman's name listed as the mother, with James as the father. Whatever the nature of the Fosters' poverty, or the degree to which their lives were cushioned by networks of kinship, religion, or ethnicity in Taunton, they chose not to remain.

It is easy to imagine that the family's relocation in Philadelphia was a jolting experience. While the Fosters had moved frequently within the medium-sized mill town of Taunton, Philadelphia was a different

\[7\] Addresses for the Fosters in Taunton are from Taunton municipal birth records and Taunton City Directory (Boston, 1874-77) "William Z. Foster," memoir by Samuel Darcy in author's possession, Foster, BTS, 11-12, E. P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (New York, 1963), 542, 706

\[8\] Foster, BTS, 12, Taunton municipal birth and death records, St. Mary's Church (Taunton) baptismal records, Gretchen A. Condran, Henry Williams, and Rose Cheney, "The Decline in Mortality in Philadelphia from 1870 to 1930 The Role of Municipal Services," Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography 108 (1984), 155, Judith Walzer Leavitt, Brought to Bed Childbearing in America, 1750-1950 (New York, 1986), 72, Samuel H. Preston and Michael R. Haines, Fatal Years Child Mortality in Late Nineteenth-Century America (Princeton, 1991), 91-92 According to Preston and Haines, the estimated proportion of children dying before age five in a national sample (1900) was 19, for children whose fathers were laborers, 23, where both parents were foreign-born, 21
environment altogether. Census records and city directories reveal no other Fosters or McLaughlins living in the vicinity of the neighborhood where they settled, suggesting that the family could not rely on the support of clan or family loyalties upon arriving in the city. The city was, of course, an industrial metropolis by the 1880s. In the districts that housed the city's immigrant laborers, vast grids of rowhouses fronted rear alleyways where the hidden poor lived in squalid backyard houses and shacks. While visitors to Philadelphia were apt to remark on the cleanliness of the city or the beauty of huge Fairmount Park, ugly court and alley slums or "horizontal tenements" characterized districts like Southwark, Grays Ferry, Kensington, Port Richmond, and Moyamensing, the name of the area in South Philadelphia where the Fosters settled when they arrived from Taunton. These districts symbolized the ambiguous promise of Philadelphia's burgeoning industrial economy, moving one civic booster to remind observers that "wherever a great city is, extremes meet."  

William Foster wrote that one street on the block where his family settled, Kater Street, between Sixteenth and Seventeenth, "was a noisome, narrow side street, made up of several stables, a woodyard, a carpet cleaning works, a few whore-houses and many ramshackle dwellings." He described two alleyways on his blocks where there was no running water and where "half-starved, diseased, hopeless" people lived by "casual begging [and] petty thieving." An impoverished African-American community centered only two blocks north of the Foster residence harbored a "dangerous criminal class," according to W.E.B. DuBois's 1896 study, The Philadelphia Negro. Here were gathered "shrewd and sleek politicians, gamblers and confidence men"; prostitution thrived as it did in many other parts of the city. Despite the proximity of DuBois's Seventh Ward to Foster's neighborhood, Irish gang members routinely attacked African Americans who ventured into their district.  


An 1895 atlas portrays a residential alleyway of small wooden dwellings in the center of the block where James Foster and his family lived, but the Fosters occupied a three-story brick rowhouse, described as a tenement in its property deed, facing South Seventeenth Street. The atlas also gives an idea of the mixed economy of the area, suggesting that in this district in Philadelphia work and community were closely intermingled. The neighborhood at that time contained several small woolen mills, chemical and smelting works, as well as lumberyards, liveries, and stables. Horse-drawn streetcars were available in Philadelphia at the time, but they were generally too expensive to be utilized on a daily basis, and most manual workers lived within a mile or so of their place of employment. It is reasonable to assume that James worked in one of the stables near his home. As for Elizabeth, it was generally rare for the spouse in a working-class family in Philadelphia to be employed outside the home during this period. Foster remembered that his mother "did not work after marriage" and that the family was "dependent on [my] father's income."

Although many Irish immigrants lived in Moyamensing in the 1880s and 1890s, it could not have been accurately described as an ethnic "ghetto." Several of the streets near where the Fosters lived were almost entirely populated by Irish immigrants, but other blocks were more ethnically diverse. In this respect, the area was similar to many other districts in Philadelphia. In 1880 while 30 percent of the city's total population was of Irish stock, only one person in five of Irish background lived in the concentrated "clusters" of Irish ethnicity. Moreover, the Irish in each residential cluster tended to be heterogeneous with regard to occupation, unemployment rates, and extent of property holdings. In industrial Philadelphia, social differences in the workplace increasingly influenced choice of residence more than ethnicity; unskilled workers, in particular, became more isolated. Similarly, social class was steadily

becoming more important as a factor in determining membership in Irish fraternal or community organizations in Philadelphia during this period.\footnote{12}

Foster remembered that the small area within the old Moyamensing district that constituted his neighborhood was known as “Skittereen.” The street gang to which he belonged defined this district quite explicitly as extending from Sixteenth to Seventeenth streets, between South Street on the north and Fitzwater Street three blocks to the south. An examination of the census manuscripts of 1880 and 1900 reveals that this neighborhood was changing quite rapidly during the period the Fosters lived there. In 1880, seven years before the Fosters arrived, the area included a large number of poor Irish-born workers, especially on the smaller “side” streets. Kater Street, for instance, was home to mostly unskilled Irish laborers, the majority reporting their occupations as carters or wagon drivers. The Skittereen, however, was still diverse in ethnicity and occupation. While far from predominant, such skilled workers as carpenters, coachmakers, machinists, metalsmiths, printers, and jewelers resided on the block in which the Fosters lived, along with teamsters and other unskilled laborers. Some businessmen and proprietors with boarding servants resided on the block, as did immigrants from Germany, England, Scotland, Italy, France, and Cuba. Several doctors and one dentist lived on one street, while a “minister of the gospel” lived on another. In this diverse neighborhood, however, there was one significant sign of economic uncertainty. A large number of the residents reported that they had been unemployed at some point during the previous year. On several streets the proportion of those who were so listed comprised over half the residents that reported an occupation.\footnote{13}

By 1900, the year William Foster finally departed, this small section of Philadelphia was home to a large proportion of African-American unskilled workers, with some streets still showing a mixture of Irish and American-born white laborers. In 1880 the neighborhood had housed a


\footnote{13 Foster, PWL, 15, Tenth Census of the U S for 1880, Philadelphia, E D s 645-647}
significant minority of skilled workers, but the 1900 Census enumerated fewer of them among its residents. Many of the recently arrived African Americans listed birthplaces in the South and simply described themselves as laborers. On Kater Street, at the center of the block where the Fosters lived, of the approximately sixty-five individuals over age twenty who lived there in 1900, only five, comprising one family, had resided there in the 1880s. The fluid ethnic composition of Foster’s neighborhood is suggested by the fact that the three-story tenement in which the Foster family had resided from 1887 to the late 1890s was occupied in 1900 by three African-American families. Moreover, the depression of the 1890s had taken a heavy toll on the neighborhood. A building across the street from the Foster residence which had housed a workingman’s club in 1889 had been converted to a relief mission by 1901. It was one of two such enterprises that were established in the immediate vicinity of the Foster home during this period. Young William Foster himself, struggling to comprehend the phenomena of powerlessness and dissolution in Skittereen, came to understand that “the rich were somehow at the bottom of it all.” His inchoate class awareness at its very inception melded with intensely felt anger at “the poverty in which I had to live.”

James Foster did not bring his family into a stable ethnic community in Philadelphia. What is striking about this Irish cohort is its diversity and lack of cohesiveness; most loyalties were focused on the family, clan, town, or home county. Very few of these immigrants were devoted to the political ideal of Irish nationalism, but for James Foster, the idea of a free and united Irish state was of tremendous importance.

William Foster characterized his father as a “militant” nationalist who made his home into a gathering place for Irish patriots as well as for Molly Maguires fleeing persecution in the mining regions west of Philadelphia. Irish nationalism was the “intellectual meat and drink” of William’s early youth, and he later wrote that it was his father’s politics that first impelled him to become a “rebel.” Despite the factiousness and thin sense of nationalism among many Irish in Philadelphia, William’s “first serious political reaction was a burning desire to help free Ireland.”

15 Light, “Role of Irish-American Organisations,” 113
Philadelphia was a hotbed of Fenian activity, and James undoubtedly had some contact with William Carroll, a prominent and militant leader of the emigre movement who held meetings at his home on South Sixteenth Street, only two blocks from the Foster residence at the time. Carroll was a leader of an extremist faction of the Clan-na-Gael that advocated violent revolutionary methods to gain Irish independence. At the level of style at least, James’s politics are evocative of his son’s later activities as a Leninist revolutionary. The Fenian organizations to which James belonged in the 1850s and 1860s were secret revolutionary brotherhoods, carefully ordered elite groups with a complex paraphernalia of initiation and other rituals, all suffused with various kinds of ritual terminology, signs, passwords, and oaths. Promotion within the brotherhoods brought higher responsibility and esoteric knowledge. Eric Hobsbawm has noted the resemblance between such organizations and the traditions of later socialist movements: in each it was understood that such movements were ideally coordinated by an International. The strategy of the groups was to “permeate” larger bodies—in James’s case it had been the British garrison. For William, the central metaphor would be that of radicals “boring from within” the American Federation of Labor. There is no doubt that William formed an intense bond with his father; as a boy he determined to devote his whole life to fighting to free Ireland.

From 1892 to 1898, James listed his occupation in the city directories as a seller of birds and dogs. William noted that his father attempted unsuccessfully to establish a small store while working as a stableman. He also points out that James, being an “ardent sportsman,” made his home a “rallying point” for cock fighters and dog fighters, as well as runners, boxers, ball players, and “race-track men.” Writing in 1884, a Philadelphia historian observed that while before the Revolution cock and dog fighting had been occasionally sponsored by “men of the highest respectability,” the sports were, by the 1820s, “shunned by all who laid a claim to social standing.” He ruefully concluded that, in the 1880s,
cock and dog fighting was merely a reflection of the fact that “in every large or growing city there is always a class of people who care little for their reputation, and [who] are not influenced by the opinion of good society.” The type of business that James conducted in his home also typically drew the attention of middle-class reformers investigating unsanitary conditions in immigrant neighborhoods.

James undoubtedly initiated his business as a way to supplement his low wages. If his income as a hostler or stableman approximated that of an unskilled industrial worker of the time, he would have been unable to achieve a “minimum adequacy” according to a budget calculated for a Philadelphia household in 1880. In a world far removed from the city’s “good society,” whatever income James may have brought in from selling birds and dogs, or possibly sponsoring animal fights, could not be depended upon to provide much economic security. The “half-starved” family, during the depression of the mid-1890s, “had to eke out [a] living by the niggardly bean soup of the neighborhood relief station.” By 1894 a soup kitchen and temporary home for indigent women with small children was in operation on nearby South Street, just around the corner from the Foster residence. Foster wrote that during the depression, with his father and older brother unemployed, “the task of being the family providers fell upon my sister and myself, both of us children hardly in our teens.”

If, as William later reflected, his identity as a “rebel” was initially forged through his sympathy with his father’s Fenian politics, it is also possible that James’s illegal activities, difficulty finding steady employment, and drinking complicated the relationship between father and son. It is noteworthy that in later years, Foster was not only a teetotaler but a vigilant ascetic and careful organizer of the smallest details of his personal life and household. In this respect his personality differed markedly, not

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18戈普西的《费城城市目录》，1892-1898，BTS，12，J Thos Scharf and Thompson Westcott，《费城历史》，1609-1884（3卷，费城，1884），941，《费城的住房条件：一项由Emily W Dimwiddie做出的调查》（费城，1904），23

only from that of his father but from those of gregarious and expansively indulgent labor organizers like Eugene Debs and Samuel Gompers.  

Survival for a working-class family in South Philadelphia during the last half of the nineteenth century was often predicated on a variety of “memberships.” The most vital source of involvement and support for many immigrants was with the Catholic Church, but William’s memories about its influence on him and his family are ambiguous. The Fosters attended St. Teresa of Avila Church at Broad and Catherine streets. William recalled that his mother and the Reverend Joseph O’Connor, a priest at St. Teresa’s and a “friend” of his, unsuccessfully pressured him to attend a Jesuit college to prepare him for the priesthood. If William associated his identity as a fighter with his father’s influence, the autobiographical fragments in which he describes his mother and the Catholicism she so fervently embraced are related in a contradistinctive way to his understanding of himself as a revolutionary modernist. In one of his essays he noted that, although he “took Catholicism earnestly” in his youth, his fascination with natural science had taken him “far and away beyond the control of the Catholic Church” at an early age. William spent his few years of education in the public school system, despite the distrust of many Irish Catholics for the public schools and the proximity of a large parish school at St. Teresa’s. Notwithstanding his mother’s entreaties, Foster seems to have identified more closely with his father’s activities, and it is noteworthy that he characterized his mother’s Catholicism as a form of “control.” He associated his mother’s religiosity with what he held to be some of the worst aspects of working-class tradition. He easily came to understand, he wrote, that the religion of his youth was mired in “unsubstantiated myths and legends,” “blind” faith, and irrational superstition. Foster’s radicalism would always be informed by a “system thinking” which denigrated the complex ontology of faith, custom, and political symbolism in worker’s lives.

20 “William Z. Foster,” Darcy memoir

21 St Teresa’s church no longer exists, but in the 1880s and 1890s it was a center of worship for many impoverished immigrants in South Philadelphia, see Joseph L. Kirlin, Catholicity in Philadelphia: From the Earliest Missionaries Down to the Present Time (Philadelphia, 1909) Foster, Twilight of World Capitalism (New York, 1949), 158-59, BTS, 14, The Worker, Sept 25, 1949, sect 3, p 1 Foster has been most convincingly portrayed as a “system thinker” in Aileen S Kraditor, The Radical Persuasion 1890-1917 (Baton Rouge, 1981)
The most important fraternal organization in Foster's small neighborhood was the street gang. Such gangs had a long history in Philadelphia, and they were commonly seen by the city's upper-class citizens as dangerous manifestations of Irish criminality. Foster's gang was named the "Bulldogs." There was a baseball team, a "social-political" club, and a mummer's band known as "The Bright Star." Foster's memories of the Bulldogs, however, were largely negative: he cited intense conflicts between Protestants and Catholics, and many of the members were "degenerates," drunks, and criminals, "the ripe fruit of the slums" as he put it.22

While there may have been a political dimension to the gang's activities, party loyalties probably did not allow for much self-determination for the neighborhood within the larger context of Philadelphia city politics. The city's Republican party organization in the last decades of the century was dominated by Anglo-Saxon business interests and the Scotch-Irish bosses of the state party. Partly as a result, the Irish Catholics in Philadelphia never came to dominate the urban political machine, as did their counterparts in Boston and New York. James considered himself a Democrat and took little part in local politics. At the same time, the Bulldogs proved to be an ephemeral presence in the neighborhood, for when Foster returned to the neighborhood in the 1920s the gang had long since disappeared. Blacks, who were violently "deadlined" by the Bulldogs, began moving into the area in the 1900s, giving the neighborhood a racial configuration that would remain into the 1980s. Even so, despite the uncertain and fragmented status of the Bulldogs, Foster remembered that "there was much real proletarian spirit in our gang." As an example of this spirit of solidarity, he cited the gang's participation in the violent strike of the Amalgamated Association of Street Railway Employees in 1895.23

Foster's memory of the 1895 Street Railway Strike is a central event in his portrayal of his childhood. According to his autobiographies, he and his family were quite conscious of the struggles of American organized labor in the 1890s. James apparently knew Molly Maguires who had

22 PWL, 16-18
been involved in strikes in the eastern Pennsylvania coal fields, and William remembered having paid close attention to the Homestead Strike of 1892 and the Pullman Strike of the American Railway Union of 1894. Despite their apparent sympathy with striking workers, William does not mention that either he or his father belonged to a union during this period. James was probably aware that the Knights of Labor had organized some hostlers serving the early horse-driven streetcar lines, but in Philadelphia the union entered a period of steep decline after a series of lockouts and unsuccessful strikes in the late 1880s. Unionism was not a significant force in Moyamensing in the last decades of the century, and in this sense as well the residents of Foster's neighborhood remained vulnerable and largely powerless.²⁴

Foster considered the Street Railway Strike to be his introduction to the "class struggle," even though the conflict was more complex than he portrayed it. If the strike was a class struggle, it was one in which the workers enjoyed widespread public support and sympathy. Many of the citizens of Philadelphia apparently felt that the demands of the trolley conductors for recognition of the right to belong to the Amalgamated and for impartial arbitration of employee grievances were legitimate. There was far less support for the violence and disorder that the strike seemed to engender. The public recognized that the strikers themselves were not involved in the riots or in the widespread wrecking of streetcars that accompanied the strike. The Philadelphia Inquirer editorialized that "there can be no mistaking that the sympathy of the people [was] with the strikers—not with disorder and riots, for which the strikers were not responsible, but the cause itself."²⁵

Near Foster's neighborhood there were several serious disturbances. At one point "fully three-thousand people" gathered in the vicinity of Bainbridge and Fifteenth streets. The mob wrecked four trolley cars before being dispersed by mounted policemen. Foster himself participated in an episode near his house where a street was barricaded and a streetcar


²⁵ Philadelphia Inquirer, Dec 25, 1895, PWL, 143
destroyed. At a gathering near City Hall, he was clubbed by a mounted policeman. Newspapers blamed "the mob," "idle youths," and lazy unemployed men as well as the "arrogance" of the Philadelphia Traction Company in contributing to the unrest. One editorial proclaimed that the rioters were "commonly foreigners, ignorant, idle and vicious, whom our lax immigration laws welcome to the superior advantages and blessings of our generous American life. They are of the class that has no sympathy with our political or social institutions." For most observers, the disorder associated with the Street Railway Strike had less to do with the rights of labor than with the potential for disruption by individuals who were deemed outside the circle of citizenship and community. Thus, in 1895 the excluded and powerless came briefly and violently into the consciousness of Philadelphia's citizens. This angry and unorganized contingent, of which young William Foster was a part, attacked symbols of corporate power and sought to identify with a strike in which workers demanded union recognition. The strike ended with a compromise: the workers gained the right to belong to a union but the union was not recognized by the company.\(^6\)

Foster identified with both the rioters and the unionists who disrupted the life of the city for nearly two weeks. The strike was a powerful spectacle for him; he was fourteen years old at the time. In his pre-Communist years especially, Foster became well known as an advocate of syndicalist direct action, an agitator for militant unionism who was distrustful of labor's involvement in the political process. His participation in the unrest associated with the 1895 strike cannot have failed to impress on him the possibilities of militant direct action by an otherwise excluded community of supporters on behalf of labor. The strike represented a briefly successful instance of collective action in a community that he portrayed as otherwise fragmented, normless, and politically impotent. Although his career as a radical would always be characterized by a certain uneasiness with street demonstrations and protests, as a young man caught up in the crucible of violence and unrest occasioned by the streetcar strike, the ideal of trade unionism fused with the impulse for

\(^6\) Philadelphia Inquirer, Dec 24, 1895, Philadelphia Public Ledger, Dec 24, 25, 1895, PWL, 143
power, community, and order. He later reflected that the 1895 strike caused him to "become a trade unionist, in theory at least."  

If the Street Railway Strike was a central public event in Foster's memory of his childhood, the circumstances surrounding his first employment were important at another level. Here, the private life of his family and his own childhood seem to have been overwhelmed by economic exigencies. He went to work at the age of thirteen. His first job was as an assistant to Edward A. Kretchman, a craftsman whose shop was located at Franklin and Noble streets, nearly two miles from the Foster residence in South Philadelphia. This was an unusually long distance, and it is quite possible that William boarded with his employer, at least periodically. Kretchman was an adept die-sinker and metal worker who, apparently, took his young helper with him on trips to New York, Boston, and Washington to sell the souvenir medals that he produced. Despite Foster's admiration for Kretchman and the craftsman's strong liking for him, he quit this job and went to work in 1894 for the MacKellar, Smith and Jordan Type Foundry. It was the first in a series of jobs in various industries. His decision to leave Kretchman probably resulted from the need to support his impoverished family. During the 1890s depression, with his older brother and father unemployed, he "had to make more wages somehow." "Men could find no work but there were always places for child slaves," he wrote.

Perhaps as a result of the economic stresses of the 1890s, William's family had come apart by 1898. There is very little dependable information available about the family during this period, but several facts seem pertinent. Foster states that by 1901 both of his parents were dead; James disappears from the Philadelphia city directories in 1898. Also during this year the family's three oldest children left the city. Foster does not mention the specific reasons for his own departure, but clearly he believed that Philadelphia did not offer the opportunity to escape from the poverty and powerlessness in which his family had been immersed in Skittereen.

Like many others who became industrial workers at a relatively young age, Foster had difficulty forming any lasting attachment to a particular

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27 BTS, 15
job or employer. He worked at the type foundry until 1897, and then he found employment at the Harrison White Lead Works in South Philadelphia. He moved to Wyomissing, near Reading, sometime in 1898, to live with his recently married sister, Sarah-Anna, and her husband, George McVey. Foster and McVey both worked in a fertilizer plant, at jobs that were often disdained by workers at the time as disgusting and unhealthy. In the winter of 1900, William left Wyomissing because he had begun to develop tuberculosis as a result of his job. He thus became a drifting worker for a period of approximately twenty years. At this point in his life, his location in the American working class was ill-defined, without clear ethnic, religious, or geographic dimensions.  

It is possible, however, to return to Foster's youth in Philadelphia and consider his life there synchronically, as a picture of the structures of his childhood experience. He identified strongly with his father's Irish nationalism and rejected his mother's Catholicism, but the most limiting and compelling influences on his early life were economic. His peculiarly vulnerable family was unable to establish itself sufficiently in the years before the depression of the 1890s to avoid battering experiences with unemployment, childhood wage-labor, dependency, and marginality. The Foster family lived in the interstices of Philadelphia's growing industrial economy, yet they were as subject to its vagaries as any of its participants, perhaps more so. To be sure, Philadelphia's economy held out a measure of reward and security for those who were able to participate in some way in its immense movement. Many Irish workers in Philadelphia moved into skilled occupations in the city's manufacturing sector or construction industry and could reasonably expect to own their own homes at some point. Nonetheless, at the height of Philadelphia's industrial development, many residents of South Philadelphia remained isolated and impoverished, outside of but not immune to the needs of the confident and expanding railroad, iron, and construction sectors of the economy. Living in the teeming back streets of Skittereen, William Foster's family

19 BTS, 12 Foster was apparently unclear and confused about his parents' ages and the exact years of their deaths. See Edward Johanningsmeier, "William Z Foster Labor Organizer and Communist," PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1988, 57, n48. On Foster as a drifting worker, see Foster's stories in PWL, and BTS, 13, 20, 23. On the transience of young industrial workers during this period, see David Montgomery, The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925 (New York, 1987), 133-35.
experienced a kind of powerlessness similar to that of many African-American families living in the city at the turn of the century. The racism directed towards the Irish was often as virulent as that directed towards blacks.\textsuperscript{30}

In 1900 Foster heard a speech given at Broad and South streets, in his own neighborhood, that "marked a great turning point" in his life. He recalled later that the analysis and arguments of this compelling street speaker, probably a member of the Socialist Labor Party, gave "real meaning to all my experience in the class struggle." Although he had devoured books on the French Revolution that he borrowed from the Free Library of Philadelphia, by 1900 he had "never encountered a socialist book or pamphlet" in his neighborhood. That same year, while living in Wyomissing, he walked six miles with his brother-in-law to "help" him vote for Eugene Debs. Foster wrote of his growing interest in socialism that "forces were at work which were rapidly developing my native proletarian instinct into genuine class consciousness."\textsuperscript{31}

While Foster the "system thinker" undoubtedly imposed something of his later political beliefs on the accounts of his childhood, his experience in Philadelphia appears to be one in which the "system" loomed as large and destructive, the city's vast economy at once inaccessible and fatally intrusive. James Foster's Irish nationalism, Elizabeth's Catholicism, or William's participation in the gang life of the Bulldogs may have provided a semblance of order for the family within the rapidly changing neighborhood in which they lived. Yet William Foster had difficulty identifying with these allegiances. He joined the Socialist party rather suddenly at age nineteen and departed from Philadelphia without a committed vocabulary of religious, ethnic, or communal metaphors with which to frame his subsequent political experiences.

In 1946 Foster admonished a high-ranking member of the Communist party for her decision to have a second child. He told her that once her child was born, "you [will] have given a hostage to capitalism."\textsuperscript{32} This

\textsuperscript{30} Burt and Davies, "The Iron Age," 488, 492, Clark, \textit{The Irish in Philadelphia}, 131, Light, "Role of Irish-American Organizations," 118-21

\textsuperscript{31} BTS, 20-23

\textsuperscript{32} Dorothy Healey, interview with author, Sept 16, 1986 Healey was a prominent labor organizer in the Party from the 1930s through the 1950s see Healey with Maurice Isserman, \textit{Dorothy Healey Remembers} (New York, 1990)
startling declaration was probably meant to be practical advice to an important party cadre, yet it is a conclusion that seems consistent with Foster's account of his own childhood. His politicized and occasionally bitter descriptions of the conditions in which he lived as a child suggest that he remembered his life in Philadelphia as that of a "prisoner" in a class war.

Such a portrayal simplifies a more complex historical reality. The concept of class war seems inappropriate to understanding the dynamics of Foster's neighborhood in the 1880s and 1890s or the Philadelphia Street Railway Strike, an event so central to Foster's memories of the period. And, while Foster's autobiographical narratives commence with a childhood seemingly predetermined by economic hardships and class warfare, his account unconsciously reveals a more complex and contradictory set of themes that would be manifested in different guises throughout his later career. A useful key to this political grammar is Foster's portrayal of his family's fertility. Although his mother's fertility was indeed high for impoverished working-class women in Philadelphia, it is very likely that her prodigious childbearing was consistent with trends and attitudes within her original family milieu: the rapidly industrializing milltowns of northern England, of which Carlisle, the town of her birth, was one. In such towns, despite very high levels of infant mortality among workers, a spasmodic yet generally expanding demand for industrial labor provided a positive incentive for workers to attempt to establish and maintain large families. Surviving older children could become positive contributors to the family economy as early as age ten. In light of this information, Elizabeth's astonishing fertility may be understood as a traditional reproductive strategy, not merely a symbol of her helplessness. In William's autobiographies she is a character without voice and animation, an essentially passive and powerless figure whose "political activities were nil" and whose life of "hardship and drudgery [was] made worse by her excessive childbearing."

As his comments reveal, William Foster came to be a convinced neo-Malthusian, and it is noteworthy that he was thinking along these lines even late in his career. In his autobiographies, he portrays his family's

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fecundity (and, indeed, working-class sexuality in general) in negative terms. Implicitly he located the problem of working-class poverty and powerlessness partly in the inability of the poor to control their reproductive lives; limitations on fertility could be a key to empowerment, he thought, by increasing the effectiveness of a "militant minority" of childless activists and by limiting the supply of labor for capitalists. Foster limned James's and Elizabeth's fertility as disabling and irrational in the rapidly modernizing economy of Philadelphia in the 1880s and 1890s, and he fathered no children of his own, although he adopted two children.  

What is striking is that Foster's attitude to some extent replicated that of modernizing bourgeois reformers who similarly invoked the ideals of discipline and restraint in their negative portrayals of working-class families. William Foster himself would always be somewhat of a labor disciplinarian, and despite his strong admiration for his father's "primitive" rebelliousness, a manifest characteristic of his life was his relentless attempt to achieve a modern revolutionary movement, a movement founded primarily through thorough organization, the productive channelling of energies, and restraint of impulse and spontaneity. It is here that Foster's portrayal of his family and childhood in Philadelphia merges with the theme of an inherently disorderly working class whose lives were punctuated by periods of solidarity as well as dangerous collective emotion.

Indeed, Foster's identity as a "professional" revolutionary revolved around his understanding of himself as an organizer. His pre-Communist reputation was established as an adept and efficient labor organizer, not as an agitator or propagandist. He once reflected that from the very beginning of his career in the labor movement he had seen himself as a "specialist" in "mass organizational work." His experiences during the great American Federation of Labor organizing campaigns during World War I only confirmed his perception that workers must first seize and maintain organizational power before any vision of a society in which labor had a meaningful voice could be realized. Unlike the great socialist leader, Eugene Debs, Foster was far more concerned with establishing the structure of the revolution than with its moral authenticity. He once

34 For Foster's attitudes on aspects of working-class sexuality, as well as his family's fertility, see PWL, 17, 260, "Prisoners," World Magazine, May 3, 1975, BTS, 12-13
35 Minutes, Pre-Plenum Meeting of Communist Party National Committee, March 23, 1939, 39, Philip Jaffe Collection, Series 7, Woodruff Library, Emory University
told a group of Communists that the worker "follows the man who organizes him," and in prefacing one article on tactics he quoted Lenin: "The strength of the working class is organization. Without organization the mass of the proletariat is nothing. Organized it is all."  

For Foster, the crucial dialogue in the class war was always between organizations, not between people and ideas. Thus, in some respects, his identity as a fighter and "rebel," which he admitted could be traced to the influence of his father, betrayed managerial overtones and themes. A "militant minority" of "specialist" organizers would move the inert and ignorant masses by seizing control of unions and bring about the revolution by the building of ever-larger forms of organization: what he and other progressives, appropriating a term with explicitly corporate overtones, called "amalgamation." Thus, a volatile syncretism lurked at the core of Foster's radicalism. An implacable fighter endowed with tremendous determination, his vision of labor activism was in certain respects bureaucratic and managerial in its approach.

It is particularly striking that these themes for Foster contain intimations of gender; they first emerge in his writings in his portrayals of his family and their lives in Philadelphia. If, as he claimed, Foster inherited from his father his identity as a "fighter" and "rebel," his own radicalism would be limited by the maleness of this conception. In the historical iconography of the labor movement, women have often been excluded from roles as "fighters," and in Foster's autobiographies the ideal organizer is nearly always the militant workingman. Foster regarded children and family as burdens in the class war; in 1912 he reflected that for the revolutionary syndicalist, "children are a detriment to him in his daily struggles" with the wage system. When he admonished a female comrade against having children, he was in part affirming this idea, impressed on him in a crude way at an early age. For him, his mother's fecundity symbolized her helplessness and underlined the difficulties faced by William's family as they struggled to make a living for themselves in Skittereen.

36 The Worker, April 22, 1922, 3, The Communist, Feb., 1939, 136
37 Elizabeth Faue, Community of Suffering and Struggle: Women, Men and the Labor Movement in Minneapolis, 1915-1945 (Chapel Hill, 1991), 73-74, William Foster and Earl Ford, Syndicalism (Chicago, 1912), 17 In Foster's Pages from a Worker's Life, there are very few women among the various organizers, agitators, socialists, unionists, and militant workers whom Foster celebrates. In one chapter in which he describes the ideal "Jimmie Higgins," or "the rank and file builder of every union, party and other working-class body," the pronouns are all male (280) Foster would use the term "man to man" when talking about the "business" of labor organizing.
William Foster's first involvement in radical politics, he believed, was the end result of a process that began during his childhood in Philadelphia. In his 1919 Senate testimony, given two years before he became a Communist, he invoked the stark economic conditions of his childhood as a sufficient explanation of his beliefs. In his autobiographies, looking back on the "forces" that created his personality and politics, his memory focused on the bitter realities and limitations he faced while growing up in an atmosphere of powerlessness in Philadelphia slums in the 1880s and 1890s. For him, these "slums" did not encompass an idealized ghetto of ethnic or religious solidarity, nor a mythical arena from which upwardly mobile Americans emerged strengthened in character and personality.

Lurking beneath the surface of the memories of his childhood in Philadelphia, however, is a somewhat more complex and problematic set of themes. Foster sought to reproduce the atmosphere of community dissolution in his autobiographies, and indeed there is a historical basis for understanding his experiences in Skittereen as alienating and corrosive of the fragile loyalties, faiths, and memberships of his working-class family. At another level, this dissolution—always portrayed in the harsh terms of economic exigency, poverty, and the inchoate power of unorganized social protest—was connected to William's relationships with his mother and father, even to his understanding of the nature of their reproductive lives. Here, the grinding forces of Philadelphia's industrial economy intersect with certain fractures, undoubtedly intensely felt, in the family itself. In turn, Foster's earliest paradigms of resistance and accommodation to the poverty he and his family experienced in Philadelphia informed the character of his radicalism as an adult. His father, angry fighter and "rebel," his mother, at once superstitious, "controlling" and oddly helpless: these portrayals can be seen as the genesis of the contradictions of William's own political personality. As a fighter and organizer, bureaucrat and rebel, modernizer and seditionist, William Foster was very much the product of the complex "forces" at work in Skittereen.

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Voice of Labor, Feb 16, 1923, 4 A penetrating examination of the themes of family, gender, and Communist politics is contained in Van Gosse, " 'To Organize in Every Neighborhood, in Every Home' The Gender Politics of American Communists between the Wars," Radical History Review 50 (1991), 109-41