

Jean Brust: Sixty years of the struggle for socialism

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Jean Brust, a founding member of the Socialist Equality Party and its predecessor, the Workers League, died on Monday, November 24, after 60 years of fighting for socialism. Comrade Brust, a member of the party's central committee since the Workers League's founding in 1966, succumbed to a massive stroke she had suffered on November 21. She was 76 years old.

Jean Brust was an inspirational figure in the history of the Trotskyist movement. She joined the Young Peoples Socialist League (YPSL) in 1937 to take up the fight against capitalist exploitation, fascist barbarism and the Stalinist betrayal of the Russian Revolution. She was politically shaped by the struggles of the American working class during the Depression of the 1930s, above all the 1934 Minneapolis general strike, which was led by the Trotskyists.

Over the past 30 years, as a leader of the Workers League and the SEP, she educated hundreds of young people around the world, not only those won to Marxism in the US, but also their counterparts in the Trotskyist movement in Germany, Australia, Britain and other countries.

With her husband and lifelong companion, Bill Brust, who died in 1991, Jean played an indispensable and irreplaceable role. When the Socialist Workers Party, the pioneer party of Trotskyism which had been founded in 1938, capitulated in the early 1960s to the pressures of the postwar boom and abandoned the program of revolutionary working class internationalism, Bill and Jean refused to go along with this betrayal. They played a crucial role in maintaining the continuity of the struggle for Marxism in the US and internationally by uniting with a small group of young comrades who had been expelled from the SWP for defending Trotskyist principles, and joining with them to found the Workers League, in solidarity with the International Committee of the Fourth International.

Jean Tilsen was born on August 31, 1921 in the small town of Elgin, Minnesota. Her parents were Jewish immigrants from czarist Russia who, as small children, came to the US with their families around the turn of the century. Unlike the great majority of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, they settled in the rural Midwest. There Jean's parents met, were married and raised five children, each of whom was born in a different town in Minnesota or the Dakotas, where Jean's father struggled to support his family as a traveling salesman and small merchant. Jean later explained that her immigrant parents inculcated in their children a respect for people of all races and nationalities, and also passed on a love of learning and literature.

Jean was the middle child in a close-knit family, with an older sister and brother as well as two younger brothers. She spent her early years in small towns like New Leipzig, North Dakota, as well as somewhat larger cities like Bismarck, North Dakota and Iron Mountain, in the upper peninsula of Michigan.

In 1935 the struggle to cope with the Depression led the Tilsen family back to St. Paul, Minnesota, a major population center as well as the state capital, where they had lived briefly a few years earlier. This was their final move, and it was in St. Paul that the teenaged Jean came into contact

with the historical and social forces which were to shape the rest of her life.

A year earlier the Trotskyists had led the Minneapolis general strike to victory, thereby becoming a major force in the working class. That strike helped pave the way for the influx of millions of workers several years later into the industrial unions.

Jean entered high school in St. Paul under conditions of a growing radicalization of workers and youth, which centered not only on union organizing but also on such world shaking issues as the rise of Hitler, the threat of war and the Spanish Revolution. She soon began searching for books on socialism.

Jean was approached in 1937 by several college students who were family friends. They tried to recruit her into the Young Communist League. Not yet 16 years old, Jean remained unconvinced by their arguments, which repeated the Stalinist line of the time that "collective security" agreements between the capitalist US and the Soviet Union could stop the threat of war. At a conference in Milwaukee she heard representatives of the YPSL, the youth movement of the Socialist Party, explain that decaying capitalism was the source of fascism as well as the war danger, and she agreed.

Jean joined the YPSL, in which the Trotskyists had won the leadership. Over the next several years she studied intensively, in addition to participating in important political activities. Among her teachers were the Trotskyist leaders in the Twin Cities area, men such as Ray Dunne and Carl Skoglund, as well as a younger group of party members which included Henry and Dorothy Schultz and Grace Carlson, Dorothy's sister. A little more than two years later, in January 1940, Jean became a member of the Trotskyist party, the SWP. Also joining the party at this time was Bill Brust, who was later to become Jean's husband and comrade in struggle.

The Spanish Revolution

In this period of revolutionary crisis the struggle in Spain occupied a special place in Jean's political education. She attended a meeting at which two speakers reported back from the front lines on the struggle against Franco's fascist forces, as well as the counterrevolutionary policies of the Stalinists. The Kremlin bureaucracy, at the very moment it was carrying out the infamous Moscow Trials and slaughtering virtually the entire leadership of the 1917 Revolution inside the Soviet Union, was using the same murderous methods to strangle the Spanish working class.

Jean read everything she could on Spain, writing a major paper for her junior English class in high school on the Spanish Civil War. She began to assimilate the historic significance of the struggle of Trotsky and the Left Opposition against the Stalinists' nationalist policy of "socialism in a

single country.” She also saw the tragic consequences of centrism, exemplified by the Spanish POUM, which refused to break from the Popular Front, thus leaving the working class leaderless and playing into the hands of the Stalinists, whose savage repression was directed against the POUM itself.

By the time she turned 20 Jean had nearly four years of political experience behind her. These were years of enormous attacks on revolutionary leadership and the working class as a whole. The world was plunged into a second imperialist world war. Leon Trotsky was assassinated by a Stalinist agent in August 1940. The following year the American Trotskyists were framed up, charged with advocacy of “force and violence,” by the Roosevelt administration, which was making feverish preparations to enter the war.

Through all these experiences, Jean was able to learn from her party comrades that the blows of reaction reflected not the strength of an outmoded social order, but rather its mortal crisis. She dedicated the rest of her life to the building of an international revolutionary leadership which would be able to avenge these crimes and put an end to capitalism and its chief counterrevolutionary agency, the Stalinist bureaucracy.

The Smith Act trial

An important aspect of Jean’s early political education was the struggle to mobilize the support of the working class against the Smith Act prosecution of the Trotskyist leaders. The SWP insisted on a political defense of the party against the anticommunist campaign, and won the support of unions representing millions of workers, despite the Communist Party’s support for the government witch-hunt.

SWP leader James P. Cannon used his testimony in the Smith Act trial to popularize the principles of socialism and expose the slanders of the class enemy. The testimony, issued in pamphlet form as “Socialism on Trial,” became a foundation for political education which Jean was to use for decades to come.

Jean also learned the vital importance of an objective political struggle within the revolutionary party itself. When in 1939-1940 a section of the SWP, led by Max Shachtman and James Burnham, capitulated to the pressure of reaction and declared it was no longer permissible to defend the Soviet Union against imperialism, Jean supported Trotsky and the majority of the party in its defense of Marxist principles and a revolutionary perspective.

During the war Jean, like so many other young women, obtained a job in a defense plant, one of several factory jobs she held over this period. She was married briefly to a young SWP member. Although the marriage did not last, her daughter Cynthia was born in 1944.

After the war Jean, along with her coworkers, lost their relatively high-paying jobs as the soldiers returned home. A series of militant strikes followed almost immediately, as millions of workers demanded improved living standards after years of Depression and bitter sacrifices in the name of the war effort. Bill Brust participated actively in the 1946 packinghouse strike in St. Paul, and Jean soon obtained a job in the industry as well. Both Bill and Jean played important roles in another packinghouse strike that broke out in 1948. They were married later that year. Their family later expanded to include, in addition to Cynthia, two sons, Leo and Steven.

The struggle against Pabloism

The revolutionary movement faced new challenges and crises in the postwar period. The war was followed by a restabilization of capitalism made possible by the collaboration of Stalinism and Social Democratic reformism. A section of the Trotskyist movement, led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, abandoned the fight to build independent revolutionary parties. In the US, this was the period of the McCarthyite witch-hunt and the consolidation of the anticommunist bureaucracy in the trade unions. The Pabloites won support from a group of trade unionists and other party members led by Bert Cochran and George Clarke, who had been made cynical and demoralized by the difficult and protracted struggle against Stalinism and imperialism.

The Pabloites came close to destroying the Fourth International, but they did not succeed. Jean and Bill played a major role in the struggle against this international tendency and its Cochran-Clarke supporters, which led to an international split and the founding of the International Committee of the Fourth International in 1953. Their home in St. Paul was the local party headquarters at this time, with leading party members meeting in the basement to discuss the progress of the internal struggle.

Jean had left her job in meatpacking in the early 1950s, and took on many public responsibilities as a local party leader. She often chaired press conferences which were held during tours of SWP leaders, and was quoted in articles in the capitalist press. Once a stone was thrown through the window of the Brusts’ home. On another occasion “Commie Dupe” was painted on the sidewalk outside the Brust home after Jean had appeared on a radio talk show. Jean was not intimidated. She told her family that the graffiti could only have been the work of a stranger, since everyone who knew her knew that she was not a dupe, but the genuine article.

The latter part of the 1950s marked the beginning of the most difficult period of Jean’s political life. Despite the fight against Cochran and Clarke, moods of discouragement and complacency continued to grow within the SWP. Difficulties were inevitable in a period of growing political quiescence, but that made internal political discussion all the more vital, as the basis for preparing for a new upsurge of the class struggle and future battles. However, political discussion within the party declined. Jean recounted later how disturbed she was when the party leadership failed to analyze the issues raised by the Chinese Revolution. This lack of clarification contributed to the development of a pro-Maoist tendency inside the movement.

When the crisis of Stalinism erupted with Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin in 1956, the SWP was not prepared to intervene. Within a short time the party leadership had proposed a policy of “regroupment,” which replaced the orientation to the working class with a turn toward the middle class milieu of disillusioned Communist Party supporters. Political maneuvers and adaptation superseded the fight for Marxist principles, at the very point where these principles were being so powerfully vindicated. Only a few years after the bitter break with Pabloite opportunism, the SWP was abandoning the political conquests of its defense of Trotskyism. This led, in the early 1960s, to the party’s uncritical embrace of Castroism and, in 1963, to its unprincipled reunification with the same opportunists from whom it had broken 10 years earlier.

Bill and Jean were deeply concerned over the drift within the SWP, but for some years they were unable to grasp why they were being drawn into a confused conflict with leaders like Ray Dunne, who had helped to win them to Trotskyism more than 20 years earlier. The SWP leadership, in its right-wing course, saw the Brusts and Henry Schultz as obstacles to their turn toward middle class protest politics. Bill and Jean were stripped of responsibilities and driven into political inactivity. During this period Jean returned to school, obtained a college degree and a master’s degree in anthropology. A bit later she began teaching at St. Olaf College, a small school in Northfield, Minnesota, south of the Twin Cities.

Though politically confused by this turn of events, Jean refused to retire

from the struggle for socialism. She remained a member of the SWP, and when a group of younger members opposed the party leadership's course and submitted documents for party discussion between 1961 and 1963, she found herself in agreement with many of the issues they raised.

The founding of the Workers League

The Brusts traveled to Europe in 1963 and had extensive discussions with Gerry Healy of the British Trotskyists. Upon returning to the US they began correspondence with the opposition that was supporting the International Committee inside the SWP. They resigned from the SWP in 1964, shortly after the expulsion of this opposition, and in 1965 they joined the American Committee for the Fourth International, which in turn founded the Workers League in 1966. From this point on, with decades of political experience already behind them, they played a huge role in the training of younger comrades and the construction of the revolutionary Marxist movement in America.

During this period a serious auto accident left Jean with a shattered ankle that never returned to full strength. The 1966 accident made political work more difficult, but failed to significantly slow her down.

Because Jean had not given in to the Pabloites, she was able to respond as a revolutionary when the war in Vietnam and the growing social crisis in the US threw millions into political struggle. Jean was instrumental in building three branches of the Workers League in Minnesota in the early 1970s. She was indefatigable, whether selling the Bulletin newspaper, speaking to hundreds of students at antiwar rallies, or organizing and conducting classes in Marxism. In all of her political work she conducted a determined struggle, not only against the anticommunist defenders of imperialist war and oppression, but also against the politics of middle class liberalism, radicalism and single issue protest that predominated on the left.

New members were immediately struck by Jean's ability to explain complex questions of Marxism in concrete fashion without watering down the party's program, and the way in which she showed how history lived in the present. She knew how to fight, without impatience or ultimatism, against the political confusion and backwardness expressed by workers and students. Her deep moral and political connection to the working class and the principles of Marxism enabled her to reach out and establish a powerful connection with younger forces.

Every new member she won to the party was recruited through struggle, not adaptation to his or her weaknesses. The lessons of the degeneration of the SWP were burned into the consciousness of young members. And when they joined the party they were turned to the working class, speaking to workers at factories such as the South St. Paul packinghouses, where Jean herself had worked more than two decades before.

When the Workers League moved its party center from New York to Michigan in the late 1970s, Jean again showed her dedication to the cause of socialism. She moved to Detroit and remained for a number of years, helping to give members the benefit of her experience in the working class, while Bill remained in Minnesota to build the party there.

The split in the International Committee

The most important struggle in the history of the International Committee still lay ahead. It began in the early 1980s, when Jean was over 60 years old. Between 1982 and 1986 the leadership of the Workers

League conducted a struggle against the opportunist degeneration of the British Workers Revolutionary Party, and once again Jean rose to the occasion. She participated actively in discussions in which the WRP's capitulation to the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois leaderships in the former colonies and national movements, such as the PLO, was exposed and combated, as was its growing nationalism and accommodation to the trade union bureaucracy and Stalinism.

Jean summoned up the lessons of her years in the SWP. She played an important role, along with Bill, in steeling younger members for the necessary struggle against older leaders who, like the SWP leaders before them, had taken the road of least resistance and turned away from the protracted fight to build an international Marxist party. This preparation enabled the Workers League to win the support of the great majority of the International Committee cadres, including the most devoted members of the WRP itself, when the unprincipled British leadership broke apart in 1985.

The victory of the Marxist and internationalist tendency against the national opportunists of the WRP represented a historical shift. It marked a crucial difference between the battles of 1961-63, which ended with the relative isolation of the International Committee, and those of the 1980s, a difference which Jean herself often discussed. The relationship of forces between Marxism and opportunism had changed to the advantage of the Marxists. The outcome of the struggle in 1985-86 reflected the collapse of the postwar boom and a weakening of all the old mechanisms—above all the Stalinist, social democratic and trade union bureaucracies—which had for so long contained the class struggle within the framework of protest and reform. As Jean recently wrote with satisfaction, this shift has been further demonstrated by the fact that “the outpouring of theoretical work by the revolutionary movement since 1985 in the struggle against the renunciationists is unequaled, either in quantity or quality, since the 1930s.”

Jean's political work in the 1980s included a determined struggle among broader layers of the working class. She never for a moment forgot what the theoretical struggle is all about, and precisely why it is so decisive.

The fight in the unions

The PATCO strike in 1981 inaugurated years of bitter struggles against concessions and union-busting. Jean, despite being slowed by her earlier injury and severe arthritis, intervened in all of these battles. In addition to national strikes like PATCO and Greyhound, there were local and regional strikes in the Midwest, above all the long Hormel strike in 1986-87 in Austin, Minnesota, about 40 miles south of the Twin Cities. Bill and Jean both worked to bring to the rank and file the hard truth that victory was impossible without a turn to political struggle.

Jean made several long trips, including to Sioux Falls, South Dakota for the John Morrell meatpacking strike in 1987, and to International Falls, on the border between Minnesota and Canada, during the bitter struggle of construction workers against scabbing between 1989-91.

Party members recall that in all of this work, Jean always had the same effect on the workers she met. They were at first disarmed and surprised to meet this woman who was pushing 70. Within a few minutes they were amazed at the fight she conducted. Sometimes they sat there, wide-eyed, not quite believing what they were hearing. Even when they did not agree, they respected her knowledge, determination and confidence. As far as Jean was concerned, there was nothing extraordinary about this. She was doing what she had always done—fighting for Marxism in the working class.

The last years of Jean's life were burdened by illness and immense personal losses. Bill died in September 1991 after a six-month struggle with cancer. Only two and a half years later, in April 1994, their 40-year-old son Leo, a dedicated member of the Workers League then working in Michigan, died suddenly of cardiac arrest. Jean, as well, had to deal with her own increasing health problems.

Jean never claimed to be superhuman. She could not but be affected by these losses, but sadness and depression never overpowered her. She remained a leader of the revolutionary party to the very end, traveling to both public and internal meetings, consulting with her comrades, and hosting visitors on several occasions.

Jean knew what life was about, and she knew how to enjoy it. When one of her closest comrades visited several years ago, Jean took him to her beloved North Shore of Lake Superior, as well as to a jazz club, a concert and a baseball game.

She loved her children, including, in addition to Leo, Steve, a well-known fantasy novelist, and Cynthia, a speech pathologist and advocate for children with disabilities. Jean also delighted in her six grandchildren. She is also survived by her three brothers and her sister, as well as by several dozen nieces and nephews.

After 60 years as a Trotskyist, Jean Brust could look back on a life full of meaning. She had lived through the Moscow Trials and witnessed the collapse of Stalinism more than five decades later. She had seen the rise of the CIO and, in recent decades, the putrefaction of a trade union movement which was based on the acceptance of the profit system.

Jean was not discouraged by the setbacks suffered by the working class as a result of the misleadership of the labor bureaucracies and the political disorientation which they spread. She saw in such developments further proof that there is no substitute for revolutionary leadership. She understood that workers were paying the bitter price for decades of Stalinist and Social Democratic betrayal; that these forces had dragged the principles and ideals of socialism into the mud and done considerable damage to the political and social consciousness of the working class. But she knew that the crisis of perspective gripping the working class today would be overcome, and that the decay of world capitalism would soon enough usher in a new period of revolutionary struggle. She retained a firm and passionate conviction that the decades of preparation to which she had decisively contributed would make all the difference in the world. And so they will. The life and work of Jean Brust will live forever.



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