

Meeting honors Jean Brust: “Jean lives on in all of us”

4 February 1998

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and the Australian Socialist Equality Party held an international school in Sydney last month on the topic of Marxism and the fundamental problems of the twentieth century. One evening was devoted to a public meeting at which leaders of the ICFI from around the world paid tribute to Jean Brust, a life-long revolutionary who joined the American Trotskyist movement in the 1930s. Comrade Jean died of a stroke on November 24, 1997 at the age of 76.

Jean joined the Young Peoples Socialist League in the Twin Cities of Minnesota in 1937. Politically shaped by the major class struggles of the 1930s, including the Minneapolis General Strike of 1934 led by the Trotskyists, she devoted the rest of her life to the building of an international revolutionary party of the working class.

With her husband and life-long companion Bill, who died in 1991, Jean played an indispensable and irreplaceable role. When the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), the pioneer party of Trotskyism which had been founded in 1938, capitulated to the pressure of imperialism and abandoned the principles of Marxism in the early 1960s, Bill and Jean resisted this betrayal and joined with a group of younger members of the SWP to found the Workers League, in solidarity with the ICFI.

Bill and Jean played a key role in maintaining the continuity of revolutionary leadership, a continuity which was inseparable from their struggle among broad layers of the working class. Jean fought for political clarity among workers engaged in walkouts and other battles, from the 1948 packinghouse strike in St. Paul, Minnesota to the bitter Hormel strike in Austin, Minnesota in the mid-1980s, and beyond.

For more than 30 years Comrade Jean served as a Central Committee member of the Workers League and then of the Socialist Equality Party, the new party launched by the Workers League in 1996.

At the center of Jean's political work was her participation in the world Trotskyist movement. In recent years she made trips as a leading party member to Germany, Britain and Australia, addressing hundreds of supporters and helping to educate a new generation in the lessons of past struggles.

The following is a report on the meeting in honor of Jean Brust.

Workers, students, young people and members of the Fourth International from around the world took part in a moving public meeting in Sydney on January 7 to pay tribute to the life and work of Jean Brust.

Prior to the meeting, many in the audience viewed an extensive photographic display depicting Jean Brust's life from early childhood to her first involvement in the strike struggles of the 1930s and her participation in many international meetings and discussions in the 1980s and 1990s.

Chairing the meeting, Linda Tenenbaum, assistant national secretary of the SEP of Australia, explained that Jean and her husband Bill, who died in September 1991, occupied a unique place within the world party.

“Assembled tonight on the platform are leaders of the various sections of the international party to which Jean committed her life. In a very profound sense, no one of us would be here without the intransigent and principled struggle of Jean Brust and a handful of others in whom the continuity of Trotskyism resided in the difficult years of the postwar boom,” she said in opening the meeting.

Tenenbaum introduced the first speaker, **Fred Mazelis**, who knew and worked with Jean Brust for over 35 years. Both were founding members of the Workers League, the predecessor of the SEP in the United States.

Mazelis described the tumultuous events that brought Jean into politics in the 1930s—mass struggles of the American working class, in which the Trotskyists played a leading role; the international fight against capitalist exploitation, fascism and war; and the Stalinist betrayal of the Russian Revolution.

He explained that she had played a decisive role in educating party members and workers in the critical experiences of these earlier struggles. He emphasized her determination to continue this task into her 70s, despite ill health.

Mazelis stressed the central lesson drawn by Jean Brust: the necessity for socialist consciousness in the working class. “Jean had the opportunity to participate in some important mass struggles of workers. What she learned from all these experiences was that spontaneous struggles by themselves were not sufficient and a Marxist leadership had to be built.”

The next speaker was **Ulrich Rippert**, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party of Germany. Rippert first met Jean's husband Bill in the late 1960s, when Rippert was attracted as a youth to the Trotskyist movement. In his conversations with Bill Brust he began to understand the crucial difference between revolutionary politics and the middle class radicalism and protest politics that dominated the period.

“I think I know what Comrade Jean would say if she had been able to participate in our discussion this week. She would explain that this summer school opens up a new stage in the building of our international party. Many people are searching for answers to complex problems of this century, answers which they can find only in our international movement.”

Wije Dias, national secretary of the SEP of Sri Lanka, said: “Jean Brust expressed the greatness of the character and personality produced by our world Trotskyist movement. Even though few were able to meet her personally, the SEP members in Sri Lanka were

always very keen to read and study what she contributed to our movement in her many speeches in different parts of the world. I must say all the comrades were very saddened by her sudden illness and demise.”

Dias explained that Jean had joined the party at the same time as those who initiated the struggle for Trotskyism in Sri Lanka. They had demonstrated considerable courage in conducting a political fight against the British during World War II, and opposing the independence settlement imposed on the Indian subcontinent by imperialism. But while these leaders were later to capitulate to the postwar pressures of nationalism and opportunism, the opposite was the case with Jean Brust. She stood firmly with the International Committee.

Chris Marsden, editor of International Worker, the newspaper of the British SEP, described the impact that Jean made on him as a relatively new member of the party in the aftermath of the 1985-86 split with the British Workers Revolutionary Party.

“Here was living proof that a teenager could dedicate her life to the struggle for human emancipation and actually honor that pledge. What was revealed to me in that first lengthy meeting was that her socialist convictions had given her life a richness and purpose to which few others can lay claim....

“The historical experiences through which she had passed, the struggles within our movement in particular, were the political capital which she brought to bear in addressing the crucial questions facing the working class today. She told me that the future generations would be educated in Marxism on the basis of the lessons derived from the split through which we had just passed.”

Keith Meadowcroft, national secretary of the SEP in Canada, joined the party as a teenager and worked with Comrade Jean throughout his adult life.

“Jean was certainly plain spoken. Indeed in some ways she was a very hard woman. She had to have been to endure not only the slanders of the Stalinists and the Cold War warriors, but also the derision and laughter of former comrades who fell prey to the easy inducements of the postwar boom and who only wanted to forget the ideals and the commitment of their youth.

“But if Jean could be hard, her character also had another side—her sensitivity, her compassion, her concern for comrades and family; her love of life complemented her political toughness. Comrade Jean believed passionately in the socialist future of mankind.”

Nick Beams, national secretary of the SEP in Australia, explained that even though he did not meet Jean and Bill until after the 1985-86 split, they had a profound influence on himself and other members of the Socialist Labour League, the forerunner of the SEP, from its foundation in 1972.

“The life of Comrade Jean Brust does exemplify, particularly for every young person, what it means to live your life by certain principles.... I recall at the age of 23 or 24 hearing of comrades in the Workers League, our American section, who traced their continuity in the movement back to the 1930s—Jean and Bill Brust.

“Under the conditions which prevailed then in the International Committee—the growing opportunism of the Workers Revolutionary Party—we did not have the opportunity to collaborate with them. Nevertheless their presence had an impact, and certainly made an impression on me.”

The final speaker was **David North**, national secretary of the SEP in the US. He said it was fitting that the first memorial meeting for Comrade Jean held by the international party was taking place in

Australia, some 10,000 miles from where Jean Brust began her political life. It showed how far the Fourth International movement had developed.

“Jean and Bill showed us what it means to live life as a whole. Her life unfolded logically, historically. There was a beginning, there was a development, there was a conclusion. It was like a musical work, and in each part of this life the different elements and segments were interconnected. What strikes one when one looks at the photographs outside, which show Jean from a young girl to an elderly woman, is that the youth is present throughout. In a certain sense it symbolizes that which was most powerful in her life.

“I, like all the comrades of the Workers League, learned an enormous amount from Jean. Of course we are very proud of the work which is being done at the school this week, the reports that we’ve prepared, the discussion which has been held. But lectures, as important as they are, and as significant as they are, only play, as a matter of fact, a small role in the education of a cadre. In my own development I must confess that the hours and hours of discussion I had with Jean and Bill, whether it was in Detroit or around their dining room table in Minneapolis, played an immense role.”

He summed up the feelings of all those who knew and worked with her by saying: “I think we are weathering this well because such was the force of Jean’s personality, so intimately involved was she in every aspect of party life, and our lives. She has left such a wealth of recollections and memories that we feel that she is still with us....

“I believe she will live very much in the recollections of future generations because she summed up in her life, in her own experience, so many powerful currents. We are all deeply grateful for having known her. We feel an immense debt of gratitude for all that she gave us, her selflessness, and the joy with which she served this movement every day of her life until the very last.”

The meeting concluded with the first screening of a video interview with Jean, in which she reviewed her youthful political experiences, the great working class battles of the 1930s, and her decision to join the Trotskyist movement. Her warmth, knowledge and immense political experience were evident as she recounted the early struggles of the Trotskyist movement, in which she was a direct participant.



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