

A tribute to Jean Brust

David North
17 May 1998

The following is the text of a speech delivered by David North to a memorial meeting held on May 17, 1998, in honour of Jean Brust.

It is, perhaps, wise that we have waited a half-year before holding this memorial meeting to pay tribute to the life of Jean Brust. This is not only because, as Jean so often warned me, it's a bad political mistake to schedule any major public activity in the Twin Cities during the winter. Rather, it has taken us all these last six months to really accept the fact that Jean is gone. We all knew that Jean was weakening. The death of Leo had dealt her a blow from which Jean had never really recovered. And her last trip to Michigan late last summer had something of the character of a farewell. Indeed, when I took a photo of her she said that it would be one to remember her by. Three months later Jean was gone. And yet it was hard for all of us to believe that she was no longer with us. How could one imagine the party without Jean? She was the personal embodiment of our history; the direct link to the pioneers of the American Trotskyist movement, and, through them, to the "Old Man" himself. Jean, a veteran of great class battles and bitter political faction fights, was the voice of experience. And, above all, she was the moral center of our movement. When she rose to speak—whether at a meeting of our central committee, a party congress, or at a public meeting—her words commanded immediate attention and unchallengeable respect. There was not a trace of pretense or affectation in her manner or words. Jean Brust was the real thing.

Jean never fully appreciated the extent of her influence within the party. "I'm not very theoretical," she would often say—as if to suggest that there was nothing exceptional about her contribution to the socialist movement. But that was not how those of us from a younger generation saw Jean. She represented to us courage, conviction, honesty, dedication, and

idealism. Notwithstanding the warmth and gentleness that flowed out from her in such abundance, the word that comes to mind when I think of Jean is indomitable. Sixty out of her seventy-six years were dedicated to the struggle for socialism—which is to say that the course of her entire adult life was shaped by ideas and ideals. Through all the historic events that she witnessed and in which she participated in the course of her life, Jean remained unyielding in her socialist, Marxist, revolutionary, and profoundly democratic and humane convictions.

To tell the story of Jean's life would require a review of the history of the last two-thirds of the twentieth century. Jean joined the socialist movement against the backdrop of the Spanish Civil War, the spread of fascism in Europe, Stalin's murder of Old Bolsheviks in the Soviet Union and the approach of the Second World War. Within the United States, the working class was engaged in massive and bitter struggles against the tyranny of the most powerful and ruthless corporations in the world. These were events that provided the political, intellectual and moral impulse for Jean's decision to join the revolutionary socialist movement. But how is one to explain her ability to sustain her revolutionary convictions over so many decades and in the face of so many pressures?

To answer this question requires, first of all, that we consider the nature of the ideas to which she dedicated her life. To be a socialist in the 1930s was not all that unusual. But Jean became a socialist of a very distinctive type: a Trotskyist—that is, a minority within a minority. As Jean often noted, she had the good fortune to have grown up in a city where the followers of Leon Trotsky had obtained a substantial following in the working class.

Jean joined the Trotskyist movement because she was won to its program and perspective—that is, she was convinced of the correctness of Trotsky's critique of

Stalinism and his indictment of the Soviet bureaucracy's betrayal of the October Revolution and the cause of international socialism. That Jean was able to maintain her political bearings amidst the political upheavals of her lifetime testifies to the power of the historical perspective upon which Trotsky based the Fourth International.

Nothing contributed more to the disorientation and demoralization of tens of thousands of American radicals and socialists than Stalinism. If Jean was spared the disorienting pangs of remorse, humiliation and disillusionment that overtook so many who had identified socialism with the manoeuvres of the Kremlin gangsters, it was because she never had any illusions in the politics of the Soviet bureaucracy.

There was another aspect of Jean's political development that must be understood. She believed deeply in the revolutionary capacities of the American working class. Jean was not one to kid herself; to read into a situation something that wasn't there. Yet, Jean often recalled the experiences of the great strike movements that followed the World War. In a political sense, as was to become clear, the situation was turning against the revolutionary movement. But for a brief period the working class revealed immense capacity for struggle and self-sacrifice. Jean recalled how the workers had pushed her forward and all but demanded that she provide leadership in the midst of a particularly bitter strike struggle. Though this movement was betrayed and beaten back through the combined efforts of the Democratic Party, the CIO bureaucracy and the Stalinists, Jean retained the conviction that the promise and potential that had once been revealed, if only briefly, would once again, under different historical conditions, find renewed expression.

Another factor in Jean's astonishing political longevity was, undoubtedly, her relationship with Bill Brust. This was a wonderful political, intellectual and emotional partnership. They created around themselves and within their family a noble environment of ideas, principles, and love. Within the party, we would generally refer to the Brusts—acknowledging, so to speak, their collective presence as a distinct and special political institution.

This past January, during a lecture series organized by the International Committee in Sydney, our Australian comrades mounted a photo exhibit which

portrayed Jean at different stages of her life. Looking at the photographs, which spanned more than 70 years, I was struck by the degree to which the face of the youth remained visible even in the most recent photos. This is to be explained, perhaps, by the fact that her entire life constituted an interconnected whole. Each episode in her life belonged to a certain chapter; and each chapter constituted a comprehensible and necessary link in a larger artistic structure. Looking back over her life, Jean—like all of us—might have wished that she had done some things differently. But, even had she been given the opportunity, the basic course of Jean's life would have remained the same. She remained, in the course of three-quarters of a century, true to her friends, her family, her comrades and her beliefs. Those of us who were privileged to know Jean, Bill, and, of course, Leo, will never forget them.



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