Meeting honors the life of veteran Trotskyist

“Jean Brust was living proof of the genuine revolutionary traditions of our movement”

Fred Mazelis
22 May 1998

The Socialist Equality Party (US) held a memorial meeting May 17 in Minneapolis to pay tribute to Jean Brust, a lifelong fighter for socialism, who died November 24, 1997. The following remarks were delivered by SEP Central Committee member Fred Mazelis, who along with Jean in 1966 was a founding member of the Workers League, the forerunner of the SEP.

It has been almost exactly six months since Comrade Jean’s death, and we have all had time to reflect on the significance of her life. There is much to say, because Jean’s life is not to be summed up merely in a few words, but takes on new and added meaning with each passing day, in relation to the basic theme of her life: the fight for social equality, for socialism.

A few months ago our party published the crucially important work by Vadim Rogovin, entitled: *1937: Stalin’s Year of Terror*. Nineteen thirty-seven was the very year in which Jean, as a 16-year-old schoolgirl, made the fateful decision to dedicate her life to the struggle for socialism. This was no mere coincidence. Jean might have joined in another year, of course, but the fact is that she and others, including her lifelong companion Bill Brust, joined the socialist movement in response to great world events, including the Moscow Trials and the fight against Stalin’s counterrevolutionary terror, the rise of fascism and world war. These were the struggles that shaped the century.

The victory of the Stalinist bureaucracy had a devastating impact on the struggles and the consciousness of the working class, throwing the fight for socialism back by decades. The struggle waged by Jean and others laid the foundation for the inevitable renewal of this fight.

Jean was not the only person radicalized by the Depression and the struggles of the 1930s. There were those who went to Spain to fight Franco’s fascism, but never understood how to conduct that fight politically. In the end, they were used as pawns by the Soviet bureaucracy. What set Jean apart was, first of all, not simply a vague hope for a better world, but the perspective and program of socialist internationalism. She had been won to revolutionary Marxism, in opposition to both Social Democratic reformism and Stalinism.

What further set her apart was the dedication and perseverance with which she waged the struggle over the following decades. She never doubted the correctness of her decision to join and build the revolutionary party. To Jean, Marxism was not some kind of unchanging doctrine or dogma. She continued to develop Marxism as a guide to action because she was fighting as part of the working class.

From her earliest understanding of politics and society, Jean saw that capitalism was unjust, that it was producing war, poverty and dictatorship. She recognized that the very development of the productive forces under capitalism, including the expansion of the working class itself, also made possible the construction of a new society in which class antagonisms and inequality would decline and eventually disappear. This new and higher form of social organization, this rational organization of humanity’s relationship to nature, was articulated by Marx and Engels, and the first step towards this new society was taken in the victorious October 1917 revolution in Russia.

Jean knew that socialism could only be built on an international basis and fought against the counterrevolutionary nationalist reaction to the Russian Revolution led by Stalin. The struggles of 60 years ago for internationalism against nationalism are crucial today because the conditions of global economic crisis, the danger of extreme chauvinism, the interimperialist rivalries and threat of world war, are all returning.

More and more workers, young people and serious intellectuals are repelled by social inequality, cultural decay and all the social ills produced by the so-called magic of the marketplace. But as yet they see no alternative. Even well-meaning people equate socialism with the “state ownership” of the former Soviet Union. Genuine socialism, based on a workers government and democratic planning and participation far surpassing the most “democratic” capitalism, has been buried under an avalanche of falsification. The whole work of Jean, as well as the significance of *1937* and the writings of Vadim Rogovin, shows that there was and is an alternative to Stalinism and the capitalism.

Jean’s role in the founding of the Workers League

In the decades when capitalism and its agencies such as Stalinism had the upper hand, when it did appear that there were national roads, that capitalism could be reformed by Social Democracy or Stalinism or Castroism, Jean fought for the continuity of Marxism and socialism. Because of that fight we are here today.

Jean was a fighter. She was not afraid to disagree with family and friends when necessary. She waged a lifelong struggle, not only against capitalist exploitation itself, but also against the ideological and political defenders of the profit system in the working class movement.

She fought not only Stalinism and reformism, but also the worship of the spontaneous consciousness of the working class, against pure

© World Socialist Web Site

and simple trade unionism, and against all the various forms of opportunism, of nationalist and reformist "short cuts" in opposition to the protracted struggle for revolutionary leadership.

While the vast majority of her contemporary socialists, including her teachers--James P. Cannon, Raymond Dunne, and Gerry Healy--later grew discouraged and turned against this struggle, Jean continued to fight.

I first met Jean and Bill in 1965. I had joined the Trotskyist movement in 1958 as a teenager, just as Jean had joined two decades earlier. We didn't meet until 1965, in part because the degeneration of the Socialist Workers Party made serious political discussion more difficult.

I will never forget the first meeting with these older comrades, whom we understood represented the best of the older generation. They were only in their early 40s, but to us at the time they seemed like real "old-timers." They were living proof that the genuine revolutionary traditions of Trotskyism remained alive, in opposition to the SWP's frantic search for substitutes in the petty-bourgeois national movements in Cuba, Algeria and elsewhere; a search which soon led to its open repudiation of Trotskyism.

Six months after I first met Jean the fate of our small group of Trotskyists hung in the balance. The Third Congress of the International Committee of the Fourth International had definitively settled accounts with the middle class Spartacist group, the same tendency which has now declared itself in "opposition" to globalization! Among the young members of the American Committee of the Fourth International at that time, there was some confusion about the Spartacists. The then leader of our tendency, Tim Wohlforth, was exhibiting the signs of political disorientation that led him to break with Trotskyism some years later.

Bill and Jean, however, were absolutely rock solid against both the nationalism of the Spartacists and the hesitations of Wohlforth. When I visited them in Minnesota in May, 1966, I felt that I had known them for years. We had extensive discussions on the history of the movement. This was the first of dozens of visits to the Twin Cities over the next decades, including a seven-month stay with the Brusts during and after the Hormel strike in 1986.

What I would like to emphasize, and what is so pertinent to the work of Jean which we must continue today, is her essential grasp of Marxism, of the materialist dialectic--not as an abstraction, but as a method of analysis corresponding to the actual relation between man and nature, between thinking and being, between the working class and its vanguard organized in the revolutionary party. For Jean it was equally unthinkable to treat the working class with disdain because it did not meet up to our subjective wishes, or to treat it as an object of idealized or romantic contemplation.

On the contrary, Jean understood that what made the working class revolutionary was not the present thinking of workers, but the objective position of the working class in capitalist society. The revolutionary potential of the working class was not utopian; it had already been demonstrated in the Russian Revolution, but it required the building of revolutionary leadership.

Jean spoke with such unshakable confidence to workers on the picket lines and other struggles. She didn't give an inch, because she understood this relationship. She fought as part of the working class, but she fought against its spontaneous thinking shaped by capitalism.

Jean's confidence in the future

Why did Bill and Jean, almost alone among their generation in this country, resist the pressures of the postwar boom and of Stalinism? It was because they took so seriously what they learned in their youth, and they never stopped learning and fighting for the scientific lessons they had assimilated in the 30s and 40s.

Thus Jean was not crushed or demoralized by the final collapse of Stalinism, or by the transformed role of the trade unions. Far from it. She was politically prepared for these developments, despite the tragic consequences for the working class of the monumental betrayals of its old organizations.

Jean's last years were full of sadness, with the loss of first Bill and then their son Leo. At the same time, all three of these comrades lived to see and participate in the rebirth of Marxist theory over the past 12 years, out of and following the struggle against the nationalist and opportunist leadership of the British Workers Revolutionary Party.

Characteristic of Jean's revolutionary optimism, of her continuous search for ways to understand and to change the world, was her enthusiasm over the development of computer technology and the internet. This 75-year-old woman busied herself on various chat groups, and sending and receiving e-mail with her comrades. Middle class radicals half her age are utterly indifferent to these changes but she recognized their revolutionary implications.

Until the end Jean followed the work to develop the Socialist Equality Party on the internet, and we know how excited she would be by the development of the World Socialist Web Site in the few short months since its launching in February.

We are fortunate that Jean leaves behind her own writings, and also video recordings and her autobiographical memoir. She will be remembered, not only by her loving children and grandchildren, and not only by the supporters and members of the International Committee of the Fourth International, but also by many thousands of young people who will be entering politics in the years to come and will turn to the theme of Jean's life. There is much to celebrate today as we mark this 60 years of struggle for socialism.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site