

Jack Maginnis--lifelong socialist in Liverpool

Barbara Slaughter
15 April 1999

The Socialist Equality Party, British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, was saddened to learn of the death, on Tuesday March 23, of comrade Jack Maginnis in Walton, Liverpool. Jack died of heart failure at the age of 70 years.

Jack, a long-standing supporter of the Fourth International, keenly followed its press and publications, and regularly attended public meetings and discussion forums in Liverpool. He was born in 1928, into a family of Irish decent. There were nine children: Jack was the eldest of three boys. His father and grandfather were both socialists. His grandfather was a seaman on a ship that broke the fascist blockade during the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s, bringing food and supplies to the Republican side. His grandmother was described by the family as a "wicked Orange woman"--a supporter of the British loyalists in Northern Ireland. In a situation in Liverpool where everyone was defined by their religion, his father became an atheist, hating the role of religion in fermenting divisions in the working class.

Jack's family lived in an area close to the dock warehouses, which were heavily bombed during the Second World War. His father admired the Soviet Union and strongly supported the call for opening the Second Front in Western Europe. Just after the end of the war, there was a strike on a Canadian ship in the Liverpool docks. The ship sailed with a scab crew and the strikers were left stranded. Local families welcomed the striking Canadian seamen into their houses. Six of them slept on the floor of the front room in Jack's home. Such experiences of international solidarity made an indelible impression on him.

From an early age, Jack was interested in politics and was attracted by the 1917 Russian Revolution and the struggle of the Soviet people against fascism during the Second World War. He joined the Young Communist League at the age of fifteen and later the Communist Party.

In 1952, after completing his national service in the Royal Air Force, Jack became a docker and worked on the

docks in Liverpool and Birkenhead all his life. He became disillusioned with the Communist Party, especially after meeting and discussing with seamen from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. He questioned why, if this was supposed to be socialism, people wanted to escape to the West? Khrushchev's speech in 1956, revealing Stalin's crimes, confirmed his opinions, though he did not have any clear political understanding of what had happened under Stalinism.

On the docks, Jack participated in all the major disputes, supporting the rank-and-file Unofficial Portworkers Committee against the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) bureaucracy. In 1956, under the leadership of the Trotskyist movement, there was a militant breakaway from the TGWU (the "White Union") in the northern ports of Hull and Liverpool. Hundreds of dockers left the TGWU and joined the National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers Union (the "Blue Union", so called after the colour of its membership cards). Jack stayed in the TGWU. He was still influenced by the Communist Party, who argued that the Blue Union was breaking trade union agreements by "poaching" members. In reality, the only concern of the Communist Party leadership was to keep the dockers under the control of the TGWU bureaucracy. The Blue Union attracted many of the more militant workers, and for a while it was led by the Trotskyists. The dock bosses stitched up a deal with the TGWU bureaucracy to only employ TGWU members. Jack, along with hundreds of other members of the White Union, refused to work unless Blue Union members were also employed, and went on strike for the recognition of the Blue Union.

Despite his growing hostility to the politics of Stalinism, Jack never turned his back on politics. He became a Trotskyist in 1970, after reading the *Workers Press*, the newspaper of the Socialist Labour League (SLL), then the British Section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). For the first time he encountered a Marxist analysis of the degeneration of the Stalinist bureaucracy and its betrayal of international

socialism.

In 1972, he took part in a mass strike against job losses on the docks. "Containerisation" meant thousands of dockers' jobs were destroyed. The Tory government used new legislation to ban dockers from picketing-out container lorries coming into the ports. This was a period of widespread militancy in the British working class. With the support of the TGWU, its General Secretary Jack Jones, and rank-and-file union representatives, many of whom were Communist Party (CP) members, the government ended casual employment on the docks. However, bringing in permanent employment for some dockers meant accepting a redundancy scheme for the rest. Jack would proudly explain how he and his comrade, Paul Kelly, fought for the political line of the SLL, outlined in a leaflet opposing the deal and the CP's betrayal. The Stalinists and their supporters were able to throw them out of the dockers' mass meeting.

The hard conditions of working class life took their toll on Jack's health. He had a heart attack in 1982, and had to retire from the docks. He was seriously ill for 10 years, before having open-heart surgery and a double bypass operation with two valve implants in 1992.

In 1985-6 there was a split in the international Trotskyist movement. From 1982 onwards a struggle had taken place within the world movement against the abandonment of socialist internationalism by the Workers Revolutionary Party, then the British Section of the ICFI. The WRP leadership of Gerry Healy, Cliff Slaughter and Mike Banda refused to reverse their opportunist adaptation to bourgeois nationalist movements and regimes in the Middle East, the Stalinist bureaucracy in the old USSR and various trade union bureaucrats and Labour MPs. They had, over a protracted period, rejected the perspective of building an independent world party of the working class and in 1985-86 broke with the ICFI.

For a while, Jack was confused by what had happened. But in 1991, he and Paul Kelly met with the ICFI's British section and began making a study of the history of the Fourth International. Paul said that they would meet every day when Jack walked his dog through a local cemetery, and would sit among the gravestones discussing politics. They both read *The Heritage We Defend*, a review of the post-1940 history of the Trotskyist movement written by David North, and for the first time came to a real understanding of the analysis of the ICFI, and what the betrayal of the WRP represented. Both Jack and Paul became firm supporters of the ICFI.

From then on, Jack participated regularly in party

education classes held in Liverpool. He was always extremely interested in theoretical issues-questions of Marxist philosophy, history and science. He often raised questions in the classes about physics and the nature of the universe. His enthusiasm sprang from an understanding of what could be achieved if science were harnessed to the needs of the international working class. He said that it was the power of Marxist ideas and the clarity of the analysis that attracted him to the ICFI.

In the two-year-long Liverpool docks dispute that began in 1995, Jack worked with the Socialist Equality Party in exposing the bankrupt role of the leadership of the strike. Whilst posing as unofficial militant leaders, the TGWU shop stewards, many of them the same Stalinists who pushed through the redundancy deal in 1972, kept the dispute firmly under the union's control.

Despite his ill health, Jack attended meetings and discussions whenever it was possible. He was enthusiastic about the launching of the *World Socialist Web Site*. Without a computer, he went with Paul Kelly to the local library in order to access the Internet. He was pleased about the correspondence the site received from workers all over the world.

Jack will be sadly missed by SEP members for his modesty, dry sense of humour, and willingness to argue for a Marxist analysis, particularly against the trade union syndicalism which had attracted so many of the workers of his generation. We send our sincere condolences to Jack's wife Margaret, his daughter Tracy and all his family.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact