Des Warren: 1937—2004

The best of his generation

Mike Ingram
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With the death of Des Warren on April 24, the working class lost one of its most principled representatives. The immediate cause was pneumonia, but the ultimate responsibility for the death of the 66-year-old former steel fixer lies with the British ruling elite, their police and judiciary and the treacherous leaderships of the workers' movement.

Warren was the victim of a conspiracy that began when then Conservative Home Secretary Robert Carr told parliament in October 1972 that he was demanding police action against flying pickets who had succeeded in closing down hundreds of construction sites throughout the country during the 12 week dispute in the summer of that year. Within a month a team of detectives from the west of England and North Wales police forces had begun full-time investigations into the building workers' strike. Over a ten week period, police grilled more than 800 witnesses in an attempt to find evidence against pickets who had travelled to Shrewsbury on September 6.

The strike took place against the background of escalating confrontations between the working class and the Conservative government of Edward Heath. This culminated in the 1974 miners' strike that forced Heath to call a snap election which he said must answer the question, "Who runs the country, the government or the unions?" The election brought down the Tories and returned a minority Labour government.

On February 14, 1973, squads of police raided several houses in different parts of North Wales. They arrested six building workers who were to face the most serious charges in what became known as the Shrewsbury trials. Along with Warren, those arrested included Ken O'Shea, Mackinsie Jones, John Carpenter, John Llywarch and Ricky Tomlinson.

In total 24 pickets were brought before the courts in a series of five trials held at the Crown Court in Mold, North Wales, beginning on June 26, 1973, four of which were concluded before the Shrewsbury trials. The Mold trials were seen as a test case for Shrewsbury in which the prosecution could sharpen up its arguments against the pickets. The most significant of these was the first in which eight pickets faced charges of causing an affray, intimidation, and the lesser charge of criminal damage. Five of these pickets were to appear again at one or another Shrewsbury trial.

The defence argued that for intimidation there must be evidence of violence, or threat of violence, to persons, not just damage to property. This was rejected by the judge, but the jury disagreed and all eight were acquitted on the charges of intimidation, though several of them pleaded guilty to the specific charge of criminal damage and were fined.

Following this experience, the state decided that subsequent trials would be held in Shrewsbury, a middle class area with no history of trade union activity. They also hoped to capitalise on the fact that the local press had waged a campaign against the pickets, regularly quoting employers affected by the strike.

The "Shrewsbury 24" appeared in court together only once, for the committal proceedings on March 15, 1973. The charges against Warren were read last as he had been singled out as the ringleader.

The six pickets arrested in February appeared at the first of three trials of the Shrewsbury 24 on October 3, 1973. Warren and Tomlinson were charged with "conspiracy to intimidate," "causing an affray" and "unlawful assembly." The charges of affray and unlawful assembly were subsequently dismissed, but the two were jailed on conspiracy charges that dated back to 1875 and had never before been used in an industrial dispute. John Carpenter was given a suspended sentence of nine months. McKinsie Jones was regarded by the judge as "not being in the same category as Warren and Tomlinson" and sentenced to nine months on each of the three charges, sentences to run concurrently. John Llywarch and Kenneth O'Shea were given nine months suspended sentences. Tomlinson received a two-year sentence and Warren got three years.

The remaining 18 pickets received sentences ranging from fines to suspended jail sentences.

In the course of his prison sentence Warren was administered drugs known as the "liquid cosh," which left him with the symptoms of Parkinsons Disease, confining him to a wheel chair prior to his death. The Labour government which took office in 1974 on the back of the miners strike refused to overturn the sentences.

Several obituaries have paid tribute to Des Warren's uncompromising and principled stand for workers' rights in the most difficult of circumstances. Using a term that he himself rejected on many occasions, Warren has been described as a martyr of the workers' movement. But Warren is portrayed as simply a militant trade unionist who found himself in difficult circumstances and handled the situation with great courage. The real Des Warren can not be understood aside from his politics.

Warren was singled out by the capitalist state because he was an outspoken socialist. Though Tomlinson to his credit stood by Des, the two were a mile apart politically. At the time of the strike Tomlinson was a member of the National Front and he continued to express racist views throughout their imprisonment. Only later did his experiences force him to revise his previous beliefs, but this has never gone much beyond a basic empathy with working people. While Tomlinson has sympathy for the working class as an oppressed class, he has no understanding of the working class as a revolutionary force for change. He thus says in an obituary to Warren published in the *Guardian* newspaper of May 1, "Once we were in jail, I knew we weren't going to get out. I had seen the money, the effort, which had gone into our arrest and prosecution. But Dezzie had absolute faith in the trade unions—and in their leadership."

Here Tomlinson confuses Warren's faith in the capacity of the working class to defeat the ruling class with illusions in the trade union leaders. Warren could not be more explicit on his opinions regarding the union leadership. Citing "notes for a letter" from March 1976, he writes in his book *The Key To My Cell*:

"I feel bitterness, anger and loathing when I think of some of our trade union 'leaders' bemoaning the nation's ills and how the workers must

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endure a cut in their living standards in order to save the country from disaster—even my kids would recognise that as a load of crap. Their phoney dealing with the government (which is holding me prisoner) is to batten down the working class and force them to accept capitalist answers to capitalism's problems. Leaders? As far as I can see the only time some of them take a lead is when they go to the front of the queue when honours are dished out." (*The Key To My Cell*, New Park (1982) p190)

Regarding the leadership of his own union UCATT (Union of Construction Allied Trades and Technicians), Warren is even more hostile. In a letter responding to a request by UCATT leaders requesting to visit him in 1975 Warren wrote:

"I realise that many of my comrades will say that I'm wrong not to meet them, that we must involve them in the campaign, but let's not forget the desperate, cowardly, self-interested role that these spineless maggots have played in the Shrewsbury issue.

"If I've said it once I've said it a thousand times that I don't take my imprisonment personally. The Tory Government wasn't interested in me or my 23 co-victims. They were attacking the trade union movement and, by failing to stand by us, the ECs of UCATT and the T&G [Transport and General Workers Union] failed to protect the movement—a job they were well paid to do, and one that many rank and filers would do for the craft rate.

"So let's involve the UCATT EC in the campaign by all means, but not as fellow fighters in the struggle, but as the paid mercenaries they are. After all this time in prison I don't feel up to the level of diplomacy required to play footsie with traitors. I feel we should play straight." [ibid, p102]

Warren was an active socialist at the time of the strike. He was a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain and following his abandonment by the Stalinists, he later declared himself a Trotskyist and joined the then British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP).

It is for this reason that special mention should be made here of obituaries written by former leading members of the WRP. Neither a report by Dot Gibson published on April 26, or an obituary by Chris Corrigan published in the *Independent* newspaper, make any mention of Warren's political affiliations. While mentioning his "memoirs" published as *The Key To My Cell*, neither see fit to acknowledge him as a member of the political party of which they were both once prominent members. Neither do they feel the need to expose the role played by the Stalinists in conspiring to ensure that Warren served out his full sentence after a Labour government had come to power so as not to risk arousing the working class and threatening the Communist Party's relations with the Labour and trade union bureaucracy. While referring to the drug induced Parkinson's Disease, none of the obituaries published so far mention the fact that these drugs were taken by Warren on the advice of a Communist Party member who was a qualified doctor.

Warren and the Communist Party

To pay Warren the tribute which he deserves, it is necessary to examine his political evolution and the role played by those tendencies to which he gave allegiance.

Warren's early political activity was in the union struggles within the construction industry. He was first elected a shop steward at the age of 23 on a McAlpine's contract, building the Vauxhall factory at Ellesmere Port near Liverpool. Later Warren got a start on the Barbican site in London. The site was notorious for its militancy and was almost constantly in dispute. Within a short time, Warren became a shop steward. He was subsequently sacked after pulling the men out on strike and placed on the employers' blacklist.

Warren joined the Communist Party of Great Britain at a meeting in Liverpool in 1964 after thinking about it for 12 months. He says in his book:

"It seemed to me that the Communist Party stewards were doing most of the fighting...

"I wanted capitalism smashed. I saw trade union activity and industrial struggle as the mailed fist that would do the smashing. Just before the Shrewsbury trial I was on a sort of industrial treadmill, fighting again and again on sites, thinking: Some you win, some you don't. I felt that somehow we would break through politically." (ibid p12)

Like many workers at the time, Warren was ignorant as to the real role of the Communist Party and saw it as the party that had led the workers to power in the Soviet revolution. In reality the British CP was the heir not of the Russian Revolution but its bureaucratic degeneration under the leadership of Joseph Stalin and the reactionary perspective of building socialism in one country. In Britain this translated into the "British Road to Socialism," a perspective which argued that the circumstances in Britain meant that socialism would not require the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist system but its democratic transformation by a Labour government.

The British CP was still dominant in a number of industries through the national shop stewards movement and this was particularly true in construction. They did not seek to debate political questions with workers such as Warren, but simply kept them at a level of trade union militancy.

Warren recalls:

"Although I had a great deal of discussion on the sites, I rarely went to political meetings. My relationship with the party was something like this: I was a fighter on the job, that was my role; the Party's leaders had the role of handling political questions. I thought that, inside the Party, there was an organised leadership which had its finger on the pulse of events and which knew how to deal with any situation that arose. However, I was to find that the Party leadership couldn't deliver."

In the course of the 1972 builder's strike Warren had tremendous faith in the CP and saw the Building Workers Charter group which they controlled as a vehicle by which to oppose the treachery of the official union leadership. During his imprisonment, however, bitter experiences forced Warren to re-evaluate his position.

Far from being a rank and file alternative to the official bureaucracy, the Building Workers Charter acted as a buffer between the working class and the union bureaucracy, preventing workers from drawing any of the urgent political conclusions that flowed from the union leadership's hostility to the strike. The initial position of the CP was to argue for the line of the right wing of the union against national strike action, in favour of selective strikes. When this failed, they used the Charter Movement to come to the head of the strike, ensuring that it never went beyond the bounds of trade union militancy. The strike was ended with none of the workers' demands being met, by a television announcement by then UCATT General Secretary George Smith, instructing the strikers to return to work. In the face of tremendous hostility, in region after region, the Stalinists pushed through votes at mass meetings and led the strikers back to work.

While in jail Warren continued to consider the CP to be his party. But he cites a number of experiences with the CP leadership that disturbed him and contributed to his rejection of Stalinism upon his release.

One of the chapters in Warren's book is titled *A Blow From Ramelson* and details the role played by the then industrial organiser of the Communist Party in attempting to get him to drop his demand for political prisoner status and go for parole, thus accepting the verdict of the courts. Contrary to prison rules which forbid the receipt of letters from one prisoner to another, Warren received a letter from Ricky Tomlinson. Regarding themselves as political prisoners, Warren and Tomlinson had undertaken a number of protests, including hunger strikes, refusing to wear prison clothes and other forms of non-cooperation in order to demand recognition as such. At this time they were both refusing to wear prison clothes and dressed only in a blanket. The purpose of the letter was

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to inform Warren that Tomlinson was giving up the protest and to persuade him to do the same. Tomlinson argued:

"The position has to be looked at as a whole: i.e., you, me, the families and the Labour movement. The solution is simple, it's getting out as soon as possible, remember all those proverbs about bending with the wind and changing course in mid-stream, they could apply now. Well, that's about it Des, remember I've made my decisions and I know if you don't agree, at least you will understand."

In his own recently published biography *Ricky*, Tomlinson sheds more light on this incident. Tomlinson describes a visit from leading Stalinist Peter Carter along with two union activists, Billy Jones and Alan Abrahams, who had become a full time UCATT official in the aftermath of the strike. Abrahams informed Tomlinson, "Dezzie isn't well. He's not sleeping and the liquid cosh is messing up his head. His feet are bad, but they won't let him wear surgical shoes. He can barely walk...".

Tomlinson was told that Warren would never "come out while you're still in here." Abrahams continued, "If you do the rest of your time, Dezzie won't last the distance. He's got an extra year on you." [*Ricky*, Time Warner Books (2003) p182]

Tomlinson's account is give additional weight when taken in the context of a letter received by Warren from Ramelson. Warren quotes:

"Your non-cooperation was the only form in which you could identify with the outside movement.

"There comes a time, however, in every form of action when consideration has to be given as to whether a particular form of action can any longer further the ultimate objective."

Ramelson argued that Warren's non-cooperation was playing into the hands of the right wing. "In my view therefore your continued non-cooperation, though it was certainly justified in the past, is playing into their hands for they are using this as the only remaining argument they have, hypocritically using the argument that your non-cooperation makes it difficult for Jenkins [then Labour home secretary] to move from his intransigent position, and it is having considerable effect on some members of the General Council who might otherwise take a more determined attitude for action. In a sense it is letting them off the hook...".

Ramelson urged Warren to give up his protest, adding that "if we cannot force your unconditional pardon through industrial action," Warren's supporters would understand him going for parole.

Warren correctly interpreted this as the CP giving up on the Shrewsbury pickets and betraying the movement for their release. He says:

"Give up the protest! Get out anyway you can! Go for parole! We cannot force your release by action outside! The letter threw me. It was very confusing. I was convinced the action I was taking was correct, yet the letter was saying I was the only one out of step. If what the party was telling me was right, the Shrewsbury pickets might as well have pleaded guilty to the charges, done a deal and got suspended sentences.

"Yet Ramelson would not have written his letter without discussion with the Party Executive Committee..." (ibid, pp130-131).

Warren details the role of the CP and Ramelson in particular in winding up the campaign and refusing to expose the frame-up following his release from prison.

It is not possible to go through this in any detail, but given its omission from all of the obituaries one must at least note the role of the CP in persuading Warren to take the liquid cosh which led to his Parkinson's disease.

In March 1976, Warren was on one of the several hunger strikes he undertook while in prison, this time to demand his right to a single cell. Feeling more and more tense and unable to sleep, Warren was prescribed drugs by the prison doctor, Smith, but refused to take them. He believed it was not drugs he required but a single cell.

He maintained this position until he was visited by a Dr. Alistaire Wilson, a long time member of the Communist Party. Warren told Wilson of the hunger strike and his sleeping problems. Wilson's advice was for Warren to place himself in the care of Dr. Smith. The drugs prescribed by Smith were known to prisoners as the liquid cosh because of the state of docility they imposed. The so-called treatment consisted of continuous doses of drugs, becoming stronger with each dose. They served to ensure that Warren remained in a zombie-like state and were designed to destroy his resistance.

It is inconceivable that Wilson would have given his advice to cooperate with the drug regimen without discussion with the leadership of the CP. In truth, it was as much in their interests as those of the prison authorities to break Warren and render him docile. The Stalinists therefore bear full responsibility for the subsequent deterioration of Warren's health that ultimately led to his tragic death.

Although he had begun to question the attitude of the CP to the Shrewsbury case, Warren still regarded it as his party upon leaving prison on August 5, 1976, after serving two years and eight months. He anticipated what he called a debriefing by the party leadership to draw the lessons of this entire period for the working class. But the Stalinists could not tolerate any discussion of the lessons of Shrewsbury and began to sideline Warren.

The most obvious expression of this was when the party refused to assist in the publication of a pamphlet written by Warren in 1977, *Shrewsbury: Who's Conspiracy?* Not only would the CP not assist with printing or publishing of the pamphlet, but leading members such as Ramelson refused to even comment on the issues raised by Warren. With the assistance of some local Communist Party members, Warren was eventually able to produce a limited print run of 5,000. The CP then refused to even review it in the pages of its newspaper, the *Morning Star*, and only did so four months later as a result of Warren's persistence.

A second edition of the pamphlet was published in 1980 by New Park Publications, the publishing house of the WRP. In an updated introduction Warren writes:

"It is largely unknown that as a result of ill-treatment and maladministration of drugs by the prison authorities during my three year sentence, I am a diagnosed sufferer from Parkinson's Disease. After consultations with specialists, my own doctor has recorded in writing that I am suffering from 'Parkinsonism caused by therapy given in prison.'

"This has prevented me from campaigning in the movement with the vigour I would like. It is a condemnation of the movement's leadership—both left and right—that the lessons of Shrewsbury are being ignored. Unfortunately, I also have to condemn the leadership of my own party, the Communist Party which I have belonged to for 16 years and am still a member of."

Saying that "the Party at the moment is in a stranglehold of reformism," Warren continues:

"Advocates of the 'British Road to Socialism' stick their heads in the sand. They do their best to ignore anything which is a contradiction of the 'British Road', and this includes Shrewsbury. This is a very dangerous game when the movement is under fierce Tory attack, and a game I'm not willing to play. I believe the interests of the working class can best be served by discussion of these issues."

Warren proceeds to list some of the issues relating to the Shrewsbury case. Not surprisingly, such a discussion was never forthcoming within the CP. Rather, the Stalinists began a whispering campaign claiming that the drugs had affected his brain!

Warren and Trotskyism

On August 6 1980, Warren issued a statement explaining why he had resigned his membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain and joined the Workers Revolutionary Party.

He explains how he came to understand that the Trotskyists, far from being "splitters" and "provocateurs" as the CP leaders had told him

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throughout his 16 years of membership, were in fact the only ones capable of leading the working class to socialism. After pointing out that the decision to join the WRP had been the product of four years of political discussion and study, not only with the WRP but with the hardline Stalinist New Communist Party and the Socialist Workers Party, Warren wrote:

"I have now joined the Workers Revolutionary Party. I did so because it is a party of discipline and organisation. It knows what it is doing, where it is going and how it is going to get there. It is a party which generates confidence and belief in it. If you go into a battle you want to know who is either side of you and who is behind you."

It is a tribute to Warren's commitment as a socialist that he consciously sought out an alternative to Stalinism. It is the greatest tragedy of Warren's life that he came to Trotskyism at a point where the British section had all but abandoned its historical struggle for Marxism.

The forerunner of the WRP, the Socialist Labour League, had been founded in 1959 on the basis of the struggle within the Fourth International against the liquidationist tendency lead by Michel Pablo. This tendency argued that rather than construct independent revolutionary parties of the working class, it was necessary to adapt to the dominance of the Stalinist and Labour bureaucracies. A detailed explanation of these issues can be found in the World Socialist Web Site's commentary on the 50th anniversary of the founding of the International Committee of the Fourth International, which can be found here.

Having led the fight against the American section's unprincipled reunification with the Pabloites in 1963, the British section itself began to increasingly adapt to the pressures of the post war period and the dominance of the Stalinist and reformist bureaucracies and various bourgeois nationalist movements.

By the time Warren joined in 1980, the WRP was no longer interested in the development of Marxist consciousness in the working class or the training of its cadre in the history of Trotskyism. Therefore his political education was cut short at precisely the point where it should have taken an important new turn.

Warren explains in his statement that although he joined the CP in 1964 and from that time considered himself a communist, his political education only really began when confronted with the necessity of understanding the historical reasons for the role played by Stalinism and the reasons for the CP's abandonment of Shrewsbury. He writes:

"My break with the CPGB began when I opened my mind to the questions that had been bothering me and started to look into its history. The book that made a strong impression on me was *Stalinism in Britain* (New Park 1970), which showed how the British CP had degenerated and abandoned the aims for which it had been founded. It made sense to me because of the bitter experiences which I had been through.

"It was not until recently that I obtained a copy of Khrushchev's speech to the 20th Congress of the CPSU [Communist Party of the Soviet Union] which blew the lid off Stalin's crimes. This is never referred to in the CP. It was through this reading that I learnt about Trotsky and Trotskyism and began to see the way that history had been distorted."

Having won Des Warren away from Stalinism as a result of their past history of principled struggle, the WRP leadership showed little interest in training him in the political principles and history of Trotskyism. By the time the conditions were created for this to be rectified, with the defeat of the opportunist leadership of the WRP and the resurgence of Marxism within the International Committee, Des was already in the advanced stages of Parkinson's Disease and too ill to assimilate the complex political questions involved in the split.

Des Warren should be remembered as among the best representatives of a generation of workers profoundly convinced of the necessity for socialism, who do not shrink from the greatest of personal sacrifice in the fight for it.

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