Ralph Edmond (1926-2005): worker and socialist

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Ralph A. Edmond, Jr. died of an aneurysm and heart failure after slipping into a coma in the early morning of June 25. He passed away at the home of his daughter Paula Landon in New Brighton, Pennsylvania, where he had lived with her husband and two children for the past two years. Ralph was 79 years old.

From 1988, Ralph was a member and prominent figure in the Workers League, forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party, and a supporter of the International Committee of the Fourth International. His political activity was severely curtailed and eventually halted by a series of illnesses beginning in 1994, including blindness, diverticular disease and prostate cancer.

Ralph was born on June 22, 1926 in the working class town of Rochester, Pennsylvania, 35 miles north of Pittsburgh. His mother was Cyrilla C. (Callahan) Edmond. His father, Ralph A. Edmond, Sr. was a sanitation worker who struggled to raise Ralph and his younger brother Robert through the Depression years, following the death of his wife from pneumonia. Ralph was only 12 years old when his mother died.

Ralph will be fondly remembered by many members of the Workers League and SEP, and the parties of the International Committee around the world. He represented the best, most principled and self-sacrificing of a generation of workers who came of age during World War II. In joining the Workers League, he rejected the chauvinism and anticommunism that had been drummed into the consciousness of workers from their days in grade school through their entire adult life by school administrators, politicians, the media and the trade union bureaucracy.

Ralph grew up during the Depression and his home town of Rochester was hit hard. His father was in and out of work. While in grade school, Ralph tried to find work to help out his family. During these years he earned the nickname “Rackie” for hustling pool and shooting dice in pool halls. He left school in the seventh grade in order to get a job and bring in money for his hard-pressed family.

After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Ralph, along with many youth, was swept up in the nationalism and war fever of the time. At the age of 16, he walked into a Marine recruiting office, lied about his age and forged his father’s signature in order to enlist.

During World War II he served in the Second Marine Division in the Pacific Theater from November 1, 1943 to March 4, 1946. He took part in the battles of Saipan and Tinian and the occupation of Japan.

Ralph often related stories of atrocities committed by soldiers on both sides. On Saipan, he spent 30 days in the type of brutal close combat for which the war in the Pacific became known. Many of those who landed with him were killed.

One experience, in particular, taught him the disregard of the officer corps for enlisted soldiers. After fighting for 30 days on Saipan, he was boarded onto a navy ship to be taken to Tinian. There he became sick with diarrhea and nausea. “When we got to our destination,” he said, “a general came around and said everyone was to go ashore. I was carried on a stretcher and laid on the beach. I was very lucky I didn’t get killed that day.”

Leading up to the invasion of Tinian, the Navy conducted a bombardment of the island in which napalm bombs were used for the first time. As on Saipan, many Japanese not killed by US military forces opted to commit suicide by jumping off cliffs, rather than being captured by the Americans, who had been told not to take prisoners. Tinian was the staging ground for the airplanes that dropped atomic bombs on Japan in August of 1945.

In the military, Ralph was taught to hate the Japanese. He often explained that the only way that the military was able to get soldiers to conduct the type of brutal fighting required in hand-to-hand combat was by promoting a thoroughly racist attitude towards the Japanese. The life of a Japanese soldier, he was told, was worth less than a dog’s.

After Japan’s surrender, Ralph, then stationed in Nagasaki, witnessed the devastation caused by the war and the dropping of the atomic bomb. Seeing the horrors inflicted on the Japanese conflicted with his militarist training and brought out the deeply humane side of his personality. Like many other US soldiers, he visited and befriended Japanese families.

Ralph became engaged to a Japanese woman, but he was prevented from marrying her when he was redeployed without notice.

It was not, however, until Ralph met the Workers League that he was able to fully understand his experiences in the war and confront the chauvinism and racism he was taught in the military. This was a vital stage in Ralph’s political development. For the first time, he was given an understanding of the imperialist nature of the war.

After the war, Ralph returned to the United States and began working in the construction industry. He was married on February 7, 1948 to Mary Frances (Mike) Edmond, who passed away from breast cancer in 1998. He had two children, Paula and Michael Edmond, to whom he was deeply devoted. He particularly adored his two grandchildren, Jeremy Joseph, age 11, and Joshua Tyler, age 3, the children of his daughter Paula.

For 40 years, from 1947 until May 1, 1988, Ralph worked in construction. He belonged to Sheet Metal Workers Local 12. He was known throughout the area as an experienced and excellent craftsman. Often he was called onto work sites to lead jobs that were very difficult and demanded exceptional skills.

Ralph became known as a militant who fought for the rights of all

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workers. He always felt that his exceptional skill and knowledge enabled him to speak up for other workers who might be less assertive because they feared for their jobs. Ralph served as president of the local for one year in 1957, but increasingly came into conflict with the union bureaucracy, which he saw making deals with contractors and providing favors for their friends, while betraying the majority of workers.

Nevertheless, Ralph did not think much about politics during this time. He believed, like most workers, that bigger and stronger unions could continue to protect workers and win further concessions from the employers. He accepted the general conception, reinforced by the rampant anticommunism and witch-hunting of the McCarthy period, that American capitalism was the best system and that socialism meant dictatorship.

This began to change in the early 1980s, when the recession of the time led to massive layoffs in steel, auto, mining and construction, and President Reagan fired the PATCO air traffic controllers, while the AFL-CIO leadership isolated their struggle and allowed their union to be destroyed.

The destruction of the PATCO union initiated an open assault on the labor movement. The union organizations for which he had fought during his entire adult life proved incapable of defending the jobs, wages or working conditions of their members. In every case, when workers entered into struggle, the union leadership worked to isolate and defeat them. Ralph began to realize that these organizations had been transformed. Instead of defending the workers, even in a limited fashion, the union officials more and more openly sought to secure their own positions by betraying the interests of the workers.

The crisis was brought home to Ralph when his son lost his job at the Babcock and Wilcox Steel Mill in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania in 1984, and his daughter, a licensed practical nurse, went on strike against attempts by the hospital to bust her union. In the course of a four-week strike at Aliquippa Hospital in the winter of 1988, Paula faced harassment and arrest at the hands of the local police.

Ralph first came into contact with the Workers League during the strike. He met a team of Workers League members who had come to speak with the strikers and report on their struggle, and he began reading the *Bulletin*, the newspaper of the Workers League.

Several weeks later he agreed to meet with members of the Workers League and joined in a long discussion late into the night about socialism, the role of Stalinism and the fate of the Soviet Union, the betrayals of the union leadership and the need to change society. That was the first of several meetings and discussions that led to his becoming a member of the Workers League.

Ralph joined, and, as the saying goes, “He never looked back.” He expressed only one regret—that he had not met the party 20 years earlier, as a younger man, when he could have learned and contributed more.

In 1988, Ralph participated in placing Workers League candidates for president and Congress on the ballot in Pennsylvania, Ohio and Michigan. He was always ready to drive long distances to meet with workers or students who expressed interest in the policies and program of the Workers League.

Not long before he joined, paper workers at four International Paper mills went on strike, and the company hired scabs to take their jobs. The union isolated the workers and worked for their defeat. Often Ralph would travel to Lock Haven, Pennsylvania to speak with workers to explain why the union was betraying them and what needed to be done.

In 1990-91 Ralph participated in the party’s campaign against the first Gulf War. He would patiently explain to workers his own experiences during World War II: how soldiers were lied to and used in the interest of their respective governments, and the need for workers to unite internationally against capitalism.

In 1993, after a devastating house fire in Detroit left seven children dead, and the local government sought to witch-hunt the parents, Ralph agreed to be a commissioner in an independent workers’ inquiry into the fire that was established by the Workers League. The commission of inquiry exposed the terrible poverty, poor housing conditions and lack of social services that had led to the tragedy. The commission exposed how the authorities were seeking to cover up the failings of the capitalist system by persecuting the parents.

Throughout these years, Ralph expressed an insatiable desire to learn. He read and studied as much as he could. Every week, he waited for the mailman to bring his copy of the Bulletin. When it arrived, he would stop whatever he was doing and read it cover to cover. He spent much of his time reading the classics by Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky. When he started reading Trotsky’s *History of the Russian Revolution* he could not put it down, and spent three days straight reading it until he was finished.

In 1994, Ralph’s health took a major turn for the worse. Forty years of hard labor had taken its toll on his body. He had already had several operations on his wrists, suffered from heart, intestinal and back problems, and now developed bleeding in one of his eyes, which deprived him of his sight in that eye. Only a few months later, he lost his sight in the other eye.

While Ralph’s other illnesses were debilitating, his blindness meant he could no longer read and thus take part in political life. Initially, documents and articles were read into a cassette for him to listen to. For a period he continued to speak to workers while at the supermarket, running errands or calling into a local talk show, but without his sight it was difficult to keep up with current political events, follow the political work of the party, read and study.

Ralph was an extraordinary human being. He appreciated the smallest gestures of kindness, and always returned them in spades. He was loving, principled and generous. While others sought their fortune, Ralph found his greatest happiness in the betterment of humanity. He embodied and expressed the revolutionary potential and destiny of the American working class. He will be remembered and missed by many.

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