

Jean Brust: A life as a revolutionary

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The tenth anniversary of the death of Comrade Jean Brust is a time for serious reflection on the meaning of Jean's life as a revolutionary, which spanned approximately the last six decades of the twentieth century.

Jean and Bill, her fellow Trotskyist who would later become her husband, both joined the socialist movement during the Depression and fought unceasingly and uncompromisingly when the very great majority of their generation fell by the wayside.

The continuity of Marxism is an objective necessity. It means the assimilation of the lessons of the whole history of the modern working class movement. Jean contributed enormously to this continuity. She and Bill played an almost unique role in defying the ideological and political pressures that bore down on those who fought to defend the traditions of Marxism and of the October 1917 Revolution in Russia.

I knew Jean as a friend and comrade for more than 30 years, but when I first met her, in 1965, she had already been a Trotskyist for more than a quarter of a century.

And what a quarter century that had been! Jean joined the St. Paul branch of the Socialist Workers Party in 1940, just a few short years after this party had led the historic Minneapolis General Strike of 1934. The Minneapolis strike anticipated and helped to encourage the explosion of class struggle in the United States in the last half of that decade that gave rise to the CIO industrial unions.

The leftward movement of the American working class coincided with increasingly unfavorable conditions internationally, however, because of the isolation of the Soviet Union and the crisis of working class leadership. The epoch of the world socialist revolution was inaugurated in October 1917, but 20 years later the counterrevolution had reared its head in the most brutal fashion. Fascism had smashed the organized working class in Germany, the very birthplace of Marxism. In the USSR, meanwhile, the first workers' state was menaced by the emergence of the Stalinist bureaucracy. The year 1937, when Jean joined the socialist youth movement, was the high point of the mass purges, the genocidal Stalinist campaign against the Bolshevik Party and the generation that had led the 1917 Revolution.

Jean often discussed these momentous struggles and their tragic outcomes. The lessons of the Spanish Revolution, where Stalinism betrayed the proletarian struggle against Franco

fascism, were decisive in her own political development. She was steeled in political battle, learning from the defeats as well as the inspiring victory of 1917.

The basic teachings of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky guided Jean for the rest of her life—on the nature of capitalism and the revolutionary implications of its turn toward war and dictatorship in the imperialist epoch; the need for a revolutionary party based upon the working class and built in struggle against the ideological and political pressure of imperialism; the fight for internationalism against the national reformism and opportunism of Stalinism and Social Democracy.

I joined the socialist movement nearly 50 years ago, in 1958. For those who turned to socialism in the decades of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, meeting and working with someone of Jean's experience was an inspiration. She had joined the movement when Trotsky was still alive and she had learned from an earlier generation of American Marxists, such as Trotskyist leader James P. Cannon. She could and did bring all of her experiences to bear in the education of a new generation.

These experiences included the Trotskyists' struggle against political persecution, above all the prosecution of the leaders of the Socialist Workers Party under the thought-control Smith Act in the immediate aftermath of US entry into the Second World War.

Later, as a packinghouse worker in the post-World War II period, in the fight against McCarthyism in the early 1950s, and in the response to the crisis of Stalinism which erupted in 1956 with Khrushchev's revelations and then the Hungarian Revolution, Jean fought with supreme confidence in the scientific correctness of Marxism and the continuous analysis of the class struggle made by the Trotskyist movement.

What characterized her work during this period and in subsequent decades as well was the determination and at the same time the patience with which she fought, whether on the picket line among her fellow workers, or speaking at a public meeting, or conducting practical party work and education with younger members.

I will never forget the impressions of my first major discussions with Bill and Jean, in May 1966. Following the Third Congress of the International Committee of the Fourth International, which I had attended as a delegate from the American Committee of the Fourth International, the

forerunner of the Workers League, I traveled to Minneapolis to report to the comrades there.

The Third Congress was where the Spartacist League, the quintessential middle class radicals, had definitively parted ways from the International Committee of the Fourth International. The young members of our group, who had been expelled from the Socialist Workers Party only two years earlier for opposing its split with the International Committee and its reunification with the Pabloite opportunists, were young and inexperienced. The fact that Bill and Jean had, independently of our own group, contacted the International Committee and then joined our struggle, was a source of tremendous encouragement. Jean stood with us in opposition to the petty bourgeois hysterics of the Spartacists. She helped us to understand what the shouting and factional charges were all about. Above all, she conveyed political confidence and showed how to cut through the superficial issues to their political and class significance.

The solid political support of Bill and Jean was key in the actual founding, later that year, of the Workers League. The relative handful of SWP members who had been expelled in 1964 were now politically prepared to take the step of broadening their struggle and reestablishing an American section of the world party in political solidarity with the International Committee.

I well recall that Jean, injured in an automobile accident some weeks earlier, was unable to attend the founding congress of the Workers League in November 1966. She was there in spirit, however, and, despite the lingering effects of the accident, threw herself into the building of the party in Minnesota as the struggle against the war in Vietnam spread and the radicalization widened from the students to the working class and the youth. Jean was in the forefront of the struggle against the political and theoretical confusion of the “New Left” as well as the bankrupt and reactionary protest politics now espoused by the ex-Trotskyists of the SWP.

The next few decades were full of political difficulties, as we know. The 1968-75 worldwide revolutionary upsurge was betrayed by Stalinism, reformism and Pabloite revisionism. A protracted period of degeneration of all the old leaderships of the working class led, by the 1990s, to the collapse of the Soviet Union, the open repudiation by all of the old social democratic parties of even the pretense of socialism, and the transformation of the trade unions into open enemies of the working class.

The growing crisis of the working class led many to despair completely and openly repudiate the ideas they had championed in their youth. There were also some who doggedly attempted to mask their demoralization by pretending that nothing had changed. Jean had nothing in common with either of these approaches. As part of the Workers League, she soberly analyzed the situation, while at every point fighting to draw the lessons and build a new revolutionary leadership. This

was the case during the decade of the 1980s, which began with the betrayal of the PATCO air traffic controllers strike and ended with the US “labor movement” having completed its transformation into a corporatist appendage of big business.

I lived with Bill and Jean for more than six months in 1986, while the Workers League carried out its struggle against the betrayal of the Hormel meatpacking strike in Austin, Minnesota. Jean marked her 65th birthday during that period, and she was undoubtedly not as physically vigorous as she had been in her youth. She was just as sharp as ever politically, however. I remember occasions when she discussed with Hormel strikers and exposed the betrayals of the union bureaucrats and also their middle class radical hangers-on in the misnamed “support committee” in the Minneapolis area, whose leaders fought above all to exclude all the urgent political questions raised by this struggle.

This took place simultaneously with the ongoing struggle to draw the historical and theoretical lessons of the degeneration of the British Workers Revolutionary Party, which had led to a split inside the International Committee in 1985-86. Jean participated actively in the discussion of the theoretical issues, right alongside our work on the picket lines and demonstrations. She always understood the inseparable connection between the inner-party struggle and the struggles of the working class as a whole.

I often think of what Jean would say about the current political situation and the work of the Socialist Equality Party. I know she would be immensely proud of the development of the *World Socialist Web Site*, and actively participating in its work. Although she died three months before the launching of the WSWS and would perhaps be somewhat amazed at some of the technology that have made the expansion of the WSWS possible, I also know that she wouldn’t be shocked by the fact that the WSWS has attracted a growing international audience. That, after all, is what she had always prepared for. We must consciously base ourselves on what Jean helped to teach us, as we prepare for the revolutionary struggles to come.



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