

# Jean Brust: An example to the new generation

Helen Halyard

26 November 2007

It is hard to believe that a third of a century has passed since I first met Jean Brust at a meeting of the Workers League, forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party, in 1972. It was shortly after I joined the party. I was convinced of the need for a socialist perspective and the correctness of Trotsky's struggle against the Stalinist bureaucracy, but I still had a lot to learn.

Jean and her husband Bill Brust had joined the movement during the great class battles of the 1930s when Trotsky was still alive. They formed a living link to the founder of the world party and played a central role in the education of the younger comrades who were just coming into political life.

Jean died ten years ago, but I will never forget the fierce determination that she brought to all of her political work. She seemed to enjoy reserves of energy that just welled up from the principled convictions that constituted the core of her existence.

In the early 1970s, most members of the party were under 30. She was over 50 and, from my point of view, nearing retirement. I will never forget my impression of Jean at that first meeting. She was wearing a blue and white dress with some pearls and looked as American as mom and apple pie. The thought crossed my mind that she might have wandered into the wrong meeting.

Only a few months had passed since the declaration by President Richard Nixon in August 1971 which removed the gold backing from the dollar and imposed an across-the-board wage freeze throughout the United States. During discussion at the meeting, Jean got up to speak on the impact this would have on politics and class relations internationally.

She explained the significance of these events as a fundamental rupture in the economic role played by the United States in the world. The policy of class compromise which had prevailed since the end of the Second World War could no longer be maintained. Jean spoke clearly on the need to build the party and its

youth movement.

My first impression had been mistaken. She may have been older, but she was not confused. From the time she was a teenager, Jean had devoted her life to the struggle for Trotskyism. Jean had been involved in the big strike wave in 1946. She explained that while the class struggle was at times dormant, it could never be abolished, not as long as capitalism existed.

Jean encouraged me to read the classics of Marx and Trotsky and to study the role of socialists in the early struggles of the American working class. What became even clearer to me in speaking with this comrade was the thoroughly reactionary character of black nationalism. In Marx's *Capital* he makes the point that the white workers can never be free as long as the black workers are in chains. This can be said in another way. There can be no liberation of the black workers and youth without a combined struggle of the entire working class.

From my initial discussions I learned more about Jean's life, the early struggles of the American working class and the role played by the Trotskyist movement in leading big trade union battles. Jean explained the role of the working class in liberating mankind from the oppression of poverty and war and that the central task we faced was making workers conscious of their historical role in society. She explained that there was no other force, outside of the workers themselves that could take control of production and produce for the needs of society and not profit.

The events of 1917, when the working class took power for the first time in history under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky, were very much alive in Jean's consciousness. She was shaped by the big historical events, most particularly the fight waged by Leon Trotsky against the degeneration of the first workers' state and the bureaucratic nationalism of the Stalinist bureaucracy.

Jean was unable to actively participate in party work during the latter part of the 1990s, after losing her lifelong companion, Bill, to cancer in 1991, followed shortly by the death of her oldest son Leo, also a longtime member of the Workers League. I stayed with her in Minneapolis for a month shortly before she died on November 24, 1997.

Although she was ill, we still spent time reviewing the major political events and discussed the work of the party. Jean was very excited about the publication of Vadim Rogovin's book, *1937: Stalin's Year of Terror*, detailing the cause of Stalin's purges, how they were prepared against the opposition and their consequences. I read passages of the work and discussed it with her.

While I had gotten to know Jean well over the course of a relationship spanning thirty years, staying with her every day revealed the many sides and talents this comrade had.

Jean's residence was beautifully done with a living room highlighted by custom-made bookcases for important political works, novels and poetry. She was a lover of the African violet plant which decorated every room in her home.

She had a wonderful selection of music, from the great classical composers to the best jazz artists. She was fortunate to have heard a rendition of Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit", the song written about lynching during the 1920s and 1930s in the southern US, at a nightclub in Minneapolis.

Small-minded people sometimes suggest, particularly concerning women, that a devotion to a great cause and great historical principles makes you an insensitive and uncaring person. Nothing could be further from the truth. Jean, who spent her entire life fighting for the betterment of mankind and the cause of the working class, was among the most caring and sensitive people I have ever worked with.

Jean dearly loved her family and children—Cynthia and Steve, in addition to Leo—took an interest in their education and development and enjoyed participating in activities with them. Jean loved to laugh and enjoyed speaking with comrades about their experiences.

There were very difficult moments as we spent those last days together. I watched as Jean's energy began to fade and she spent more and more hours sleeping during the day. At the same time, it also gave me pause to reflect on the fact that here was a person that had

given everything to the building of our movement. Jean came into the party out of the great struggles of the American and international working class. She lived through and witnessed the horrors of the Depression and the Second World War and joined a movement to prevent such barbaric tragedies from ever taking place again.

I encourage younger comrades to read the volume of Bill Brust's articles, *Defending Principles—The Legacy of Bill Brust*, with an introduction by Jean and to carry forward the fight to which both these comrades dedicated their lives.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**