

Ten years since the death of Jean Brust, veteran Trotskyist

26 November 2007

November 24 marks ten years since the death of Jean Brust, a founding member of the Socialist Equality Party and its predecessor, the Workers League. Brust, a veteran of 60 years fighting for socialism in the United States and internationally, suffered a massive stroke on November 21, 1997 and died three days later, at age 76.

Jean Brust played a leading role in the Trotskyist movement over an historical period that extended from the founding of the Fourth International in 1938, in defiance of the Stalinist blood purges, to the final preparations for the launching of the *World Socialist Web Site* to carry forward Trotsky's perspective of world revolution in the age of globalization and the Internet. Jean died less than three months before the WSWWS began daily publication in February 1998.

Joining the Young Peoples Socialist League (YPSL) in 1937 to take up the fight against capitalist exploitation, fascist barbarism and the Stalinist betrayal of the Russian Revolution, Jean was politically shaped by the great events of that period: the Spanish Civil War, the struggle to expose the Stalinist frame-up trials, and the great movement of the American working class during the Depression years.

One of the high points of the movement was the 1934 Minneapolis general strike, led by Trotskyists, which gave the party a strong base in the working class of the Twin Cities, where Jean's family moved in 1935. It was in St. Paul that the teenaged Jean came into contact with the historical and social forces that were to shape the rest of her life.

She was approached in 1937 by supporters of the Young Communist League, the Stalinist youth movement, but was not convinced by their arguments in favor of a "Popular Front" alliance between the Soviet bureaucracy and the US administration of Franklin Roosevelt. She was attracted instead to Trotskyist youth who were then working in the YPSL,

the youth movement of the Socialist Party, fighting for a perspective based on socialist internationalism and the political independence of the working class from all capitalist parties. In 1938, Trotsky founded the Fourth International, and his American supporters established the Socialist Workers Party (SWP).

During World War II, Jean worked in a defense plant, only to lose her relatively high-paying job at the end of the war. She and Bill Brust both worked for a time in the packinghouse industry and played important roles in the strikes that broke out in 1946 and 1948, part of a series of militant struggles throughout the American working class in the years immediately following the war.

Jean became an inspirational figure in the history of the Trotskyist movement, emerging, along with her husband Bill, as one of a handful who remained true to Trotskyist principles in the post-World War II period, when the Socialist Workers Party capitulated to Pabloism, an opportunist tendency which sought to adapt the Fourth International to the domination of world politics by Stalinism and American imperialism.

Under the impact of the postwar economic boom and the McCarthyite witch-hunting that isolated socialists in the labor movement, the SWP moved steadily to the right, eventually abandoning its adherence to the program of revolutionary working class internationalism in the early 1960s. Bill and Jean Brust refused to go along, rallying to a small group of young members of the SWP who had been expelled for their opposition to this betrayal.

Jean and Bill were among the founding members of the Workers League, founded in 1966 in political sympathy with the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world organization founded in opposition to the Pabloites. The International Committee insisted, against the glorification of

Stalinism and bourgeois nationalism that prevailed in radical circles in the 1960s, that Stalinism was a fundamentally counterrevolutionary force and that only the international working class, not peasant guerrillas or student protesters, could wage and win the struggle for socialism on a world scale.

Jean threw herself into the struggle to build the Workers League in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a period of stormy upsurge among workers, students and minority youth in the United States. Almost alone among those of her generation, she had a powerful ability to communicate to young people the principles of Marxist internationalism which she had embraced in the 1930s. She could explain concrete questions without patronizing her audience or watering down principles. She gave voice to the passionate aspirations of the most advanced sections of the working class for a revolutionary way forward.

In the early 1980s, when Jean had just entered her 60s, she played a critical role in the struggle conducted by the Workers League leadership against the opportunist degeneration of the Workers Revolutionary Party, the influential British section of the International Committee. This struggle, waged from 1982 to 1986, resulted in the defeat of the opportunists and the rallying of the great majority of the cadres of the International Committee to a principled revolutionary perspective.

As Jean herself would explain, the victory of the ICFI in 1985-86 demonstrated the changed relationship of forces between Marxism and opportunism within the international working class. It prefigured the breakup and collapse of the Stalinist regimes which had masqueraded as “real existing socialism” for so many decades, while doing everything in their power to betray the international working class and destroy socialist political consciousness.

The disintegration of Stalinism was a vindication of the Trotskyist perspective for which Jean Brust had fought for a half-century. It demonstrated that the Soviet bureaucracy was, as Trotsky had warned, the gravedigger of the Russian Revolution. And it signaled a parallel process taking place within the social-democratic, Labor and trade union bureaucracies in the capitalist countries, all of them repudiating any connection with the interests of the working class and becoming the direct instruments of big business.

The Workers League and the International Committee drew the conclusion from these experiences that it was necessary to put forward the Trotskyist movement as the political alternative for the working class. It was not a matter of advising workers to pressure the existing organizations, the rotten bureaucratic shells produced by decades of bureaucratic degeneration and adaptation to capitalism, but of providing them an independent revolutionary leadership. This understanding led to the transformation of the Workers League into the Socialist Equality Party in 1995, and then to the decision to launch the *World Socialist Web Site*, made in 1997 with Jean’s participation and support, and brought to realization in February 1998, three months after her death.

The last years of Jean’s life were burdened by illness and immense personal losses. Bill died in September 1991 after a six-month struggle with cancer. Only two and a half years later, in April 1994, their 40-year-old son Leo, a dedicated member of the Workers League then working in Michigan, died suddenly of cardiac arrest. Jean, as well, had to deal with her own increasing health problems.

She loved her children, including, in addition to Leo, Steve, a well-known fantasy novelist, and Cynthia, a speech pathologist and advocate for children with disabilities. Jean also delighted in her six grandchildren.

Jean knew that the crisis of perspective gripping the working class would be overcome, and that the decay of world capitalism would usher in a new period of revolutionary struggle. She retained a firm and passionate conviction that the decades of preparation to which she had decisively contributed would make all the difference in the world. Her example lives on in the education and training of a new generation of revolutionary socialists in the United States and internationally.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact