

Eddie Benjamin: January 2, 1953—February 5, 2008

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11 February 2008

It is with great sadness that the *World Socialist Web Site* reports the sudden death of Eddie Benjamin, a long-time member of the Socialist Equality Party in the US, and its forerunner, the Workers League.



Eddie Benjamin

Comrade Eddie, 55, died of a heart attack on the evening of Tuesday, February 5. He collapsed after playing basketball at a community college gym in a western suburb of Detroit. Despite efforts to revive him, he never regained consciousness. His death was particularly unexpected because of his physical fitness, stamina and seemingly boundless energy.

Eddie is survived by his wife, Ruth, and two daughters, Sade, 21, and

Larissa, 19.

Comrade Eddie was part of a remarkable generation of working class African-American youth who were won to revolutionary politics in the 1970s. His decision to join the Workers League in 1973 was bound up with the conditions of oppression he experienced in his own youth, as well as the social upheavals in the US and internationally of the 1960s and 1970s that brought him and many others into political life.

Eddie was one of a relatively small number of that generation, however, who drew political lessons from the betrayals of the working class and continued the struggle to build a revolutionary leadership. For more than three decades, he devoted himself fully to building this leadership.

Eddie was born on January 2, 1953 in Dawson, Georgia, a small rural town in the southwestern part of the state, where black sharecroppers faced grinding poverty and Jim Crow segregation. As Eddie later noted, one of the major plantation owners in the area was the future Democratic president, Jimmy Carter.

His father, Anderson, worked in a fertilizer factory and his mother, Mae Bell, was a domestic. Eddie grew up with his eight brothers and sisters in a home without indoor plumbing. When Eddie was old enough to go to school, he joined his brothers and sisters picking cotton in the fields to earn money for school clothes and other necessities.

In the business district in Dawson, the brothers and sisters had to make sure they used the water fountains marked “colored,” not “white.” On Sundays they would go to their favorite malt shop. The whites could make their orders in the front, while blacks had to order from a back room.

Eddie once told a story of young civil rights activists coming to his town during the struggle to integrate public places and win voting rights for blacks. While many of the older black workers shunned them out of fear of retribution, the young people in town were inspired by their courage and determination.

Eddie’s brother Robert said, “Many blacks were scared because to go against the system meant the police would hunt you down and retaliate. Eddie was the type of person who was going to get involved anyway. I asked him, ‘Don’t you know what is going to happen? When they leave town you are going to be on your own.’ That didn’t matter to him. He said, ‘We got to start the fight somewhere.’ He always had that fight in him. He would stand up against injustice.”

Times were made more difficult when their father left the family. Hoping to improve their lives, Eddie’s mother moved the family to Cleveland, Ohio in the early 1960s. Eddie grew up East Cleveland, an impoverished African-American neighborhood plagued by high rates of unemployment, poor housing and substandard schools. In July 1968, there was a violent riot against police brutality and racism in the area. Carl Stokes—a Democrat who was the first black mayor of any major city in the nation—called in the National Guard to suppress the uprising, leaving seven people dead.

Eddie often spoke of his opposition to the war in Vietnam from the experiences of his family. In the 1960s three of his brothers—Lonnie,

Robert and Walter—were drafted and saw combat in Vietnam. He recalled young men in the neighborhood were either killed or came back psychologically scarred by the experience.

Graduating from East High School in 1971, Eddie went on with an athletic scholarship to the University of Akron, where he studied commercial art. Although he had suffered racial discrimination firsthand, Eddie single-handedly brought black and white students together at the college's lunchroom, where they usually ate their meals separately.

He moved back to Cleveland in the early 1970s, but was unable to get a job using his artistic talents, with many employers saying 'No' once they discovered they were speaking to a black man on the phone. He moved back with his mother and earned a living working in factories and warehouses.

At the end of 1973, he met and joined the Young Socialists, the youth movement of the Workers League. He was won to the perspective of building a political movement of the working class against the Democrats and Republicans and fighting for a socialist alternative to war, poverty and oppression.

He threw himself fully into the work of the Young Socialists and was elected to the YS National Committee in May 1974. Eddie was a fiery and eloquent public speaker. In 1975 he helped organize a delegation of youth from Cleveland to attend the founding conference of the International Youth Committee of the Fourth International in London. Although he had little political background before joining, Eddie was always eager to learn about the history of the movement and its principles.

He was also active in the campaign to free Gary Tyler, a black youth in Louisiana who was framed up for a murder he did not commit. The YS won the support of hundreds of thousands of trade unionists, youth and others, which played a key role in preventing his execution.

Speaking of his role during this period, Helen Halyard, the assistant national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party, said, "Eddie joined the party after the end of the mass antiwar protest movement and during a period in which black nationalism and other identity politics were influential. He was won to the perspective of Marxism and political principle. He understood the necessity of organizing the independent political activity of the working class. He drew lessons and was particularly attracted to the Workers League's fight at that time for a labor party and socialist policies.

"He was extremely sensitive and compassionate about oppressed sections of the working class, particularly the conditions facing minority youth. Because of his experiences in the South, he knew the impact of racial oppression.

"But Eddie understood that this could not be overcome outside of uniting the struggles of black and white workers against the central cause of this oppression, which lies in the economic relations of capitalism.

"One adjective described Eddie: enthusiasm. You can see by looking at the pictures from this period that Eddie approached every campaign of the party with enormous determination and dedication and gave himself wholly. Whatever talents and potential he had, he wanted to use them to win the most advanced layers of workers and youth to a Marxist understanding."

In 1976-77 Eddie came to New York, where he was trained as a party printer and worked closely with Tom Henehan, a leader of the Workers League who was killed in a political assassination in 1977. Although he had no technical background, he worked diligently to develop his skills and played a decisive role in maintaining the publication of the Workers League's newspapers, the *Bulletin* and *Young Socialist*.

Eddie came to Detroit in 1980 and was actively involved in the many interventions of the Workers League in the struggles of the working class against corporate-backed union-busting, beginning with Reagan's firing of 13,000 PATCO air traffic controllers in August 1981.

In the early 1980s, he was one of several comrades—including a fired

PATCO striker who had joined the movement—who traveled to the AFL-CIO Executive Committee meeting in Florida to present a petition circulated by the party and signed by thousands of workers demanding action to defend the air traffic controllers.

Eddie became the industrial reporter for the *Bulletin* and provided coverage of a series of strikes in the Detroit area, including Barry Steel, Livernois Moving & Storage and Cunningham drug stores, which were isolated and betrayed by the AFL-CIO and the United Auto Workers union.

In 1982, as one of a slate of Workers League candidates in Michigan, Eddie ran for US Congress in Detroit's 1st District, the home of thousands of autoworkers facing the loss of their jobs and wage-cutting. He opposed incumbent congressman John Conyers, a "left" Democrat who sought to keep the working class tied to the Democrats and prevent any serious opposition to the corporate-government assault on their living standards.

In an interview in the *Bulletin*, Eddie said, "I'm running for public office because in my area there's no political representation for working class people. Everything which has taken place in the economic situation in this country has shown that this system is absolutely bankrupt....There's no way which the capitalist owners can combine the drive for profit with meeting the living standards of people in this country. The two are in direct opposition....Either the factories are going to be shut down or the workers will have no choice but to nationalize them, or run them under their own control, to provide jobs and to meet the basic needs of their families."

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Eddie was involved in reporting the struggles of the working class. He traveled with a reporting team to Hamlet, North Carolina, following the September 1991 fire at the Imperial Foods chicken processing plant that killed 25 workers. He spent a week interviewing survivors, coworkers and family members of those who died, and help prepare a series of articles on the tragedy. Able to speak plainly and effectively with workers, he was outraged at the conditions of work and life that prevailed in the town.

Eddie was dedicated to the building of the world Trotskyist movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International, and was inspired by the political struggle against the nationalist degeneration of the Workers Revolutionary Party in 1985-86 and the unprecedented integration of the work of the world movement that followed.

In the aftermath of the first Gulf War, Eddie traveled to Berlin in 1991 to attend the ICFI's Conference against Imperialist War and Colonialism. In 1996, he traveled to Australia to assist comrades in the election campaign of the Socialist Labour League, forerunner of the SEP, working in Brisbane and Sydney. There he met with comrades from around the world and won their deep respect and affection.

In his last overseas trip in 2003, he made sure to visit the Anne Frank house in Amsterdam, where the heroic young Dutch Jewish girl hid before being captured and killed by the Nazis.

Comrade Eddie was an unusual and extraordinary man with many intellectual and cultural interests. He had a deep appreciation of art and music, particularly jazz and the blues and never failed to spot the most talented musicians. Although life kept him from fully developing his love of art, his home included wonderful paintings, including one he did of the Delta Blues man, John Lee Hooker.

This writer had the opportunity to work closely with Eddie during the 1996 SEP election campaign in the US. We traveled together to Minnesota, New Jersey, New York and other states giving meetings to students and workers. In the hundreds of miles we drove together he never grew tired of recalling his early days in the movement and discussing the prospects and potential to develop the party. During those trips we discussed and sometimes heatedly debated questions of politics, history, film, music, sports and other subjects.

A man of many interests, Comrade Eddie identified himself, above all, with the cause of international socialism, which he fought for passionately for 35 years. His passing is an immense loss for our movement. He will be missed sorely by his comrades, family and friends in the US and internationally.



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