

International condolences and tributes to Eddie Benjamin

12 February 2008

We are publishing here a selection of the many messages of condolence and the many tributes to Eddie Benjamin sent by Eddie's comrades from around the world and from within the US.

Comrade Eddie, a member for 35 years of the Socialist Equality Party and its forerunner, the Workers League, died suddenly of a heart attack on February 5. He was 55.

Eddie is survived by his wife, Ruth, and two daughters, Sade, 21, and Larissa, 19. (See "Eddie Benjamin: January 2, 1953—February 5, 2008")

A memorial service for Eddie, held Sunday, February 10 in Southfield, Michigan, was attended by over 350 people, including many members of his immediate and extended family and family friends from Cleveland, Ohio, Eddie's workmates and associates, friends of Ruth and of Sade and Larissa, and SEP comrades from the East Coast and the Midwest.

Dear Ruth, dear comrades of the SEP,

We learned with dismay and sadness of the sudden death of our comrade Eddie. We still cannot really believe he is dead. The note informing us of his death came as a real shock.

With the loss of Eddie we have not only lost an important cadre of our international party, a man who fought for the political principles of our movement over decades, we have also lost a friend and comrade who won many friends with his cordial and cheerful manner, combined with his readiness to help others and offer solidarity.

Many comrades got to know him in Germany some years ago in the course of international schools, and virtually everyone who met him during his stay in Germany has a story to tell.

I am reminded of the occasion when my family spent time in Detroit and Eddie spontaneously offered to organise a visit to the Henry Ford Museum, an offer we were very pleased to receive and take up.

Comrades from Frankfurt vividly recall his visit nearly five years ago. Eddie could spend hours relating the situation in the US and the conditions of American workers, and it was always interesting and a pleasure to listen to him. He then proceeded on to Amsterdam. In the few weeks he was here, he wanted to see and experience as much as he could of European culture.

Combining openness and an infectious friendly manner with curiosity and a deep interest in culture, Eddie embodied some of the best characteristics of American workers.

The friendship he struck up with many international comrades was based on deep socialist convictions. His death at such an early age is very tragic, and we all regret that he will be unable to witness how the ideas and perspectives he fought for throughout his life now win influence amongst a new generation of workers and young people.

Dear comrades, on this sad day we feel closely bound to you all and, above all, we wish to express our deepest sympathy and condolences to Eddie's wife Ruth and his two beloved daughters, Sade and Larissa.

We are all very sad at the loss of an outstanding comrade and friend, but Eddie remains alive in our hearts and will always have a firm place in our memory.

On behalf of all the comrades of the German Socialist Equality Party,

Uli Rippert, national secretary

To dearest Ruth, Sade and Larissa and to Comrade Eddie's family, friends and comrades,

I share your sense of shock and disbelief, and send you my deepest sympathies on the untimely death of dearest comrade Eddie.

I first met Eddie in New York in 1977, when we were both 24. He seemed to me to be, even at that young age, an experienced cadre. As a member of the Workers League, he had already worked through and assimilated many critical issues of the perspective and program of Trotskyism and had clearly made a very conscious, deliberate decision to utilize all of his many capacities, along with his boundless determination and enthusiasm, to fight for them in the American working class.

I recall especially Eddie's curiosity and interest in Australia—in the working class and its experiences, in Australia's Aboriginal population and its terrible, tragic history, in the climate and the flora and fauna of a country on the other side of the world. This was just one small expression of his lifelong commitment to internationalism.

I met Eddie again in 1988 and, while it seemed that he had physically hardly changed, he had by then participated in the historic struggle, led by the Workers League, to defeat the opportunist leadership of the British Workers Revolutionary Party and its attempt to liquidate the world movement. In his firm stance in defence of the party and the principles of socialist internationalism, Eddie proved himself to be among the finest representatives of the American and international working class.

In the wake of that struggle, Eddie was even keener to discuss the experiences of the Australian Socialist Labour League. He communicated to me, several times and in no uncertain terms, his eagerness to visit and collaborate with the Australian section.

In 1996 he got his wish. Eddie came to Australia to participate in the SLL's federal election campaign. After several days discussing and campaigning in Sydney, he flew north to Brisbane, where he joined the campaign in support of SLL candidate Carl Wyles.

This was the election that saw a landslide defeat for the Keating Labor government and the coming to power of John Howard. It was the election that propelled Pauline Hanson to national—and international—prominence as a former Liberal candidate whom the right-wing party had been obliged to disendorse due to her anti-Aboriginal racist policies. Carl, an Aboriginal worker, was standing directly against Hanson, in the large working class electorate of Oxley.

From the very outset, Eddie understood the political importance of the issues that were emerging—that they had to be carefully discussed and patiently clarified in the working class. It was necessary to fight intransigently against the attempts to divert mounting social distress and hostility to Labor into anti-Aboriginal and anti-immigrant racism.

At the same time, it was necessary to firmly counter the reactionary nostrums of identity politics and black nationalism. Our task was to fight for the unity of all workers, regardless of colour or ethnicity, in the common struggle against the profit system. Eddie had cut his political teeth on these questions, and he campaigned tirelessly, despite the

unrelenting heat, which he found quite difficult, to utilize his political experiences in the US for the benefit of the party and the Australian working class.

Comrades who worked with him in Brisbane remember his powerful ability to speak directly to workers, to clarify difficult political issues, and, above all, his indefatigable determination.

Eddie's interest and concern for the international movement, and for all his comrades, was boundless. He was a wonderful comrade and a wonderful, warm, funny and exuberant human being. I will miss him deeply.

With warmest greetings,

Linda Tenenbaum, assistant national secretary, SEP of Australia

Dearest Ruth, Sade and Larissa,

I speak for all of us here in Britain when I send my heartfelt condolences on the death of Eddie.

You will have been inundated with letters and tributes to a valued comrade, who for you was so much more.

I really liked Eddie. He was a genuinely nice man. I cannot even picture him without a smile on his face or a twinkle in his eyes that preceded one. And I can hear his mischievous laugh even as I write this. He was someone who loved life and cherished his friends and comrades.

From my own brief experience stopping with your wonderful family, I know that he was a man fully engaged with the world and everything in it—testament to the generosity of spirit that animates the socialist movement of which he was such a remarkable representative. I consider myself honoured to have known him and richer for having done so.

His life was tragically shortened, but he didn't waste a moment of it. We will all miss him.

I send you all our love at this painful time in your lives and those of Eddie's many, many friends.

Your comrade,

Chris Marsden, for the Socialist Equality Party of Britain

To the family, friends and comrades of Eddie Benjamin,

We are shocked and deeply saddened by the unexpected death of comrade Eddie.

We have experienced the enormous warmth with which he always greeted us as international co-thinkers. In fact, it was Eddie who drove me to the airport on my way back from the international school which was held last August in Ann Arbor.

During the discussions I and others had with him, we felt the deep understanding he had about the vital importance of the struggle of our world party to develop socialist consciousness among the working people. He related to us with enthusiasm how he broke from narrow nationalist trade unionism and joined the Workers League, the forerunner of the SEP. He expressed his unwavering confidence in the development of the party in the present period of social shocks and upheavals experienced throughout the world.

We send our heartfelt condolences to Ruth, his two daughters and all the comrades of the SEP.

Wije Dias, general secretary, SEP of Sri Lanka

Dear Ruth, Sade, Larissa and Eddie Benjamin's other family members, comrades and friends,

Our Eddie is gone, snatched from us suddenly and far, far too soon. Words—no matter how evocative or sincere—cannot not salve that wound.

I only want you to know that I consider it a privilege to have worked with Eddie on and off for more than 30 years. He was a friend and a comrade, with all that entails in terms of a common commitment to a socialist future and a willingness to share, to speak frankly to one another, and to strive, struggle and, at times laugh, together.

As others have no doubt reminded you, Eddie represented the best, the most farsighted and self-sacrificing of a generation of working class youth radicalized by the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War and the titanic

struggles of the working class that resounded round the world between 1968 and 1975.

I will remember Eddie as a gregarious person with an infectious smile and a passion for life—a passion fructified by a theoretically and politically grounded understanding of the potential for a new world without the injustices, degradations and horrors of contemporary capitalism.

I would also like to extend to you the heartfelt sympathy and condolences of all the members and supporters of the SEP of Canada.

Keith Jones, national secretary, SEP of Canada

Dear Ruth, Sade, Larissa, family, friends and comrades of Eddie Benjamin,

It was with profound shock and sadness that the comrades in France learned of the death of Eddie Benjamin. We send our heartfelt condolences to you and sympathy for your grief.

Some of us had the privilege of knowing him personally and we are all aware of the great contribution that he made to the Trotskyist movement and the fight he made to establish the unity of the working class against ethnic and racial divisions.

We have a profound feeling of loss on knowing that we have lost a comrade who, through the study of Marxism and all that is best in human culture, devoted his life to overcoming the obstacles that class society puts in the way of the political education of the working class.

However, as we go into a period for which his life was a preparation—the break-up of the postwar stabilisation of capitalism and the emergence of immense class struggles—his contribution in building the movement takes on great significance.

I remember an afternoon I and others spent with Eddie as he showed us around Detroit, following the summer educational of 2005. He was completely imbued with the history of the struggles of the automobile workers against the bosses and their goons, and pointed out where historic confrontations had taken place to establish union rights and improved working conditions. He spoke of the gate sales of the party paper, the *Bulletin*, which he had conducted at the car plants and the response that workers had given in the heart of imperialism.

His enthusiasm was contagious as was his outrage over the areas devastated by closures and unemployment. He took us to his house and we met his wife Ruth and his daughters Sade and Larissa. We discussed, among many other things, the conditions of immigrant workers in France, and he advised us on books to read about the Jim Crow that he and his family had lived through.

Over the years, Eddie would often point out that we were not getting any younger. He'd say, "We ain't no spring chickens any more!" If we want to honor comrade Eddie's memory in a meaningful way, we must dedicate ourselves anew to training a new generation of Marxists and Trotskyists from among the workers and youth who are being radicalized by the ever greater attacks of their capitalist oppressors.

Our warmest comradely greetings,

Antoine Lerougetel, for the comrades in France

Dear comrades, dear Ruth,

With a sense of great sadness I receive the news that Comrade Eddie, still in the prime of his life, has prematurely left us. It is an irreplaceable loss for his family, his relatives, his friends and for our party.

Only few months ago I saw him as a very lively, energetic, buoyant person when I attended the educational school in Ann Arbor last August. It was my fortune that I also spoke with Ruth and Larissa.

The course of Eddie's life was broken in an untimely manner, but the memory of his uncommon personality will always be with us. He is inseparably linked to the great intellectual, political and moral heritage of our international movement accumulated over many decades. He embodied the best sort of people who are attracted to our party in this tumultuous, very complicated and intense time.

An enormous amount of confusion has been created in the period of

historical decline of postwar reformism, which has seen the destruction of the social gains of the working class by the ruling elites all over the world, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and a new eruption of international, especially American, imperialism.

Many reactionary conceptions have been developed and promoted during this time. Despite all of these influences, however, Comrade Eddie remained a committed socialist and devoted fighter for the principles of social equality, internationalism and basic democratic rights.

In the name of the Russian comrades, I express my deepest condolences to his family and relatives.

I strongly believe that the best commemoration of Comrade Eddie's life and work will be the new political advances of our party in the US and elsewhere in the coming period.

Vladimir Volkov

I was shocked and very saddened to hear of the sudden and completely unexpected death of Comrade Eddie Benjamin.

I don't know too much about Eddie's personal or political history. But having been born in 1953, he must have spent his youth during the period of the civil rights movement, the Kennedy years and then the Vietnam War.

Instead of turning to black nationalism as so many others did, he found his way to the Trotskyist movement and has remained steadfast in his allegiance to it ever since. That was not an easy path to take, and he was one of the few worker comrades in the party for a whole period.

There is no doubt that many others will follow him, but it is a pity that he will not be here to participate in the training and integration of those new forces and to be part of that living connection with the struggles of the past.

I know he was a warm human being who was extremely friendly to me when I visited Detroit. And I know that he was justifiably proud of his two beautiful daughters, Sade and Larissa.

Please pass on my deepest condolences to Comrade Ruth, his daughters and the rest of his family.

Warmest regards,

Barbara Slaughter (SEP of Britain)

Message to the memorial gathering for Eddie Benjamin:

All of the members and supporters of the Socialist Equality Party in the New York area want to extend their sympathy and remember the contributions of our comrade Eddie Benjamin on this sad occasion.

Some of us knew him for nearly 35 years, others met him more recently, but we all have memories of his warmth, his determination to fight for socialism, his fierce identification with the international working class and his commitment to the building of a revolutionary party based on that class.

Our deepest sympathy to Ruth, Sade and Larissa. We can be proud of the contributions that he made to the future of the working class and all humanity.

Fred Mazelis

Dear Comrade Ruth, Sade and Larissa, comrades and friends,

On behalf of the comrades in the southern California area, I would like to send our deepest condolences to today's memorial honoring Comrade Eddie. There is no question that we have lost an outstanding comrade and friend.

My own memories of Eddie go all the way back to the 1970s, when many of us joined the party.

As all comrades remember, Eddie had a distinctive laugh. I can still hear him. Whenever we visited youth or workers, he had an easy way about him as he sought to patiently explain political concepts or developments to them. And he would laugh *with* them as they began to understand more.

Eddie was a very warm and genuine comrade, but at the same time, unflinching and committed as an internationalist, as a Trotskyist. He embodied the very best qualities of the American working class—its

courage, its deep sense of democratic ideals and willingness to fight for them.

Having come from the South, he knew what racial prejudice was all about, but he joined *this* party because he, as most of us then, was attracted to its scientific, historical and internationalist perspective—this in the heyday of ethnic nationalism and protest politics.

The party explained that those other roads ultimately ended up in reformism, in the camp of the Democratic Party. The working class is the only revolutionary class by virtue of its relation to the productive forces and because it has no country. Watching the elections today, we know that with our intervention, the American working class will come to understand this through painful experiences.

I saw him in Ann Arbor at last summer's lecture series. We talked about how great it was seeing so many new comrades joining the party and the high caliber of the lectures and level of political discussion.

We will miss Comrade Eddie dearly. And we were very, very fortunate to have known and worked with him. He has made an indelible contribution to the struggle for the liberation of mankind from world capitalism.

Warmest greetings,

Kimie Saito, for the southern California-area SEP members



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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