

Dave Hyland: A life-long struggle for Trotskyism

Chris Marsden
21 January 2014

We are posting here the contribution delivered by Chris Marsden, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party of Britain, to the memorial meeting held January 18 in honour of Dave Hyland, the party's former national secretary, who passed away on December 8, 2013 (see "Memorial meeting pays tribute to Dave Hyland's political struggle").

**

It is my privilege to be able to speak at today's memorial meeting for Dave Hyland, who was both my comrade and my friend.

I knew Dave for 30 years, and for many of those years I worked as closely with him as is humanly possible. So if I were to recount anecdotes about our experiences together, we would be here all night.

But that is not necessary. Many in this room knew Dave, and all will have their stories to tell. They would all be different, of course, but I would venture to suggest that every story would, in some way or other, depict a man who was driven by politics, who was both wholly genuine in his beliefs and absolutely principled in his fight for them.

Believe me, he wasn't an easy-going guy.

I was trying to find a word that summed Dave up and thought perhaps pugnacious would do. So, like an editor does, I looked it up. And the list of synonyms included combative, belligerent, argumentative—which I thought are close to the mark—but also bellicose, warlike and threatening—which aren't.

The point is that he expected comrades to give their all in the fight to build the party because he himself would do nothing less.

And if he was tough and uncompromising, then this was because he was forced to carry out this task under the most extraordinarily difficult circumstances imaginable—above all, in the face of the betrayal of the leaders he had looked up to as an inspiration.

Dave's life was shaped by one colossal political event—the struggle waged by David North, the Workers League and the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) against the political degeneration and betrayal of Trotskyism by the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP).

I can't speak at any length on this seminal struggle, because on this platform today is the man not only best able, but with the absolute right to do so—Comrade North.

What I will do later is quote Dave Hyland on the crucial decision he took to contact the Workers League on October 9, 1985.

I myself will say something about Dave pre- and post-split, in order to help illustrate just how important a figure he was in the movement's history in Britain and internationally.

The first time I met Dave was in 1983, when he came to tell a young(ish) student that he was attending a Young Socialists Active Workers conference that weekend and he should forget studying for his upcoming exams.

I knew nothing at that time about Dave's past history in the movement, but I came to know, respect and admire him for his absolute dedication and tenacity during the next year or so, which was dominated by the

national miners' strike beginning in February 1984.

I knew also that he had come to Yorkshire without his family, slept on floors, ate thanks to the generosity of members and supporters, was lucky when he occasionally got paid, and collected his own petrol money.

I knew that he went to picket lines at the crack of dawn, prepared political reports, and was able to reanimate an area of the party that had been all but destroyed by the activities of the WRP leadership.

And that mattered. Because when Dave set out to demand a control commission into the actions of Gerry Healy, there was never a question in my mind, or the mind of anyone else who knew him, that he was acting out of principled and not subjective considerations—unlike many others.

I would also like to say something about Dave after the split. Comrade Larry Roberts in the United States made an important and incisive observation in his letter of commiseration sent to Dave's family. He wrote:

"It is one thing to be a leader of workers in the party. It is quite a different challenge to become a Marxist leader of a national section in the fight for internationalism against those you had respected and who had enormous resources. Dave took the high road, the one that is the most difficult to take."

That he most certainly did.

What was truly extraordinary is how much Dave—who had a formal education only until the age of 14, who was previously considered a worker-activist and had been subjected to appalling treatment in the WRP—was prepared to do in order to meet up to the challenge of his role as national secretary.

He wrote articles, political polemics, prepared reports—and he read voraciously.

To indicate the seriousness with which he approached political questions, I asked Eileen how many books were in Dave's library. She told me over a thousand—ranging from poetry, art, theatre and playwrights, medicine, labour history, general history, local history and Chartism to biographies ranging from Mohammed Ali to Thomas Paine.

He educated himself and in turn did all he could to educate others.

These are remarkable individual character traits, but as such they must have equally deep social roots.

What I only learned to fully appreciate after the hurly-burly of the split had passed was why it was Dave who responded most determinedly and in the most principled political fashion to the struggle being waged in the ICFI, and who then established the WRP (Internationalist) minority on the Central Committee.

I knew Dave had joined the Socialist Labour League, the WRP's forerunner, at the height of major political struggles waged by the working class in Britain, including the miners' strikes of 1972 and 1974 against the Heath Tory government, and that he had led struggles himself at Kodak and elsewhere, for which he had been victimised and sacked.

At Kodak, management and the union spread the rumour that he had bombs in his locker, against the background of the IRA bombing

campaign. He was escorted from the premises to stop him speaking to the workers and placed on the blacklist compiled by the Economic League.

The WRP did nothing to defend him, an expression of the political shift that had begun to take place as they were abandoning the factories for the theatres.

Mounting financial problems forced the family to move repeatedly. Dave worked in many factories until they found out who he was. At one, the police were waiting for him at the start of a shift to escort him from the premises. Of course, the unions did nothing and probably fingered him to management.

For these reasons, I saw him as the genuine article—someone who had taken up the fight to build a revolutionary leadership in the working class whatever the personal cost to himself.

But he was something far more than simply a militant fighter. He was a Trotskyist, and his point of reference, what animated him, was not only the fate of the working class in Britain, but that of the international working class.

He never considered himself to be a member of a British party—I later found that many did—but of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

Dave Hyland had joined the SLL at a crucial juncture in not just British, but world history, and it was world events that ultimately shaped him.

He told his daughter, Comrade Julie, in an interview he gave that what convinced him to join was not just the SLL's determined struggle in his union at the time, but its analysis of Stalinism and the internationalist basis of its perspective.

Dave bought a copy of *Workers Press* and read an article on the Middle East and the role of Stalinism historically. "It blew my mind," he explained. "Because I really understood the role of Stalinism worldwide and that what I was encountering at Kodak with the Stalinists was part of that worldwide role, which was a counterrevolutionary role based on the defence of the interests of a national bureaucracy."

"That changed my life," he said.

Dave was only one representative of a generation that has played and continues to play the central role in the ICFI. Consider this.

From 1968 to 1975, as we have analysed, world capitalism was gripped by a revolutionary crisis out of which the best representatives of the working class and intellectuals joined the ICFI. In those years, as well as Dave Hyland, Uli Rippert, Nick Beams, Peter Schwarz and David North were won to the ICFI's ranks. And that is to name only the most prominent figures who constitute the central leadership of the world movement today.

That is why there was nothing accidental in the fact that Dave responded to the political critique formulated by David North. He was a convinced Trotskyist, and he responded to what he recognised as a genuinely Trotskyist critique of the opportunist course pursued by the WRP.

If I may, I would now like to read excerpts from two letters sent by Dave in his last weeks—letters in which he made an astute political estimation of his own life. They richly deserve a public airing.

The first brief extract is from a letter to Linda Tenenbaum in Australia, written on November 19.

He wrote:

"Julie has probably told you about my prognosis. I hope there will be few tears shed for me. I don't want to sound smug, but thanks to the theoretical and political education I received as part of the leadership of the ICFI, I've lived a wonderfully fulfilling and rewarding life politically.

"I've made many close comrades and friends in the movement over the years, and with the unflagging assistance of Eileen and a loving family, I've almost made it to the Shakespearean expectation of three score years and ten.

"...It's been Comrade Dave, of course, who's dominated my political life since 1985 through the leadership he gave in the theoretical fight

against the politically degenerate leaders of the old WRP, Healy-Banda-Slaughter. He has also led the fight for the revival of Marxist theory, literature and culture within the international workers' movement, for objective historical truth against Stalinist lies and distortions, as well as the fantastic development of that enormous weapon of Marxist education and revolutionary propaganda, the *World Socialist Web Site*"

To Bettina Rippert, he wrote on November 9:

"There is no need to be sad for me. I don't want to go and leave my family and comrades, but there are some things you ultimately have no power over.

"...Rheumatoid arthritis runs in the Hyland family, and my grandmother suffered with it very badly from the age of 30. I was diagnosed with it when I was 40 and have been fighting against medical complications related to RA for the last 26 years. Not alone, I might add.

"Comrades Dave, Linda and Uli have often sought on behalf of the IC to find the best medical attention from around the world to help me. Compare this with the treatment of the cadre by the WRP leadership during the latter stages of its opportunist political degeneration.

"The increasingly callous attitude towards the well-being of the cadre, which was bound up with its retreat from a fight for Marxism and an international socialist perspective, found their most grotesque expressions, as we know. How differently the ICFI and its sections have dealt with these questions since the defeat of Healy-Banda-Slaughter and the renaissance of Marxism.

"...Uli arrived just as I was writing these lines and we've had a very good chat about everything under the sun. We talked about the 'old days' when we were young men and learning new political lessons every day of the split and its immediate aftermath. Not in the sense that one learns academically in the schoolroom, nor like a worker on the picket line, but as revolutionaries loyal to the Marxist world socialist perspective fighting out the political questions that must be addressed by the proletariat.

"It was a case of 'even and uneven' development within the IC. As a result of our close proximity to the WRP leadership, those of us in the British section paid a price in terms of 'damage' to our Marxist theoretical consciousness.

"Conversely, Trotskyism has deep roots in the British working class, most of them planted there by the historical struggle waged by Gerry Healy against the various political forms of Pabloism throughout the 1950s, 60s, and early 1970s.

"I was aware of the fact I was a member of a world party and that's why I felt I could turn to it and make the phone call I did to Cd. Dave N.

"That's why I think, against all the odds, a genuine Trotskyist tendency emerged out of the WRP and responded to the theoretical and programmatic criticisms made by Cd. DN of the WRP leaders' revisionist positions."

Nothing substantive needs to be added to that depiction.

Finally, in that same letter, Dave gave a thumbnail sketch of the present political conjuncture in Britain and internationally.

He wrote:

"The 2008 crisis destabilised even further the entire capitalist system. In every country, economic, political and social relations are in a complete state of flux. I've been following the impact that Snowden's revelations on the NSA spying operations have had in Germany. He's become a real hero, much to the embarrassment of the Merkel government.

"In Britain, behind the cover of the Tory/Liberal government, the bourgeoisie have intensified their ruthless rampage against the working class, and in doing so are also destroying the former comfortable living conditions of large layers of the middle class.

"It's as if they have gone completely mad as they bring down every prop they ever built, needed to maintain their rule, no holds barred. This stretches from the reformist social programmes to the cutting of cultural funding, which have so much impact on the middle class, in particular. In

its struggle against its international competitors, the ruling class is dismantling all previous health, safety and building regulations.

“All of this is leading to an increasingly febrile political atmosphere, and the situation is only being kept together because of the treacherous role of the trade union bureaucracy.

“But this can’t last forever and anything can lead to further political eruptions...the whole situation is pregnant with political possibilities for the growth of our movement in the UK and throughout the world.

“I do not want to imply there are no dangers or hurdles to overcome, but I am very optimistic.

“The life of a revolutionary, as you know, is never easy. How could it be any other way? We are in the constant struggle to rally the international working class to overthrow a rotting, historically bankrupt capitalist system, while defending all that is progressive from the past. We are fighting to change society and open up a new stage in human development under socialism.

“I’ve made good comrades and friends within the movement and feel that I’ve carried out my revolutionary duty towards my party and my class.”

Let me close with one final observation on this very moving passage.

It wasn’t an easy route for Dave’s generation to find their way into the ranks of the Fourth International. The working class was still dominated by the mass social democratic and Stalinist parties and trade unions, which were, in turn, backed up by various pseudo-left groups. But the very best were won to Trotskyism nevertheless, under conditions of a revolutionary crisis and an eruption of global class struggle.

As Dave pointed out in his letter, today world capitalism is entering a new period of economic and political crisis that dwarfs in scope that which erupted between 1968 and 1975. And a new generation is coming forward into revolutionary struggle and gravitating towards the ICFI.

They do so under a vastly changed relationship of political forces—one in which the ICFI has an unchallenged claim to be the genuine contemporary manifestation of the world party of socialist revolution of Leon Trotsky.

The continuity of the struggle for Marxism in the working class is often, and rightly, addressed as a study of the most important analyses and polemics. But always behind this written record are the people who made that history, those men and women who gave themselves and dedicated their mental and physical energies to the fight to build a revolutionary leadership.

Dave for me and those who became politically active in the 1980s was my first vital link to a previous generation of revolutionaries.

He and others were, in turn, educated and inspired by Healy and his generation—preserving all that was positive in that experience and learning from the mistakes made.

Dave played a key role in the struggle to preserve the Fourth International from destruction. This was an event whose lessons still inform everything we as a world party do to this day.

Many young people are now finding their place in the ranks of the ICFI. This new generation of revolutionaries would do well to follow the example set by Dave Hyland—one of selfless dedication to the socialist liberation of humanity.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact