

Dave Hyland and the role of the individual in history

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We are posting here the transcript of a filmed message delivered by Nick Beams, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party of Australia, to the memorial meeting held January 18 in honour of Dave Hyland, the former national secretary of the SEP of Britain, who passed away on December 8, 2013. (See: “Memorial meeting pays tribute to Dave Hyland’s political struggle”).

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Comrades and friends,

While I am not able to be physically present at this meeting, I would like to add my voice to those expressing their appreciation of the struggle waged by comrade Dave Hyland in defence of the programme and principles of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

I speak here not just for myself, but on behalf of the entire leadership and membership of the Australian section of our world movement.

I first met Dave at an international school conducted by the Workers Revolutionary Party leadership at the College of Marxist Education in Derbyshire in September 1984. We gravitated to each other and found an immediate political and personal rapport. In the following years we used to joke that we were old school friends.

The miners’ strike had reached a critical turning point and the school took part in a lobby conducted by the WRP of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) in Brighton to demand support for the miners. Little did we know at the time that Arthur Scargill, the National Union of Mineworkers leader, had indicated to the TUC that he was in no way seeking, let alone demanding, such support.

The TUC duly offered no support, apart from a meaningless statement that recognised the right of the

NUM to exist while raising not a finger against the full force of the state being mobilised against it.

The morning after the lobby of the TUC, the school met to consider its outcome and the decisions of the TUC. I was sitting next to Dave at that meeting.

He was fuming. But it was hard to ascertain whether the greater cause of his anger was the TUC betrayal or the cover-up of that betrayal by the “This Morning” editorial column of the WRP’s daily *News Line*.

The atmosphere which the leadership of the school sought to generate was one of hostility to the sections of the International Committee. As we now know, this was the logical conclusion of the protracted national opportunist degeneration that had taken place over the preceding years.

Dave Hyland, however, evinced a very different response. He sought to establish genuine political collaboration and discuss common political experiences. Little did either of us know that just 12 months later we would be fighting together in the political battle of our lives.

We also discovered that, at a personal level, we had a number of things in common, especially an appreciation of the popular music of the 1960s, the days of our youth. In particular, we both loved the song after which his daughter, Julie, is named.

Having met Dave at the school, and appreciated his qualities, I was not altogether surprised when I came to Britain in October 1985 in the midst of the implosion of the WRP and found that he was leading a tendency that was fighting for the programme of the International Committee.

I well recall the meeting held on October 25, 1985 when the IC secured the adoption of two resolutions that defined the crisis in the WRP as the product of national opportunism and set out its perspective for the

resolution of the crisis of the British Trotskyist movement.

Comrade Dave fought for the adoption of those resolutions and the subsequent resolutions of the International Committee. At that first meeting, well aware of the provocative and hostile activities of both Michael Banda and Cliff Slaughter, he had arranged for several working class comrades to be present outside it, so that the meeting proceeded in good order.

I was to spend the next few weeks in Britain, together with comrade Keerthi Balasuriya, the general secretary of the Sri Lankan section, as the crisis unfolded. We collaborated closely with Dave during that time as he fought, under the most difficult conditions, for the programme of the IC against the daily, one could say even hourly, provocations of the WRP leadership.

Trotsky referred on several occasions to the “physical power of thought.” I witnessed the embodiment of that conception as comrade Dave waged his struggle inside the WRP.

Just to give you an idea of the atmosphere of that time, I can do no better than cite the following passage from the IC statement *How the WRP Betrayed Trotskyism*:

“The scene which the IC delegates confronted as they assembled in London for an emergency meeting in late October defies description. What had appeared to be a smoothly running machine had exploded and was discharging red-hot fragments in all directions. The old apparatus that served as the basis of Healy’s despotism was breaking down into its constituent elements, setting in motion that most frightening of all social spectacles--the stampede of the enraged petty-bourgeois. The terrible political degeneration of the WRP under Healy was mirrored most clearly in the political bewilderment and disorientation of those whom he had supposedly trained.”

It is important to understand the role Dave played not only in relation to the British section, but on an international scale.

In Australia, we were confronted with a group of supporters of Michael Banda and Cliff Slaughter who were determined to liquidate our section. In that battle to clarify the movement--and I am sure the situation was the same in other sections--the fact that in Britain, in the eye of the storm, Dave was leading an implacable struggle for our common programme immeasurably

strengthened us.

This meeting is rightly focusing on comrade Dave’s role in the events of 1985-86. But his role subsequent to that should also be appreciated. The protracted degeneration of the WRP had left a great deal of confusion and disorientation. Cadres had been mis-trained and it took some time to really overcome that legacy. I know from my own experience this was not an easy task to accomplish, above all in Britain where so much damage had been done.

In conclusion I want to draw your attention to what I regard as two fundamental lessons to be drawn from our appreciation of comrade Dave’s significance.

The first is the role of the individual in history. Marxism bases itself on the objective laws of society. But it has nothing in common with any kind of fatalism or passivity.

At crucial turning points in the historical process, the decisions made by individuals and the struggles they undertake on the basis of those decisions prove to be the decisive factor. Dave’s decision to fight for the programme of the IC was one such decision.

The second lesson concerns broader processes. What gave comrade Dave his great strength in the most difficult of circumstances was the programme of Trotskyism for which he fought so tenaciously.

When that programme becomes the perspective that grips the leadership of the working class, as it gripped him, the proletariat will become a mighty force that no power on earth will be able to stop. That is the enduring lesson of his life and struggle.



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