

Lou Renfrow (1925-2014)

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The *World Socialist Web Site* and Socialist Equality Party extend our condolences to the friends and family of Lou Renfrow, a long-time member and supporter of the Socialist Equality Party and its forerunner, the Workers League, who died January 24 at the age of 88. Renfrow died of complications from pneumonia at an assisted living facility outside of Cincinnati, Ohio. He is survived by two sons, five grandchildren and seven great grandchildren.

Lou and his wife of 58 years, Dorothy, who passed away in 2009, were among a small number from their generation in the US who, breaking with Stalinism, came over to the principles of Trotskyism embodied in the program of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).

Lou was born on July 29, 1925 and grew up in Cincinnati. His parents were public school teachers who instilled in him a love of culture and education.

During World War II, he served in the US military in the European theatre, where he was wounded during the allied push into Germany. After the war, he attended first Harvard and then the University of Cincinnati, where he was expelled for joining a picket of a segregated roller skating rink. At about this time he met Dorothy. Radicalized by the events of this period, they joined the Communist Party, mistakenly believing, like many of their generation, that it represented revolutionary socialism.

While a member of the CP, Lou obtained a job at the Fisher Body plant in Cleveland, where he was elected to the post of United Auto Workers (UAW) committeeman. During the McCarthy period, Renfrow, like hundreds of other militant, socialist-minded workers, was victimized. He was framed up for a work infraction and fired, with the collaboration of the UAW bureaucracy, headed by Walter Reuther. Dorothy, meanwhile, was fingered as a Communist and fired from her job as a social worker.

Lou was forced to earn a living any way he could to support his family, including driving a coffee truck and selling encyclopedias. Subsequently, he obtained a Bachelors Degree at Kent State University and took up public school teaching.

The events of this period, including the partial revelation of Stalin's crimes by Khrushchev in 1956 and the bloody suppression of the Hungarian Revolution by Soviet troops later that year, led Lou to question the Communist Party's claim to embody socialism. He and Dorothy left the Communist Party. However, unlike many former CP members who became disillusioned and embittered, renouncing their socialist ideals, Lou retained his confidence in the revolutionary capacities of the working class.

It would, however, be a number of years before he was exposed to the Trotskyist analysis of the counterrevolutionary nature of Stalinism, in large part due to the deep crisis then wracking the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), at that time the American sympathizing section of the ICFI. In 1963, the SWP reunified with the Pabloite United Secretariat, abandoning the fight for the construction of independent revolutionary parties in the working class based on Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution.

In 1966, Lou and Dorothy moved to Dayton, Ohio, where Lou obtained a position as a public school librarian. He also became well known as a local social activist.

It was in the early 1970s that Lou first came into contact with the Workers League. The Trotskyist analysis it presented clarified Lou on the origins of the counterrevolutionary policies of the Communist Party as well as the role of Pabloism, which served as an apologist for the crimes of the Kremlin bureaucracy. On that basis, he joined the Workers League and undertook the work of building a revolutionary leadership in the working class.

Lou and Dorothy played an important role in the party's intervention among auto workers in Dayton and in election campaigns in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. At the General Motors Delco Moraine brake plant in Dayton, Lou and Dorothy helped establish a faction of the Workers League, which waged a vigorous struggle against the UAW bureaucracy, headed at that time by President Leonard Woodcock. A Workers League slate obtained a sizeable vote in union elections at the factory, prompting Woodcock to personally come to Dayton to shore up the local union leadership.

Later, Lou and Dorothy supported the struggle of the International Committee against the Workers Revolutionary Party, which split from the ICFI in 1985-86.

Jim Lawrence, a retired General Motors worker and the Socialist Equality Party vice presidential candidate in 2004, had this to say about Lou: "He was a very loyal and courageous comrade and supporter of the working class. He was involved in all the party work on campuses and at the factories, both inside and on the outside. He was also a great fundraiser.

"He was my mentor. He recruited me and other workers in the auto plants around here. He really instilled in me a hostility to Stalinism."

This writer, who worked with Lou and Dorothy for many years, remembers the Renfrows as kind and generous hosts, whose home was always open to the party members who regularly came to Dayton to take part in political interventions.

Lou helped educate me in the rich traditions of struggle of the American working class. Lou, ever the activist, was always eager to head to the picket lines if a strike broke out, and also enjoyed work among the student youth on the campuses in the area, though by this time he was well into his 60s.

During the later years of his life, Lou retired from political activity, in part due to the declining health of Dorothy, but he still continued to follow political events and maintained contact with party members in Ohio.

Both Lou and Dorothy will be remembered as loyal members who played a key role in the interventions of the party in the working class in a crucial stage in the development of the American Trotskyist movement. They will be greatly missed.



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