The Life and Times of Bill Brust

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Veteran Trotskyist Bill Brust died twenty-five years ago today, on September 15, 1991. This speech by David North was originally delivered at a memorial meeting for Brust held in Minneapolis, Minnesota on October 27, 1991. It was published in Defending Political Principles: The Political Legacy of Bill Brust.

Just over two months ago, in late August, I spoke to Bill for what we both knew would be the last time. In fact, he came to the phone for the specific purpose of saying good-bye. He understood the nature of his illness and was fully aware of the fact that he had entered its final stages.

Nevertheless, Bill retained not only his composure, but also his objectivity. He knew that the period of his own personal contribution to the struggle for socialism was coming to an end, but he was convinced that what he had achieved in his own life had helped to lay the foundation upon which the younger generations will continue to build. It was this inner confidence that underlay the courage and equanimity with which he confronted the immediate prospect of his own death.

I said to him in that last discussion that I hoped that all of us, when our time comes, will be able to face death with the same courage and strength that he displayed in the closing months of his life. And yet the way he confronted death flowed inexorably out of the way he had led his entire life over the previous seventy-two years.

Bill Brust was born in Budapest, Hungary, in 1919, a momentous year in the history of the twentieth century—a year which began with the defeat of the Spartacus uprising in Germany and the murder of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, two historical personalities to whom he, by the way, was deeply devoted. It was also the year of the founding of the Communist International and in the United States the brutal suppression of the great steel strike. The events of 1919 played no small role in the biography of Bill Brust, for it was in the aftermath of the defeat of the Hungarian Revolution that Bill and his family emigrated to the United States and settled in Minneapolis.

Bill's youth and education took place against the backdrop of the rise of fascism in Europe, the Depression and the eruption of the CIO movement in the United States and, of course, the approach of world war. The finest representatives of the generation which came of age during this period—and Bill must certainly be counted among them—took the world and their own role within it seriously. They didn't play with ideas. They didn't look upon ideas and the discussion of ideas as a game. Rather, they thought about society. They read London, Dreiser, Dos Passos, Lewis and came to despise the world of the ruling class. They read these works to educate, rather than merely to entertain themselves. They reacted with passion to the injustices of the world and believed that the only life worth living was one animated by great historical and moral principles. And these principles were found by the most farsighted and penetrating of this generation in the classics of Marxism.

Bill grew up in Minneapolis, a city described by Charles Walker as "pugnacious" and "headstrong." While still in his teens, he outgrew the radical populism so deeply rooted in the history and traditions of Minnesota and sought to ground his anticapitalist instincts on foundations firmer than those provided by the Farmer-Labor Party. The Minneapolis general strike of 1934 had demonstrated the decisive role of revolutionary leadership in organizing and directing the struggles of the working class. But Bill was still too young and inexperienced to know that behind the heroic role played by the Dunne brothers in the great strikes of '34 lay their own involvement in the political and theoretical struggles of the international Trotskyist movement against Stalinism. So, at first, Bill joined the Young Communist League. But as soon as he came to understand, at the ripe old age of nineteen, that the program and traditions of the October Revolution were defended not by the leaders of the Soviet state and their international coterie, but by Trotsky and his persecuted adherents, Bill became a partisan of the Fourth International.

In this crucial decision on the most difficult of all political issues, Bill gave an early demonstration of those essential elements of his character that were to determine the entire course of his life: an uncompromising honesty and selfless devotion to the cause of the working class that enabled him again and again to identify the critical issues of principle involved in all the great political questions he confronted. In his day-to-day work, Bill made mistakes like all the rest of us. On this or that secondary political issue, Bill's judgments were occasionally imprecise or even mistaken. But when the issue at hand was one of fundamental principles, of the basic interests of the working class and its revolutionary vanguard, of the direction and fate of the international socialist movement—that is, of the life-and-death questions of mankind—Bill Brust, along with his wife Jean, could always dig down deep into himself and find the necessary response.

It cannot be said that Bill's youthful commitment to socialism was, in itself, particularly unusual. He was part of a generation that was inspired by the Russian Revolution and identified itself with the great upsurge of the American working class in the 1930s. However, what distinguished Bill was precisely the depth and earnestness of his socialist convictions. It was one thing to fight under a revolutionary banner in those heady days when the masses were in open struggle against the old order; it was quite another to defend the socialist program and its revolutionary traditions through a protracted period of political reaction.

By the time Bill was just thirty years of age, the heroic period of the CIO movement had come to an end. The betrayals of Stalinism internationally and in the United States had given capitalism a new lease on life in the aftermath of the Second World War. The American Communist Party, having done everything in its power to destroy the revolutionary potential of the CIO movement, facilitated the consolidation of power inside the trade unions by the right-wing trade union bureaucracy. Despite its long and principled struggle against Stalinism, the Socialist Workers Party could not escape the political consequences of the stabilization of capitalism. The increasingly reactionary political climate led to a weakening of its influence within the working class. Those cadre of the SWP, like Bill and Jean, who had played such a prominent role in the trade union struggles between 1946 and 1948 found themselves isolated.

These were the conditions that created a favorable climate for the growth of opportunist tendencies inside the Socialist Workers Party. The revisionist formulations devised by Pablo and Mandel in Europe—who claimed that the expropriation of the capitalists in Eastern Europe by the

puppet regimes set up by the Soviet bureaucracy indicated that Stalinism still had a progressive role to play—provided a convenient cover for those inside the SWP who were seeking an easy way out of the revolutionary movement. Cochran and Clarke, the supporters of the Pabloite line in the United States, adopted as their battle cry the notorious slogan, "Junk the Old Trotskyism." The ideas and program developed by Trotsky, they proclaimed, were irrelevant and served only to prevent the Socialist Workers Party from integrating itself into the so-called real mass movement. The Cochranites ridiculed the defenders of "orthodox" Trotskyism as "museum pieces" who vastly exaggerated the historical significance of the Fourth International.

I met Bill many years later, but I can imagine how his blood must have boiled when he read the insolent and arrogant insults hurled by the Cochranites against the program and traditions of the Fourth International. For Bill, the heritage of revolutionary thought as it had developed over many decades of bitter struggle was the most precious acquisition of mankind and had to be defended at all costs. To call into question the relevance of the revolutionary perspectives of Marxism, simply because the prevailing political winds had temporarily shifted, was, for Bill, the worst form of political and intellectual treachery.

There were two elements of the Pablo-Mandel-Cochran platform that Bill especially despised. First, it was their claim, as I have already indicated, that Stalinism—despite all its past crimes—still had a progressive role to play in world affairs in general and in the struggle of the working class in particular. Bill, who had settled his own intellectual and political accounts with Stalinism while still in his teens, was not prepared to attribute to Stalinism any progressive role whatsoever. He could not forget the revolutions strangled by the Stalinists nor the revolutionaries they had murdered. The victory of the socialist cause, Bill remained convinced, could not be realized through the medium of the Soviet bureaucracy and the Stalinist parties, but only as a result of a ruthless struggle against them. The creation of police-state regimes in Eastern Europe, including his native Hungary, was, for Bill, yet another in the long list of crimes committed by the Stalinists against the socialist aspirations of the working class.

The second element of the revisionist platform against which Bill rebelled was its implicit denial of the vital role of the revolutionary Marxist party in the preparation and victory of the socialist revolution. For Bill, this role did not consist only in the actual physical organization of the working class struggle against capitalism. Bill understood that the revolutionary organization of the working class was, in the last analysis, the product of its revolutionary education and enlightenment. It was only through the patient work of the revolutionary party, spanning decades, that the mass of workers could be infused with those great liberating ideas which provide the conscious impulse for revolutionary organization and struggle.

It was, I believe, this deeper insight into the historical significance of the revolutionary party that enabled Bill to stand firm not only against the Cochranite splitters in 1953, but also against the ongoing political pressures which led to the decay and death of the Socialist Workers Party as a revolutionary organization. The SWP had opposed the opportunist line in 1953, but it was not long before its principal leaders began developing positions which would lead them, within just a few years, to reunify with the Pabloites.

There is no doubt that the degeneration of the SWP leadership was a bitter and difficult experience for Bill and Jean. At least in 1953 there existed the consolation that the old party leaders—Cannon, Dunne and Lewitt—were in the leadership of the fight against the Pabloites. But in the aftermath of the '53 split, these venerable leaders were in visible decline. The old Minnesota movement, with which Bill and Jean so strongly identified, was shaken by factional infighting that reflected the disorientation of the SWP. The political line of the SWP drifted more and more openly toward radical protest politics and unprincipled maneuvering with the very political forces against which it had once fought so implacably.

The entire political physiognomy of the Socialist Workers Party began to change. The old "proletarian orientation" for which Trotsky and Cannon had fought in the early days was replaced with an orientation to the middle class. Trotsky had once insisted that only those who had acquired experience in the class struggle should be placed in positions of authority within the SWP; but suddenly the leadership positions were being filled with a strange group of students mysteriously recruited off the campus of Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota, where the SWP had conducted no political work. Then, without any discussion inside the SWP, Farrell Dobbs turned up in the Twin Cities to announce that Fidel Castro was a "natural Marxist" who had created a workers state in Cuba. This came as a shock to Bill, who believed that the essential point of the 1953 fight against Cochran and Clarke was that the victory of the socialist revolution depended upon the building of Trotskyist parties inside the working class. Now, however, the SWP was asserting that the victory of the socialist revolution and the creation of workers states required neither a Marxist party nor even independent political action by the working class. Rather, the perspectives of socialism, according to the SWP's new line, could be realized through the actions of small groups of petty-bourgeois guerrillas.

Confronted with this new doctrine, Bill wondered what had happened to Marx's classic dictum that the liberation of the working class was the task of the working class itself. And yet, all around him in the SWP, he found that his old comrades were delighted with these strange and shallow political and theoretical innovations. They all seemed to welcome the news that socialism could be achieved without having to educate and organize the working class on the basis of Marxism. It was as if a great weight was finally being lifted from their shoulders. The new political line devised by the SWP leadership was freeing them from their old political responsibilities.

Bill was, by now, in his mid-forties, and he could have adapted himself to the new political line and even taken advantage of the increasing popularity of the SWP in the circles of middle class protest politics. But Bill and Jean lacked the chameleon characteristics so common among their tired and self-justifying contemporaries. He had no intention of reconciling himself with the philistinism of middle class life and the hypocrisy and fraud of American capitalism. And so, Bill took another courageous and decisive action. While traveling in Europe in 1963, Bill contacted Gerry Healy, the leader of the British Socialist Labour League, who had collaborated closely with Cannon ten years earlier in the fight against the Pabloites. On the basis of his discussions with Healy, Bill decided to make contact with a small tendency inside the SWP, led at that time by Tim Wohlforth, who opposed the leadership's capitulation to Pabloism.

A valuable insight into Bill's views and character at that time are provided by a letter he wrote in October 1963:

"Jean and I, with 25 years apiece in the movement, are perhaps too 'indoctrinated' with the Old Man's ideas to lightly or on the say-so of even venerable leaders of the party accept the proposition that a middle class movement, even when led by honest radicals, can evolve into a genuine proletarian party and a workers state."

It could not have been easy for Bill to break politically and personally with comrades and friends with whom he had shared so many experiences. But Bill knew his priorities; friendship was dear to Bill, but the truth still dearer. He was a warm, kind and generous man; but he was also a disciplined man and he was a fighter. He was not a man of mere opinions—that is, of random and accidental impressions—but of convictions that had been formed through a profound interaction of personal experience and persistent study which he carried out in no less than five

languages.

For Bill, to learn, to study and to fight were parts of a unified whole. Alongside of politics, his passion was literature which, as I said before, he studied not for the purpose of entertainment, but to gain a richer insight into life and the tasks which confront mankind. He loved German literature in particular, and there is to be found in the writings of Goethe an aphorism that inspired and expressed Bill's intellectual outlook. "Man must hold," Goethe wrote, "to the conviction that the incomprehensible is comprehensible, for therein lies the drive to study and investigate."

He spent the last twenty-five years of his life as a member of the Workers League. It is not possible for me, or even any combination of members of the Workers League and International Committee, to sum up adequately, certainly not within the limits of one meeting, the full scope of the contributions which he made to our movement. I speak not only for myself, but for members of our party all over the world when I say that with the death of Bill we have lost a beloved and respected comrade.

We all know that we owe to Bill, and, I must add, to Jean, an immense debt. We are here today because of the work that Bill and Jean carried out over more than a half-century. I know that might be difficult for Jean to accept, but it is true. The history of the Workers League is inseparably bound up with the work of Bill and Jean Brust. I have in mind not only the day-to-day contributions he made to the work of the party through his practical activity. Rather, Bill was, in the most profound sense, a moral force within the Workers League and the International Committee. He was, for us, the embodiment of all the noble traditions and principles that we identified with the cause of international socialism. At every moment of crisis in the history of our movement, we placed the greatest value on the views and judgments of Bill.

In closing, I'd like to raise a question which I think is of some importance. Why was it that Bill endured when so many others went by the wayside? What was it that made it possible for this man to resist the enormous pressures under which so many others broke? It is always difficult to examine and investigate the interaction between political movements and the individuals who play at different times of history a prominent role within them. But it must be said that Bill had the capacity to see beyond the problems of the immediate moment. He was, of course, a man of flesh and blood who felt deeply, who reacted to the events of the day, who had, like everyone else, his ups and his downs. But he never lost himself in the problems of the moment. Bill always drew upon the lessons of history, and he sought to incorporate into his own activity the lessons of the social and historical experiences of previous generations.

It is very often said that a great man is one who reflects his age. Well, that's only true in a very specific sense. It is one thing to merely reflect the prejudices of one's time and to respond to its more superficial impulses. It is quite another to articulate its deeper forces and hidden essence. But Bill was precisely such a man. Ask yourself: Who reflects our age more profoundly—Bill Brust, whose life and experiences were bound up with the greatest social struggles in history, or the empty-headed celebrities, the bankrupt bourgeois and middle class politicians, who enjoy cheap fame until some scandal descends upon their heads and are forgotten? Is it the Bill Brusts or the Bill Clintons who represent the strivings of mankind? Bill's life was an inspiration. That is why, though Bill Brust has died, he will not be forgotten. The sixteen-year-olds and seventeen-year-olds and eighteen-year-olds who wrote from all around the world to Bill Brust will continue to fight for his principles under conditions very different from those under which Bill was compelled to fight for the last forty years of his life. Times are a-changing. We are once again entering an age of great upheavals. The cause of international socialism, betrayed so many times, is undergoing a rebirth in the struggles of the international working class and the work of our own movement, the International Committee.

Bill Brust died just a few days before I had the privilege to undertake on behalf of the International Committee a trip to the Soviet Union. In the course of this trip, it was possible to assemble a group of supporters of the International Committee in Kiev and hold an organizing meeting to lay down the foundations for the building of a new section of the Fourth International in the Soviet Union. I knew that Bill would have been very proud of this meeting because he had done so much to prepare it. Bill Brust will live in the memory of this movement. He will continue to live in the struggles of the working class. He will forever remain a great example of courage and strength for the international working class. All of us here were very privileged to have worked with him, to have known him and to have been counted among his comrades. And we will do everything to prove ourselves in the coming period worthy of the trust he placed in us.

This speech is included in Defending Principles: The Political Legacy of Bill Brust, a compilation of tributes as well as writings by Bill Brust.