Forty-three years since the assassination of Tom Henehan (1951-1977)

Tom Henehan: A revolutionary life

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Today marks the 43rd anniversary of the assassination of Tom Henehan, a member of the political committee of the Workers League—the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party in the US. On October 19, 1997, the Socialist Equality Party held a meeting in Ann Arbor to commemorate the 20th anniversary of Tom Henehan's death.

Below we post the tribute to Tom that then SEP National Secretary David North delivered at the meeting.This lecture is also available in pamphlet form atMehring Books.

On the evening of October 15, 1977, Tom was supervising an activity sponsored by the Young Socialists, the party's youth movement, in Brooklyn, New York. Two men, later identified as Edwin Sequinot and Angel Rodriguez, started a disturbance by attacking another Workers League member, Jacques Vielot. As Tom rushed to Vielot's aid, he was shot five times by a third assailant lying in wait, a professional gunman named Angelo Torres. Sequinot then pulled out a gun and shot Vielot, severely wounding him. The injured Vielot rushed Tom to Wyckoff Heights Hospital. Tom died approximately an hour after arriving at the hospital, in the early morning hours of October 16. He was 26 years old.

The murder of Tom Henehan was a political attack aimed at intimidating the Workers League and blocking its efforts to build a socialist leadership in the American working class. Tom's death came at a point when the party was gaining significant influence among city workers in New York, coal miners in West Virginia and Kentucky and other sections of militant workers.

At the same time, the Workers League was involved in an historic investigation of the circumstances surrounding the 1940 assassination of Leon Trotsky, the founder of the Fourth International. This investigation, whose findings were published under the titleSecurity and the Fourth International,exposed the decades-long efforts of the police agencies of imperialism and Stalinism to penetrate and sabotage the world Trotskyist movement. Among other things, the investigation revealed the insidious links between Joseph Hansen—who later became a leader of the American Socialist Workers Party—and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. In June 1977, Hansen and the SWP published a statement that warned of "deadly consequences" if the investigation continued. Shortly afterwards, Tom Henehan lay dead in a Brooklyn hospital.

Soon after Tom's death, the Workers League and the Young Socialists launched a campaign to demand the arrest and conviction of his killers. The campaign won widespread support from workers and youth throughout the country, including tens of thousands who signed petitions to the Brooklyn District Attorney's office. Officials from unions representing 3 million workers in the US also endorsed the campaign.

Late in 1980, after three years of claiming that Torres had fled and could not be found, and that there was no case to be brought against Sequinot, the New York police finally arrested both men. Torres had been living in the same apartment throughout this period and had once been arrested and released, despite an outstanding murder warrant. The two were tried in the summer of 1981, convicted, and sentence to long prison terms for acting in concert in the murder of Tom Henehan and the wounding of Jacques Vielot.

The death of Tom Henehan at such a young age was a tragic loss for the international working class. Intelligent, courageous, dynamic, indefatigable and compassionate are the words that best describe young Tom. He was born on March 16, 1951 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. When Tom was still a young child his family moved to Grand Rapids, Michigan. Later, when Tom was a teenager, the family settled in Kalamazoo. In 1969 Tom entered Columbia University in New York City, where he met the Workers League during his senior year. In March 1973, Tom joined the party and dedicated his life to the political education and liberation of the working class.

During his four years in the party, Tom played a central role in the development of the youth movement in the US and internationally and was particularly active in expanding the Workers League's influence among coal miners in West Virginia and Kentucky. Tom was charismatic and, in the best sense of the word, idealistic. He left an immense and unforgettable impression on all those who knew him and with whom he worked.

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I would like to begin my remarks with a recollection. After returning from the hospital where Tom Henehan had died in the early morning hours of October 16, 1977, I called Tom's older brother, Paul, and relayed to him the terrible news. Paul then told me that he would take responsibility for informing other members of Tom's family.

A few hours later I was told by Paul that Tom's mother, Mary Elise Henehan, would be flying to New York the next day. I recall awaiting the arrival of Mary Elise Henehan with trepidation. I had never before met her. What, I asked myself, could I say to Tom's mother that might in some way be of help to her at such a tragic moment? But when she arrived at our offices, before I had managed to say anything to her, she embraced me. I, who had been wondering how to comfort Tom's mother, was instead being comforted by Mary Elise.

None of us who lived through the events of October 1977 can forget the strength and support that Mary Elise Henehan gave us during what must have been the most terrible week of her life. I realized then that Tom Henehan's extraordinary qualities were due in no small measure to the fact that he was the son of an extraordinary human being. All of us are

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very proud that this extraordinary person, Mary Elise Henehan, as well as Tom's sisters are with us today on this memorial occasion.

On October 22, 1977, at the memorial held only a few days after the murder of Tom Henehan, we promised that we would never forget him. Today, 20 years later, we are honoring that pledge. The very fact that many of those who were present at the first memorial meeting are here again today—in some cases traveling thousands of miles—is a poignant expression of the enduring impact of Tom's personality upon those who knew, respected and even loved him. Even after 20 years, so many facets of his personality remain vivid in our memories of Tom: his intelligence, determination, physical courage, compassion, energy, sense of humor and enthusiastic enjoyment of life.

And yet the purpose of this meeting is not only to recall the past and pay tribute to the memory of a fallen comrade. We are also, in the very process of honoring Tom on the anniversary of his death, reaffirming our own enduring commitment to the ideals and principles for which he lived. Indeed, the power and relevance of those ideals finds expression in the presence at this meeting of representatives of a younger generation, some of whom were only infants at the time of Tom's death or even not yet born.

Tom Henehan was only 26 years old when he was assassinated in New York City. When we who were his contemporaries look at the photographs of Tom, having ourselves aged by 20 years, we are able to appreciate today, more profoundly than in 1977, how very young he was at the time of his death. We have a better sense today of how much more he could have and would have accomplished had he not been murdered. To this day we feel an enduring sense of loss, but not of waste and futility. The 26 years of Tom's life were far too short, but they were not short of purpose and enduring meaning.

Had Tom not died in October 1977, had he been privileged to live another 20 years and were he still with us today, he would certainly have experienced and accomplished more than what was possible in the space of 26 years. But the essential course of his life would have proceeded along the lines that were set down when he decided, in the spring of 1973, on the eve of his graduation from Columbia University, to join the Workers League and devote his life to the cause of the working class and the struggle for international socialism.

Tom was, in the best and positive sense of the word, an idealist. He believed passionately in justice, equality and the solidarity of mankind. But he did not join the Workers League in a fit of thoughtless youthful exuberance. Tom matured amidst the social and political convulsions of the 1960s and early 1970s, and he was politically radicalized by the Vietnam War, the violent struggles in the cities, and the obvious inability of liberal reformism to fashion any viable solution to the problems of poverty and oppression in the United States. Like many others of his generation, he was drawn to the conclusion that the cause of the social ills that plagued American society was capitalism.

By the time Tom first made contact with the Workers League he already had encountered many of the innumerable political tendencies on the left that were active at the time—from the splintered fractions of the SDS and the Maoists of Progressive Labor to the revisionists of the Socialist Workers Party and the Spartacist League. But none of these tendencies—which had in the course of the previous decade found supporters among thousands of student youth—won the allegiance of Tom Henehan.

What was it that attracted Tom Henehan to the Workers League? Just as the character of a person is expressed in the philosophy he adopts, an individual reveals, in the choice of a party, the forces, ideals, principles and aims that motivate him at the most profound level of his intellectual and moral being. But the relation between the party and the individuals of whom it is composed is a complex one. It is undoubtedly true that an individual must choose the party that he wishes to join. But in a broader historical sense, it is still truer to say that the members of a party—and especially a Marxist party—are themselves the product of a historical selection.

The revolutionary movement is a great fisher of men and women. It seeks out those who have the capacity to rise to the level of the most difficult of historical tasks, who are prepared to devote to the socialist cause not merely months or even several years, but decades and even a lifetime. It demands of its members exceptional powers of intellectual and moral endurance. Those who are seeking only superficial answers to the problems of this world will choose a party that makes few demands upon their intellect, that offers easy and reassuring answers to complex problems, that adapts to the prevailing prejudices of public opinion and so-called common sense, and that denies the depth of commitment, intensity of struggle, and theoretical labor required for the revolutionary transformation of society. Superficial organizations attract superficial people.

Of all the words that could be used to describe Tom Henehan, superficial is the last that would come to mind. Tom was drawn to the Workers League by its concern for problems of theory, its study of Marxism as a science, and the profound sense of history that permeated its perspective and program. Tom's decision to join the Workers League expressed an essential seriousness of thought and purpose.

Those of us who, like Tom Henehan, joined the Workers League in the early 1970s did so because this was the only movement that placed the problems confronting the working class in the United States within the broader context of the historical experiences of the international socialist movement in the 20th century. It explained that enduring answers to the great political and social questions of the day were not to be found at the level of radical-sounding but basically empty-headed slogans (such as: "Power comes out of the barrel of a gun") or in the midst of frenetic activism. Rather, the Workers League insisted that the essential foundation of revolutionary practice consisted in the assimilation of the theoretical and political lessons derived from the monumental struggle waged by Leon Trotsky and the Fourth International against the betrayal of the 1917 October Revolution by Stalinism.

Back in the 1970s, the Workers League was commonly denounced by its many opponents within the radical left as "sectarian." With this epithet they wished to malign the very political characteristics that we considered our greatest strength: our preoccupation with materialist dialectics, our passionate interest in history, and, flowing from this, our irreconcilably critical attitude toward the parties and organizations that dominated the mass movements of the day. We were the party that refused to either forget or forgive the crimes that had been committed by the Stalinist bureaucracy and its accomplices against the Soviet and international working class. Unlike the revisionist movements, we refused to attribute to Stalinism any progressive characteristics. We did not see Stalinism as a misguided political tendency that was to be influenced and moved to the left, but rather as the political expression of a counterrevolutionary bureaucracy that was to be exposed, discredited and destroyed.

Our attitude to the politics of radical bourgeois nationalism was no less uncompromising. The Workers League had been founded in 1966 on the basis of the struggle waged by the International Committee of the Fourth International against the American Socialist Workers Party's capitulation to the politics of Fidel Castro. As the International Committee correctly warned, the SWP's adaptation to Castroism represented a rejection of the predominant revolutionary role of the working class. Castro's victory represented, no doubt, an embarrassment and setback, albeit of a temporary character, for the United States. It did not, however, represent either a new form of proletarian power or a viable strategy of socialist revolution. No combination of urban and rural guerrilla forces, led by politicians from the radical petty bourgeoisie, could bring about socialism. We maintained that the fate of socialism depended upon the conscious

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political struggle of the international working class, educated and led by an international Marxist party, for power.

These were not popular conceptions in the political climate of the 1970s. The Soviet bureaucracy and its associated Communist parties still disposed of vast resources and exercised immense influence over millions of workers. The "national liberation" movements—as they were then known—enjoyed an immense international prestige. With the help of funds provided by the Soviet Union—which saw in these organizations a means of countering the global influence of the United States—the "armed struggle" waged by the radical nationalists of the so-called Third World was followed with enthusiasm and admiration by broad sections of students, intellectuals and other sections of the middle class. The 1970s were the heyday of national liberation movements—the IRA, the MPLA, the PLO, the Sandinistas, the Farabundo Marti, Frelimo, and countless other organizations.

Our criticisms of such movements, the analyses we offered of the real social interests expressed in the politics of the bourgeois nationalists, and our warnings of the inability of these movements to solve the related problems of imperialist domination, economic backwardness and national oppression were frequently met with hostility. "You Trotskyites," we were told scornfully again and again, "live in a world of theory and are always criticizing movements that are leading real struggles."

Tremendous pressure was placed upon our movement to adapt and conform to the popular politics of the radical petty bourgeoisie. Unfortunately, a section of our international movement buckled under that pressure. By the mid-1970s, the Workers Revolutionary Party in Britain began to adopt the very conceptions it had earlier opposed when it had fought against the opportunism of the Socialist Workers Party. In fact, at the memorial meeting held after Tom's murder in October 1977, we listened with a mixture of surprise, alarm and dismay as Mike Banda, the general secretary of the WRP, transformed what had begun as a eulogy of Tom into an unabashed tribute to the Palestine Liberation Organization! Praising the politics of Arafat, Banda declared that in the pursuit of the goal of a democratic and socialist Palestine, the PLO leaders "were not trying to take any shortcuts, any pragmatic expedients...."

In the last 20 years, Arafat and the PLO have attempted not a few "shortcuts" and "pragmatic expedients." I believe that visits to the White House, a trip to Oslo to collect the Nobel Peace Price, and countless secret parleys with various Israeli prime ministers qualify as "pragmatic expedients," if not exactly "shortcuts." At any rate, Arafat and the PLO long ago abandoned the goal of a "democratic and secular Palestine" and have settled instead for (what is called in the language of international diplomacy) an "entity" in which the Palestinian masses live in utter poverty and without rights, oppressed not only by the Israeli regime but also by the police of the so-called "Palestinian authority." I have recalled Banda's speech and drawn attention to the evolution of the PLO in order to illustrate how completely the historical process has vindicated the political principles and program for which the International Committee, the Workers League and Tom Henehan fought.

In a speech which Trotsky recorded at the time of the founding of the Fourth International, he referred to the powerful mass organizations of the day—the parties and trade unions controlled by the Stalinists and the social democrats—and predicted that they would be shattered by historical events that "will not leave of these outlived organizations one stone upon another." In the years since the death of Tom Henehan we have seen the fulfillment of that prediction. One after another, organizations that seemed so powerful such a short time ago have been blown to pieces. The Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union imploded. The Maoist regime in China presides over a system of brutal economic exploitation that has become one of the linchpins of globalized capitalist production. Fidel Castro, deprived of Soviet subsidies, stakes the fortunes of the Cuban economy on the promotion of a tourist trade that is already recreating in modern form the squalor and corruption of the Batista era.

In evaluating the life of Tom Henehan it is necessary to consider the validity of the cause and the principles for which he fought. From all sides we hear the claim that socialism is dead. But the entire basis of this claim rests on the false and cynical identification of the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union with Marxism and socialism. The irreconcilable opposition of Marxism to Stalinism was the essential premise of the political program and perspective of the Workers League. For Tom, the struggle for socialism proceeded necessarily through a fight against Stalinism and the politics of the Soviet bureaucracy. The collapse of the Soviet Union signified the end not of socialism, but of a reactionary regime that utilized Marxist phraseology only to betray and discredit socialism.

Of course, it cannot be denied that the cause of socialism was dealt terrible blows by Stalinism. There is, inevitably, a difference between our scientific assessment of the nature of Stalinism and the way in which the demise of the USSR is understood at the present time by the broad mass of the working class. It will take time for the masses to assimilate and understand the complex political experiences of the 20th century. No one can predict the duration of that period of assimilation and reeducation. But while political confusion may retard for a certain period the growth of the socialist movement, there still remain within the very structure of the capitalist mode of production contradictions of which socialism is the necessary and, in a historic sense, ineradicable expression.

These contradictions find direct and potentially explosive expression in the dominant role of the transnational corporation, the global integration of production, and the internationalization of the capitalist labor process. The past 20 years has seen, as a direct consequence of international capitalist development, a vast expansion in the size of the proletariat. Another phenomenon of the last 20 years has been the extraordinary polarization of capitalist society between the fabulously wealthy, who constitute a tiny percentage of the population, and the broad mass of the people who live in varying degrees of uncertainty and distress. The process is much lamented but, within the framework of capitalism, uncontrollable.

The productive forces grow ever more gigantic and the technology increasingly amazing. In the realm of science everything seems possible. In the realm of society, however, humanity seems to be caught in a rut. If anything is to be learned from the scientific study of history, it is that such a situation cannot last. Sooner or later the existing barriers to progress will be burst aside. Beneath the surface of events, notwithstanding the prevailing confusion and disorientation, powerful objective processes are laying the foundations for a new eruption of revolutionary cataclysms.

The death of Tom Henehan was a tragic loss for his family, for his comrades and friends, and for the cause of the working people. For those of us who personally experienced the events of October 1977, I think I speak for all of them when I say they were the saddest of our lives. The sense of loss not only remains with us to this day, but has even become more profound. Having passed through the upheavals and convulsions of the last 20 years and witnessed their impact upon society, we have today a deeper sense of what we lost with the death of Tom.

If we have learned anything with age and experience, it is the immense significance of socialist consciousness in the modern historical process. The unending war against Marxism waged on so many fronts by the bourgeoisie expresses its own recognition of the power of socialist thought and the danger posed by its dissemination. Objective conditions provide the working class with the possibility but not the guarantee of socialism. To an extent even greater than suspected by the founders of our movement, the fate of socialism, and, therefore, of mankind, depends upon the expansion of the intellectual horizons of the working class.

In this sense, socialism is not merely the mobilization of the working class around a set of economic and political demands but also an immense cultural movement of the proletariat. But this movement cannot emerge

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spontaneously. It is only through the cadre that socialist politics and culture can be brought into the working class. The cadre—the men and women who make the fight for socialism the central purpose of their lives—are the human bearers of the only scientific doctrine of universal social emancipation. What we mourn in the death of Tom Henehan is the loss of not only a comrade and friend, but a precious and irreplaceable instrument of social enlightenment and human progress.

In conclusion, I would like to address myself to the younger generation which has much to learn from the example of Tom Henehan. Through no fault of their own, the youth have been cut off not only from the revolutionary spirit that loomed so large throughout the first three-quarters of this century, but even from the intellectual traditions that inspired earlier generations of youth to immerse themselves in great and self-sacrificing social struggles. The young people of today are, indeed, the targets and victims of a ferocious assault on the very process of socially-critical thought. In countless ways and in innumerable variations, the makers of official public opinion—in the government, the media and especially the universities—preach the same dreary message of conformity and complacency. Money, it is proclaimed, is the measure of all things. The point of life is simply to live as long and accumulate as much as possible. The most important decision in an individual's life is not the cause for which he will fight, but the mix of mutual funds in which he will invest.

History shows that the dominance of such empty and egotistical conceptions is characteristic of a society that is in a process of decay and dissolution. The youth must free themselves, intellectually and practically, from this fetid environment. They must think of the future and assume responsibility for it. They must ask themselves why and for what purpose are they alive. Tom Henehan asked himself these questions, and acted seriously and passionately upon the answers he found. And in doing so, he lived a life of enduring significance.

In the prevailing climate of cynicism, there are no doubt people who believe that to die at so young an age is merely a personal calamity and that no cause could possibly be worth such a sacrifice. The same people give little thought to the fact that their own precious comfort, which they value above all else, rests upon an economic order that condemns countless millions to privation and early death. All of us wish that Tom were alive today. But a life must be measured not by its longevity or other superficial and conventional indices of personal success, but by what it contributed to the improvement of the human condition. The fact that Tom is remembered by so many, that he remains a source of inspiration to people all over the world, is the truest indication of the value of his life.

It has been said that youth is the finest period of a person's life, the time when ideals count for more than anything else. If a person is not seized by ideals when he is young, then he never will be, and his life will never amount to anything. Such people are only to be pitied, for they have condemned themselves, whether they know it or not, to a life without any real purpose.

But there is another element of this insight into the significance of youth, and that is the relation of one's youth to the rest of one's life. The moral quality of an individual's life is best measured by determining the degree to which he has remained loyal to the ideals of his youth. That is a very difficult test, not only for individuals but also for political parties.

Tom Henehan was part of the youth of this party. He exemplified the ideals that motivated this party in its youth. Our party has in the course of the past 20 years lived through many experiences, including that of a bitter political split that separated us forever from the Workers Revolutionary Party. We have learned a great deal and become more mature. We have transformed the Workers League into the Socialist Equality Party. But in all these experiences, and in the midst of political upheavals that have turned the world upside down, we have remained true to the revolutionary principles that once inspired Tom and fired his imagination.

The resiliency of this party, its unyielding commitment to its founding principles, and its confidence in the future are derived, in the final analysis, from the power of its historical perspective and insight into the insoluble contradictions of the world capitalist system. Capitalism is only one stage in the historical evolution of man, and the market is not the highest and final expression of man's genius. Labor, from which capital is derived, remains the essence of man; and the movement of history, for all its complexities and tragedies, leads inexorably toward socialism.

The years since Tom's death have been for our party, both within the United States and among its international sections, a period of political and intellectual growth. But for all the necessary changes in the forms of our practical work, Tom Henehan, were he alive today, would still recognize this movement as his party. His work lives on in this movement. That is why the Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee of the Fourth International can hold this anniversary and honor the memory of Tom without a trace of inner discomfort. This is the party of genuine Marxism and revolutionary socialism, and we appeal to the youth to come forward and help us build the movement that will put an end to all forms of exploitation and injustice.

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