Australian Trotskyist Barry Jobson dies aged 78

The Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
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It is with sadness and a deep sense of loss that the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) reports the death of Comrade Barry Jobson, who passed away at a Sydney nursing home on December 11 after a period of illness.

From the time he joined the Socialist Labour League (SLL), predecessor of the SEP, in 1974 Comrade Barry was a tireless fighter for the program of Trotskyism in the working class, particularly in the Elcar railway workshops in the south-western Sydney suburb of Chullora where he worked for many years.

One of the most significant features of his work, which he carried out in collaboration with fellow leading party member, Terry Cook, was his struggle to defend the interests of railway workers against the betrayals of the Labor Party, the Communist Party Stalinists and the trade union bureaucracies, all the time seeking to educate them in the program and principles of the Trotskyist movement.

He understood that the very foundation of the program of Trotskyism was the fight for internationalism, which led him in 1985-86 to stand with the International Committee of the Fourth International in defence of the principles of world socialist revolution against the nationalist opportunist degeneration of the British Workers Revolutionary Party.

Contained in this position was the fight for the political independence of the working class against the adaptation by the WRP to the Labor, Stalinist and trade union leaderships—the forces against which Barry fought with such intransigence from the moment when he joined the party.

This internationalist outlook found expression in the political work he carried out in the Elcar workshop. It was the scene of many lunchtime addresses by members of the Australian party and by members of other sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International during visits to Australia. Those who addressed workers at Elcar included Fred Mazelis of the SEP (US), Helen Halyard of the SEP (US) and Nanda Wickremasinghe, a founding member of the SEP in Sri Lanka.

Barry Jobson was born in 1942 and grew up in the then working-class suburb of Surry Hills in Sydney. His family was deeply scarred by the impact of the Great Depression of the 1930s which had brought unemployment levels as high as 30 percent.

His early political life was as an active member of the Labor Party in the south-western Sydney suburb of Villawood where he now lived. He was deeply hostile to Australian intervention in the Vietnam War waged by US imperialism, but at that stage saw the Labor Party as the way forward.

In 1973, Barry helped to introduce the elite barrister, Neville Wran, who became state premier in 1976, to local workers as he was installed as the state member of parliament for the working-class seat of Bass Hill.

But disillusionment was not long in coming and Barry would often express his class-based hostility to Wran. This hostility extended beyond individuals as he came to grasp the essential class role of the Labor Party in the political suppression of the working class and its subordination to capitalism.

In 1974, he took the decision to join the Socialist Labour League. This was a decisive step because it involved the rejection of the illusions surrounding the Labor government of Gough Whitlam and its program of mild reform after it won the federal election in December 1972, ending 23 years of Liberal Party rule.

The poverty endured during Barry's childhood, as was the case with many of his generation, deeply affected his early education, including his writing and reading skills.

However, Barry understood the crucial importance of studying and assimilating the writings of the Marxist movement and grasping the strategical historical lessons of the 20th century, beginning with the Russian Revolution of 1917 in order to educate himself as a revolutionist. So he decided to go to night school, determined to overcome the deficiencies of his early formal education and develop these skills.

In subsequent years he displayed a keen interest in political economy, following major economic events and seeking to grasp their significance. He regarded philosophy and the dialectical materialist method of Marxism as being of crucial importance. Among the works he read was Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* as well as Trotsky's *In Defence of Marxism*.

The latter was a particular favourite because of Trotsky's lucid and concise explanation of the dialectical method, in opposition to the static conceptions of formal logic. On occasions Barry could be found explaining these issues to young workers and apprentices at his workplace.

The decade of the 1980s involved crucial strategic experiences for the working class in Australia and internationally.

As a result of an upsurge of working-class militancy from the early 1980s, not least in response to the deepest recession to that point since the 1930s, the Fraser Liberal government, initially installed by the governor-general's coup of November 1975 that ousted Whitlam, virtually disintegrated.

The Labor Party, now led by former trade union chief Bob Hawke, came to power in a decisive electoral victory in March 1983.

However, the deepening crisis of the global capitalist system and the offensive being waged against the working class, spearheaded by the Reagan administration in the US and the Thatcher government in Britain, meant that there was to be no return to even the limited reforms of the Whitlam period. Those days had gone.

Rather, the central policy of the Hawke government was the Price and Incomes Accord, a tripartite alliance involving the Labor Party, the trade union bureaucracies and the major employer groups to drive down wages, working conditions and destroy jobs as part of a major "restructuring" of Australian capitalism in order to increase the flow of profits.

At first, the struggle waged by Barry Jobson and Terry Cook was somewhat against the stream. But events were to rapidly show that the Accord was a full-scale assault on the working class spearheaded by the trade union apparatus.

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The extent to which the opposition of the Trotskyists was starting to win support was revealed in 1984 when Barry stood in the election for national president of the Australian Railways Union against Pat Dunne who was supported by the right-wing head office machine.

Nationally he polled 4,600 votes against Dunne's 6,648. But in NSW, where he was known, Comrade Barry outpolled Dunne by two to one.

In an interview on the result, he said: "In the railways workers are concerned at the growing job losses and are looking for leadership. I believe that they have responded to our campaign for socialist policies to defend jobs and to fight the privatisation of rail work.

"This is despite the claim by both the right-wing and the 'lefts' that you can't bring politics into the unions, that you can't campaign for socialist policies. Our campaign proves that you can raise these vital issues and win support for a socialist program in the railways."

In the fight to break the working class from the Labor leadership, the SLL advanced the tactic that the Labor "lefts" expel the right-wing Hawke-Keating leadership and initiate the struggle for a workers' government to implement socialist policies.

In June 1987, the Elcar shop committee carried a resolution calling for an ALP conference to carry out this policy. Growing sections of the working class were coming into conflict with the Labor government and in 1989 a mass meeting at Elcar rejected the Accord and called on the shop committee to "use all means at its disposal to mobilise opposition throughout the union movement to this historic assault on the conditions, living standards and basic rights of the working class."

The support for the policies advocated by the Trotskyists not only at Elcar but in other sections of industry was the outcome of a developing rebellion of the working class against the Labor government.

However, global politics was about to take a sharp turn. The disintegration of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989 and then the liquidation of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy at the end of 1991 led to a wave of confusion and demoralisation in the working class.

For broad layers of workers, even those who were conservative or right-wing in their political outlook, the existence of the Soviet Union represented something of a bulwark in defence of their social position. In their eyes it served as a constant reminder to the ruling classes that if their depredations went too far there would be major repercussions. But now the USSR had been liquidated and capitalism restored without significant political resistance.

This event was eagerly seized on by the ruling classes to hail the end of socialism, the death of Marxism, even the "end of history," and to declare that the so-called "free market" had demonstrated it was the highest and only possible form of socio-economic organisation.

The resultant disorientation in the working class allowed the ruling classes to deepen their onslaught against the working class internationally.

In Elcar, this disorientation produced a retreat among the more class-conscious workers on whom Jobson and Cook had based their work. At the same time the disorientation strengthened the hand of the Stalinists and the Labor bureaucracy and they deepened their offensive, eventually leading to the Trotskyists losing the leading positions they gained in the shop committee.

In New South Wales the state Liberal government, with the active collaboration of the trade union bureaucracy, carried through the closure of Elcar as workers took redundancy payouts and redeployment.

Barry was one of those affected by the wave of demoralisation which swept over considerable sections of the working class in this period and for a time became politically inactive.

The liquidation of the Soviet Union, however, did not signify the end of socialism but was rather the culmination of the utterly reactionary nationalist program of Stalinism and all sections of the labour bureaucracies. With his clarification by the International Committee of the Fourth International, Barry resumed his position as a fighter for the program of Trotskyism.

With the launching of the *World Socialist Web Site* in 1998 his political work took a new turn and he became a writer, developing articles on key issues facing the working class, including job cuts, wage suppression and safety issues in the railways, drawing out the treacherous role of the Labor and trade union bureaucracies.

Moving to the Newcastle region north of Sydney, Barry was active in the development of the work of the SEP in his later years before ill-health, which all too often afflicts workers who have spent a life in industry, overtook him.

He was, above all, an active participant in the fight to build a branch of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality at Newcastle University.

Together with Terry Cook, Barry, now well into his seventh decade, regularly campaigned at the campus, distributing WSWS articles and SEP literature and persistently and patiently explaining to youth the key political issues of the day, the program of Trotskyism and insisting that they should read and study the works of the Marxist movement in order to orient themselves in the struggles they faced.

So impressive was his grasp of complex political and historical knowledge that students would many times ask him in which faculty he taught.

Barry Jobson wrote an imperishable page in the history of the struggle for the program of Trotskyism in the working class. He has gone but his legacy lives on.

Above all, his life underscores for youth and students now coming into the Trotskyist movement the crucial importance of winning workers in key sections of industry, of the necessity for their training and education as Marxists and the decisive role that these worker-Marxists can and will play in shaping the course of the revolutionary struggles now unfolding.

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