

Reminiscences of Jean Brust 100 years since her birth

Steven Brust
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Steven Brust is the son of veteran Trotskyists and founding members of the Workers League, Jean Brust and Bill Brust. August 31 marks the 100th anniversary of the birth of Jean Brust, who died on November 24, 1997. Steven, a novelist currently living in the Twin Cities, Minnesota, sent the following reminiscences on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the birth of his mother, Jean.

To mark this anniversary, the WSWs has published an exhibit featuring essays on Jean Brust's life and political work. (See "100 years since the birth of veteran Trotskyist Jean Brust.")

During one of the packinghouse strikes that happened between 1946 and 1948, in which my parents participated (they literally started dating on the picket line), the Farmer-Labor governor, Floyd B. Olson, called out the National Guard against the strikers. There was a mass protest at the state Capitol, and Governor Olson appeared and addressed them. My mother was in the back, telling people that someone should answer him. She kept getting pushed forward, until she was in the front, and so she did. I'd love to know what she said. I've never found the article, but the story is that in one of the Twin Cities newspapers that reported the event, she was referred to as "Little Mount Vesuvius."

Yeah, that was her.

My mother was one of few people I've ever met who, when she got angry, became clearer and more precise in her arguments. One day, it must have been late in 1968 or early in 1969, there was a meeting of students and faculty at St. Olaf College to discuss the Vietnam War. She was quiet, listening, as people spoke against the war. At that time, to my perception, she was more or less in the background; a solid party worker, but, except for her history with the Twin Cities labor movement, she didn't really stand out. Some professor—and I'd

love to know his name so I could thank him—got up and explained that we were in a small college in the Midwest, and, whatever we thought of the war, we had to accept that there was nothing we could do, students should concentrate on getting an education, and ...

And Mom blew up. It was the first time since I'd known her. She stood up and destroyed that poor guy. She gave that room a talking-to, about how the suffering in Vietnam and the conditions of the poor and the working class here at home were connected. She discussed the massive outrage against the war, and how it was a question of where this outrage was directed, and the role each individual could play in building a revolutionary party to take on the system responsible.

We'd never seen her like that. From that day on, we had a solid cadre at that small, isolated Midwestern college, especially among students who had managed to win scholarships from impoverished regions of the South; and from that day on, Mom was in the forefront of all discussions. In that instant, she became the leader the members of the SEP now remember her as. It was breathtaking.

It was the early 1970s, probably '71 in the midst of the Vietnam War, and before the complete collapse of union militancy. The immediate task was to draw the connection between the fight against imperialism and the issues being faced by the working class—most particularly, the packinghouse workers at the Armour Packing Plant in South St. Paul. We would show up, every Wednesday, and sell the *Bulletin* (the precursor to the *World Socialist Web Site*) to the workers as their shift ended. Over time, we got more and more positive responses, selling more copies every week.

This response attracted the attention of the South St. Paul police, who began to show up and harass us. There was a long private road leading from the Armour plant

across a set of railroad tracks and onto a two-lane highway. One week the cops would tell us we couldn't be on the highway because it was a public road; the next week they'd tell us we couldn't be in the road because it was private property, and so on.

The day Mom got fed up with it, there were four of us: Mom, me, and two black students from the Deep South, Louis ("Louie") and Terry, who Mom had recruited from St. Olaf College in Northfield. So, there we were, and as the workers started driving out, the cops showed up. The smaller of the two must have been about 6'4". They came out and started their spiel about how this was a public highway, and ...

Mom broke in. "Every week you tell us something different," she said. "Make up your mind. We'll be on either side of the tracks you want, but we aren't leaving."

"We can arrest you," they said.

"All right," said Mom. "We'll discuss that." She pulled us together into a group to talk about whether we wanted to be arrested. The bigger of the two cops followed us, and Mom—a little 5'1" woman—stopped and held her palm out. "No," she said. "You wait there. We'll tell you what we decide." The cop's eyes widened, and he stopped like he'd run into a wall, his mouth open.

We talked, and Mom reminded us we had a meeting on Friday, and it would be inconvenient to be in jail. We agreed that we'd be arrested next week. Mom walked up to the cop and said, "Okay, we're leaving. We'll be back here in one week, and you can arrest us then."

That was the last time the cops showed up.

When my sister Cynthia passed away, I was asked to write something about her for the WSWs, and, as I mentioned there, I struggled to say something purely personal and not at all political about her life, and eventually gave up. With the relationship between my parents, and with the entire family, it is a thousand times more difficult. The interrelationship between our personal lives and political lives was so fundamental to Mom and Dad that we never questioned it. (See "A remembrance of my sister, Cynthia Brust Moore.")

We sat down one evening to play a game. I don't remember what it was; I think it was a gift from some relative. It was one of those games where you draw a card with a question, and you have to guess how the

other players will answer. The question was something like, "How important is what you do for a living in defining who you are?"

I don't remember who answered it, or who guessed what, but I remember the discussion about it. Because for Dad, it was very important; he told us that one reason he was a socialist is because of how criminal it is that the greater part of humanity is forced to spend 40 hours a week for 40 or more years doing things they hate just to survive. Mom had the opposite answer. "What I do for a living doesn't matter, what matters is the struggle for socialism, that's what my life is about."

For my mother, the fight for a better world was what gave her life meaning.



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