

Jim Lawrence, American autoworker and longtime Trotskyist, dies at age 83: A life dedicated to the fight for socialism

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Comrade Jim Lawrence died in hospice January 25 in Dayton, Ohio, after months of declining health. He was 83 years old. He is survived by wife of 59 years, Lois, son David, daughter Tanza, four grandchildren and two great grandchildren.

Jim dedicated the greater part of his adult life to the fight for socialism. All who met him were impressed by his commitment to principles, his deep interest in culture and history, and his immense confidence in the revolutionary capacity of the working class.

He was won to the program of Trotskyism in the early 1970s, and he played an important role in developing a base of support for the movement among a key section of industrial workers. The experiences gained in this period played an important role in the subsequent political development of the American and world Trotskyist movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International.

Born in Dayton, Ohio, during the last years of the Great Depression, Jim was one of seven children. His father worked at a foundry in Dayton making parts for the auto companies, in particular, General Motors which played a central role in the city's economy.

Jim said his father considered himself a socialist and held a local union post in the Stalinist-dominated United Electrical Workers at his factory. Jim thought his father likely was a member or supporter of the Communist Party, although his father never talked about it. From his father, Jim said he gained an understanding that there was an alternative to capitalism.

According to Jim, two of his uncles had been recruited by strikebreakers at Ford during the 1941 strike for UAW recognition. However, his uncles quickly realized they were being used and along with other black workers joined forces with the strikers, ensuring the victory of the union.

During his youth, Jim saw scenes of militant industrial struggles in Dayton, including the Univis Lens strike in 1948, led by the UE. It developed into a mass confrontation with strikebreakers. Ohio Governor Thomas Herbert eventually deployed National Guard troops, backed by tanks and armored vehicles, in an attempt to break the picket lines. The sight of soldiers in the street evoked mass popular outrage, eventually forcing the withdrawal of the Guard units.

After he graduated from high school in 1957, Jim went into the US Army. When he was discharged, he obtained a job at the foundry where his father worked. Jim told the story about how the local union had sent him in to "integrate" a section of the plant that was all white at the time. He later said he initially had trouble due to the racial backwardness of some of the workers, but one white worker befriended him and told the others to stop. He said that this experience helped to show him that class solidarity could overcome racial divisions.

In 1966, Jim went to work at the General Motors Delco Moraine brake plant in Dayton. He participated in the 1970 nationwide strike against GM that lasted 58 days, the last contract in which the United Auto Workers

achieved any significant gains.

This was a period when masses of students and young workers were being radicalized by the experience of the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement. It was also a period of enormous class battles.

Jim met the Workers League, the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party (US), in 1972. Supporters of the Workers League were distributing copies of the party's newspaper, the *Bulletin*.

He recounted that he obtained a copy of a Workers League pamphlet, *Where Wallace Really Stands* by David North, which explained the position of George Wallace, the notorious Alabama segregationist and racist who was seeking the 1972 Democratic nomination for US president. The exposure of the right-wing nature of the Democratic Party impressed Jim, and he decided to attend his first Workers League meeting.

Jim later said that the Workers League was the only political tendency that could explain the role of Stalinism, the political vehicle of a privileged and nationalist bureaucracy that had usurped power in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and advanced the anti-Marxist theory of "socialism in one country." In the 1930s, the Stalinist bureaucracy carried out a wave of political genocide, murdering hundreds of thousands of socialists, targeted above all at the supporters of Leon Trotsky, culminating in the assassination of Trotsky himself in August 1940.

"I found out that the Stalinists were the murderers of the leaders of the October Revolution," Jim explained. "They did more to discredit socialism than any capitalist could ever do." He paid specific tribute to longtime Workers League member Lou Renfrow, who served as his political mentor.

The Workers League also clarified Jim on the role of the Pabloite renegades from Trotskyism, such as the Socialist Workers Party, who promoted various forms of identity politics, including feminism and black nationalism to confuse and divide the working class. Early on, he developed an abiding hostility to all forms of nationalism and racist politics.

Jim and other supporters of the Workers League established a faction of the Trade Union Alliance for a Labor Party (TUALP) at the Delco Moraine plant, which won wide support through its exposure of the collaborationist policies of the UAW.

At that time, the unions in the United States still had the loyalty of millions of the more politically active and advanced workers and played a significant role in the life of the working class. The Workers League advanced the demand for a Labor Party based on the trade unions as a means of imbuing the militant movement of the working class with a political and socialist perspective by raising the necessity for the workers to rebel against the pro-capitalist trade union bureaucracy and its political alliance with the Democratic Party.

In that period, UAW conventions, though even then tightly controlled,

still provided a certain forum for debate over substantive issues. The Workers League would have a large literature table at Cobo Hall in Detroit during the UAW Constitutional Convention, which generally attracted large numbers of delegates. *Bulletin* reporters were able to circulate among the delegates on the convention floor and hand out leaflets explaining the party's policies. The Workers League was even able to solicit signatures to demand the arrest of the killers of Tom Henehan, a Workers League Political Committee member gunned down at a party event in New York City in 1977.

At one convention, Jim Lawrence's presence caused a considerable stir. So many delegates knew about his activity at the Delco Moraine plant and wanted to speak with him that the president of his local, Elmo Parrish, became unnerved. He demanded to know why Jim was not at work. Jim coolly explained that he had taken a personal day so that he could observe the proceedings.

Jim attended the February 1973 conference of TUALP held in St Louis, along with 275 other trade unionists, and made an important contribution to the discussion.

In the April 1974 local union elections at Delco Moraine, TUALP candidates Jim Lawrence and John Austin received 20 percent of the vote for local president and vice president. TUALP supporters also ran for shop chair and five other executive board positions.

In response to the campaign by TUALP, at one point, UAW President Leonard Woodcock came to Dayton to consult with local leaders. The *Bulletin* reported that Woodcock "raved like a madman" against the TUALP caucus. The support won by the TUALP candidates produced a red-baiting campaign by the union and local media, with Local 696 President Parrish even threatening to shoot salesmen of the *Bulletin* outside the plant.

"We were told to come down to the union hall for a meeting with Woodcock, but we refused to go unless we could go with a group of workers," Jim recalled. "We figured there would be threats." Despite confusion on socialism, workers recognized Jim and other party members as fighters for the working class, and the UAW was never able to victimize or silence them.

In an interview with David North published in the *Bulletin* prior to the vote, Jim explained, "The reason that local officials always try to prevent us from putting our position forward is that these demands serve to expose the existing leadership of the UAW for what they are ..."

He continued, "The bureaucrats want to lobby Congress, the same people who passed the laws against the trade unions. They do not wish to take up a fight against the system. They want to fight for reforms, when there cannot be reforms. This has the effect of turning the workers to the existing political parties, and this can only lead to defeat. The workers must know what they are going into consciously, that they are going into a class conflict. ... There must be a break from these political parties, and workers must have their own party."

The ruling class responded to the militant class battles of the 1970s and the protracted decline in the global position of American capitalism by launching a counterrevolutionary offensive in the 1980s. Under the Democratic Carter administration, interest rates were driven to record levels in 1979, forcing into bankruptcy wide sections of industry in order to weaken the working class. The offensive intensified under the Republican Reagan administration, which fired and blacklisted the PATCO air traffic controllers in 1981, opening up a period of unbridled unionbusting.

The unions, based on their nationalist and pro-capitalist program, had no answer to these attacks. The AFL-CIO isolated the PATCO strikers and worked to suppress the widespread sentiment for a general strike. The unions betrayed a series of struggles throughout the decade while transforming themselves ever more directly into instruments of corporate management. Conditions of workers were driven backwards, and

hundreds of thousands of jobs wiped out.

Throughout this period, Jim circulated the *Bulletin* in his plant and continued to fight for the party's policies. He also followed with intense interest the struggle waged by the Workers League and its collaborators in the world Trotskyist movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International, against the national opportunism of the British Workers Revolutionary Party. Jim supported the struggle against the WRP in the 1985-86 split, which laid the basis for an immense theoretical and political development of the ICFI.

In the aftermath of the split with the WRP, the Workers League, on the basis of the experiences of the 1980s and a theoretical examination of the significance and implications of globalization, drew the conclusion that the official unions, controlled by a highly privileged layer of upper middle class executives, had undergone a fundamental transformation. They could no longer be characterized as "workers organizations," as they worked deliberately and systematically to lower the living standards of the workers they claimed to represent. Based on this assessment, the Workers League withdrew its previous demand for the formation of a Labor Party based on the unions.

In 1996 Jim stood as the Socialist Equality Party candidate for US Congress in Dayton. He used the opportunity to campaign among workers directly based on the party's program, drawing the lessons of the UAW's endless betrayals and its bankrupt policy of support for the Democratic Party as the "lesser evil."

That same year, GM workers struck the two Delco Moraine brake plants in Dayton for 17 days, forcing the temporary idling of 75,000 GM workers. The UAW obtained phony promises from GM to preserve jobs at the plant, which along with all other GM plants in the area were eventually closed anyway with the loss of some 20,000 jobs. Today, Delco Moraine, as Jim explained, is just a "concrete slab."

In 2004, the SEP selected Jim to run as its candidate for US Vice President alongside WSWS writer Bill Van Auken. Jim was involved in the drive to place the SEP candidates on the ballot in Ohio, which involved a fight against the unscrupulous actions of Democratic Party state officials in the wholesale disqualification of hundreds of genuine signatures of registered voters based on trivial technicalities.

The 2004 elections were dominated by the expanding imperialist war in Iraq and the ongoing decimation of industrial jobs in the United States, overseen by the UAW and other unions. In a speech given to a meeting in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 2004 Jim explained the role of the unions, "The UAW and the AFL-CIO officially adopted the position of corporatism in the 1980s, rejecting the very concept that workers had any interests separate and apart from the corporate bosses. Union officials were put on the boards of directors of corporations like Chrysler, and a myriad of labor-management structures were put into place, allowing the companies to use labor officials to impose speedup and various cost-cutting measures to improve 'competitiveness.'

"Hand in hand with management, the UAW and other unions promoted the most poisonous national chauvinism and racism, aimed at convincing American workers that their enemy was not big business but Japanese and European workers who were supposedly 'stealing' American jobs.

"What has the promotion of economic nationalism produced? When I first joined the UAW, the union had 2.25 million workers in basic industry. Today it has 638,000 members. Throughout the US, just 8.2 percent of private sector workers belong to unions, and just 2.2 million factory workers belong, down 60 percent from two decades ago."

In 2005, Jim intervened along with other SEP members at a meeting of autoworkers in Kokomo, Indiana, to oppose the massive destruction of jobs at parts maker Delphi. He stressed the need not just for workers to form independent organizations of working class struggle but to build a political leadership based on a socialist and internationalist program.

In his later years, declining health prevented Jim from active

participation with the SEP. But he continued to read the WSWS and followed political developments closely. In a video interview in 2018 he made the following appeal to workers and young people:

“The policies of the capitalists are such that they are leading us from one war to another war, heading to the destruction of the human race itself. All of this is with the approval of the union bureaucracy everywhere. ... The unions have always been tools of the ruling class. You should not kid yourself. Even in the 1970s the more astute workers understood that if the union bureaucracy was involved in any way, it would be betrayed.

“The only way you can free yourself from wage slavery and threat of war is to abolish capitalism. Only the working class has the power to do that.

“The working class must be conscious of its power; it is a lot more powerful than the bourgeoisie. But for that it must be organized. The Fourth International has fought for the last 80 years for the interests of the working class. Only the Fourth International has done that. I would ask you to join the Fourth International wherever you live. It is the only way forward for the human race.”

To his final days, Comrade Jim remained a committed socialist and fighter for the working class. He will be sorely missed.



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