Obituary: Australian Socialist Equality Party member Virginia Grenfell (May 2, 1953–November 8, 2022)

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It is with great sadness that we report the death of comrade Virginia Grenfell on November 8. Virginia, a member of the Socialist Equality Party for 15 years, was 69 years old when she succumbed to an aggressive, inoperable and untreatable cancer, only three months after receiving the diagnosis. She leaves behind her son Oscar, mother Pat and four sisters Rebecca, Louise, Jo and El and their families.

Virginia, the second eldest of six children, was born in 1953 in Melbourne, Victoria. Family life was not overtly political, but the fact that Virginia's maternal grandfather had been a Labor Party Senator impacted on her and contributed to her seeing Labor as a means of alleviating the difficult conditions facing working people. It was at university where she studied arts, English literature and philosophy that she became more interested in world events and politics.

Like many students and youth of her generation, she was radicalised by the horrors of the war in Vietnam and the Australian government's participation in it and took part in the anti-war protests in the 1970s. She was not, however, attracted to the petty-bourgeois radical milieu prominent on campus at the time, who were hostile to the working class and the fight to build a socialist and revolutionary leadership.

After meeting her long-time partner Jacques in 1975, they travelled and worked together in Adelaide, Darwin and Melbourne, finally settling in Sydney where their son Oscar was born in 1992. While the relationship ended in 1996, they remained the best of friends until Jacques' untimely death in 2020. Throughout this period Virginia worked in hospitality, aged care facilities and with agencies assisting women and children in the poorer areas of Sydney.

In 1998 she was shocked, as were many workers in Australia at the time, by the unprecedented attack carried out against waterfront workers by the Howard Liberal government. Virginia, with young Oscar, attended protests in support of the workers.

In the course of the Patrick Terminals waterfront dispute, black-hooded security guards invaded the terminals forcing workers from the premises after the stevedoring company sacked the entire 1,400-strong workforce. It was used as a turning point by the Howard government to eliminate half the workforce and drive-up productivity while strengthening anti-strike legislation. This was aimed not just at the waterfront but the entire working class.

However, without the role of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), led by Stalinist Jenny George, and the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) leadership, neither the government nor the company could have imposed such attacks. The unions agreed to the halving of the workforce, the outsourcing of hundreds of other jobs, the destruction of hard-won conditions, including overtime and penalty rates, and the imposition of increased casualisation.

But it was the failure of the 2003 anti-Iraq war demonstrations to prevent the imperialist slaughter, which was to reduce Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya to rubble, that both dismayed and alarmed Virginia. Mother and son attended these protests. They were the largest demonstrations ever seen in Australia and internationally but which George W. Bush, the Howard Liberal-National government and every other imperialist administration dismissed with contempt and disdain.

When Virginia and then 14-year-old Oscar met the

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Socialist Equality Party (SEP) election campaign team in Dulwich Hill in 2007 she was relieved and excited by the analysis discussed with her. She took the SEP election manifesto, read it from cover to cover then attended the party election meeting advertised in the statement.

Having previously met the pseudo-left Socialist Alliance, whose only interest was acquiring votes and not the major historical or political issues, Virginia and Oscar were impressed by the SEP, which addressed the global crisis of capitalism, the threat of war and the ongoing assault on the working class. The SEP explained the necessity for a socialist leadership, independent of the Labor and Liberal parties who represented the interests of business.

It was a turning point for Virginia who would later recall that she had never heard anything like it. For the first time she had been provided with answers to the issues of war and inequality that had so angered and troubled her, not just what was happening, but why and a perspective of how to fight it.

She joined as an Electoral Member (EM), a step which she took very seriously as this was the first political organisation she had ever joined. Then began a period of political discussion and education which was conducted through regular EM meetings, education classes, party meetings and discussions that covered key political, historical and philosophical issues. She would later comment that this study was more intensive and serious than anything she had undertaken at university.

She learned about the role played by Social Democracy, Stalinism and the trade unions, and the tragic and difficult lessons of the betrayal of the revolutionary struggles of the working class at the hands of these organisations. She studied the necessity for the building of independent revolutionary organisations of the Fourth International, of which the International Committee is the leadership, to resolve what is the crisis of revolutionary leadership of the working class.

Once Virginia joined, she never wavered.

She was centrally involved in the work of the branches, campaigning at shopping centres, university campuses, factories and protests, explaining and fighting for the perspective and program of the SEP. She visited contacts and supporters and assisted in the fight to build clubs of the party's youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE). She played a central role in the development of Mehring Books, the SEP's literature arm, constructing attractive displays and tables at public meetings, and the SEP rallies in defence of Julian Assange.

While Virginia played an important role in the work of the party branches, she regarded her proudest achievement to be the development of her son Oscar.

While both mother and son joined at the same time, Virginia was very careful to ensure that Oscar was able to make his own decision and find his own way to the party. His development as a leader of the IYSSE and SEP and an accomplished writer for the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) was a source of immense pride and satisfaction to Virginia.

Virginia's sudden and unexpected diagnosis of cancer was a shock to all, and while her decline was rapid, Virginia faced her prognosis with courage and objectivity. She was acutely aware of the outcome of her disease but with her customary understated manner dealt with it. Oscar cared for his mother until her death.

Virginia died confident that she played her part in the construction of the ICFI, the World Party of Socialist Revolution, whose task it is to lead the working class in the revolutionary struggles for the overthrow of capitalism and for a socialist society.

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