This week in history: November 21-27

This column profiles important historical events which took place during this week, 25 years ago, 50 years ago, 75 years ago and 100 years ago.

20 November 2022

25 years since the death of veteran Trotskyist Jean Brust

On November 24, 1997, Jean Brust, veteran Trotskyist and founding member of the Socialist Equality Party and its predecessor, the Workers League, died after 60 years of fighting for socialism. Comrade Brust, a member of the party's central committee since the Workers League's founding in 1966, succumbed to a stroke she had suffered on November 21. She was 76 years old.

Jean Brust played a leading role in the Trotskyist movement over an historical period that extended from the founding of the Fourth International in 1938, in defiance of the Stalinist blood purges, to the final preparations for the launching of the *World Socialist Web Site* to carry forward Trotsky's perspective of world revolution in the age of globalization and the internet. Jean died less than three months before the WSWS began daily publication in February 1998.

Joining the Young Peoples Socialist League (YPSL) in 1937 to take up the fight against capitalist exploitation, fascist barbarism and the Stalinist betrayal of the Russian Revolution, Jean was politically shaped by the great events of that period: the Spanish Civil War, the struggle to expose the Stalinist frame-up trials in the Soviet Union, and the great movement of the American working class during the Depression years.

Jean became an inspirational figure in the history of the Trotskyist movement, emerging, along with her husband Bill, as one of a handful who remained true to Trotskyist principles in the post-World War II period, when the Socialist Workers Party, then the US section of the world Trotskyist movement, capitulated to Pabloism, an opportunist tendency which sought to adapt the Fourth International to the domination of world politics by Stalinism and American imperialism.

Under the impact of the postwar economic boom and the McCarthyite witch-hunting that isolated socialists in the labor movement, the SWP moved steadily to the right, eventually abandoning its adherence to the program of revolutionary working class internationalism in the early 1960s. Bill and Jean Brust refused to go along, rallying to a small group of young members of the SWP who had been expelled for their opposition to this betrayal.

Jean and Bill were among those who founded the Workers League in 1966 in political sympathy with the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world organization built in opposition to the Pabloites. The International Committee insisted, against the glorification of Stalinism and bourgeois nationalism that prevailed in radical circles in the 1960s, that Stalinism was a fundamentally counterrevolutionary force and that only the international working class, not peasant guerrillas or student protesters, could wage and win the struggle for socialism on a world scale.

Jean threw herself into the struggle to build the Workers League in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a period of stormy upsurge among workers, students and minority youth in the United States. Almost alone among those of her generation, she had a powerful ability to communicate to young people the principles of Marxist internationalism which she had embraced in the 1930s. She could explain concrete questions without patronizing her audience or watering down principles. She gave voice to the passionate aspirations of the most advanced sections of the working class for a revolutionary way forward.

The WSWS published an exhibit in August 2021 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Jean Brust's birth to bring together a number of essays on her life and political work, which can be viewed here.

50 years ago: Appellate Court overturns Chicago Seven convictions

On November 21, 1972, the convictions of seven antiwar protesters were overturned by the United States Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals. The "Chicago Seven," as they became known, were arrested at the August 1968 Democratic Party convention in Chicago for organizing protests against the Vietnam War.

The defendants were singled out as leaders of various antiwar groups. They included Tom Hayden and Rennie Davis, former leaders of the Students for a Democratic Society, the longtime antiwar pacifist David Dellinger, and Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin of the anarchistic Youth International Party, among others.

Bobby Seale of the Black Panthers was also originally on trial alongside the others as an eighth defendant. Because his attorney was unable to be present in court, Seale requested a delay in his trial and a separate hearing. Seale's request was denied by presiding judge Julius Hoffman. During the trial, Seale repeatedly protested that his right to legal representation was being denied. Judge Hoffman ordered Seale bound to a chair and gagged for several days of the trial, eventually removing him from the courtroom and sentencing him to four years in prison for contempt of court.

When the trial ended for the remaining seven defendants the jury acquitted two, John Froines and Lee Weiner, of all charges. It further acquitted all the defendants of the charge of conspiracy. Davis, Dellinger, Hayden, Hoffman and Rubin were all found guilty of traveling across state lines to incite a riot and were sentenced to five years in prison. Over the course of the trial Judge Hoffman charged the defendants and their attorneys with 159 counts of contempt of court for various protests against the political character of the trial.

When the appeal case was heard in May 1972, the panel of judges dismissed the great majority of the contempt charges and ordered a retrial

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with a separate judge for the remainder. Those contempt charges that remained did not result in jail time. In its final ruling in November, the panel reversed all of the criminal convictions against the seven. The appellate court ruled that Judge Hoffman and the prosecutors made several legal errors during the trial and that in addition "the demeanor of the judge and the prosecutors would require a reversal even if errors did not." The court issued a censure against Judge Hoffman and the prosecutors for their actions during the trial.

While the overturning of the convictions represented a significant legal win for the defendants and their right to protest the Vietnam War, by the time of the appeal the police repression and FBI infiltration of the antiwar movement had exacted a considerable toll.

More fundamentally, the winding down of direct US involvement in the war, coupled with the emergence of mass struggles among the working class in the US, had exposed the political bankruptcy of the middle class element that dominated the protest movement, which found itself with nothing left to say. The Chicago Seven defendants would fade into the political background with some, like Jerry Rubin and Tom Hayden, moving well to the right and finding comfortable positions in the upper middle class.

75 years ago: Congress votes to find the Hollywood Ten in contempt

On November 24, 1947, the US Congress voted overwhelmingly in favor of citing 10 prominent Hollywood screenwriters, directors and producers with contempt over their refusal to provide full testimony before its House Un-American Activities Committee the previous month.

The vote, put forward by the Democratic Party administration of President Harry Truman, marked a major escalation of the anti-communist witch-hunt in the film industry and more broadly. Those targeted for refusing to discuss their possible affiliation to the Communist Party and to name names would be convicted of contempt of Congress in a federal court in 1948 and sentenced to terms of imprisonment from six months to a year.

The victims of this initial volley of the purges, dubbed the Hollywood Ten, were Alvah Bessie, Herbert Biberman, Lester Cole, Edward Dmytryk, Ring Lardner, Jr., John Howard Lawson, Albert Maltz, Samuel Ornitz, Adrian Scott and Dalton Trumbo. The famous German playwright Bertolt Brecht would have been among them but had fled to Europe before Congress discussed the charge of contempt.

The same day as the vote in Congress, the top Hollywood studios released a statement cheering on the attack on basic democratic rights. Dubbed the Waldorf Statement, after the New York hotel at which it was drafted, the document was written with the involvement of executives from Warner Brothers, Paramount Pictures, 20th Century Fox, other major studies, as well as government-connected figures such as former US Secretary of State James F. Byrnes.

Of those targeted by Congress, the statement declared:

> "We will forthwith discharge or suspend without compensation those in our employ, and we will not re-employ any of the 10 until such time as he is acquitted or has purged himself of contempt and declares under oath that he is not a Communist."

On the broader campaign, it proclaimed:

> "We will not knowingly employ a Communist or a member of any party or group which advocates the overthrow of the government of the United States by force or by any illegal or unconstitutional methods." And later, "We request Congress to enact legislation to assist American industry to rid itself of subversive, disloyal elements."

100 years ago: *New York Times* takes notice of Hitler

On November 21, 1922, the *New York Times*, the American newspaper of record, published its first article on the German fascist leader Adolf Hitler, "New popular idol rises in Bavaria," on page 21, written by a correspondent named Cyril Brown.

The article described Hitler accurately as a "Bavarian Mussolini," after the fascist leader Benito Mussolini who had come to power in Italy only a month earlier. Hitler, the article asserted, was uninterested in political programs but sought to grow his movement, which it estimated to be 30,000 strong. Although the article does not say this, Munich had been a hotbed of far-right agitation ever since gangs of armed ex-soldiers were used to suppress the working class during the brief Bavarian Soviet Republic of 1919.

Hitler refused an interview with Brown, because he was instead going, as the *Times* put it, to "a series of reactionary inflammatory meetings and incidentally to beat up protesting Socialists and Communists with blackjacks if any dare protest, which is becoming rarer." The *Times* spoke of his "rare oratorical gift … of spellbinding whole audiences." The article described his squads of quasi-military "storm troops."

He is against, the article continues, "Jews Communists, Bolshevism, Marxian Socialism … the high cost of living … the weak Berlin government and the Versailles Treaty." It noted that "the keynote of his propaganda in speaking and in writing is violent anti-Semitism." Jews had left the area in fear of a pogrom.

But then the article offered *Times* readers some anodyne:

> "But several reliable, well-informed sources confirmed the idea that Hitler's anti-Semitism was not so genuine or violent as it sounded, and he was merely using anti-Semitic propaganda as a bait to catch masses of followers and keep them aroused and enthusiastic."

Germany was suffering from hyperinflation and moving closer to the revolutionary crisis of 1923, when the French invaded the Ruhr region to demand payment of war reparations by the German government. Far-right forces were also growing. There had been an attempted right-wing coup two years earlier that had been defeated by a general strike. By 1922, workers were mobilizing to oppose the right-wing threat again. Hitler himself was less than a year away from his first attempt at seizing power in the Beer Hall Putsch in Munich, after which he would be imprisoned briefly. His movement would gain momentum again after the elections of 1928.

The article ends by suggesting that Allied imperialism may see Hitler's movement as a "violation of the military clauses of the [Versailles] treaty."

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