

Ken Mantell, Australian Trotskyist: November 11, 1945–November 30, 2025

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It is with great sorrow that we report that long-standing Socialist Equality Party member, comrade Ken Mantell, died on November 30, two days after suffering a massive stroke. He was 80 years old and is survived by his three sons, Stephen, Mathew and Jason, six grandchildren and six siblings.

Ken, the third son in a family of six boys and two girls, was born on November 11, 1945 in Melbourne to parents Geoff and Mary.

The family of ten, living in the shadow of World War II, survived on the wage of their father Geoff, a toolmaker, and the sporadic income Mary could earn before the children were born. Rationing was still in place, and the Mantell family would have been using ration books, queueing for certain foods and making do with limited supplies—especially of meat, butter, sugar and tea. There was little surplus and even less waste in the household. Constant budgeting, repairing, reusing and going without luxuries was standard.

Ken, along with his siblings, was educated in the Catholic school system, where he attracted the ire of the Christian Brothers from an early age until he finished Year 8 and left. During his primary school years, he began to play a vital role for the family by earning money, which he gave straight to his mother. Before and after school, he sold papers on the street, gathered firewood for the combustion stove, and collected soft drink and beer bottles for trade-ins to help cover household expenses.

He left school at 14 to begin his working life, taking on roles such as a storeman, crockery salesman, truck driver, labourer and steel fixer. It was in the building industry as a steel fixer that Ken spent many decades, teaching himself to read architectural drawings and studying the different types of steel used. In his later years, he also worked in the printing industry, learning a trade for which he had no prior experience.

Ken worked in some of the most diverse, remote and

demanding parts of Australia. While spending years on building sites and factories in the country's major cities, he also worked in the scorching heat and dust of Condobolin in NSW, Western Australia and the central Queensland towns of Moura, Mt Isa and nearby Lake Julius, created by the dam he helped build.

Although Ken left school early, he was utterly determined to overcome his lack of education. Ken's older brother, Martin, with whom he maintained the closest relationship until his death, would send him the *Time* magazine each week for Ken to read to improve his skills. He read each issue diligently.

It was as a steel fixer that he joined the Socialist Labour League (SLL), the precursor to the Socialist Equality Party, after being introduced to the party by his then-wife Liz in the early 1980s and won over to the program of socialist internationalism. During the SEQEB dispute, when in 1985 the hated right-wing Bjelke-Petersen government in Queensland sacked more than 1,000 electricity workers, he and Liz, with a young Jason in a stroller, campaigned at the mass meetings selling *Workers News*, the weekly publication of the SLL.

Once Ken was convinced of the program and the need to build the revolutionary party, he never wavered and kept studying. Even when he struggled with harsh medication to manage his health issues, he insisted on attending the weekly education classes run by the SEP. He dedicated his considerable talents, effort and determination to the creation of the revolutionary party for mankind's liberation through a socialist future.

He was not just a "hard man" as they say, but was politically intransigent in opposing and exposing the betrayals and perfidy of the trade union bureaucracy—in particular, the Stalinists of the Communist Party of Australia and the Maoists, including Norm Gallagher, leader of the Builders Labourers Federation (BLF).

During the attack on the BLF by the federal Hawke-

Keating Labor government in 1986, Ken, as a member of the SLL, fought against the deregistration of the union while exposing Gallagher's role. The BLF leader's attempt to channel opposition and anger into the courts was driven more by his fear of an independent workers' movement than by the attacks from the Labor government.

While these and many other struggles were important, he rightly identified the key fight of his political life as being against the national opportunists of the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) in Britain. Having been a party member for a relatively short period, Ken stood with the International Committee of the Fourth International in opposing the WRP's subordination of the working class to the British Labour Party, trade union bureaucracy and bourgeois nationalist regimes in the Middle East and beyond.

Ken understood that the political struggle waged during the 1985-86 split with the WRP leadership would determine not only the future direction of the ICFI but also its very existence. The adaptation of the WRP leadership of Healy, Banda and Slaughter to nationalism, in the form of Stalinism, social democracy and the positions of Pabloite opportunism, would have led to the liquidation of the party into those forces—the very political formations that all three WRP renegades joined after abandoning the Trotskyist movement.

Ken stood as a candidate for the SLL/SEP in both federal and state elections, led branches and worked in most areas of the party, including as a full-time cadre of the SEP.

In 2024, Ken spoke alongside comrade Warwick Dove at an SEP public meeting called to warn of attacks by the Labor government on the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union (CFMEU), outlining some of his key experiences in fighting for the party's perspective among building workers in the 1980s.

Ken recounted that in 1989, as a BLF delegate, he went to the podium of a mass meeting of 5,000 building workers. The union bureaucracy attempted to stop him by taking the microphone from him, but the workers refused to allow it and demanded he be permitted to speak. Ken presented a motion opposing the attack on the BLF and calling for a struggle that would not only involve building workers but also extend throughout the working class. The motion was carried at the meeting.

The young students and workers in the audience were captivated by his contribution, which he found greatly satisfying.

The recent period has been especially tough for Ken. His long-term partner, comrade Regina Lohr, developed breast cancer and, although she and Ken fought it as best they could, passed away from the disease in October 2022, just over three years ago.

Ken's own health was profoundly affected by the gruelling conditions in which he worked as a steel fixer in the building industry. He suffered multiple ailments that he also fought to keep at bay.

His death followed an attempt to overcome tremors caused by damage to his arms and shoulders from carrying heavy loads of steel year after year.

Ken, however, did not seek to overcome his ailments so he could "smell the roses" or wander peacefully in the garden, but rather so he could more effectively fight for the working class and promote a socialist perspective.

He was a party member deeply concerned with workers and young people—their lives, their experiences and their misconceptions—which he laboured to combat and clarify. He always made a point of seeking out young members to discuss and guide them in their training and development. He was generous to a fault with his time and resources.

He understood that if the working class did not consciously embrace a revolutionary perspective, capitalism would impose the worst nightmare on the new and emerging generations of young people. He saw in his sons and grandchildren representatives of that generation and felt deeply about the risks they face. He loved them dearly and dedicated his life to overcoming the obstacles to a socialist future, which is the only way to ensure mankind's future.

We send our very deepest condolences to the family, comrades and friends of comrade Ken Mantell. Future generations will look to him as a shining example to be emulated by workers and young people everywhere.



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