Obituary: Australian Trotskyist Steve Brown (July 15, 1953–September 8, 2026)

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It is with a heavy sense of loss that we report the death of comrade Steve Brown, a member of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) for ten years. Steve died in hospital on September 8, suffering what has been initially diagnosed as a heart attack one week after a medical operation that successfully removed a malignant cancer. He was 73 years old.

Steve had three children with his first wife Tracey: his deceased son Luke, Hailey, and Jake. He is also survived by his second wife Margaret, his younger siblings Julie and David, and three grandchildren.

He joined the SEP in 2016 at the age of 63. On numerous occasions, Steve said he regretted not meeting the party earlier in his life. But once he did join, he dedicated his last ten years to fighting in the working class for socialism, from which he never wavered in his commitment.

Stephen Brown was born on July 15, 1953 in Melbourne. His early life unfolded in the post-war boom in the coastal suburb of Rosebud, which at that time had a growing population of working-class and lower-middle-class families.

His father Reginald, a clerk at a nearby naval base, served in World War II as a telephonist in the Air Force. He was stationed in Papua New Guinea in 1944–45, in Madang and Lae, where he contracted malaria and dengue fever. Reginald died aged just 43 in 1965, when Steve was only 12.

Steve and his two siblings were then raised by their mother Barbara, known as Babs, a schoolteacher who had to take on other jobs to support the family and pay off a mortgage. She often held three jobs at once, including teaching at Rosebud Primary School, working at a nursing home in Dromana, and dishwashing and cleaning at the local pub in the evenings. Steve's paternal grandparents lived with them in the Rosebud house.

Barbara had grown up on a dairy farm in Darnum, near the Latrobe Valley, a centre for Victoria's coal mining and energy industries. Steve recounted that his mother would give milk to homeless people living in tents near their farm during the Great Depression. She was influenced by the Communist Party of Australia in the 1940s, when it was conducting political meetings in the Latrobe Valley area. While thoroughly Stalinised at this point, the Communist Party nevertheless had a substantial base among broad sections of workers who were hostile to capitalism and drawn to socialist politics, out of their experiences of the Depression and World War II.

As Steve would later recall, Barbara was also an acquaintance of J.J. Brown (no relation), a Communist Party leader and prominent trade union official in Victoria. "Jack" Brown became a close family friend whom the Rosebud household would visit every Christmas. The conversations between "Jack" and Barbara had an influence on the family's politics.

As a boy, Steve had a love for science and subscribed to science fiction magazines, growing especially fond of the "hard" science fiction works of Arthur C. Clarke. However, during his time at Rosebud High School, he struggled academically. This was partly due to bronchitis impairing his studies.

Steve's mother *Socialist* David *World* Web *Site* tha family circumstances had an impact: "It was tough, for children and for adults. Mum wasn't around to encourage us to study particularly hard, or at all. He really didn't develop his academic skills until after he left school." Steve's lack of formal education always frustrated him later in life, and he actively sought to make up for it by reading widely and educating himself.

In 1971, he trained for 12 months in the Citizens Military Force, a precursor of the Australian Army Reserve. While he enjoyed the physical exercise involved, however, he never wanted to fight in war.

Steve's political radicalisation took place over a lengthy period in response to the struggles and conditions he experienced as a worker in different jobs, and also to the US-led wars that erupted in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

As a young man, he worked in Melbourne's outer suburbs as an abattoir storeman and then at an auto parts manufacturer, before deciding to become a nurse in 1982. This marked a change in the direction of his life that would impact his later development. His nursing career would last the next four decades.

Steve worked at multiple hospitals, from rural health centres in Bendigo and Kyneton to city geriatric hospitals. In the 1990s, he enrolled at university to qualify as a registered nurse, earning certificates in infectious diseases and renal care at La Trobe University, as well as a Bachelor of Health Science at Victoria University. He then worked as a registered nurse at the Austin, a major public hospital in Melbourne's northeast, where he was employed from 2002 until his retirement in 2016. He was immensely interested in the conditions of other workers including from abroad. He had met workers from other countries through travel, including a university-sponsored trip to Beijing Medical Hospital for three months, aimed at mentoring Australian nursing trainees paired with Chinese counterparts.

As a nurse, Steve became involved in the trade unions. He was a union delegate at Greenvale Hospital for six months, and a health and safety officer at the Austin Hospital for the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF). Throughout the 1980s and 90s, Steve experienced first-hand the corruption of the union bureaucracies and witnessed their alignment with the government in eroding workers' conditions and dismantling public health. He was outraged by the bureaucracy's suppression of democratic discussion by workers, later saying that he stopped attending ANMF delegates' meetings because he had "no voice and no vote."

A major experience was the 1996 closure of the Fairfield Infectious Diseases Hospital, a globally renowned institution. Steve not only worked at Fairfield at the time, along with his wife Margaret, a fellow nurse—he had been treated there for adult measles years earlier. Despite popular opposition to the closure, the Liberal state government of Premier Jeff Kennett shut down the hospital as one plank of its austerity and privatisation agenda. This was part of a nationwide assault on the working

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class, its living conditions, and its access to social programs, which had been led by the Hawke-Keating Labor governments and enabled by their partners in the union apparatuses.

The Socialist Labour League, precursor to the Socialist Equality Party, played a central role in the campaign to defend the hospital and fight for the broad mobilisation of workers across industries, hosting public meetings, discussions with health workers, and a march to the hospital.

Steve was further radicalised by the criminal US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan and the active involvement of Australian governments. The massive crimes inflicted on millions in the Middle East sharpened his opposition to war and imperialist aggression, enacted under the banner of "human rights" and "democracy." The Iraq war provoked a mass anti-war movement in 2003, involving over 10 million people worldwide in what were the largest international demonstrations to that date.

He first met the SEP in 2014 at a public meeting on the destruction of the Australian car industry. Automotive giants like Ford, Holden, and Toyota had announced closures for plants in Melbourne, Geelong, and Adelaide, throwing over 150,000 workers into unemployment and subjecting whole working-class suburbs to deindustrialisation and impoverishment. The unions acted as instruments for the corporations in this assault, packaging it as an effort to make the industry more "internationally competitive."

Steve responded particularly to the party's analysis of the transformation of the unions, from organisations in which workers fought for improved wages and conditions, into forces that function today as "policemen of capital," suppressing the class struggle and disciplining workers on behalf of the major corporations, governments and the state.

He joined the party and devoted the remainder of his life to the struggle against war, inequality, and oppression, and for the socialist transformation of society.

Although Steve was in his sixties when he joined the party, he approached the study of history and the lessons of the international class struggle with youthful enthusiasm and reviewed many ideas he had held uncritically.

Party members explained to Steve that crimes of US imperialism are not the responsibility of the entire American population and could not be opposed by a boycott of American goods. He grasped that the essential division in society was class, and that American workers were not to blame for the wars of US governments. The fight against war requires a unified struggle by workers in Australia with their class brothers and sisters in the US and around the world to abolish capitalism.

Studying the history of working-class struggles, he came to understand that militancy alone cannot resolve workers' problems. What workers need to take up is an independent political struggle based on socialist internationalism. Moreover, the problems facing workers cannot be resolved by changing the union leaderships, but by building a revolutionary party in the working class.

Understanding the role of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union was also critical. Its degeneration was not the result of Stalin's psychology, but stemmed from the isolation of the workers' state and Russia's economic and cultural backwardness, which gave rise to a bureaucratic apparatus whose interests were expressed in Stalin's retrograde theory of "socialism in one country."

Once Steve understood these fundamental questions, his commitment to the party never faltered and he devoted considerable energy to different areas of the SEP's political work. In reviewing Steve's legacy, his comrades have frequently described him as the "backbone" of the Melbourne branch. From printing leaflets and posters, campaigning in working-class areas, participating in the party's election campaigns, to regularly writing for the "Workers Struggles" column on the *World Socialist Web Site*—Steve fought tenaciously to build the SEP as the new political leadership of the working class.

Shortly after joining, Steve was involved in the party's campaigns in the Latrobe Valley in 2017, when the state Labor government and the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union (CFMEU) oversaw the closure of the Hazelwood power station and two timber plants. He was returning to an area he knew as this was where his mother had grown up. He campaigned enthusiastically among workers and residents in the socially devastated region, opposing the job destruction and fighting for workers to mount a struggle.

On campaigns, Steve was approachable, relishing the opportunity to have discussions with workers, whether it was about their lives, industrial disputes, or the historical development of Marxism. He earned the respect of large numbers of workers, listening carefully as he patiently explained the party's positions. At picket lines, where the party often meets with hostility and aggression from union bureaucrats, he was never fazed or intimidated because he understood politically and theoretically the role of the union bureaucracy.

He also took a keen interest in the experiences and development of young people and their future under capitalism. He participated in the work on various university campuses by the SEP's youth wing, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), showing patience and sympathy for the plight of students.

Steve never saw his political self-education as finished. He read the *World Socialist Web Site* meticulously, and continued to study the history of the Trotskyist movement. In his final weeks, at home and in hospital, he was rereading Trotsky's autobiography, *My Life*, and the new Mehring Books release, *Art and the Influence of Revolution*. An avid reader even before meeting the party, he remarked how Marxism had broadened his world outlook and awakened in him a desire to learn more deeply about every field of human knowledge: from politics to history, economics, science, and the arts.

Steve took the news of his cancer calmly and objectively. He underwent surgery to remove a large tumour, which had formed at the bottom of his spine and was giving him immense pain. The surgery, lasting a gruelling thirteen hours, was successful. In his last days, he looked forward to fully recovering and continuing his political work, and he wanted to take part in the coming revolutionary upheavals of the working class.

His sudden heart attack, while recovering from this surgery, is a tragedy that has filled everyone who knew Steve—his comrades, family, friends, colleagues—with tremendous sadness and shock. We send our heartfelt condolences to them all.

Steve exuded revolutionary optimism. It was not based on hope but on the understanding that the socialist program to which he had dedicated himself would be embraced by workers because it represented their class interests in Australia and internationally.

Comrade Steve Brown stands as an example of what a worker can achieve once clarified on such critical issues as nationalism, the trade unions, the historic betrayals of Stalinism, and above all the necessity of a revolutionary struggle against war and social inequality. He charted a path that numerous other workers, in Australia and worldwide, will follow in the present period of capitalist breakdown and growing class struggles.

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