

A remembrance of veteran Trotskyist Bill Brust, twenty-five years after his death

By Fred Mazelis
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Today marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the death of veteran Trotskyist Bill Brust, whose political struggle as a revolutionary socialist spanned 53 years. Comrade Brust, born in 1919, died of pancreatic cancer at the age of 72.

Bill's life was bound up with the fight against capitalism and its replacement by a socialist society. Bill and his wife and comrade, Jean (1921-1997), embodied the best traditions of the Socialist Workers Party when it was led by James P. Cannon. Bill was part of a generation of youth radicalized by the Great Depression of the 1930s. He was inspired by the struggle of the Minneapolis Teamsters, whose historic strike in 1934 played a major role in triggering the massive struggles for industrial unionism.

Bill spent time in Europe as a soldier in the closing months of the Second World War, and his experience there only solidified his internationalist principles and his hatred of the imperialist order that had plunged humanity into the Second World War.

Following the war, Bill entered the meatpacking industry, and he played an important role in both the 1946 and 1948 strikes of packinghouse workers, part of the powerful but short-lived upsurge of working-class militancy after the war. The postwar boom led to higher living standards, while the Cold War quickly ushered in a period of witch-hunting, in the unions and elsewhere.

These objective conditions contributed heavily to the growth of complacent, conservative and pessimistic moods within the Trotskyist movement, and the revisionist tendency, led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel internationally and Bert Cochran and George Clarke in the US. It sought to politically disarm the movement in the name of a "new world reality." The slogan of Cochran and Clarke was "Junk the Old

Trotskyism!"

Bill stood together with Cannon and the SWP majority opposing this liquidationism, a struggle that led to the founding of the International Committee of the Fourth International in 1953.

Less than a decade later, the SWP leadership moved to make its peace with the Pabloites. Bill and Jean found themselves resisting the SWP's shift to the right and away from the necessary fight in the working class. In 1963 Bill established contact with the leadership of the British Socialist Labour League. This led shortly afterward to him and Jean joining the American Committee of the Fourth International, which had been formed by members of the SWP who had been expelled for their opposition to the SWP's reunification with the Pabloites and the subsequent entry of the Ceylonese Pabloites into a bourgeois coalition government.

Bill Brust became a founding member of the Workers League, the predecessor organization of the Socialist Equality Party, in 1966, and he contributed enormously over the next 25 years, taking up the banner of Marxism that the SWP had so disgracefully abandoned in its embrace of Castroism, black nationalism and other forms of middle-class protest politics.

I first met Bill Brust in the mid-'60s, in the period leading up to the founding of the Workers League. Separated in age and in political experience by about two decades, we both found ourselves in opposition inside the SWP to the party leadership's abandonment of Trotskyism. We did not meet, however, until after the International Committee supporters inside the SWP, of whom I was a part, were expelled. From that point on, Bill and Jean brought the benefit of their knowledge and experience in the workers' movement and in the SWP to the largely youthful and less experienced members of the Workers League.

A high point for me was the opportunity to work closely with both Bill and Jean for an extended period in 1986, both during the Hormel meatpacking strike against union-busting, a strike that was sabotaged by the union itself, as well as in Bill's campaign as the Workers League's candidate for governor of Minnesota.

During the 1950s and 60s, Bill was able to resume his own education, pursuing an advanced degree in German literature, followed by college teaching for many years, an academic career that never stopped him from conducting political work and fighting for his views among students and other youth.

Bill Brust's political life spanned the Second World War and the government prosecution of the American Socialist Workers Party under the Smith Act; the postwar boom, the bureaucratization of the trade unions and the McCarthyite Red Scare; the fight against Jim Crow segregation and the war in Vietnam, alongside the upsurge in militancy of the working class in the 1960s; and the fight against the social counterrevolution during the presidency of Ronald Reagan that was embraced by both capitalist parties.

Throughout these decades Bill based himself above all on the struggle for Marxism. His activity in the working class was always guided by serious concern for the theoretical and historical foundations of revolutionary practice. He fought to clarify the decisive political issues facing the working class, and on this basis to win and train a leadership for the struggles ahead.

This year also marks 25 years since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The last quarter-century has vindicated the struggle to which Bill dedicated his life. The warnings by the Trotskyist movement that Stalinism would lead to the restoration of capitalism unless it was overthrown by the working class in a political revolution were proven correct.

Bill did not live to see the final collapse of Stalinism and its catastrophic aftermath after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991. He took ill in early 1991 and died six months after his cancer diagnosis. He was survived by his wife Jean, who died six years later, and by his three children, Cynthia, Leo and Steve, as well as grandchildren. His children were all members or supporters of the movement to which their parents had devoted their lives. Leo Brust, a

member of the Workers League, died suddenly of cardiac arrest in 1994, at the age of 40.

A memorial meeting was held for Comrade Bill Brust in Minneapolis on October 27, 1991, about six weeks after his death. Posted separately is the speech given by David North at this memorial meeting 25 years ago. It is included in *Defending Principles: The Political Legacy of Bill Brust*, a compilation of tributes as well as writings by Bill spanning the years of his activity in the Workers League.

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