

Twenty-five years since the death of Ed Winn

By Fred Mazelis
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This week marks 25 years since the death of Ed Winn, a longtime member of the Workers League, forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party in the US, and twice the Workers League's presidential candidate. This obituary, commemorating Ed Winn's life and work, appeared in the International Workers Bulletin, a forerunner of the World Socialist Web Site. It has been slightly edited for republication.

Ed Winn, a leader of the Workers League and the party's candidate for US President in 1984 and 1988, died in Wilmington, North Carolina on June 20. He was 58 years old.

Comrade Winn had suffered for some years from kidney disease and had been on a waiting list for a kidney transplant. However, his death from an apparent heart attack was sudden and unexpected. It is a great loss for the working class and the revolutionary movement.

For nearly two decades, Ed Winn was a member of the Workers League and a political supporter of the Fourth International. His history of struggle, as a transit worker in New York City and, above all, as a leader of the Trotskyist movement, is bound up with the great political issues of our time.

Ed was born on February 12, 1937 in Wilmington, North Carolina. His father, Richard, was a bricklayer, and his mother, Anna, a homemaker. His family, like millions of others, struggled to sustain itself during a period of mass unemployment and poverty.

The Jim Crow system of racial apartheid was firmly entrenched in North Carolina during his childhood. Ed's political awareness as he matured in the 1950s was shaped by the growing civil rights struggle. He recalled the threats from the police and white racists and the whole system of segregation: "the separate drinking fountains set up for white people, the separate public facilities that were set up by the racist laws of Southern states from Maryland, where I had relatives, all the way to Mississippi, where I visited and stayed for a while."

Ed was 18 years old when Emmett Till, a 14-year-old black youth, was beaten and lynched by the Ku Klux Klan in Sumner, Mississippi in the fall of 1955. Till, a Chicago youth who was visiting relatives, was slain for the "crime" of allegedly whistling at a white woman. His murderers were acquitted.

When Ed Winn arrived in New York City in 1958 he already knew a great deal about the struggle for equal rights. He soon found out about the struggles of workers on the job. He obtained work at a clothing store and became for a period a member of the clothing workers union. In late 1965 he was hired by the New York City Transit Authority, where he worked for the next 22 years.

Only a few months after becoming a transit worker, Ed joined thousands of others in a militant strike which shut down the System. The 1966 transit strike was among the bitter struggles, including those in auto, the mines and other sections of basic industry, which erupted as the post-World War II boom was coming to an end. Transport Workers Union President Mike Quill, the union's founder, was forced to call the walkout and defy the capitalist politicians and the courts. Quill, who suffered from a serious heart ailment, had a fatal heart attack after being jailed.

The strike ended in a victory for the transit workers, although the gains made in wages and benefits have since been largely destroyed by years of

concessionary contracts. Ed was elected as a shop steward at a car maintenance yard during his first year on the job.

Several years later, Ed joined an opposition caucus in Local 100, the Rank and File Committee, which was dominated by a black nationalist outlook. The Opposition challenged the right-wing union leadership on racial grounds, claiming that attacks on workers were the result of discrimination and arguing that the increasing number of black workers in the transit system made possible a change to "black leadership" of Local 100.

As Ed Winn later explained, "We did not understand the class issues that were involved, that the problems that were developing in work locations were problems affecting both black and white workers, that these were problems affecting the working class itself. Our narrow nationalist outlook prevented us from bringing black and white workers together in order to take up a common struggle against those, namely, the bankers and businessmen, who wanted to place the burden of the crisis in transit onto the backs of the workers."

The Rank and File Committee disintegrated in 1972. Ed, along with most of its other active supporters, turned away for a time from political and union activity.

In the mid-1970s, world capitalism was shaken by a series of economic and political convulsions. In the US, the Watergate crisis precipitated the resignation of Richard Nixon, which was followed by the defeat of the American war against Vietnam. In 1975 New York City teetered on the edge of bankruptcy, and a state Emergency Financial Control Board was established to tear up union contracts and force city workers to pay for the crisis.

Joining the Workers League

Ed was by now working as a bus maintainer at the East New York surface maintenance shop in Brooklyn. It was here that he came into contact with the Workers League. He heard about the party's campaign on behalf of Gary Tyler, a youth who had been framed up and imprisoned in Louisiana for a crime he did not commit.

Tom Henehan, a young leader of the Workers League and its youth movement, the Young Socialists, played the key role in recruiting Ed Winn into the Workers League.

Tom discussed the Workers League pamphlet *Black Nationalism and Marxist Theory* with Ed, arguing that the fundamental issue facing every section of workers was the class struggle and not struggles based on race. Tom also stressed the importance of taking up a fight inside the transit union against its pro-capitalist leadership and of fighting to build a labor party to establish a workers government.[1]

As a result of these discussions and his reading of the *Bulletin*, as the newspaper of the Workers League was then called, Ed joined the Workers League in early 1976.

He later said that "the very first work by Leon Trotsky that I read was *Marxism and the Trade Unions*, in which he dealt with the economic decay of capitalism and the necessity for transforming the trade unions into revolutionary organizations. This, in turn, meant replacing the reformist union leadership with a revolutionary leadership. At the same

time Trotsky warned that the trade unions could not replace the revolutionary party: that the revolutionary leadership could only come through the building of a party trained in the Marxist world outlook and a scientific perspective.”

One of the crucial political experiences through which Ed and other members of the Workers League passed came less than two years later, when Tom Henehan, then 26 years old, was shot and killed at a Young Socialists dance in support of Gary Tyler in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn.

Along with other members and supporters of the Workers League, Ed Winn responded strongly to this political murder, gathering the support of thousands of transit workers and others on petitions demanding an investigation of the killing and action to bring the assassins to trial. After more than three years, the two gunmen were arrested, tried, convicted and sentenced to maximum prison terms.

In December 1977, Ed Winn was elected to the executive board of TWU Local 100, representing more than 1,000 workers in the Surface Maintenance division of the union. He ran on a program calling for the building of a labor party and socialist policies. He was reelected in 1979.

During these years Ed developed as a Marxist fighter in the working class. When the transit workers struck once again in 1980, he was on the executive board and fought against the moves of the bureaucracy, then headed by John Lawe, to isolate and betray the strike.

Ed fought for transit workers to turn to the entire working class against the union-busting Democratic Mayor Ed Koch. Lawe’s other opponents on the Local 100 executive board, however, based themselves simply on trade union militancy and ignored the political issues in the struggle against the union bureaucracy. “They themselves refused to break from the capitalist Democratic Party and challenge the so-called right of a few billionaire bankers to dictate wage concessions, layoffs and cuts in social services,” Ed stated. “Therefore, they could offer no viable alternative to the capitulatory policy of the Lawe leadership.”

Candidate for president

The defeat of the transit workers in 1980 foreshadowed the betrayal of the PATCO air traffic controllers’ struggle one year later and the ensuing decade of betrayed and broken strikes. The next stage of Ed Winn’s activity as a transit worker and a leader of the Workers League was bound up with the struggle against these betrayals. In 1984 Ed applied for and was granted a leave of absence from his transit job in order to run as the presidential candidate of the Workers League in its first-ever national campaign.

This was a period of wholesale wage-cutting, concessions, plant closures and union-busting. The assault on the working class was carried out by both the Democratic and Republican parties. Jesse Jackson pursued his own campaign as a Democrat in order to keep workers tied to that big business party. Ed and his running mate Helen Halyard were placed on the ballot in six industrial states, and they received 14,363 votes. He spoke to thousands of workers in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Illinois and Minnesota.

In 1988, Ed was again the Workers League candidate for President, joined this time by Barry Porster as the vice-presidential candidate. The Workers League campaign exposed the deterioration in the social conditions of millions following eight years of the Reagan presidency and the huge transfer of wealth to the rich, as well as the crisis facing the labor movement.

The union-busting onslaught, aided and abetted by the AFL-CIO leadership itself, had deepened during the 1980s. The defeat of the Hormel meatpacking strike was followed by the frame-up of the four coal miners involved in the 1984-85 strike against A.T. Massey in Kentucky. During this period trade union membership continued to decline rapidly.

One of the high points of the 1988 campaign was Ed Winn’s

appearance before one thousand paperworkers and their supporters at a rally in Lock Haven, Pa., marking the first anniversary of the struggle against International Paper. In that speech, listened to intently by locked-out workers and strikers from several States, Winn analyzed the defeats suffered in the 1980s and explained their source.

“No one can claim,” he concluded, “that American workers did not want to fight the corporate union-busters or that they were too weak to defeat them. The weakness is not in the ranks of labor, but in the cowardice and treachery of the bureaucrats. With a revolutionary leadership, a leadership which fights for socialist policies, and a revolutionary strategy, the working class can defeat its enemies and open up a new road for society, throughout the United States and internationally. This is what I call upon you to do.”

In the 1988 campaign the Workers League placed its candidates on the ballot in eight states and the District of Columbia. Ed Winn received 18,662 votes.

Struggle against opportunism

The period between the 1984 and 1988 campaigns also witnessed a historic struggle against opportunism inside the Fourth International. The Workers League and its co-thinkers internationally defeated the opportunist leadership of the British Workers Revolutionary Party, which reacted to the protracted degeneration of Stalinism, Social Democracy and the trade union bureaucracy by abandoning the fight for revolutionary leadership. The struggle between the majority of the International Committee and the WRP leadership, which began in the early 1980s, culminated in a split in 1985-86.

In 1984, Ed had a chance to witness the degeneration of the WRP first-hand, when he visited Britain as the presidential candidate of the American Trotskyists. At a public meeting his hosts introduced him simply as a transit worker, omitting all mention of the Workers League election campaign. In fact, at this point the WRP was providing Jesse Jackson with favorable coverage in its press.

Ed retired from his transit job in order to devote himself fully to the 1988 election campaign and other political work. Soon after the campaign, however, he was diagnosed as suffering from polycystic kidney disease, a hereditary disorder leading to progressive loss of kidney function. He began receiving kidney dialysis treatments and prepared for an eventual transplant, which would enable him once again to lead a normal and active life.

During this period Ed continued to participate in political work to the best of his ability. He met with his fellow transit workers, spoke at public meetings of the Workers League, and wrote articles and columns for the *Bulletin* on the struggle in transit, as well as on other subjects.

In 1990 and 1991 New York City was the scene of several bitter struggles, including the Daily News and the Greyhound strikes. In November 1990, police, with the collaboration of Newspaper Guild union officials, arrested Ed on the Daily News picket line on a phony charge of disorderly conduct. A campaign by the Workers League forced the Guild to come to Ed’s defense, and the charges were dropped.

The fear which Ed Winn continued to evoke within the TWU bureaucracy, three years after his retirement, was demonstrated in March 1991, when Local 100 President Sonny Hall wrote Winn a hysterical and threatening letter in response to a column in the *Bulletin* which exposed Hall’s fraudulent claim to support the Daily News strikers. Hall wrote, “what you ... wanted was a Mass Strike, not to win wages, but to bring down the government.” In Winn’s reply, he wrote: “What’s so terrible about that? If that’s what it takes to defend the jobs and living standards of transit workers, then so be it!”

Ed was always proudest of his collaboration with his international comrades in the Trotskyist movement in Europe, Asia and Australia. In November 1991 he was able to travel as part of the US delegation to the

World Conference Against Imperialist War and Colonialism, held in Berlin, where he met with workers from many parts of the world and participated in its proceedings.

Comrade Winn moved back to Wilmington in 1993 after his father's death and remained on a waiting list for a kidney transplant. He continued to participate in the political life of the Workers League, meeting with other party members and discussing political developments.

Ed is survived by his three children, Ed Jr., Adrienne and Debbie, and by ten grandchildren. A funeral took place in Wilmington on June 25. The Workers League will soon announce the date for a memorial meeting to be held in New York City.

Anyone who knew Ed Winn would be willing to testify to his integrity and honesty. He was universally respected by his fellow workers, even those who disagreed with his political views, and by his neighbors in Brooklyn. A calm and dignified man, he would seethe with scarcely concealed emotion when fundamental questions of principle were at stake. He had an intellectual and moral impact on those who encountered him.

Ed's political legacy has to be set against the degeneration and collapse of the old leaderships of the working class all over the world.

He never wavered in his dedication to the struggles of workers, his confidence that a new period of revolutionary struggle was approaching, and his scientific conviction of the necessity for the socialist transformation of society. That is why so many workers will learn from and honor the example that he set.

[1] During this period, the Workers League fought for the building of a Labor Party, based on a socialist program, as the political form through which the American working class could establish its independence from capitalist politics. The bankruptcy of the nationalist program of the unions, and their degeneration into direct instruments of the corporate financial elite to police the working class, led the Workers League to conclude in 1995 that the Labor Party demand was no longer viable. For more information, see The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party—Part 11 .

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