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Reviews

A Memoir of Life in Struggle

- Reviews section -

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European Trotskyists, in recent writings about the movement, tend to give short shrift to Trotskyism in North America. (An example is *An Impatient Life* by the late French leader Daniel Bensaid.)

While the U.S. Socialist Workers Party has been covered in books published by the SWP before its degeneration, and more recently in my own political memoir about my time in the SWP from 1960 through 1988, the Canadian movement has not received the attention it deserves.

This book by Ernie Tate sheds light on an important decade of Canadian Trotskyism. It begins with Ernie being born into the Protestant working class in the British-controlled six counties of Northern Ireland. He had little formal education:

“I had left school before my fourteenth birthday, the legal age at that time for school leaving in Northern Ireland. Most of the young people in the area I grew up in Protestant working class Shankill Road terminated their formal education at that age, or earlier if they could. In the whole time I lived in Belfast, I had never known or met anyone who had gone to a secondary school, never mind university. My family was the poorest of the poor. There was a common joke around my neighborhood that had a lot of truth to it: 'If anyone around here paid their rent two weeks in a row, the police would be visiting to see where the money came from.'” (6)

He recounts how the Catholic working class was even worse off and suffered extreme oppression at the hands of the Protestants.

Ernie got his first job at 14. His experiences in various factory jobs over the next years taught him a lot about the workings of capitalism, although it would take being exposed to Marxism later that enabled him to understand it.

Some who come to Marxism but have never worked for capitalists find Marx's explanation of value, surplus value and exploitation difficult and abstract, but to Ernie it “clicked” and explained his concrete experience. In the atmosphere of religious bigotry, he also came to question religion.

Discovering Socialism

As a young worker, Ernie became a voracious reader. At age 20 he emigrated to Canada in 1955, at first in hopes of winning an athletic university scholarship based on his abilities as a runner.

“By the time I had arrived in Canada, even though I was looking to get myself involved in athletics, I considered myself an atheist and a communist, not truly understanding what these terms meant. But I knew enough to be aware that those in authority in our society hated the Soviet Union and Communists, and seemed afraid of them. If that was the case, I thought to myself, I was on the side of the Communists, more a form of iconoclasm on my part than anything else.” (12)

Early that summer he ran across the Toronto Labour Bookstore, which was the headquarters of the clandestine small Trotskyist group, run by Ross Dowson. “[T]his would be my first exposure to socialist ideas and the beginning of a

life-long commitment to radical politics I have never regretted.” (5)

I have taken time to rapidly go over this story because it has a lesson. Young thinking workers, even with limited formal education, can become radicalized, and be open to socialism once they come in contact with socialists.

This is true in general. One outstanding example was the young Farrell Dobbs, who was radicalized in the great 1934 Teamsters' strike and became a leader of it before he found out the initiators of the strike were seasoned Trotskyists, whom he soon joined.

One thing I hadn't been aware of before reading Tate's book, was that shortly before Ernie arrived in Canada there had been a split among Trotskyists there, part of the split in the Fourth International in 1953.

The group that Ernie joined was indeed small, a few tens concentrated in Toronto and Vancouver. It was also clandestine, having joined the Canadian Commonwealth Federation (CCF), a social democratic formation with some rural populist roots (particularly in western Canada — ultimately a forerunner of the New Democratic Party as discussed below — ed.).

The Trotskyists were underground, because they were in danger of being expelled by the CCF leadership if it discovered them. Nevertheless, the group was able to carry out political work through the CCF. The most open aspect of the operation was the Toronto Labour Bookstore, which also served as a meeting place for the group, which was called The Club.

Toward the end of 1955, a step forward was taken, when The Club became the Socialist Education League (SEL), which saw itself as part of the CCF, and began to publish a monthly journal, The Workers Vanguard, the same title as the paper put out in the 1930s by those expelled from the Stalinized Communist Party for “Trotskyism.”

During World War II, Canadian Trotskyists had been outlawed and forced underground. In the postwar labor upsurge that swept Canada as well as the United States, they were again able to emerge publicly as the Revolutionary Workers Party (RWP), which published Labour Challenge.

During the labor upsurge, the RWP made rapid gains in recruitment, and even scored some impressive election results for a small group, receiving 11% of the votes for Mayor of Toronto and then 17% the next year. But this growth was short lived, as the anti-communist witch-hunt and the postwar international capitalist economic boom took hold.

In this period of retreat, it was Ross Dowson who was the main leader and held the dwindling group together. The American SWP had helped train Ross Dowson as the editor, and so he became the SEL's de facto editor of The Workers Vanguard in 1955.

The SEL functioned almost as a branch of the American SWP, which was much more seasoned and professional, Ernie reports. The SWP also helped the SEL to develop a cadre of people educated in Marxism. A few Canadian comrades were invited to attend each year at no cost a four-month cadre school at the SWP-owned Mountain Spring Camp. Ernie attended one of these intensive sessions.

The Stalinist Breakup

One of the threads running through the book is the gradual emergence of more and more public activity by the SEL, in the CCF but also in other areas.

One of these was in the unions. Ernie has two chapters on this important work, especially in the Teamsters where the SEL, almost fortuitously at first, became part of a big Canadian Teamsters wildcat strike wave, and took on leadership positions together with other militants.

In 1961, the League for Socialist Action (LSA) superceded the SEL. After a major strike was lost in 1962 there was a period of lull, but by 1966, there was a renewed Teamster upsurge, and LSA members again came to the fore. Ernie outlines other arenas of outward work.

To back up a bit to 1956, that year saw a crisis in Communist Parties throughout the world. In the beginning of the year, Soviet Premier Khrushchev gave his famous speech on the crimes of Stalin, which rocked world Stalinism. About six months later came the Hungarian revolution, and the spectacle of Soviet tanks crushing this great worker-led uprising for socialist democracy.

These events led to a crisis in the Labour Progressive Party (LPP), as the Canadian CP was called then, a crisis "from which it would never recover," Ernie reports. This crisis of the LPP led many to leave the party and opened a process of regroupment in which the Trotskyists played a part.

One particularly interesting episode involved Ernie himself, combining this regroupment activity with work in the CCF. Ernie was assigned to a CCF local and became active in its Toronto area youth group, soon becoming its organizer, while another SEL member, Alan Harris, became chairman. (Alan, originally from England, would later return there "€" Caroline Lund and I worked with Alan and his companion Connie when we were assigned to be SWP representatives to the Fourth International twice, once in Brussels and later in Paris.)

Another major event occurred in July 1956, when Israel, Britain and France invaded Egypt over its nationalization of the Suez Canal. The SEL comrades in the CCF youth organized a protest rally, "and in true ecumenical spirit that ran counter to the anti-Communist mood of the adult [CCF] leadership, we invited the Young Communist League (YCL) to come along. Very surprised to get the invite, they were very pleased to participate."

The demonstration was a success, but then the CCF leadership expelled the Trotskyists because they "had allowed Communists to participate. But suddenly we were in touch with more CP youth than ever, an unexpected and positive consequence of getting kicked out of the CCF youth." (88, 89)

From CCF to NDP

A major discussion broke out in the unions in the late 1950s, which had previously endorsed the CCF, about the need to establish a "new party" in the wake of a decline of the CCF.

The debate came out into the open when the newly-formed Canadian Labour Congress (a product of the fusion of the industrial Congress of Labor and the craft Trades and Labour Congress, much like the U.S. fusion of the CIO and AFL) at its 1958 convention issued a call for a "new party."

This led to the birth in 1961 of the union-based New Democratic Party, signaling a beginning of a turn to the left from

the previous witch-hunt period. The NDP replaced the old CCF, and became another arena of work for the revolutionary socialists.

Ernie devotes a long chapter on the Canadian Trotskyists and the Cuban Revolution, which led to them taking the initiative with others in setting up the Canadian Fair Play for Cuba Committee (FPCC). LSA leader Verne Olson became its chair. Participation in this work would lead to growth of the LSA, as it coincided with the emergence of a worldwide youth radicalization.

Ernie details the initial skepticism of the Trotskyists about the Cuban revolution, dispelled as the revolution moved sharply in an anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist direction, as well as problems, including with Stalinists in Cuba. (At one point, they made a major blunder, which played into the Stalinists' hands. Joe Hansen, a leader of the U.S. SWP, made a comradely and pedagogical intervention into the matter, which helped the comrades correct their mistake. I'll leave it up to the book's readers to delve into this interesting affair.)

Party-Building Problems

Ernie goes into detail about cross-country trips that lasted many months, even six months, where a group of comrades would travel from Toronto to Vancouver, selling subscriptions and other literature, living hand-to-mouth from the proceeds of their sales. These excursions would cover over 4,000 miles round trip.

These trips were a project of Ross Dowson, the central leader of the group. He maintained that they were party-building enterprises. From Ernie's description, I can only conclude that they were failures in that regard. That they were repeated a number of times with little or no lasting results indicates a weakness in Dowson's concept of party building.

Dowson also maintained that they were useful in the cadre development of those members who undertook them. This reflected an ascetic streak in Ross. He himself lived very frugally, and seemed to think that hardship, which the comrades suffered a lot of on these trips, was "character building," which I find is nonsense.

Throughout the book, it seemed to me that there were other weaknesses. When confronted with political differences inside the groups, Ross sometimes appeared to make these personal, and even urged those who had differences to drop out of activity for a time.

In another chapter I found it interesting that Ernie in the late 1950s was "on loan" to the U.S. SWP in helping to found the Young Socialist Alliance. Much of this information was new to me, including his first-hand experience at a conference of the youth group of the "Shachtmanite" Independent Socialist League, the Young Socialist League (YSL), where it voted to follow the ISL into the Socialist Party.

Max Shachtman himself spoke at length at this gathering, although he was far from being a youth. A minority of the YSL rejected this move, and split. This minority would become part of the formation of the YSA.

There are some small errors in the book, which are not germane to its content. The second volume, which covers Ernie's years of work for the Fourth International, requires a discussion of its own. In the meantime I whole-heartedly recommend this first volume of Ernie's memoir.