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In Memoriam

Bill Onasch: The life of a Marxist in the American workers movement

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Bill Onasch, a long term socialist and trade unionist died peacefully, after a long battle with cancer, in Kansas City on July 8. The purpose of this article is to look at what made my close friend such a remarkable comrade. The easiest way to understand Bill is to borrow the concept of overlapping circles from Venn Diagrams in math. The first circle is the front trenches of the US labor movement: daily conflicts in the workplace, collective bargaining, strikes, and the inner life of the trade union movement. The second circle is Trotskyism: building revolutionary organizations with all of their ups and downs, vigorous participation in mass movements, theoretical debates, and the Fourth International. The third of our circles is the everyday life of an American worker in the 1950s and early 1960s: Lucky Strikes, baseball games, meatloaf and mashed potatoes, the local paper, and Perry Mason on TV.

Bill lived in the intersection of these three circles. This led to an extraordinary life. Bill was probably the only South Dakota full time union organizer to present reports on the Leninist approach to armed struggle in Latin America. He was probably the only diehard Kansas City Royals fan to have a debate with Pierre Rousset on the revolutionary approach to the 1986 Filipino election. Perhaps, the only early morning shift Missouri bus driver to give educationals on economic changes in Eastern Europe.

Bill and the labor movement

A teenage reading of *Arch of Triumph* by Erich Maria Remarque had awakened Bill's interest in social issues. Watching socialist candidates appear on TV during the 1956 and 1960 election campaigns created a sense of class struggle. Therefore, the union was a natural home when Bill went to work. Bill's most sustained union work was at the Litton Microwave plant in Minneapolis. In the 1970s and 80 she was both Shop Chairman and President of United Electrical Local 1139. I think that Bill saw this as the happiest and most successful of his many projects. It led to a long involvement with the UE. He participated in many regional and national UE meetings. He "followed the work" as the UE attempted to organize a runaway Litton's plant in South Dakota. It was completely fitting for Bill to link up again with UE stalwarts such as Bob Kingsley, Frank and Carl Rosen, and Ed Bruno in the Labor Party twenty years later.

Bill moved to Kansas City in the late 1980s. He found work as a bus driver and became Vice-President of ATU Local 1287. One of his tasks was organizing a broad public campaign against transit cutbacks.

In 1996 OCAW leader Tony Mazzocchi formed the Labor Party. Bill was involved in this process from the beginning. He organized a local chapter in Kansas City and became a prominent member nationally. Bill supported Mazzocchi and Mark Dudzic's approach of prioritizing winning support inside of unions over a rapid turn to election campaigns. The Labor Party was not able to overcome the unfavorable balance of class forces and lasted little more than a decade. Bill was a loyal member to the end.

It was during this time that Bill started his KCLabor website. It was originally conceived as the site of the Kansas City Labor Party. However, it quickly morphed into something much more ambitious. Very early each morning Bill would collect all the stories on unions and strikes from the newspapers on the internet. These would be posted along with at least weekly articles by Bill. The "Week in Review" would be Bill's insightful commentary on the news of the past week, in essence a substantial editorial.

Bill was early in recognizing the centrality of environmental issues for the labor and socialist movements. He wrote extensively on the need for "class and climate justice" and developed Tony Mazzocchi's concept of a just transition for workers whose jobs would have to be changed for environmental reasons.

Bill and Revolutionary Marxism

Early in the 1960s, Bill first joined the Young Socialist Alliance and then moved to Chicago to join the adult Socialist Workers Party. On a humorous footnote, the SWP was not the only party that Bill reached out to for information. One of the other parties he wrote to was the DeLeonist Socialist Labor Party. This was the only group that actually had a member in Kansas City at the time. The local comrade duly went to visit Bill. However, Mrs. Onasch was not about to let a strange man visit with her teenage son. A compromise was eventually reached in which the SLP recruiter was allowed to explain the role of "socialist industrial unions" from outside a locked screen door!

Bill spent the next twenty years as a working member of the SWP in the Midwest. This obviously involved activity in the movement against the Vietnam war and the myriad aspects of building a socialist organization. He took to the theory and outlook of the SWP and devoured the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, and Luxemburg. He felt confident enough in his ideas to even challenge Farrell Dobbs on Teamster perspectives at one point.

Bill was to need this theoretical compass and independent perspective in the 1980s. The SWP central leadership went through a political volte-face at this time. They decided that the Cuban Communist Party and its allies were the potential leadership of the world revolution. Therefore, our task was to get as close as possible to this current. Anything that obstructed this rapprochement, such as Trotskyism and the Fourth International, had to be jettisoned. Bill joined the opposition inside the SWP to this course. The leadership rapidly decided that this opposition was also on the jettisoning list. So, Bill and the rest of us were expelled in January 1984.

This began one of the most politically eventful periods in his life. The opposition was unable to agree on a post-SWP course and quickly splintered. Bill supported the Fourth Internationalist Tendency of George Breitman and Frank Lovell. He quickly rose to national leadership. In 1986, he moved to New York where he worked as the full time national organizer of the FIT. This was new terrain to him. It was quite different than work in the union movement or a local SWP branch. However, I think that Bill politically flourished during this period.

Bill began to write during this time. He was a frequent contributor to the FIT's *Bulletin in Defense of Marxism*. His articles ranged from analyses of bourgeois politics in this country to debates in the revolutionary movement. They are online now and deserve a re-reading. This was also the time when Bill played an active role in the life of the Fourth International, travelling to Mexico and Europe. In particular, he spent several months in 1988 in Amsterdam at the cadre school of the Fourth International.

Bill did well in New York as a Marxist writer and leader of the FIT. However, New York City was not Bill's kind of town and he was happy to return to Kansas City in 1990. Here, Bill focused on the trade union movement. He continued to try to build branches of the different wings of the Trotskyist diaspora: the FIT, Solidarity and finally Socialist Action. However, none of his efforts were able to conquer the difficulties of the period and overcome the general crisis of the revolutionary left.

Bill and daily life

Bill glorified in his persona of an American worker of the 1950s and 60s. Always wearing a cap, smoking Lucky Strikes or Camels, an avid baseball fan, a lover of Kansas City barbecue, a regular watcher of Star Trek, Major Crimes, and NCIS, a systematic reader of the local paper, Bill was about as far away from the stereotype of a far left activist as one could be. I think he relished this aspect of his personality. For decades, he would answer the simple question, "How are you" with the refrain, "As well as can be expected for a man of my age and condition."

Behind all the pretending not to know the difference between a hash tag and a hash brown, I think Bill was sending comrades the message not to be pretentious and pretend to be more than you are. I also think that he was stressing the need to breakout of ingrown left circles and pay attention to the real workers movement.

Conclusion

Since 1984, I have spent literally thousands of hours discussing politics with Bill Onasch. I learned many things in those conversations. Four of them may be particularly relevant for revolutionary socialists today.

One, always keep your eyes on the real workers movement. The working class is the force that is going to change society. If we're going to make a contribution, we have to understand the labor movement, warts and all. Understanding the class struggle accurately is one of our main tasks.

Two, we have to work on really analyzing the US political scene. No one will, or should, take us seriously unless we have a serious understanding of the economic situation, the state of bourgeois politics, and the overall social situation.

Three, understanding Marxist theory is an indispensable first step. But the real challenge is to intelligently apply it in new and unforeseen situations. Repetition and analogy are no substitutes for concrete analysis.

Four, revolutionary socialists are in tiny organizations facing a vast task of changing the world. We are obviously in for a very long haul. A calm patient approach is the only way to survive. Bill lived Trotsky's adage that all revolutionaries need a sense of proportion and a sense of humor.

In conclusion, here are some of the plans that Bill's wife Mary and his friends have made.

*Condolence letters should be sent to Mary Erio at billonasch@yahoo.com

*Donations in Bill's honor should be made to the United Electrical workers union.

The UE's address is:

4 Smithfield Street, Floor 9, Pittsburgh, PA 15222-2226

Checks should be made payable to : UER&MWA

*There will be an online memorial meeting in the fall. Jeff Mackler of Socialist Action has kindly agreed to help organize this.

Many socialist obituaries end with the words of the great labor anthem Joe Hill.

From San Diego up to Maine,
In every mine and mill -
Where working men defend their rights
It's there you'll find Joe Hill.
It's there you'll find Joe Hill.

It's there you'll find Bill Onasch. You might also find him wherever people drink cans of Pepsi, eat Bryant's barbecue, and smoke Lucky Strikes.

July 20, 2021

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PS:

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