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Obituary

“Joanna was always at the helm of the struggle”

- Features - In Memoriam - Obituaries and appreciations -

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Joanna Misnik (1942-2025) was a long time leading member of the Fourth Internationalists in the USA. We are publishing here the first tributes received.



Women power at an IC meeting, from left Susan Caldwell, Penelope Duggan, Joanna Misnik, Terry Conway.

With deep sadness I have to report that Joanna Misnik, a founder and longtime leader of our organization, died last night (September 3) in Chicago.

A few weeks ago Joanna suffered a massive stroke and deep brain aneurysm. It was evident from the outset that she wouldn't regain consciousness and there was no hope of recovery. She was in hospice care since last weekend, with comrades from the Chicago branch taking turns by her bedside. Memorial arrangements will be forthcoming.

I am not the best person to write in any detail about Joanna's life and contributions, as others knew her longer during her years of work for the Fourth International in Europe and activism in the Socialist Workers Party. Briefly, I first met Joanna in 1985 in the early stage of the regroupment process that led to the formation of Solidarity. She was committed to that project, hoping that there would be opportunities to expand it further. Joanna, like many comrades within (and beyond) our currents, had abandoned the "party-in-miniature" conceptions of renewing the revolutionary socialist movement that had energized, and debilitated, many efforts in the 1970s and '80s U.S. left.

Joanna was always a thinker and movement-builder, particularly when it came to antiwar organizing (as in the 1990=91 Gulf War and 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq). She was well acquainted with the works of Trotsky and other Marxist thinkers, especially in the FI, but never an uncritical follower. She paid close attention to, and was actively involved in, the labor movement following her years of work in our national office. In recent years she experienced health challenges and deteriorating eyesight but continued to be politically astute.

There's a lot more to be said about Joanna, but it should be left to other comrades. She will be remembered at our coming national convention, and her loss will be felt as we move forward.

David Finkel 4 September 2025

The death of Joanna Misnik, a long-time comrade who suffered a stroke at age 82 on September 3, stirs a complicated mix of emotions. Something about Joanna's character was indelible, with no possibility of a

successor”an arrangement of notes that will never be played again.

On the one hand, I was struck at our first meeting (late 1970s, in Paris) by her gift of sharp political insight, a magisterial conceptual grasp miles above my own. She also had a well-developed sense of the ridiculous, somewhat more comparable.

An irresistible source of wit and immensely sociable, Joanna may also have been one of the last and most attractive representatives of a certain type of 1960s revolutionary Marxist: The type who gave no forethought to pursuit of a personal career but could function effectively for decades, playing a variety of roles, in a Left organization.

Joanna moved among many cities (Cleveland, New York, Detroit, Chicago) and carried out numerous political tasks, including attendance at international gatherings in Western Europe. I fear that they don't make life-long socialist activists of this sort anymore—ones not afraid of rootlessness and uncertainty, paradoxes and mysteries.

Joanna wasn't perfect. Razor sharp and unflappable, she could seem to be a complicated and often inscrutable person, quite capable of exasperating her friends. In discussion her political points sometimes landed like quick jabs and she could exhibit an alpha dog streak; a socialist-feminist feistiness particularly threatening to certain male comrades.

She also could be brusque—and give colorful advice that was not always welcome. (Such as, “Alan, you can put that draft political document where the sun don't shine.”) She had the habit of unexpected candor, and she wasn't bashful about ribbing friends, often letting fly with a well-aimed zinger. Still, year after year, Joanna was always at the helm of the struggle.

As we now arrive “el fin del camino” for the '68 generation, one increasingly feels as if alone in an empty room surrounded by ghosts. But Joanna's shade is among the more comforting because it resonates with her winning effervescence and vivacity, unstoppable intelligence, and a fierce honesty. The Joanna I remember, mostly from her visits to Ann Arbor for political events, was never satisfied with rote answers, predetermined conclusions, or received wisdom. She always insisted on looking at the world anew and facing reality as it is, not as we wish it to be.

Characteristically self-questioning, she had a rare capacity for blending charm and wit with self-discipline, unafraid to reverse herself when predictions didn't pan out. But the end goal was for creative ways to intervene in the present without shirking the complexities of our constantly changing political landscape.

Alan Wald, 6 September 2025

I met Joanna in the late 1970s. I loved her calmness and caustic humour. We almost always chose her to chair the meetings of the leadership bodies of the Fourth International. When passions ran high and shouting began, she would calmly say: I am used to dealing with poor young people in New York, so either calm down or you will find out that with my experience, none of you impress me, so be quiet and let the meeting continue. We all obeyed Joanna, not only because we did not want her to treat us like young delinquents from the Bronx, but because we loved and respected her very much. I have no doubt that the earth will be light upon her.

Sergio Rodríguez, 7 September 2025

To the Solidarity Convention 13 September 2025

Dear Comrades

On behalf of the whole of the Fourth International we wish to transmit our condolences and solidarity to Joanna's family, and to all of many friends and comrades. But we would also like to express our own deep sense of loss and grief.

Joanna Misnik had been closely associated with the International for over forty years, since her early days in the international centre in Brussels and Paris. Her role there was officially a technical one, but she nevertheless impressed comrades, such as Ernest Mandel, Livio Maitan and many others, then as always, with her political sharpness, as well as her warmth and inimitable charm.

After her return to the US, she navigated the period of the expulsion from the SWP, the attempts to form a new group until she was able to achieve the fusion of the three groups that formed Solidarity in 1986. This was an important, ground-breaking experience for the Fourth International as the first successful initiative that foresaw the orientation we adopted at our 14th World Congress in 1995: that of building new parties, on a programme and from traditions broader than those of the Fourth International, while retaining a clear militant and anticapitalist programme and a horizon of a decisive break with capitalism and all of its economic, social and political exploitation and oppression.

For the next three decades Joanna made an invaluable contribution to the discussions of the Fourth International leadership. Understanding the political situation in the USA is obviously of crucial importance for internationalist revolutionaries, given the role of the USA on the world stage. Joanna was able to bring that to us in an open and non-dogmatic way, as she was when we discussed the role of our International. It is fitting that we were finally able to welcome Solidarity as the full Fourth International section in the US before she died.

Joanna was an unforgettable character for all the comrades that met her. When comrades learnt of her death, messages came in from around the world - from the Philippines, Pakistan, Brazil Mexico, many countries in Europe, remembering and appreciating her for her political and personal qualities. One comrade focused on a particular talent of Joanna's. He said:

“We almost always chose her to chair the meetings of the leadership bodies of the Fourth International. When passions ran high and shouting began, she would calmly say: ‘I am used to dealing with poor young people in New York, so either calm down or you will find out that with my experience, none of you impress me, so be quiet and let the meeting continue.’ We all obeyed Joanna, not only because we did not want her to treat us like young delinquents from the Bronx, but because we loved and respected her very much.”

We loved, respected and will miss her.

Once again on behalf of the Bureau and the International, our solidarity and condolences to you all. We hope you have a successful convention.

Long live the memory of Joanna,

Long live the Fourth International.

Paris, 11 September 2025

PS:

“Joanna was always at the helm of the struggle”

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