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Obituary

“One of the indispensable ones ”

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Mick Gosling 26 September 1952 - 7 April 2021

The driving force of Mick Gosling's life was the defence of working people's rights and a commitment to socialism to achieve that.

Mick (James) Gosling grew up in Stevenage, in a left-leaning working-class family - his father had been involved in Michael Foot's 1945 election campaign in Plymouth. Mick himself joined the LPYS at fourteen.

In 1970 he went to Kent University in the heady days of student radicalization when Kent was one of the hotspots, “Oxford, Essex, Kent unite, one struggle, one fight” is a fondly-remembered slogan. He soon joined the International Marxist Group. Friend and comrade Dave Wimhurst remembers “he was completely tireless in his efforts to support the battles of the day. This was the era of Apartheid, Troops Out of Ireland, the National Front, the Vietnam War, Pinochet's dictatorship, the Miners' Strikes, along with the eternal struggles against Racism, for Women's Rights, Gay Liberation, and, locally, a couple of University occupations to help organize and maintain.” Tony Graham adds: “I can see him now spontaneously responding to the day's events, tapping away on a roneoed sheet for mass distribution late at night cultivating an active way forward in simple, crisp, clear language.”

For Jean-Claude Bibi from Mauritius, “Mick was one of those who convinced me to join the International Marxist Group at Kent University in early 1972. His [...] support for the independence of Angola, Mozambique, Namibia were part of his permanent commitment to struggle against social injustice and imperialism.”

Mick was particularly committed to supporting workers' struggles and building the “workers-students alliance” as we called it. This meant not only the 1972 sit-in in support of striking catering workers at the university but the local miners. Davy Jones recalls “While some of us curled up in our beds, Mick was up at the crack of dawn in a minibus headed for the picket line at Betteshanger Colliery. His consistency and dedication were second to none.”

In 1972 he took out a year out of university and went to the North-East as an IMG organizer. There too he threw himself into local struggles. One was in defence of an IMG member, a lecturer at a local college who was victimized for supporting a students' occupation over grants. Liz Lawrence reminds us “He kept his job as a result of a successful student and trade union mobilization.” [1] Just before returning to Kent, Dave Carter remembers, Mick organized a picket at Wallsend shipyard following the coup in Chile as two Chilean warships were being refitted there. He wrote a front page article for the IMG paper under the name Chris Balfour. (Red Weekly 21 September 1973)

Mick continued with his frenetic level of activity in his final year. Tony Graham remembers “Just before his finals, we were in occupation over the university's badly-handled dismissal of a CP student. The CP hadn't wanted to defend him (!) but we did anyway and won. Immediately after our short victorious campaign, a day or so before his finals, Mick disappeared into his study to plough through his revision for a few days and nights. He won a First which, given his profound commitment to the struggle, seemed to come from nowhere.” A probably apocryphal story went the rounds that Mick should have had a viva (oral exam) to confirm his First, but that David McLellan (the well-known academic Marxist) did not want to face Mick, known for keeping up cogent and informed arguments for hours, and gave it to him anyway.

The possibilities opened up by that degree – using it to make a career or achieving bourgeois honour – did not matter

to Mick. Instead, he used his brilliance and talents for the causes he believed in.

For several years after leaving Kent he put his one of his talents to good use on the IMG paper *Red Weekly* (replaced by *Socialist Challenge* in June 1977). His colleagues and comrades on the paper remember him as “an excellent writer, and a great member of the team at a time when we were often working late into the night to get everything pasted up ready to go to the printers (talk about old technology!),” (Martin Meteyard). Geoff Bell continues, “Those were good, optimistic days and sharing them with Mick helped make them more so. He was both a good person and a fine writer, and that ability should not be forgotten, nor that he used it for the greater good.”

One of his major articles as the campaign for the referendum on Common Market membership hotted up was the centre spread “A Most Uncommon Market” in the 30 January 1975 issue. Another was a detailed briefing on the car industry in the wake of the Ryder report in 1975. (*Red Weekly*, 18 September 1975). In October 1977 he co-authored the *Socialist Challenge* pamphlet “The Battle for Grunwick” with Geoff Bell, Tessa van Gelderen and Jonathan Silberman. [2]

Of course, Mick did more than write, he was also a talented organizer. In 1977 he worked with Jeremy Corbyn, Bernie Grant and Phil Marfleet to build the Stop the NF demonstration in Wood Green. Jeremy Corbyn recalls “Mick was a fantastic anti-racist campaigner. He spent his life opposing racism in any form!”

In the 1978 council elections with Mick Sullivan, he stood as a Socialist Unity candidate in North Islington to defend the rights of the local council tenants who were being ignored by the then right-wing local Labour Party.

However, Mick wanted, as he would have said, to “get stuck in” directly to the class struggle. So it was by political choice that he got a job at the Fords factory in Dagenham in 1978. He was an active union member, shop steward and finally chair of the TGWU Ford, Paint Trim and Assembly Branch I/1107, the largest union branch in Ford and one of the largest TGWU branches in Britain.

Ten years later, with neoliberalism in full force and restructuring underway, Ford made a determined effort to get rid of him. They charged that he had chaired a branch meeting with Bernadette McAliskey during work time, despite attestations he was at work either side of the lunch break during which it was held, and that he had sanctioned unconstitutional stoppages and walk outs at times he was not even present on the factory floor. So determined was management to get rid of him that they mailed a four page document to all the workers in the plant repeating their disproved allegations – and that he had hidden the fact he had a university degree – and threatening that the strike action in defence of Mick proposed by the union would lose workers money and put the future of the factory in danger. Thus, despite international solidarity from Ford workers as far afield as Spain and Brazil, Mick’s sacking was confirmed in 1989. [3]

For the next couple of years Mick put his writing and organizing skills to good use for the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom, building up the trade-union contacts that were essential to its work.

Kathy Lowe remembers him as “one of the first national organizers of the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom (CPBF).” At the height of the 1984-85 miners’ strike the *Daily Mirror* claimed NUM president Arthur Scargill had paid for his mortgage with money donated by Libya. This report was also to go out on the “Cook Report” on Central TV, synchronized to go out with the *Mirror* “exclusive”.

The CPBF representative told Mick’s funeral, “Mick was CPBF national organizer at the time and Granville [Williams] remembers at that year’s TUC in Blackpool Mick organized a petition in support of Arthur Scargill. It wasn’t all that popular with some trade unionists - it was the sort of dirt they wanted to believe - but he remembers a packed fringe

meeting which Mick organized.” Another major issue for CPBF in Mick's time as organizer was gagging orders on the British press over the North of Ireland, for which Mick was warmly welcomed by Sinn Fein during a visit to Ireland some years later.

Although Mick moved on to work for Hackney Council, he remained an active member of the CPBF National Council and was its treasurer from 2007 to 2012.

As Hackney Press Officer throughout the 1990s he is remembered by colleagues as having dynamized the whole left-leaning communications operation – starting the magazine Hackney Today – before being victimized again when the council was taken over by the right wing: “Because, with a rabid slash and burn chief executive running out of control as the politicians fell apart, they couldn't have ‘lefties in the press office.’” [4] One of the things he did while there was to produce a dossier to expose the racist witch-hunt of workers from West African backgrounds at Hackney Council and how hundreds were targeted by the Home Office immigration department.

While at Hackney he still followed what was happening with Ford. The NUJ obituary remembers that much later “Mick was incensed by the treatment of workers at manufacturing plants divested by Ford. More than 560 jobs were lost at Visteon's plants in Enfield, Belfast and Basildon in Essex, with staff being given less than an hour's notice. Mick joined Visteon workers when they were protesting outside Ford's plants, handing out leaflets to Ford workers on their way to work and asking them for their support.”

In 2009 he met a delegation of Ford workers from France fighting to keep their jobs, led by Philippe Poutou, later to become nationally known as a presidential candidate and national spokesperson for the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste.

After his victimization at Hackney Mick stayed in local government press and communications work for several years, working for the London Borough of Southwark.

The experience gained as a trade-union organizer in Fords were put to good use throughout the rest of Mick's life. As CPBF former secretary Jonathon Hardy put it “Mick was brilliant at radiating energy and encouraging everyone to keep going with the same political passion he always showed. He carried all this with an immense amount of humour, generosity and friendship. Something in that experience of organizing Ford workers in Dagenham, encouraging, persuading, never posturing or puritanical, was a fantastic model for campaigning and political activism and was there in all his work in the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom, in Hackney Press Office, in the National Union of Journalists and beyond.”

As a local council press officer Mick was a member of both the NUJ and Unison and was active in both. His NUJ branch was London Press and PR - he was branch chair for many years and delegate to NUJ conference a number of times.

In 2007 he proposed a motion to NUJ conference calling on it to “condemn the savage, pre-planned attack on Lebanon” [in 2006] and the “slaughter of civilians in Gaza” over the last few years to boycott Israel. This was adopted after two recounts before being shelved by the national leadership after protests led notably by BBC journalists. [5]

Although Mick ceased membership in a revolutionary organization he never stopped fighting injustice and racism in all their forms, even in his last years when he suffered from debilitating ill health brought on by his unfortunately life-long alcoholism.

Living in Hackney since 1983 he was involved in many local movements, such as Hackney Stand Up to Racism and Fascism and Hackney People's Assembly Against Austerity as well as different attempts to build a left-wing unitary alternatives such as Respect or the Socialist Alliance, rejecting sectarianism.

In 2011 at the founding of the Hackney Alliance to Defend Public Services he was elected treasurer, as he was when, with others, he reformed Hackney Trades Council in that same period. This was a frequent role as Mick was in the words of his wife Kathryn Johnson “excellent with money” or of Alan Gibson “magnificently trustworthy and great at getting money in”.

In 2015, like many other longtime socialist activists, he joined the Labour Party. As Dave Kellaway writes: “While having no illusions in the Corbyn project he was fully behind it from the beginning, seeing it as a big opportunity for socialists. Happily, he lived to see the left consolidate its leadership of his local Labour Party.

“More recently I remember him in his wheelchair, supported by his wife Kathryn Johnson, at Hackney Stand Up to Racism and Fascism meetings or making sure he still had his say at the Hackney North and Stoke Newington General Committee.”

His final years were spent as an officer – treasurer again – of Hackney Trades Council and as a leading member of the Hackney North and Stoke Newington Labour Party. In the February 2020 meeting he stepped down as auditor for the Hackney Unison branch, of which he had remained a retired member.

In the last period of his life, Mick's severe ill-health restricted his life more and more, but his ever active intelligence pushed him to maintain his interest and involvement as far as possible, alongside Kathryn and with her unflinching support. As Dave Kellaway noted “The last time I saw him I could still see his brain working at a hundred miles an hour despite his weakened body preventing him from expressing himself with the old fluency. He was as interested as ever in news of the movement here and internationally.”

The many, many tributes to Mick all underline the way in which he encouraged and enthused others by his own dynamism, his sharp intelligence, his eloquence in speech and writing. His interests were wide-ranging: history, literature, politics ... and football – he was a Spurs fan. He could, and often did, talk about each of them for many hours. He was a fascinating, entertaining companion. Yet, as Kathryn underlined at his funeral, his alcoholism was obviously a way of dealing with an inner pain and suffering; but the other way he expressed it was in that lifelong fight for social justice in all its forms.

Mick was, to use the words of Bertolt Brecht, one of the indispensable ones because he struggled all his life. [6]

People cited from Facebook comments, tributes at Mick's funeral or personal correspondence with the author who knew Mick since they were both students at Kent.

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[1] Mother Grumble, 12 May 1973 [“Victory Against Victimisation”](#).

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[2] The Grunwick dispute was a British industrial dispute involving trade union recognition at the Grunwick Film Processing Laboratories in Chapter Road, Dollis Hill in the London suburb of Willesden, that led to a two-year strike between 1976 and 1978.

[3] *The Militant*, 10 March 1989, *Hackney Union News*, May 1989.

[4] Tash Shifrin [“Mick Gosling – always a socialist”](#).

[5] *Press Gazette*, 7 June 2007 [“Broadcasters call to end NUJ Israel boycott”](#).

[6] “In praise of Fighters”, song from the play “The Mother”, 1930.