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Book Review:

# Revolutionary Activism in the 1950s & 60s: A Memoir by Ernest Tate

- Reviews section -

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**European Trotskyists writing recently about this movement tend to give short shrift to Trotskyism in North America, in the US and Canada. An example is *An Impatient Life* by French leader Daniel Bensaid, who died this year.**

While the US 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, as I always knew him, sheds light on an important decade of Canadian Trotskyism. And, since it has been published in Britain, perhaps interested persons on “the continent” as the rest of Europe is known popularly on the tight little island of England will take note.

## Belfast

The book begins with Ernie being born into the Protestant working class in the British-controlled six counties of North Ireland. He had little 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 – 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 in two weeks in a row, the police would be visiting to see where the money came from.”

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

He got his first job at 14. His experiences in various factory jobs in 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’ 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, Ernie also came to question religion.

## Canada

As a young worker, he became a voracious reader. When he was 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.

Early that summer he ran across the Toronto Labour Bookstore, run by Ross Dowson, which was the headquarters of the clandestine small Trotskyist group.

[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.

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 radicalised, 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 radicalised in the great 1934 Teamsters' strike, and became a leader of it before he found out the initiators of the strike were seasoned communists, Trotskyists, whom he soon joined.

## â€˜The Club'

One thing I hadn't been aware of that I learned from the book was that shortly before Ernie arrived in Canada there had been a split among Trotskyists there. This was part of a split in the Fourth International in 1953 that Michel Pablo had engineered, resulting in a major split in the US Socialist Workers Party, and in France, Britain and elsewhere.

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. The Trotskyists were underground, because they were in danger of being expelled by the CCF leadership if it discovered them, although 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 when closed 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. It 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 Stalinised Communist Party for "Trotskyism". During WWII, the Trotskyists were outlawed and had to go underground. In the post-war labour upsurge that swept Canada as well as the US, they were again able to emerge publicly as the Revolutionary Workers Party (RWP), which published *Labour Challenge*.

The US SWP had helped train Ross Dowson as the editor, and so he became the de facto editor of *The Workers Vanguard* in 1955 as he was the only one qualified.

During the labour upsurge, the RWP made rapid gains in recruitment, and even scored some impressive election results for a small group, receiving 11 per cent of the votes for mayor of Toronto and then 17 per cent the next year. But this growth was short lived, as the anti-communist witch-hunt and the post-war 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 SEL functioned almost as a branch of the US SWP, which was much more seasoned and professional than the SEL, Ernie reports. The SWP also helped the SEL to develop a cadre of people educated in Marxism. One aspect of this was a few Canadian comrades were invited to attend a four-month cadre school the SWP had set up at a camp the SWP owned, called Mountain Spring Camp. Ernie attended one of these intensive sessions.

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, and Ernie has two chapters on this important work, especially in the Teamsters, where the SEL became, almost fortuitously at first, part of a big Canadian Teamsters wildcat strike wave, and took on leadership positions together with other militants. After a major strike was lost in 1962, there was a period of lull, but by 1966, some time after the SEL changed its name to League for Socialist Action (LSA), there was a renewed Teamster upsurge, where the LSA members again came to the fore. As a result the LSA attracted Teamster militants in this period.

## Post-Stalin crisis in Canadian CP

There were other arenas of outward work that Ernie outlines. To back up a bit to 1956, this year saw a crisis in the Stalinist Communist parties throughout the world and in Canada. In the beginning of the year, Soviet Premier Nikita 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.

The SEL intervened in this crisis of the LPP, which led many to leave and opened a process of regroupment the Trotskyists were part of. One particularly interesting episode involved Ernie himself, that combined this work with work in the CCF. Ernie was assigned to a CCF local, and became active in its youth group, and soon became its organiser, while another SEL member, Alan Harris, became chairperson.

(Alan was originally from England, and 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.)

There was another major event in 1956, in July, when Israel, Britain and France invaded Egypt over its nationalisation of the Suez Canal. The SEL comrades in the CCF youth organised 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.”

Another big event that the SEL participated in was a major discussion that broke out in the unions in the late 1950s, which had endorsed the CCF, about the need to establish a “new party” in the wake of a decline of the CCF. The debate broke 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 fusion in the US of the CIO and AFL) at its convention in 1958 issued a call for a “new party”. This resulted in 1961 in the birth of the union-based New Democratic Party, signalling 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.

## Cuba solidarity

Ernie devotes a long chapter on the Canadian Trotskyists and the Cuban Revolution, which led to the SEL taking the initiative with others in setting up the Canadian Fair Play for Cuba Committee (FPCC). SEL leader Verne Olson became its chair. The Canadian FPCC lasted longer than the US committee of the same name for various reasons, almost a decade in fact. Participation in this work would lead to growth of the SEL and then LSA, as it coincided with the emergence of a worldwide youth radicalisation.

Ernie details the initial scepticism of the SEL 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 the same time, they met with sympathy from many of the non-Stalinists among the Cuban leadership and people.

At one point, they made a major blunder, which played into the Stalinists hands. Joe Hansen, a leader of the US 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.

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.

Canada is quite long, going from the Atlantic to the Pacific oceans, but is not very wide in relation to population. These trips would cover some 2000 miles. I found these chapters interesting from the point of view of learning about Canada. I have only been to Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal. I was also interested in the fact that there were some individual sympathisers of the SEL scattered across this vast distance.

## Ross Dowson

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 Ross' 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 of Ross' approach. When confronted with political differences inside the groups, he sometimes appeared to make these personal, and even urged those who had differences to drop out of activity for a time.

Another chapter I found interesting is that Ernie in the late 1950s was "on loan" to the US 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 Independent Socialist League, followers of former SWP leader Max Schachtman, where it voted to follow the ISL into the social democracy. Shachtman himself spoke at length at this gathering, although he was far from being a youth. A minority 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 should have been caught in more careful editing [\[1\]](#). One was the claim that the First International was formed by Marx and Engels in 1848. It was formed at the initiative of British trade unionists in the 1860s – and Marx, who was living there in exile, became a leader of it.

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The SWP's Mountain Spring Camp was in New Jersey, not Pennsylvania. Ernie also gets the names of youth groups wrong in his discussion of the formation of the YSA. The youth group of the ISL was the Young Socialist League (YSL), not the Young Peoples Socialist League (YPSL), which was the youth group of the social-democratic Socialist Party – Social Democratic Federation. The majority of the YSL joined the YPSL after its convention.

Another is a garbled account of the US Progressive Labor Party, which Ernie says emerged in the 1950s as part of the regroupment process in the US, but which in reality was a Maoist formation that developed after the Sino-Soviet split. It appears that Ernie confused the Progressive Labor Party with the Canadian Labour Progressive Party. But these errors and a few others are not germane to the content of the book.

I whole-heartedly recommend this first volume of Ernie's memoir, and look forward to the second.

*To order either or both volumes of Revolutionary Activism in the 1950s & 60s: A Memoir by Ernest Tate contact [bookorders@socialistresistance.org](mailto:bookorders@socialistresistance.org) and state which volume(s) you wish to order and which country you need them dispatched to.*

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[1] This review was written in relation to the first edition of Volume 1 - these and other errors have been corrected in the second edition which is listed above - Ed