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Obituary

Berta Langston (1922-2010)

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BERTA LANGSTON (1922-2010), a founder and member of Solidarity, died of lung cancer at age 84 in Norwalk, Connecticut on June 23. Born Berta Green on the Lower East Side of New York City, she was one of four sisters. She joined the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in the mid-1940s and throughout nearly four decades of activity she was widely esteemed on the Left as one of the party's most devoted and capable militants, a person who could work with sundry individuals to develop coalitions and political defense committees of national and international import. From time to time she used the party name "Berta Graham," and she received a Marxist education at the "Trotsky School" at Mountain Spring Camp in New Jersey. During the mid-1960s she served briefly on the SWP National Committee.

Berta moved from New York to Detroit in 1957 where she worked full-time for the SWP. Central activities in those years include her defense of the two victims in "Kissing Case" in North Carolina, when eight-year-old and 10-year-old African-American boys were charged with assault for having played a game in which they kissed white girls. A whisper campaign claimed attempted rape.

She was also energetic on behalf of Robert F. Williams, an advocate of armed self-defense in the NAACP, who, along with his associates, was the object of harassment by the FBI. She became a leader of the Committee to Combat Racial Injustice, which toured Williams, and the Executive Secretary of the Committee to Aid the Monroe Defendants, headed by Dr. A. E. Perry of Monroe, North Carolina.

Following the Cuban Revolution Berta relocated to New York and became prominent as the first secretary of the New York branch of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (FPCC) and then Executive Secretary of the national organization. The FPCC was founded in New York in April 1960, to provide popular support for the Cuban Revolution against attacks by the U.S. government once Fidel Castro openly admitted his commitment to socialism and began nationalizing Cuban assets belonging to U.S. corporations. FPCC opposed the Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961 and the imposition of the U.S. embargo against Cuba, and campaigned against U.S. policy during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.

Among the best known figures in the Cuba Solidarity movement, Berta herself became a target of the FBI; her name appears in U.S. Senate Hearings of the period as well as in materials about the government's Counter-Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) which was designed to disrupt the political Left.

With her second husband, Robert Langston (1933-77), she was also a leading activist in the Alexander Defense Committee (ADC), formed in February 1965 in response to the persecution of Dr. Neville Alexander and 10 of his comrades by the South African government. In the beginning of the 1970s she and Bob were admired for their leadership of the Committee for New Alternatives in the Middle East and their role in the publication of a book by Arie Bober called *The Other Israel: The Radical Case Against Zionism* (1971).

Shortly afterwards, Berta, along with others in her generation of SWP cadre, became alarmed by the growing power in the party of a circle of former students around a rising organizational functionary, Jack Barnes. Deciding to take action, she and Bob Langston became increasingly identified with the political views of Ernest Mandel and the United Secretariat of the Fourth International, submitting oppositional documents on subjects such as the Middle East and Argentina. In 1973 they supported what was called "The International Majority Tendency" and for the convention period were members of the "Internationalist Tendency" inside the SWP. When the Internationalist Tendency was expelled in 1974 (Barnes claimed that it had "split"), the Langstons initiated a vigorous protest.

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Berta's personal life was also marked by sizeable grief. Her beloved Bob died of a heart attack in his early forties. This occurred in Paris in June 1977, where the couple had moved to work closely with Mandel and their international comrades.

Returning to the United States, Berta was among those many long-time activists bureaucratically expelled from the SWP in 1983. After a brief membership in Socialist Action, she helped to found and support Solidarity, also keeping her ties to the Fourth International and remaining politically active in Connecticut. Bob had left her some money which she generously used to support causes and projects consistent with their sympathies. In the last few years she organized an antiwar vigil at City Hall in Norwalk, Connecticut, the town where she had settled. She could be seen there every Saturday since the beginning of the Iraq war, through rain, snow and the heat of summer.

She is survived by a son, Eugene Zuckoff, an attorney who works on behalf of abused children in Catskill, New York; and sisters, Kitty Staebler, Edith Gbur, and Phyllis Shaw. She will always have a warm place in the memories of her many friends and admirers for whom she served as an inspiration of political idealism and commitment for so many decades.

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