

<http://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article6581>



Obituary

Remembering George Shriver

- Features - In Memoriam - Obituaries and appreciations -

Publication date: Sunday 10 May 2020

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George Shriver was born in India in 1936 of missionary parents. He died April 24, 2020 in Tucson, Arizona. Having joined the Socialist Workers' Party in his 20s, he was a lifelong Fourth Internationalist.

I knew about George Shriver (who used the party name George Saunders) long before I got to know him. Since the early 1960s he had been part of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), which I joined in 1973, and shortly after I joined a very important book was published that he edited and which I hungrily devoured, *Samizdat: Voices of the Soviet Opposition*. This was an eye-opening and inspiring collection of primary sources on resistance, inside the Soviet Union, to Stalinist and bureaucratic oppression, ranging from heroic and ill-fated struggles of Left Oppositionists in the 1930s to articles and documents from dissidents of the 1960s and 1970s.

Over time, I learned more about George from my own observations and from what comrades told me. Multi-lingual and fluent in Russian, he played an important role in monitoring and writing about events in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. In earlier years he had been to the USSR, talked with dissidents, interviewed the rebel poet Yevtushenko. In the 1960s he had been a part-time staff member for the *Militant*. Over time he wrote for the impressively sophisticated weekly, *Intercontinental Press*, edited by Joseph Hansen and associated with the Fourth International. More than this, he had been collaborating closely, over the years, with George Breitman, helping to oversee and produce translations for the 14-volume *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1929-1940*, three additional volumes of speeches and writings, *The Challenge of the Left Opposition 1923-1928*, and other works by Trotsky.

These have, of course, become a vital resource not only for scholars of Russian, Soviet, and Marxist history, but for theorists and activists laboring to help build a working-class socialist movement that would be capable of replacing all capitalist and bureaucratic tyrannies with a genuine democracy (rule by the people) over our economic life, in which the free development of each would become the basis for the free development of all.

Role in the Socialist Workers Party

George never seems to have aspired to be a leader in the SWP - he was intent on being part of a cohesive and democratic collective, to which he would offer his own considerable talents. Among his mentors and models were seasoned activist-intellectuals George Breitman, George Lavan Weissman (with Breitman a mainstay of Pathfinder Press), Joseph Hansen (former secretary to Trotsky and editor of *Intercontinental Press*, who died in 1979), and Frank Lovell (whose extensive experience in the labor movement was reflected in his role, for a number of years, as the SWP's trade union director).

Each in their own way demonstrated a rock-hard commitment to revolutionary Marxist perspectives, considerable practical skills, organizational savvy, as well as immense personal and political integrity. George described Breitman in this way: "He had tremendous political acumen, a fierce honesty, a commitment to meticulous accuracy in dealing with documents, history, translation, plus a wonderful sense of humor and vast knowledge of radical history." These were qualities that George himself sought to emulate.

From his own account, in 1980 it was becoming clear to George and others that serious problems were developing in the SWP. Headed by Jack Barnes, a younger layer of comrades (of George's and my generation) had assumed SWP leadership in the mid-1970s. By 1981, the Barnes leadership was secretly engineering a fundamental political shift in

the organization, away from Trotskyist perspectives, and away from the Fourth International that Trotsky had founded. This was being replaced with an orientation toward what Barnes perceived as a more revolutionary "new international" that would presumably be crystallizing around Fidel Castro and the Cuban Communist Party (as things turned out, something that never actually came to pass).

George was - like his mentors - a supporter of the Cuban Revolution, but he was convinced that the decision of the new SWP leadership to jettison Trotskyist perspectives, and to carry this out through undemocratic manipulation, would cause irreparable damage to the SWP and the revolutionary socialist movement. By this time, in order to push through its new orientation, the Barnes leadership was already carrying out a grotesque tightening of the organization (falsely claiming this as "Leninism") and preparing a wave of expulsions in 1983-1984, on trumped up charges, that swept hundreds of actual and potential oppositionists out of the SWP. George participated in an informal grouping known as "the Breitman caucus," and then joined Breitman and Naomi Allen (well-known for her work in helping translate and edit Trotsky's works), in declaring the formation, at the start of 1984, of the Fourth Internationalist Tendency (FIT).

From *Bulletin in Defense of Marxism* to Labor Standard

The FIT was the smallest of the formations organized by those driven out of the SWP (its numerical highpoint was about 70 members). One short-lived current around Peter Camejo, the North Star Network, sought to build a broad left current without reference to or connection with Trotskyist perspectives. In contrast, Socialist Action (initiated under the leadership of Nat Weinstein, Lynn Henderson, and Jeff Mackler) launched a new Trotskyist organization, of about 200-300 members, with an orientation consistent with that of the pre-1979 SWP. A substantial break-away from Socialist Action merged with two other small socialist groups to form Solidarity (which would contain a rather passive caucus for those wishing to maintain ties with the Fourth International); with 200-300 members, Solidarity also saw itself as an alternative to the SWP.

The FIT, led by Breitman and Lovell, rejected the notion of building itself as an alternative to the SWP. Instead, it sought to do three things: (a) defend Trotskyist perspectives by using them - with critical creativity - to analyze and explain the evolving realities around us; (b) develop a documentation and explanation of how and why the SWP had degenerated, drawing lessons from that; and (c) bring together all Fourth Internationalist groups and individuals in the United States (including the SWP) in order to carry out a serious political discussion and debate, and on the basis of such political clarification, reconstitute a unified section of the Fourth International.

George identified with the FIT and was formally a member of the editorial board of its monthly magazine *Bulletin in Defense of Marxism*. In its initial years he was not a very active participant in either the FIT or the *Bulletin in Defense of Marxism*. This changed dramatically in 1989, and even more so in early 1990. By that time, George has explained, in a remembrance of Frank and Sarah Lovell, after the 1986 death of Breitman, "the burden of carrying on [the work of the FIT] was on Frank and Sarah more than ever." Noting that by 1990 the two aging Trotskyists had succeeded in getting him "to do my part," George concluded: "For me, working closely with Frank and Sarah, in the effort to keep alive the voice of revolutionary socialism, of Trotskyism in the United States, ... was a tremendously rewarding experience."

It was in New York City, in the Lower Manhattan apartment of Frank Lovell and Sarah Lovell, that I first got to know George. It may have been in 1990, and I recall George presented me with a copy of a recently-published volume he had translated, the revised and expanded edition of Roy Medvedev's remarkable, massive, well-documented account of the Stalin era, *Let History Judge*. Sometimes I could be clueless, and it took a nudge from Frank to get me to reciprocate by giving George a copy of my just-published *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party*. Frank was a seasoned

veteran of the Trotskyist movement. He was like a father-figure to both George and myself, and looking back on it, he clearly sought to nurture a bond between the two of us. In his own patient way, he was working to draw us both into a team that would help ensure the success of the FIT's monthly publication, *Bulletin in Defense of Marxism*.

George noted: "In 1990-91 Frank and I were in agreement on trying to get the Fourth Internationalist groups together to reestablish a sympathizing section of the Fourth International (FI) after the Barnes-led SWP had formally withdrawn from the FI." Serious efforts toward unification with Socialist Action were initiated but failed, at which point a majority of the FIT voted to dissolve the organization, in late 1992, to join Solidarity and its FI Caucus, while maintaining the magazine as an independent publication in order to continue working toward Trotskyist unity.

I served as managing editor of *Bulletin in Defense of Marxism* from late 1992 to late 1994, a period in which George was also playing a central role in the work of the publication. We labored closely and well together, with numerous email consultations, regular conference calls with the rest of the editorial board, and lengthy phone conversations. In late 1994 managing editorship shifted, shared by George and Tom Bias, a very fine and seasoned comrade from the printing trades. This arrangement continued as the magazine was transformed into *Labor Standard* in the autumn of 1998. George and Tom continued to function in these positions as *Labor Standard* transitioned to an online journal in the early twenty-first century. Increasingly intermittent, it ceased publication in 2019, as Tom was contending with terminal cancer.

The magazine had changed its name in 1998 because those of us gathered around it were excited about, and engaged with, developments among a significant left-wing current in the unions, gathered around longtime and influential labor militant Tony Mazzocchi. An educational Labor Party Advocates seemed on the verge of coming an actual Labor Party, a left-wing labor formation that might have tens of thousands or more adherents. In this context the socialist message of *Labor Standard* might have genuine traction. Mazzocchi's slogan was: "The Bosses Have Two Parties, We Need Our Own." Although that never stopped being true, by 2000 it became clear that the promising initiative had failed to crystallize.

Labor Standard supporters had been very active in Labor Party efforts throughout the country. This was certainly the case in Tucson, Arizona, where George now lived. The ongoing struggles of the multi-faceted working class against all forms of oppression - against exploitation at the point of production, against racism, against anti-immigrant bigotry, against militarism and imperialism, against tyranny wherever it existed - continued to engage his attention, sympathies, and energies in committees and coalitions in Arizona no less than in the online pages of *Labor Standard*. As best he could, George remained true to the commitments that had given such meaning to his life, and he became part of Socialist Action, connecting with friends and comrades who shared such commitments.

Reflections Personal and Political

If he had played things differently in his life, I suspect George could have had a successful career in academe or publishing. Having on one's resumé both Harvard University and the prestigious Russian and Eastern European studies program of University of Indiana in Bloomington would certainly not have hurt. In addition to his finely developed editorial skills, there was also his international reputation for translating numerous works - not only those of Trotsky, but major books by Mikhail Gorbachev, the three-volume memoir of Nikita Khrushchev, several volumes by Nikolai Bukharin, and most recently three volumes related to the Verso *Complete Works of Rosa Luxemburg* - a massive collection of Luxemburg's letters and big chunks of her economic writings making up the first two volumes of the *Complete Works*. [\[1\]](#)

A successful career, however, seemed to be the furthest thing from his mind. George truly loved helping make

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Trotsky and Luxemburg available to English-speaking readers. It was only the need to make money, however, that turned his talents to what he considered the political mediocrity of Gorbachev and Khrushchev. What money he made, however, was quite inadequate - he lived in relative poverty.

One could certainly say that his was a selfless devotion to the revolutionary struggle for a society of the free and the equal. But there is a dark underside to the term "selfless" - for George, more often than not, didn't take proper care of himself and of making practical arrangements for his future. Those of his close friends who knew the score would sometimes provide long-term loans to help him get through a desperate situation. Sometimes it seemed that George may have been dealing with a debilitating depression that could block him from dealing with important personal matters, and certainly from leaving Tucson to attend a conference or be available for a speaking engagement, and at times from coming through with translations.

Yet there are other, more positive dimensions of George's selflessness. He seemed the very opposite of being in orbit around himself. The friend I came to know was unassuming, even shy, very thoughtful, very kind. A mutual friend summed it up most aptly: "A lovely, gentle, cultured man." And an essential aspect of the person he was involved a deep understanding of, and an incredibly firm commitment to, the revolutionary cause. This comes through in George's contributions to the memorial volume *Revolutionary Labor Socialist: The Life, Ideas and Comrades of Frank Lovell*, which Tom Bias and I edited in 2000.

George recalled that around 1960, as he was approaching the Trotskyist movement, he connected with "this unusual generation of worker Trotskyists," personified first of all in Boston, when he attended "a class on Trotsky's History of the Russian Revolution led by a tough-minded working class veteran named Larry Trainor." He also recalled the Presidential campaign of that year, when he was able to hear SWP candidate "Farrell Dobbs speaking optimistically ... on the class consciousness of workers that remained beneath the surface of their then-current acquiescence" to the capitalist status quo. "Don't sell the workers short," George remembered Dobbs saying. He explained that the veteran Trotskyist strike leader was "speaking of their potential capacity for revolutionary action and international solidarity" - even though such possibilities seemed far from the current realities.

"Around that same time," George continued, "I ran across an article by Irving Howe about the Trotskyists of the Socialist Workers Party." Howe was a former Trotskyist who had abandoned revolutionary Marxism and became editor of the moderate socialist magazine *Dissent*. "I remember Howe describing the Trotskyists of the James P. Cannon persuasion as rigid, unyielding, stubborn, determined, and committed to their ideas." According to George, Howe viewed them as impractical doctrinaires "who wouldn't play footsie with Democrats, wouldn't go along with imperialist war policies, wouldn't sell out the socialist program in exchange for bureaucratic privilege or the emoluments of bourgeois politics."

He noted that "Howe's article was a kind of grudging admission of the unusually strong qualities to be found among the working class socialists and activists grouped around James P. Cannon." George concluded: "My admiration for these people who I was just getting to know rose higher from reading Howe's opinions, although I'm sure it wasn't his intention to praise them."

I am so sorry this good friend and comrade is gone.

A few years ago, I wanted him to speak about Leon Trotsky on a conference panel with another good friend and comrade, Tom Twiss (who had produced a fine study of Trotsky's evolving analysis of the Soviet bureaucracy), and myself. I secured money to make it happen. I was overjoyed when George said he would come - and then, as often happened, he couldn't.

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Perhaps to make up for this, he generously sent me dozens of long and amazing poems - which he had translated - about revolutionary history that Nikolai Bukharin had written in 1937, while awaiting execution. There were still email consultations and telephone conversations, the last ones dealing with the Rosa Luxemburg translations he was working on. Then communication ended. But I intended to travel to Tucson this summer, track him down, visit with him.

Now that cannot happen. To hear his voice and engage with the remarkable person that he was will be possible only in my memories. And also in the wonderful translations he helped make available to all of us, sharing vibrant contributions from comrades living in other times and places.

[There is a plan to scan *Bulletin in Defense of Marxism* - over 140 issues - and make them available on-line in the Marxist Internet Archive, hopefully by the end of 2020.]

30 April 2020

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[1] See "[In Memory of George Shriver, Translator of Rosa Luxemburg](#)".