

A Tribute to George Breitman

never stopped contributing to the very best of his abilities to the struggle for human liberation. What he was able to contribute was very substantial, and it makes us stronger, and it inspires us to carry on the struggles.

Talks and a Reminiscence

Steve Bloom

Steve Bloom was an alternate National Committee member when he was expelled from the SWP in 1983. He is now the national administrative secretary of the F.I.T.

Last February we held the third national conference of the Fourth Internationalist Tendency in Cleveland, Ohio. George was too ill to make the trip, and when we realized that it was just short of his seventieth birthday, we voted to send him a message, a birthday greeting, which said a few nice things about his lifetime of dedication to the movement, and his courage in the face of physical ailments which would have caused many a less dedicated comrade to decide it was time to retire.

George complained in a letter which Paul Le Blanc showed me that the greetings were "overly laudatory," and expressed the same thought to me verbally. I don't think most of the delegates who voted to send the greetings would have agreed. But there was nothing phony or put-on about George's reaction.

His modesty, more than anything else I think, enabled George to relate to his comrades and to the party in the manner which has been described by many of the speakers here this evening. One quality which particularly impressed me was simply his willingness to respond "I don't know" when someone asked a question on a subject about which he was ignorant. He never felt that because he was a leader he was somehow obliged to know everything.

I don't have time to dwell on this side of George. I want to spend a few minutes talking a little about my work with him during the last few years, during the struggle against the liquidationist faction which took over the leadership of the Socialist Workers Party. This was the period in which I worked most closely with him and really came to know him.

Before I do that, however, I think there's another aspect to George Breitman's personality which deserves to be

mentioned this evening. George was capable of great anger. That, too, is a useful trait for revolutionaries when directed at the proper target. Mostly George got angry at the bourgeoisie and the oppression of workers, Blacks, women, and others. But he was capable of expressing anger at his comrades or coworkers as well, when he perceived some slackness, some weakness, some stupidity on their part. And he got supremely angry at the present misleadership of the Socialist Workers Party for what it has done to that organization, and for the way it has chosen to treat an entire generation of comrades who spent decades working to build the movement.

I remember how George expressed his outrage over the refusal of the SWP to send a speaker—or even a message—to the memorial meetings for Larry Stewart and George Weissman when those comrades died. I don't think we can let the present occasion pass without expressing our own indignation over the failure, once again, of the party leaders to join us here this evening to acknowledge George Breitman's years of contributions and dedication to the SWP.

The way the SWP leaders have treated George's death, their attitude toward this memorial meeting, their refusal to cosponsor it or send a speaker, stands as the most eloquent testimony against their pretensions as proletarian revolutionists. *Genuine* proletarian fighters would be incapable of acting with the callousness exhibited by Barnes and company. They have laid bare the souls of petty bureaucrats and functionaries for all to see.

I said before that George did not give in to his many illnesses and opt for retirement, though no one would have blamed him if he had. It's a fact, though, that before the 1981 SWP convention George was thinking seriously about doing just that.

I remember my conversations with him after the pre-convention discussion opened that year. We began to have some very disturbing statements made by party leaders during the oral discussion in the Brooklyn branch. Two years earlier George had submitted a critique of the party leadership's position on Castroism, which no one else in the SWP had agreed with. I urged him to write something again, and told him that on the basis of the discussion so far, we might be

able to elect a delegate from Brooklyn in favor of a moderation of the approach to Cuba and Nicaragua. He submitted the famous "Breitman amendments," and we not only elected a delegate from Brooklyn, but four others from around the country—and got the support of another member of the National Committee, Frank Lovell.

In the course of preparations for the convention George confided in me that he was not feeling up to his old self. He was tired and sick. He found it almost impossible to write anything anymore. He didn't have the strength or the inclination to be on the National Committee of the party for another two years. Yet it would seem unserious after he submitted his amendments and made a fight at the convention if he declined to run.

The solution he struck upon was to ask me if I would make the report for our caucus to the convention, and allow him to nominate me for the NC. The convention didn't want to accept this, and tried to pressure George into continuing on the committee. But in the end he prevailed and I was elected as an alternate NC member.

Last summer George and Dorothea came out to have dinner at our apartment, and George offered a toast to me, saying that I had had no idea what kind of a struggle I was getting into when I agreed to be a candidate for the NC in 1981. I agreed, but countered with a toast to George, because he had also had no idea what *he* was getting into when he went into opposition at the '81 convention. He thought he would nominate me for the NC, and retire calmly to advisory status.

Periodically in the years after that, and especially after the mass purge in 1984 and the founding of the *Bulletin in Defense of Marxism* and the F.I.T., George would say that he wasn't sure if he could continue. He was in too much pain. He was too tired. He was too ill. A few days later, however, George would call me and tell me that he had written a short article, had an idea for a project he would work on, would try to talk to other comrades and help them in their projects.

George contributed a pretty fair volume of written material to the *Bulletin IDOM* during the period after his expulsion. And I always appreciated his political criticisms or editorial comments on articles, reports, documents, etc., which I would submit to him.

But George's biggest contribution to our movement at this time was in the realm of ideas. He had one of the most creative minds I have ever met, and never stopped trying to think of new ways to advance our objectives—from big ideas, like the formation of the F.I.T. itself (which was George's suggestion after he and dozens of others were expelled), to little ones, like pamphlets or articles which we should publish, or ways to improve the *Bulletin in Defense of Marxism*.

George Breitman achieved something which many humans aspire to but few of us manage—to live a life which will transcend our own individual deaths. If I may borrow a much used cliché, George Breitman continues to live. He lives in his writings, which remain a legacy for our own and future generations to learn from and cherish; he lives in the methods of work and study he taught to younger revolutionaries; he lives in our memories, and in the hearts of those who had the privilege to know him and to work with him. Most of all he lives in the ongoing revolutionary movement of the U.S. working class.

Today the organized, conscious nucleus that George labored a lifetime to build is a tiny, persecuted minority. We appear small and ineffectual to the superficial observer—hardly a legacy for George Breitman to have been proud of, hardly worth this half-century of sacrifice and dedication. But George knew better. He understood that for those who are fighting to bring about revolutionary change most of our time will be spent battling overwhelming odds. Yet the changes we are fighting for can come about if, and only if, a dedicated few refuse to be overwhelmed by those odds.

George knew what history has demonstrated time and again—that even tiny handfuls of conscious revolutionaries can grow, given favorable conditions, to the point where they lead great masses. That's why George's effort to build the Fourth Internationalist Tendency—a small group of conscious revolutionary fighters who emerged out of the debacle which the Barnes leadership of the SWP has created for American Trotskyism—was far from wasted. It was, in fact, the most fruitful thing he could have done during the last two years of his life.

Only those few who are able to maintain a broad and sweeping historic vision can lead the kind of life that George Breitman did. Those of us who are the product of his efforts, who have learned from and worked with him, on whom at least a little of his dedication to truth and a better world have worn off—we will now have to redouble our efforts to build a revolutionary organization of the U.S. working class which can overthrow this rotten and oppressive system, usher in humanity's socialist future, and transform human relations. Such an organization and such a transformation will stand as the most faithful memorial we could ever construct to this great man of American Trotskyism, George Breitman.