

# Myra Tanner Weiss, 1917-1997

## A Life of Struggle

On 13 September 1997 Myra Tanner Weiss, a leader of the American Socialist Workers Party (SWP) through the 1940s and 50s, died in a nursing home in Indio, California. She had been the organizer of the SWP's five-branch Los Angeles local for a decade, a member of its National Committee (NC) from 1944 to 1963, a three-time SWP candidate for vice-president of the United States, and, for many years, the only female full member of its Political Committee (PC). An obituary in the *New York Times* (20 September 1997) described her as a "fiery speaker" who:

"cut a stylish figure in leftist circles—a small, attractive woman who was always immaculately turned out, generally in a well-cut suit of lush material run up by her husband's tailoring family."

Myra Tanner was recruited to Trotskyism in 1935, while at university in Salt Lake City. She soon moved to California where she became active organizing agricultural and cannery workers. Like Murry Weiss, whom she married in 1942, Myra was one of the few party youth who played a significant role in the 1939-40 struggle against the petty-bourgeois opposition within the SWP, led by Max Shachtman.

The Shachtman split cost the SWP most of its intellectuals and youth. In the post-split SWP, the Los Angeles local, with Myra as organizer, stood out as lively, young and intellectual. By the late 1940s, the LA branch was the largest, and provided the SWP with its most important youth recruitment opportunities.

Myra was not only the SWP's Los Angeles district organizer, but also its main public figure. She ran for mayor in 1945 and again in 1949. In 1945, under her leadership, the Los Angeles SWP conducted an exemplary campaign against the fascist Gerald L.K. Smith, and succeeded in mobilizing 20,000 workers to run him out of town. In an October 1983 letter to the SWP, Myra referred to this as "the most important contribution the Los Angeles Local of the SWP made to the movement as a whole and to the country as a whole."

### Myra, Murry and Jim

James P. Cannon, the veteran leader of American Trotskyism, held Myra in high regard. At the SWP's 1942 national convention, he supported a proposal to put her on the National Committee, however she was not elected until 1944. In a pamphlet written in 1986, Myra recalled:

"Jim Cannon several times called me an 'anarchist.' I didn't mind. Some of our greatest proletarian heroes and heroines were anarchists....But anxious not to offend, like the good revolutionist he was, he always added, 'but she's our anarchist,' which made me, I suppose, an 'anarchobolshevik,' to keep the labels straight. In my opinion Cannon leaned on the side of centralism in this polar relation of organizational concepts. I leaned on the side of democracy. But neither of us collided organizationally in those years. We both lived in the same movement."

—*The Bustelo Incident*

This pamphlet, which is an extended argument for integrating "feminist consciousness" into Trotskyism, contains

interesting observations on her experience in the SWP. She recounts some of the "experiments we conducted in the Los Angeles branches" of the SWP:

"Sometime in the late Forties, to upset stereotypes, we arbitrarily, and unanimously, decided that for a year only women could be elected organizers and only men could hold the secretary's job. At another point we noticed that executive committee meetings, where policy matters were hashed out, were lively and interesting while branch meetings appeared to be dull. For awhile...we decided that executive meetings should be limited to discovery of differences, not their resolution...we took them to the branches unresolved—there to be discussed and decided. That changed branch meetings considerably and gave fuller participation to the members."

In 1952, when Cannon retired from his central leadership role in New York, and prepared to hand over the reins to Farrell Dobbs (the legendary trade-union organizer), he convinced Murry and Myra to transfer to New York in the hope that they might help rejuvenate the SWP's aging and increasingly conservative central cadre.

At this time, the SWP faced a critical internal situation with the emergence of the Cochran-Clarke faction which embraced the "New World Reality" theories of Michel Pablo, and denied the historic necessity for Trotskyist leadership in the struggle for socialism. Pablo proposed instead to pressure the reformist and Stalinist parties to the left. Cannon, who had gone along with Pablo's prescriptions for the rest of the Fourth International, finally balked at the attempt to apply this liquidationist course on his home turf.

At the May 1953 SWP National Committee meeting, Cannon revealed:

"During the course of the past year, I had serious doubts of the ability of the SWP to survive. At one time—I will frankly admit to you here for the first time—I thought that our twenty-five year effort, compounded on all the previous experience and work of ourselves and others, had ended in catastrophic failure; and that, once again, a small handful would have to pick up the pieces and start all over again to build the new cadre of another party on the old foundations."

—*Speeches to the Party*

The "small handful" who could be counted on was a reference to the Weisses and their supporters—as the Cochranites acknowledged by their complaints about the "Cannon-Weiss" faction. The routinist and conservative Dobbs-Kerry-Hansen grouping were eager to take over the reins of the party, but displayed little appetite to fight the liquidators. Cannon ultimately brought Dobbs over with the promise of a free hand in running the party.

The Weisses came into sharp conflict with Dobbs as a result of a 1954 article by Joseph Hansen ("Jack Bustelo") ridiculing women who wore cosmetics. The article unleashed a series of negative responses (chiefly from female SWPers) which Dobbs blamed on the Weisses. In her 1986 pamphlet, Myra described this as a crisis "which threatened to tear the organization apart." Things were eventually patched up, and a joint statement was issued by Murry and Farrell Dobbs pledging to work together collectively. Myra

and Murry both sat on the Political Committee in the 1950s, Murry edited *The Militant* for a few years, and Myra served as a staff writer, and was the SWP's vice-presidential candidate in 1952, 1956 and 1960. But the Weisses were never fully assimilated into the Dobbs regime, and remained on the outside of the central leadership.

Myra considered that the "explanation for the anti-Weiss" group was that, to a large extent, "it was really an 'anti-Cannon' group":

"it was Cannon, 'retired' to California, who persuaded Murry and me and some of our younger cadre to transfer to the center in hopes of improving the situation there. As strong a leader as Cannon was in that small movement, he could no longer count on winning the majority of the leadership in any given dispute with Farrell Dobbs. For example, Cannon, in alliance with Vincent Dunne of Minnesota, could not get a majority vote in the National Committee for their nomination of a woman, this writer, as U.S. Vice Presidential candidate to run with Dobbs in the 1952 election. They were able to win only after taking the problem to the floor of the National Convention."

—*Op cit.*

## The Weisses & the RT

There is a special historical connection between our political tendency and the Weisses. Murry Weiss had always taken a particular responsibility for, and interest in, youth work, and it was natural that he was the one to recruit a layer of talented youth from the Shachtmanite Young Socialist League in 1957. These comrades, who included Shane and Judy Mage, Tim Wohlforth and James Robertson, played an instrumental role in launching the Young Socialist Alliance—the SWP's youth group. A few years later, Wohlforth, Mage and Robertson were leading the Revolutionary Tendency (RT—forerunner of the Spartacist League).

In a discussion in our Wellington, New Zealand, branch occasioned by news of Myra's death, Bill Logan recalled how in the Spartacist League/U.S. in the early 1970s:

"Robertson used to talk a lot about Myra and Murry Weiss, in his little living room in Spanish Harlem—before the days of Scotch, when it was cheap California red wine. I remember him saying something like 'I wasn't trained by Cannon, but I guess I was trained by people who were trained by Cannon.' And it was clear that to Robertson the most important of these people were Murry and Myra Weiss. They more than any other individuals were responsible for winning him and his immediate grouping to a whole range of political conceptions.

"Of course the most important thing the Shachtmanite youth had to be won over on in the process of their recruitment to Trotskyism was the position on the Russian question, but Robertson also learned a whole range of ideas on organization from the Weisses, including the conception we still carry on of a youth organization which is politically subordinate to the adult organization but organizationally independent, and in which the adult organization does not run its members as a disciplined fraction manipulating the non-party youth.

"Robertson...certainly felt a real affection for Murry and Myra, and respect for the thoroughly principled way they carried out political struggles within the SWP, even though they had actually moved to the right more quickly than the party leadership."

The Weisses had played a key role in the fight against Cochran/Pablo's liquidationist perspectives in the early 1950s, but, a few years later, they were among the first in

the SWP leadership to embrace Castroism as an alternative to the Leninist insistence on the centrality of the class conscious proletariat. Dobbs soon followed their lead. The Revolutionary Tendency, forged in opposition to this revisionist course, was the victim of unprecedented bureaucratic measures by the Dobbs regime, and was ultimately expelled.

While Myra disagreed profoundly with the RT's positions, she vigorously defended their rights as a minority. And she was the only member of the National Committee to do so (Murry had suffered an extremely serious stroke in 1960 which removed him from political activity). In a motion she presented to the Political Committee on 1 November 1963, Myra noted:

"The 'evidence' of 'disloyalty' submitted in the report consists entirely of opinions, and no one in the history of the Socialist Workers Party has ever been punished for thoughts that differ with those of the majority—nor ever can be if we are to remain a revolutionary force."

But, by this time, the SWP was no longer a revolutionary force. The purge of the RT was followed by a campaign to get rid of other dissidents in the party, including the Weisses. After leaving the SWP, Myra and Murry were involved in a variety of leftist political projects at some distance from revolutionary Marxism as we understand it. Murry died in 1981, shortly after joining Clara Kaye's Freedom Socialist Party.

In his remarks to the Wellington comrades, Logan added the following "minor footnote":

"It was 1979....Aaire and I were living in New York, and I was suspended from the organization [i.e., the international Spartacist tendency] and preparations were being made to expel me, ostensibly on the grounds of various complaints against me as chair of the Australian section in the 1974-76 period.

"One of the big boys of the Spartacist League, Reuben Samuels, wrote a nasty document [19 June 1979] in which he said that some of my submissions in this case:

"can only receive the response they so justly deserve when he [Logan] is no longer a member of a proletarian organization. Until then he shall be protected by the norms of proletarian morality of which he has so little sense."

"Aaire and I took this to be a threat to use physical violence against me after my expulsion, but we were aware of the pressures on us to become overly paranoid, and there was nobody we both trusted and could properly consult with. We were isolated in a foreign city. So I broke the discipline of the Spartacist tendency. I looked up Myra in the telephone book, gave her a call, and made arrangements to have a talk with her. I had no doubt at all that she would keep our consultations effectively confidential. "She was a delightful woman in her early sixties. She talked about Murry, and his overcoming the effects of his stroke. She talked about his getting qualified as a psychotherapist—"it's a good trade for a revolutionary politician." She complained about men in politics.

"And then she asked about my story. At first she was incredulous. She regarded Robertson with some affection, and as a principled sectarian who she thought would conduct inner-party struggle in an overly hard way, but a proper way. She was sure that he and those he was working closely with would eschew violence among ostensible communists.

"But she read the documents, there in front of me, getting more and more interested and annoyed, and she altered her opinion and confirmed our interpretation of this com-

ment of Samuels as a threat of violence.

“She had no time for the Spartacists programmatically, and was bemused as I defended them, but she was visibly disappointed in what she regarded as a kind of moral degeneration in Robertson, and having seen that degeneration she didn’t see any point in our staying round to argue with it. Her attitude was that we should just walk away from the Spartacist tendency.”

When the New York branch of the Bolshevik Tendency was being formed in early 1987, several comrades had the

opportunity to meet Myra Tanner Weiss (see accompanying article). It is somehow fitting that one of the last public political events she attended was a debate on the Russian question between the Bolshevik Tendency and the League for the Revolutionary Party held in New York City in December 1988. Myra was present as an adherent of the same Soviet defensist position to which she had helped win Robertson, Mage and Wohlforth some 30 years earlier. ■

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