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Frank Fried (1927-2015): One of “the most remarkable U.S. revolutionary socialists”

Friday 20 March 2015, by [QUINN Patrick M.](#) (Date first published: 1 March 2015).

FRANK FRIED, AMONG the most remarkable U.S. revolutionary socialists in the second half of the 20th century, passed away in Alameda, CA on January 13, 2015 at the age of 87. He is survived by his wife of 27 years, the novelist Alice Wilson-Fried.

Frank was attracted to the political views of the Socialist Workers Party in Chicago as a teenager. He joined the SWP in 1944 just before he entered the U.S. Navy. It was not a propitious time to be joining the party. Its leaders, including those who led the famed 1934 Teamsters strike in Minneapolis and the SWP’s founder, James P. Cannon, were in the federal prison in Sandstone, MN having been unjustly convicted in 1941 of “violating” the Smith Act.

After the end of World War II and his discharge from the Navy, Frank became an active member of the party’s Chicago branch. His mentor was Milt Zaslow (publicly known as Mike Bartell), its organizer, and under Milt’s guidance Frank became one of the party’s youngest leaders.

Frank and the other party members became active in various progressive struggles in Chicago, including the effort to end segregation at the “White City” amusement park on the city’s South Side. They played a central role in the “Hickman case,” a long-forgotten struggle that only recently was rescued from the mists of history by Joe Allen in his book *People Wasn’t Made to Burn* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011).

Along with Milt Zaslow, SWP members Leon Despres (later a famous member of the Chicago City County), Mike Myer, Carl Schier, the novelist Willard Motley and the actress Tallulah Bankhead, Frank played a key role in the fight to free James Hickman, an African American who had been convicted of murdering his landlord after Hickman’s family had been burned to death in 1947 when his apartment was destroyed in a fire started by the landlord.

Joe Allen begins: “‘I want you to write about the Hickman case,’ Frank Fried told me, gripping his cane with one hand and gesturing with the other. ‘It was the best thing we ever did and nobody knows about it.’”

Frank was indeed right about the central role that the SWP played in the Hickman case, but, characteristically, in the account of the case that he provided to Joe Allen, he underplayed his own role in the struggle to gain Hickman’s release.

Between 1947 and 1953, Frank played a role in other activities that the Chicago SWP was involved in. However in the early 1950s he joined a minority current led by Bert Cochran, Harry Braverman, George Clarke and Milt Zaslow that had developed political differences with the leadership and James P. Cannon about strategy and tactics in the trade union movement and the best means of building the party.

In 1954, after several years of intense internal debate, the minority, which became known as the

Cochran group (named after its leader Bert Cochran), including Frank, left the SWP. The group founded the magazine *American Socialist* and Frank became an active supporter of the publication.

Music and Political Activism

During this period, Frank was fired from his industrial job at the U.S. Steel Works in Chicago after the FBI pressured his employer to discharge him — a widespread FBI practice against militant socialists in the 1950s. And subsequently, as with other socialist militants, the FBI made it difficult for Frank to obtain another job.

Interested in music, especially folk music, Frank began assisting folk music clubs in Chicago, including the “Gate of Horn,” by doing their publicity work. At first he provided assistance gratis and eventually for a small fee. While involved in such activities in the late 1950s, he acquired an intimate knowledge of the music promotion business.

In the early 1960s he formed a partnership, Triangle Productions, with Fred Fine, a former member of the Communist Party. And when the Beatles first came to the United States in 1963, Frank and Fred organized a concert by them at Comiskey Park.

The concert was an enormous success, exceeding all expectations, and Frank and Fred made a small fortune, which launched Frank’s career as a music impresario. Triangle Productions went on to organize concerts for performers such as Frank Sinatra, Barbra Streisand, Pete Seeger and Frank Zappa.

Frank became one of the most successful and well-known music promoters in the country. But in defiance of Marx’s observation that “being determines consciousness,” Frank never lost his commitment to revolutionary socialism.

He maintained contacts with revolutionary socialists who had been members of the Cochran group and with those who had been his comrades in the SWP. He also developed relationships with younger socialists, myself included. I got to know him in 1974 when he lived in Evanston, a few blocks away from where I was living. We had many political discussions that eventually cemented a friendship that would continue for the next 41 years.

It was shortly after his very successful Beatles concert that Frank began sharing the wealth that he had accumulated (and would continue to accumulate) with various socialist and progressive organizations, a process that would last until the end of his life.

One of his initial major financial contributions was to Ed Sadlowski, who ran for president of the United Steelworkers as an integral part of an effort to democratize the Steelworkers union. Over the course of the campaign, Frank developed a close friendship with Sadlowski.

Frank financially supported many other socialist endeavors, including Solidarity after it was founded in 1986, and became a sympathetic supporter of the organization for almost 30 years, eventually joining Solidarity shortly before he died. He also supported the Fourth International and the political work of the late Peter Camejo’s Green Party candidacy for Governor of California, and his North Star Network.

During the 1980s, he broadened his role as a music impresario and developed the Rosemont Horizon in a northwest suburb of Chicago as a major venue for music performances and athletic events. Among the performers he brought to the Rosemont Horizon were the Rolling Stones.

He became associated with Madison Square Garden in New York City and eventually became the president of the famous Delta Queen Mississippi River steamboat company in New Orleans.

Preceded in death by his first wife, Francoise Nicolas, and his elder sister, Vivian Medak, Frank is survived not only by his wife Alice, but his children Pascale, Isabelle, Bruno, Troy and Teasha, and many grandchildren, nieces and nephews.

With Frank's passing, we have lost one of the very best of that generation. We salute Frank and the legacy he bequeathed to future generations of socialist militants.

Patrick M. Quinn

P.S.

* From Against the Current n° 175, March/April 2015. <http://www.solidarity-us.org/>