

Frank Fried (1927-2015): Friend, Fighter, Comrade, Mensch

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Before I met Frank I felt like I already knew him: he was legendary on the far left for putting people together, being effective, and getting things done. And he had good politics. How could I not know him? We met when both Frank and I were working on the author Daniel Singer's Solidarnosc tour in the 1980s; Frank's organizational skill made certain the meetings were large, well organized, and well attended. We became friends once I started teaching at Saint Mary's College, just through the tunnel and down the road from Frank and Alice's beautiful home in Rockridge. That was 1992. Frank's house was on my way to and from campus and we met as often as we could for meals, and on several occasions I stayed there, when I had meetings and couldn't get back to LA.

This coincided with the tumultuous implosion and so-called transition in Russia. I started going to Russia nearly every year, and of course Frank always wanted the full report upon my return: what was the situation on the ground, what kind of politics did the emerging left have, and more. We organized meetings for the new leftists from Russia here in the Bay Area—Boris Kagarlitsky and then Alexander Buzgalin, and as always, Frank hosted them at his house.

Frank organized a house meeting for me to talk about Russia back when he and Alice held many such 'salons' in their house. Privately, when we discussed the latest, whether it was the Russian or later the U.S. emerging Occupy left, he always said, "What's the program?" Exactly what Alex Buchman and Mark Sharon would say (old-timers from the thirties: Alex was one of Trotsky's guards at Coyoacan and Mark was in the CLA and then SWP, visited Trotsky in Norway, then left with Shachtman in the 1940 split)—meaning activism is one thing, having a concrete program is another.

Frank had a way of tempering my optimism without being a naysayer. He was also a reminder and representative, for me, of those who came up during a time when there was a U.S. labor and a socialist movement. It gave them a clarity of perspective and purpose that later generations had to rediscover and are only doing so now. That last would be a point of contention with Frank; I can hear him telling me not to get carried away with my enthusiasm for every glimmer of class resistance. But the twinkle in Frank's eye always told me that he shared the sentiments behind the enthusiasm, even if he could keep it more real than I often did.

We continued to meet once Frank moved to Alameda, since it was now close to Oakland airport, so we could meet for breakfast, and later at his house to continue the discussion (usually a political Cook's tour of the struggles in the world). I loved talking to Frank: we both had the same speedy shorthand way of talking, often not finishing sentences and rushing to the next thought, a kind of telepathic way of getting what was about to be said before it was uttered.

Frank and I always talked politics, Trotskyoidy stuff and about the books he was reading—you probably all know what a voracious and disciplined reader he was. We both came out of the same political tradition, believed that Trotsky represented the continuation of revolutionary Marxism, and that the Trotskyist movement left much to be desired. Frank wanted to promote excellent revolutionary socialist journals. Since I was on the board of two of them, Frank would subject each to penetrating criticism, esp. Against the Current, which he saw as one of the best, but not up to the

standard of the American Socialist. The articles had to have good politics, be very well written and well edited, and the look of the magazine had to be frankly impressive. When the new South African journal *Amandla!* appeared, Frank was all in. But back at home he continued to support ATC and as others will attest, joined Solidarity, the organization behind it, so that he could be part of a socialist organization.

Frank was non-sectarian, open, and opinionated. He loved Howard Zinn's work and promoted and organized the play "Marx in Soho" with Brian Jones playing Marx. Frank brought the play to San Francisco, and we brought it to a giant crowd at Saint Mary's.

Frank's interest in my research on Stalin's spies in the Trotskyist movement always came back to what I could dig up about Cannon's secretary [Sylvia Callen/Caldwell/Franklin/Doxsee]. Sad to say, I dug up a lot more about six weeks ago and couldn't wait till we were to see each other in February to tell him (he was right of course in his hunches, but now I had many more details.) And about Trotsky: many of you were at the Alameda public library for the large meeting to support the Trotsky Museum in Coyoacán in 2011. Trotsky's grandson Sieva Volkov spoke, and Lindy Laub and I presented a twenty-minute clip of a film on Trotsky we are still working to finish.

Frank had a close interest in the project: he sent us to Chicago to do a filmed interview with Leon Despres, at the time 101 years old - who told us a delightful story about spending two weeks with Trotsky in 1937 in Mexico. Frank then came to LA the following year when we organized an event showing the film short at Sherry and Leo Frumkin's house. I am very sad that we couldn't finish it while Frank was alive, as he asked me so many times to do. If there were two things I could count on Frank to say to me, one would be to stop using the word 'Stalinist' so much as a derogatory qualifier, and the other would be to move mountains to finish the documentary on Trotsky.

Each year Frank would come to speak to my class on the politics of labor. The students LOVED and respected Frank not only because of the way he chronicled his experiences as a steel worker and later organizing a near-win in the Sadlowski campaign, but the way he integrated this into a narrative that really gave the students a sense of the time. And then he'd talk to them—Frank was always more interested in what the students were thinking about current politics, what hope they had for themselves and what struggles (if any) they were involved in. Did they vote for Obama and what did they expect from him? Jack Gerson and Carl Finamore each brought Frank to the class and could see the way he could elicit a meaningful discussion and we all went away thoroughly impressed.

There is one image that will always be with me: at the end of the meeting in Alameda, someone suggested we sing "The Internationale." Everyone stood, some steadied by their walkers, and sang. I was at the front so I could survey the crowd of what my kids might call "us old relics." I was transfixed by Frank: he stood tall, fist clenched, a glimmer or perhaps a tear in his eye.

Frank Fried was among the best of the many who spent their lives fighting for a world where human dignity would soar. He belonged to a splendid collection of people, many of them Jewish—and if you ever had the honor of rubbing shoulders with them, you'd never forget it, with their exceptional intellectual dynamism married to a conception of socialist democracy and a commitment to making it happen. I already miss Frank. I salute him and his life. And to Alice and Frank's children and grandchildren: may the many "Frank" memories sustain and fill you. Frank Fried: friend, fighter, comrade, mensch.

Suzi Weissman

P.S.

* Solidarity, February 6, 2015:

<http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/4358>

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