

United States - A life for socialism: Bea Bryant (1922-2016)

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Marxist activist and community organizer

Half a century ago, the highpoint of my schedule as a socialist organizer in Toronto was the monthly hour-long drive up Bayview Avenue for an evening with Bea Bryant and her partner George in their Richmond Hill home. Their solidarity work in that sleepy and conservative suburb was the most innovative and instructive I had ever seen.

Memories of those stirring events faded with the years. Bea's passing two years ago was not widely reported among Toronto socialists. This account, drawing on my memories and an 1999 interview, is an initial step toward compiling her political biography.

Making the Vietnam war personal

Photo: Bea Bryant at anti-war march in the 1960s

Back in the late 1960s, Bea was the sparkplug of the Richmond Hill Committee to End the War in Vietnam. Bea had met this lively collection of campaigners for the most part in varied community activity in her teachers' union, the New Democratic Party, and Cuba solidarity. Opposition to the U.S. war in Vietnam was widespread in those days, but it was not easy to persuade working people in Bea's community to move into action, given that Canada was not directly involved in the fighting.

Bea's genius lay in finding ways to link the far-off genocidal conflict, in which Canada was deeply complicit, to residents' personal concerns – in other words, to present the war in a way that empowered people to make their voices heard.

Bea took full advantage of a visit to North Vietnam by Dr. Gustavo Tolentino to learn first-hand about the health calamity caused by U.S. bombing of civilians in and around Hanoi. But when the committee applied to hold a meeting in a civic building, it was denied space on the grounds that the issue was too controversial. Bea, George, and their friends leaped into action, pointing out to

residents that their personal right of free expression was being denied. The committee won its point – one of the many small victories that led Canada to adopt a flawed free-speech charter about 12 years later.

The next step was innovative. The Boy Scouts and some other charities held annual fund-raising “tag days,” obtaining the required permit from the Richmond Hill civic administration. The anti-war committee duly applied for permission to hold its own tag day to raise funds for medical assistance to Vietnamese civilian victims of the war. This time, city authorities were adamant in their rejection, and right-wingers denounced the proposal as a Communists plot. The committee pointed to the horrific reality of death and mutilation caused by U.S. bombs, utilizing in part Dr. Tolentino’s evidence. Once again the committee stressed how important freedom of speech was to every individual resident. A joint statement was signed by an array of prominent residents. City Hall was adamant, and the controversy raged in the local press.

The turning point came when Pierre Berton, an author and media celebrity in nearby Kleinberg, signed the statement. The dispute was now breaking into the mainstream Toronto press, and feeling grew in Richmond Hill that City Hall’s stand was petty and arrogant. The tag day permit was granted: a sweet victory for free speech – and also for the solidarity with Vietnam.

Building the League for Socialist Action

I could sense the excitement of these campaigns in the evening discussions at Bea and George’s home. I got to know some of their comrades, activists like Anna Wilkie, Helen Cowan, Art Gray, Mary Donnelly, and Art Kershaw. Bea and George recruited some of them into the Richmond Hill branch of her and my socialist group, the League for Socialist Action/Ligue Socialiste Ouvrière. The work of these Richmond Hill comrades expanded northwards, and soon they set up a sister branch in Orillia. Branches of the LSA/LSO were also formed at that time in Kitchener, Hamilton, St. Catharines, and Sudbury. For a moment, in the early 1970s, it seemed that the Richmond Hill example could be replicated across Canada.

Photo: Bea Bryant c. 1995

While community-focused in her activity, Bea was global in outlook and internationalist in thought and action. She was modest and respectful in political discussion, but stubborn in asserting her views. Widely respected in the LSA/LSO she was elected in 1970 to its leading body, the Toronto-based Political Committee. Two years later, she helped turn the organization around on a central strategical question.

A controversy on Canadian nationalism

There was broad resentment in Canada at that time against U.S. imperialism abroad and perceived U.S. domination of Canada’s economic and cultural life. This approach was not widespread among Québécois and aboriginal peoples, who faced oppression by the Canadian state., but was more common in the rest of the country. The left-wing “Waffle” caucus in the NDP won wide support in the party for an “independent socialist Canada.”

In 1972, the majority of the LSA/LSO central leadership became convinced that anti-U.S. nationalism in Canada was progressive, and a statement to that effect was proposed in the Political Committee.

I was in Europe on assignment at that time, but I can well imagine how this motion would grate on Bea Bryant. An internationalist by conviction, she was also of Métis ancestry and had been raised a

francophone Catholic in the province of Louis Riel. She was well aware how Canadian flag-waving was utilized against working people and oppressed minorities.

Breaking with the LSA/LSO's strong tradition of consensus voting, Bea voted almost alone against the pro-nationalist motion. In the months that followed, her position came to be adopted by the majority of the membership. (For documents of this discussion, see Socialist History Project, "The Debate on Canadian Nationalism, 1968-1973.")

Rural activism

When I moved to New York in 1983, I lost contact with Bea and George Bryant. Three years later, the Bryants left Richmond Hill and moved to Dealtown, near Blenheim, Ontario, where they were close to their son David and his family. We re-established contact soon after my return to Toronto in 1994.

I found Bea and George well integrated into the radical activity of their rural region. They were in touch with leftists in nearby Chatham, frequent visitors to socialists in Detroit, and partisans of a local First Nation seeking to recover a portion of their ancestral land. They remained, as always, strong supporters of Cuba and frequent visitors there.

Bea tended an ambitious vegetable garden on raised plots of earth constructed by George for more comfortable cultivation. Bea had always been an outspoken environmentalist and urban farmer, even back in the sixties when most socialists showed little interest in these question.

She remained always a supporter of the Communist League, a successor group of the LSA, including in 2003 when the CL inexplicably turned its back on demonstrations against the U.S. war in Iraq war. Bea spoke with pride, at that time, of her ongoing role in the anti-war committee in Chatham.

Farmer radicalism in the 1930s

In 1999 Bea talked to me in some detail of how she came to the socialist movement and showed me some records of her long life.

Born Beatrice Lafreniere, Bea belonged to a large family farming near the Pembina Hills in southern Manitoba. The farm was very poor, and in the Depression years of Bea's childhood it was in constant danger of foreclosure. The impoverished farmers "would sit around my family's kitchen table and discuss all kinds of political ideas," Bea told me. Her father was briefly attracted to the Social Credit movement, which then promised to defend farmers against big business. "And there was a lot of interest in the Soviet Union," Bea added. Listening to these discussions "gave me a social conscience; I knew there was something wrong with capitalism."

Family tradition had it that the Lafrenieres were descended from a bastard son of a king of France, settled on land in Normandy where there was a grove of ash trees (frênes), and that they were among the first French settlers in Quebec. Family research in Bea's lifetime could not confirm the bit about the king, but the rest of the story proved to be true. A scythe on the Lafrenieres' Manitoba farm was authenticated as having been manufactured in Normandy in the 1600s.

There were much stronger influences on the Lafreniere family than that of the apocryphal French king. Bea's mother was a refugee from war-torn Belgium. Her French-speaking family endured Manitoba's banning of French at school or in government. They had links to the culture of indigenous and Métis peoples suppressed after the 1885 Riel rebellion. Radicalism was rampant among Prairie farmers. Her family resented the arrogance of the Catholic church hierarchy and

simultaneously suffered from bias against Catholics. At one point Bea was obliged to sign up with a Protestant denomination in order to get a teaching job.

Eight years of public school plus a work-study high-school education in a convent brought Bea qualification as a primary school teacher, her profession until retirement. Along the way, Bea grabbed opportunities to broaden her scope. During the Second World War she enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force and was posted to Newfoundland. After demobilization, she utilized veterans' benefits to attend art college in Toronto. She then committed her personal savings to pay her passage to Europe, at a time when such trips were extremely rare among young working-class people in Canada. She worked for three years as a governess and teacher in France and England and travelled in Morocco.

First steps as a socialist

After returning to Toronto, Bea said, "I decided in 1952 to join the Communist Party of Canada (CP)." That took courage. Hatred of "Communism" was widespread at the time, impelled not only by Cold War hysteria but also by revulsion at Stalin's crimes against the Soviet people. "This was the McCarthy time," Bea said. "We carried a petition on street corners against the bomb. I went to cell meetings - very undercover!" She recalled the CP as "very strong" at the time, holding a rally of several thousand in Toronto's Massey Hall to hear the "Red Dean of Canterbury," the pro-Soviet and anti-war cleric Hewlett Johnson.

Canada was at war at the time in Korea, and Bea wondered "why the CP never had a demonstration against the Korean War." The CP spoke out against the war, but "people in the CP said they did not want to do anything, because things would work out so well in the Soviet Union that people would want to copy that. They said that all we needed was peace."

At one CP public meeting, Bea said, "I was having some differences and stood up to give my point of view. My CP friends on each side pushed me down and told me I was not to speak. That did it. I figured this was not the place for me. So I decided I would live my own life and forget about politics."

Partnership with George Bryant

Although unaffiliated to any church, Bea enjoyed a good time, and in January 1956 she went to a square dance at St. Andrews United Church - as it happens, the church I personally attended at that time. It was there that Bea locked eyes with George Bryant. They hit it off right away. "I learned he was opposed to capitalism but also to the political system of the Soviet Union. That was more or less the conclusion I had come to," she said. Bea hoped George would propose, and after six weeks, he did. They were married in St. Andrews in June.

George, a railway worker, was a long-time activist in the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), predecessor of today's NDP. He was also part of the Trotskyist group in Toronto that later became the LSA. After a time, Bea joined the group and attended some of its meetings - "though not too often because of the baby" - her newly born son, David.

"George was a feminist, even then, and felt I had as much right to get into politics as he had. In the branch, the attitude to me was good. I spoke when I had something to say. I was listened to respectfully."

Bea took part in the work of the Trotskyist group, then called the Socialist Educational League (SEL), in support of the CCF project to form a new party. She joined the SEL in 1957 and endorsed

its efforts to root the New Party strongly in the unions and win it to a socialist course. The New Party's founding convention in 1961 added the word "Democratic" while turning away from a socialist course.

Encounter with revolutionary Cuba

At about that time, Bea drew inspiration from a trip to revolutionary Cuba:

"George and David and I went for two months - a very exciting time. We went to the 26th of July demonstration, with peasants coming in from all over Cuba in trucks. They were receiving deeds to the land. Fidel spoke for hours, teaching people about the revolution. Cuba had been declared a socialist society, and he explained that. There was great enthusiasm everywhere, though you found some people that were upset.

1961 was the year of education. We stayed at a hotel in Havana that had just been taken over by the workers. There was a sign on the hotel, 'Free territory of Cuba.' It was filled with *brigadistas* (young Cuban participants in the great literacy campaign), with their little lanterns, going out to teach in the countryside.

When we came back I gave a talk on Cuba. That was my first such talk. That was a public forum with quite a few people there, organized by the Fair Play for Cuba Committee."

Bea became a leading figure in the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, winning supporters in Richmond Hill. This activity helped lay the basis for her and George to found the Richmond Hill Committee to End the War in Vietnam.

During her long life, Bea travelled widely both geographically and in terms of social experience and political engagement. Always she radiated a spirit of friendship, loyalty, and deep humanistic commitment. Throughout her ninety years she remained true to the commitment to social justice that she first heard expressed during her childhood by impoverished neighbours around her farmhouse table.

Bea came on her own to Marxism, a commitment renewed and deepened by her encounter with the LSA/LSO and with revolutionary Cuba. An audacious organizer in her working-class community, she also help lead efforts to build a revolutionary Marxist organization - a combination that speaks to the challenge of our times.

John Riddell

P.S.

• John Riddell. MARXIST ESSAYS AND COMMENTARY. March 19, 2018:
<https://johnriddell.com/2018/03/19/a-life-for-socialism-bea-bryant-1922-2006/>