

Vernon Stevens, long time working class fighter for Trotskyism, dies at age 82

Shannon Jones
24 September 2024

It is with sadness that we report the death of comrade Vernon Stevens, a long-time member and supporter of the Socialist Equality Party and its predecessor, the Workers League. Vernon died of cancer on September 19 in Dayton, Ohio, at age 82. The SEP extends condolences to Vernon's friends, family and comrades. He is survived by brother Robert and sisters Patricia, Eulaine and Yvonne.

Vernon, a long-time resident of Dayton, had been in declining health for several years, but he continued to follow political developments and participate in discussions with SEP comrades. His decline in health was accelerated when he recently contracted COVID at a health care facility due to the official abandonment of all mitigation measures.

Vernon first met the party in 1988, when he was a bus driver for the Dayton Regional Transit Authority and a member of the Amalgamated Transit Union.

Vernon soon joined the Workers League, the forerunner of the SEP. The late 1980s was a period of intense class battles in the US amid an escalating global offensive against jobs, wages and living standards as the ruling class abandoned any semblance of reformist policies and adopted a program of class warfare. In the face of this, the trade unions, which had previously functioned as defensive organizations, became direct accomplices in the attacks on the working class. Time and again, strikes were isolated and betrayed by the trade union bureaucracies.

Since the early 1970s, Dayton had been an important center of the political activity of the Workers League, and the party won an important base of support among industrial workers. Supporters of the Workers League, including General Motors worker Jim Lawrence, constructed a faction of the Trade Union Alliance for a Labor Party at the GM Delco Moraine plant, where Vernon's brother was also employed.

In 1974, Jim Lawrence and another party member John Austin received 20 percent of the vote in an election for president and vice president at UAW Local 696. Both ran as socialist opponents of the pro-capitalist United Auto Workers bureaucracy. The Workers League and its newspaper the *Bulletin* were well known among GM workers and other sections of workers in Dayton.

The many cases of collusion by the unions in open strike-breaking, wage-cutting and the destruction of millions of industrial jobs were critical experiences analyzed by the Workers League and the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement. The ICFI analyzed the impact of globalization on the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union, the labor parties in Europe and the AFL-CIO in the United States. Out of these experiences, the world party drew the conclusion that the unions had

undergone a fundamental degeneration and transformation and could no longer be considered "workers' organizations." The Workers League therefore later withdrew its demand for the formation of a labor party based on the trade unions.

One seminal event during that period that Vernon often mentioned was the strike by Hormel meatpackers in Austin, Minnesota in 1985-1986. In 10 months of militant struggle, Hormel workers rejected concessions, organized mass picketing, and defied court injunctions and National Guard troops sent by Democratic Governor Rudy Perpich. The strike was crushed by their own union, the United Food and Commercial Workers. The UFCW revoked the charter of the local union and formed a new local based on the strikebreakers.

Born in 1941 into a working class family, Vernon grew up in Dayton. His father worked as a custodian at Dayton Tire and Rubber. His sister Pat recalled, "There were three boys and three girls. We grew up in a three room apartment house. When Vernon was 12, we moved into the first integrated neighborhood in the city, and Vernon had to go to another school. After he got out of school his daddy told him, 'It is time for you to get a job or go into the military.' He didn't find a job, so he went with four of his friends to join the Army, but they ended up being sent to the Air Force. He was stationed in Lackland, New York."

She said, "He loved photography. He did weddings and children. He didn't have kids, but he was like a dad to kids in our family."

After getting out of the service, Vernon met a Canadian woman and lived for a period of time in Montreal. He then moved to New York City, where he worked as a cab driver. Later, he secured a job at Dayton transit and worked as a bus driver until his retirement.

Like many cities in the industrial Midwest, Dayton was devastated by the process of deindustrialization in the 1980s. The city had been a center of manufacturing since before the Civil War, when it built rail cars for the union war effort. After World War II, it was a center of the GM empire and home to scores of other manufacturing facilities, such as Frigidaire and National Cash Register.

Dayton also had a long history of militant working class struggles. The Stalinist American Communist Party had a major presence among industrial workers in Dayton in the 1930s and 1940s. Through their trade unions, workers had won real improvements in their standard of living.

Today, almost nothing is left of manufacturing except some concrete slabs or low-wage sweatshops. The city's neighborhoods are plagued by the ongoing opioid epidemic.

Like many militant African-American workers, Vernon had been exposed to the politics of black nationalism and Stalinism. This author recalls that one of the very first questions Vernon raised in a visit I

made to his house was about the class nature of Cuba and the role of such demagogues as the Reverend Jesse Jackson, who promoted racial politics and illusions that the imperialist Democratic Party could be pressured to carry out an agenda of social reform.

Coming out of such discussions, Vernon began reading and studying, with the assistance of comrades, the *Revolution Betrayed*, Trotsky's brilliant analysis of the class nature of the Soviet Union and the bureaucratic and nationalist degeneration of the Bolshevik Party under the leadership of Stalin, based on the anti-Marxist theory of "Socialism in One Country."

The International Committee of the Fourth International was the only political tendency that understood correctly the political significance of the program of Glasnost and Perestroika being carried out at that time in the Soviet Union. The party warned that far from seeking to reform the Soviet state, the Soviet bureaucracy headed by Gorbachev was preparing the final betrayal of the October Revolution and, unless halted by the working class, would liquidate the workers' state.

In 1988, the year that Vernon joined the party, the ICFI published the perspectives document, *The World Capitalist Crisis and the Tasks of the Fourth International*, which assessed the significance of capitalist globalization. It traced the betrayals of the old working class parties and trade union organizations witnessed in every country to the bankruptcy of nationalist and reformist programs under the impact of fundamental changes in world economy.

This groundbreaking analysis drew on the lessons of the 1985-86 split with the Workers Revolutionary Party, then the ICFI section in Britain. The ICFI traced the abandonment of Trotskyist principles by the British WRP under the leadership of Gerry Healy, Mike Banda and Cliff Slaughter to the party's increasingly nationalist focus, separating the building of the party in Britain from the fight to build the world movement.

What distinguished Vernon from many of his contemporaries who became discouraged and disoriented by the defeats suffered by the working class in that period was his willingness to patiently work through the theoretical, historical and political experiences contained in these seminal events. In fact, Vernon later explained, his determination to understand what was happening by studying the works of Lenin and Trotsky impelled him to improve his limited reading skills under the encouragement, in particular, of Comrade Lou Renfrow.

When speaking of his experiences, Vernon often talked about his time in New York City and the influence of the Black Panthers. What attracted him to the Workers League, he said, was that it opposed the black nationalism of the Panthers and emphasized the central role of the working class in the struggle against capitalism.

On joining the party, Vernon became active in interventions in the ongoing struggles of the working class. One of the initial party interventions in which Vernon participated was the strike by General Electric Aircraft workers in Evendale, Ohio, south of Dayton. After a bitter eight-week strike, 7,000 members of the United Auto Workers and International Association of Machinists were saddled with a contract that drastically slashed the number of job classifications, gutting working conditions at the giant facility.

The Workers League won a very powerful response from workers with its call for a rebellion against the UAW and IAM bureaucracies, which were betraying the strike, as well as its call for a break with the Democratic Party and the formation of a labor party to advance the fight for workers' interests based on a socialist program.

In the following years, Vernon conducted a principled political struggle in his local of the Amalgamated Transit Union, exposing the right-wing politics of the bureaucracy. He also assisted Comrade Jim Lawrence and other comrades in interventions at the Delco Moraine plant in Dayton, where Jim was employed. This included an intervention in the 1996 17-day strike at Delco Moraine. That same year, he supported the campaign of Jim Lawrence, who ran for Congress as a candidate of the Workers League in Dayton.

Vernon campaigned very actively to place the Socialist Equality Party on the Ohio ballot in the 2004 presidential election, where Jim Lawrence stood as the SEP candidate for vice president along with the party's presidential candidate Bill Van Auken. Despite collecting nearly 10,000 signatures, the party was denied ballot status in the state after a reactionary and undemocratic court ruling.

Vernon would travel regularly to the party center in Detroit to take part in meetings and party schools. He also participated in online educationals and discussions, where he shared his experiences with younger SEP members. He had particularly enjoyed working with Comrade Lou Renfrow in setting up literature tables and speaking to students at local colleges, including at Wright State University in Dayton.

Comrade Phyllis Steele, who also worked with him, recalled, "Vernon was a very serious political person. He came regularly to our branch meetings and stayed in touch even after he became sick. He was principled and always explained the role of Stalinism and the trade union bureaucracy during meetings and educationals.

"In 2014, 22-year-old John Crawford III was shot and killed by police at a Walmart right outside of Dayton. As soon as it happened, we called Vernon to see what he knew about it. He explained how much the area had changed in a generation. He knew the area extremely well and followed developments closely."

Vernon remained politically active until 2019, when declining health compounded by the impact of the pandemic reduced his involvement. But he continued to support the party financially and to discuss political developments with comrades.

My last conversation with Comrade Vernon was several weeks ago. He remained alert and politically engaged and was encouraged by the success of the SEP in placing its candidates Joseph Kishore and Jerry White on the ballot in Michigan.

Once he joined the Trotskyist movement, Vernon never wavered in his defense of the socialist and internationalist principles. The assimilation of these great ideas by workers is an indispensable precondition for their victory in the coming revolutionary battles.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)