

Ian MacDonald: Class Warrior, Marxist-Humanist (1957-2009)

London Corresponding Committee

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Ian MacDonald, a leading contributor to *The Hobgoblin*, has died from cancer, aged 52. As Unison lead convenor for Surrey, Ian made a video for his trade union colleagues from his hospital bed, with solidarity greetings on the ongoing struggles in children's services. "But at the moment," he said "I've got my own fight; I wish you the utmost the very best and in yours." Days later Ian lost the fight.

When, in 2004, Ian joined the London Corresponding Committee – the British Marxist-Humanist organization – he was no stranger to left-wing politics. Politically, during the final years of the old Cold War politics, Ian never saw any contradiction in opposing both Stalinism and capitalism; as a militant young shop steward in a west London engineering factory in the early 1980s, he caused consternation among Communist Party union officials by distributing Polish Solidarnosc badges to fellow workers. As a revolutionary socialist, he spent some years, first in the Socialist Workers Party, and then in the British affiliates of the Fourth International, finally leaving them (and the Blairised Labour Party) in 1996. In the changed world of post-communist globalisation Ian increasingly began to question the vanguardism of the Trotskyist left. At the turn of the century he was introduced to Marxist-Humanism by Chris Ford, one of the founding editors of *The Hobgoblin* (now with *The Commune*).

By the time Ian joined the Corresponding Committee he had been working as a social worker for some years at Surrey County Council, in the difficult field of child protection. In 2005, newly married to his beloved Carol and happily ensconced in leafy Horsham, Ian had decided he wanted to leave social work; partly because he found the job stressful, but also because he wanted to do more studying and political/philosophic work. As preparation for a change to part-time employment he retrained as an electrician (a previous profession of his) and passed his electrical exams. But when, in 2006, Surrey County Council decided to restructure services and sack elements of the workforce whilst

increasing workloads for hundreds of staff, Ian decided there was a union struggle there to be fought which had to come first.

In early 2006 the Unison branch's annual general meeting mandated officers to call a ballot for industrial action if job losses were threatened. But when it came to the crunch the branch union leadership ignored their mandate. In response Ian called a number of meetings to discuss the issues and organise a fight back. With staff in social services spontaneously organising against the cuts, Ian challenged the existing Unison leadership, who were duly voted out at a branch committee. The result was a new leadership, with Ian as branch secretary, elected on a platform of fighting against cuts and job losses.

In an article for Hobgoblin Ian related his philosophic perspective to this particular struggle very concretely:

“The nature of union organisation was and is a combination of individual representation and collective action. The branch has discussed what are, in essence, philosophical and political questions; of how to fight back and involve staff as subjects, rather than objects. This has meant representing members' individual concerns and linking them in practice toward collective action to defend members who are sacked. It also has a future perspective in planning for further attacks on staff and services by means of further cuts and outsourcing. Traditionally, the Left has had a rather negative stance towards casework. This has meant that the wishes of individuals cannot be addressed in the first place and therefore the link never made with the possibility of collective action. The dialectic between initial 'selfish' and then collective actions to meet both individual and collective need is never resolved. The leadership of the branch is not a vanguard leadership that has set itself the task of being consciously two steps in front of the workers and taking them through transitional steps so that their eyes can be opened. Instead, this is a leadership that involves elements of the class who are at different levels but spontaneously organising to defend themselves as individuals and as a class.”

After attending the Unison national conference in July 2007 Ian wrote:

“What is needed in Unison and across other public sector unions is a public sector alliance which is based on the struggles of rank and file members and integrated with a study of Marxist ideas that are concrete to the lives of workers who are being sacked on a daily basis, outsourced and having their real wages cut. It is vital that workers study Marxist ideas and learn from their own struggles and other struggles internationally, so that they can form a concept of a free socialist society and what the nature of that society would be. It is important that this can happen without pre-established 'lines' drawn up by vanguard

organisations and that workers think for themselves by studying original texts and not just the summaries of any particular central committee member.”

In December 2008 government Ofsted inspectors, investigating the failure of Child Protection Services in the north London borough of Haringey to protect an at-risk child (‘Baby Peter’), revealed that managers of Child Protection Services had been able to “hide behind” false data to earn themselves a good rating from inspectors just weeks after Peter’s death in 2007. Shortly afterwards Ian was contacted by the BBC Panorama production team who were researching childcare issues in Haringey, and in Surrey, where the Council had just received a miserable one-star rating with regard to its safeguarding of children’s services and the ability of its senior management to implement the necessary changes. Ian later appeared in the program along with four social workers who were interviewed anonymously.

Ian recalled:

“When I was interviewed by Panorama’s Alison Holt, we started to discuss the general problem of doing good social work, whilst not being able to critically evaluate a potential grave risk to a child because of the pressure to do paperwork and go on to the next job. In essence I tried to put a broad-brush argument for quality versus quantity, which at last is being debated in a limited fashion in the national media.”

Ian made a number of points that didn’t get into the final edit.

“I made the point at the end of the interview that the real issue here is, ‘what type of society do we want?’ If we really want to protect children then we have to look seriously at the resource implications which show that funding for social care is minuscule compared to education funding and poses the question: does the present type of society really care about protecting children or does it care about being seen to be doing just enough and blaming hard-pressed staff when something goes wrong?”

Ian’s approach to radical politics combined realism and idealism in a unique way. He had no illusions about the awesome challenge of building a philosophically-based alternative to capitalism; and he fully believed in the power of ideas to overturn the world. For him, grappling with Hegel’s Phenomenology of Mind and Raya Dunayevskaya’s Philosophy and Revolution, or fighting the machinations of management and right-wing union bureaucrats were part of the same struggle; he didn’t separate his personal philosophic development from building a new Left for the 21st century.

U.S. Marxist-Humanists

He fought managers and bureaucrats without rancour or personal vendetta. Within the Left he fought the battle of ideas in a comradely manner, with respect for his opponents, but without ever compromising his principles. He will be remembered by friend and foe alike. For his Marxist-Humanist comrades he remains unforgettable. We extend our deepest sympathy to Ian's wife Carol, his family, colleagues and friends.

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