

John Sullivan (1932-2003)

HIS MANY friends and admirers were deeply shocked to learn of the death of John Sullivan from a heart attack whilst bathing in the sea on holiday in Spain. His death, followed only weeks later by that of Walter Kendall, creates a yawning gap in the dwindling band of independent thinking socialist historians whose life experience prevented them from being stifled by academe.

John began life in a poor Glasgow Irish working class family and followed an apprenticeship in engineering. Since national service still continued, he refused to serve in the army, but went into the merchant marine instead. This was the time when the grants system (of blessed memory) first allowed substantial numbers of working class youth to attend university, and he did his first degree as a mature student at the LSE, where he met his wife Palmira, whose deep socialist roots and quiet dignity formed an ideal counterweight to his mischievous and iconoclastic sense of humour. The LSE in those days was a bubbling cauldron of socialist thinking and agitation, and it could be said that there was something almost automatic in John's adherence to Marxism – not the stale Marxism of Stalinism (though he had briefly been in the YCL in Glasgow) but the livelier Marxism of the emerging Trotskyist movement.

Some of it could be described as all too lively. And a brief spell in Gerry Healy's Socialist Labour League convinced him that this organisation could hardly be regarded as contributing to human emancipation, whatever else it aimed at. He then spent some time with Ken Weller in Solidarity, a group inspired by, the ideas of the French group Socialisme ou Barbarie, which was bringing out some of the most thought-provoking and innovative literature ever seen on the British left. But challenging as its message was, its organisational forms were too limited to exert much influence on the massively structured British labour movement, and John left to join the International Socialists, writing a revealing critique along with his friend Tom Hillier, *Solidarity Forever?*

The IS, by that time several hundreds strong, then contained a wide spectrum of socialist views, from the libertarian thinking of Peter Sedgewick through the state capitalist views of Tony Cliff to the more conventional Trotskyist ideas of Workers Fight (the modern Alliance for Workers Liberty). But this was not to last. The defeat of the trade union movement in the seventies and the stranglehold of anti-trade union legislation that inevitably followed had a stifling impact upon all the left. The IS

reverted to the more familiar defensive forms of toytown Bolshevism, and by 1976 had changed its name to the Socialist Workers Party. John left the IS in 1975, joining the revolt led by Jim Higgins, Harry Wicks and others to set up the Workers League, but it lacked ideological cohesion, and soon foundered.

Organisations come and go, but life and thought flow on. By then John had become a WEA organiser and moved to Bristol, in the meantime undertaking his pioneering study of Basque nationalism, which brought him more recognition in Spain than it did in Britain. He continued to make valuable contributions to our knowledge of the rich revolutionary traditions of the Spanish working class, marked by enviable accuracy and down to earth analysis, as well as translating articles for *Revolutionary History* and even entire books (such as Manuel Grossi's *The Asturian Uprising* for Socialist Platform). At the time of his death he had all but finished a collection of the best of the theoretical writings of Nin's Communist Left from the 1930s which has been left to Reiner Tosstorff and Andy Durgan to complete.

But books and paper, however learned, can never contain the essence of a man. However committed he was to ideas, John remained an activist above all, still agitating against the occupation of Iraq the week before he went on holiday. The Chilean community in Bristol still warmly remember the help he gave them when they fled the bloodbath of Pinochet's coup. But what marked John above all were his transparent honesty, his playfulness and his irreverent sense of humour. Socialists in Bristol learned to be on their guard at the number of fictitious organisations he set up to mock their shibboleths and eccentricities, which many attempted to join in the belief that they were authentic. And his sharp, though affectionate, skits on the left, such as *As Soon as this Pub Closes...*, are now rare and much sought-after items. This pamphlet in particular has a unique quality, in that all who read it laugh heartily at what he says about the other organizations, only to become deeply indignant when they come to his descriptions of their own. Copy after copy was stolen by the honourable members from the House of Commons Library, which was obliged to order two batches of them.

"He was my friend, faithful and just to me." Those of us who were privileged to know him can only wonder that so much was contained in one person.

Al Richardson