

Goodbye, Big Red Mike

August 10, 2022



Michael Hirsch was my best friend. I lost him on December 16, 2021, almost a year after I'd lost another socialist mentor, Leo Panitch. It was a punch to the gut, and I still feel it.

Mike and I first met in 2000 at the Socialist Scholars Conference (precursor to the Left Forum) in New York. At the time I was fairly new to the left, and New York City, and the NYC left. Mike was one of the first people I'd ever met in person with a long labor background who'd been both a rank-and-file dissident (in the United Steelworkers) and a staff member (as a writer for the United Federation of Teachers newspaper). We got along quite well. I was already a *New Politics* (NP) subscriber and he encouraged me to write for the journal. I did. By 2004 he invited me onto the editorial board. I joined. I remained there for the next 16 years.

I can't claim that NP editorial meetings were always a blast — such isn't true, I'm sure, for any publication — but I'm glad I stayed on as long as I did and I'm proud of my NP work. For my part, I asked Mike to join Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), which he did, after many years of being an unaffiliated socialist (he'd left the International Socialists in the 1980s). Mainly, I wanted Mike by my side in disputes within DSA, as 95 percent of the time we weren't just on the same page, but finishing each other's sentences. Broadly speaking, we both identified with the tradition represented most eloquently in print by the writings of Hal Draper, though some in the NP milieu thought we'd drifted too far into "social democratic" territory. On the other hand, some in DSA thought we were both too rigidly or orthodoxly Marxist. (You can't please everyone...)

Mike somehow ended up in DSA national leadership for a while right after I'd "retired" from it. I'm glad he continued to play an active role in NYC DSA for as long as he could, in both the Labor branch and the Lower Manhattan branch, where he engaged in excellent political education work. He also became a moderator for the Internet-based news service *Portside*, where he worked with people whose political histories were in the Communist Party USA or the 1970s New Communist Movement, whose political views significantly differed from his own, and yet he generally managed to keep his cool — or so I gather.

Mike was a great writer. I learned a lot from him, both politically and in terms of his writing style, which I've subconsciously imitated for years. (Example: He said of the late economist John Kenneth Galbraith that he "was a decent man who titillated Cambridge's sherry-drinking set by calling himself a socialist. But the closest he ever came to understanding working-class self-activity was watching his plumber snake a drain.") I was very happy when he agreed to write a chapter for my book *Rosa Luxemburg: Her Life and Legacy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). It's my favorite chapter. A typical passage:

"Marxism is not a divining rod or a Ouija board. Projecting possible futures is what makes for horseracing, not science. Still, I'll bet on the prole horses. And why not? Pascal's wager on the existence of a god is based on a cost-benefit analysis. Why not the same wager by capitalism's critics?"

I always enjoyed Mike's demonstrations of his vast knowledge of NYC history — at times it seemed like he knew the lineage of every building. He was also a comics fan dating back to the 1960s, of both superhero comics and underground/art comics, so that was another bond for us, as was our common heritage as secular Jews — something hardly uncommon on the NYC left. There was likewise a large overlap in our musical tastes, and I have fond memories of going with him to see Richard Thompson and Sonny Rollins. I never let him live down the fact that he'd had the chance to see John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, *and* the Velvet Underground, and he blew all of those chances! A shame! A *shanda*!

Despite his admittedly deserved reputation for being cantankerous, if you got to know him it was clear that Mike was a warm, generous guy. Given the sectarian "edge" that still permeates so much of the far left, I wish we had more socialists like him. Put simply, the left would be a much better place if there were more militant, radically democratic intellectuals and class fighters like Michael Hirsch.

I miss him intensely and always will.