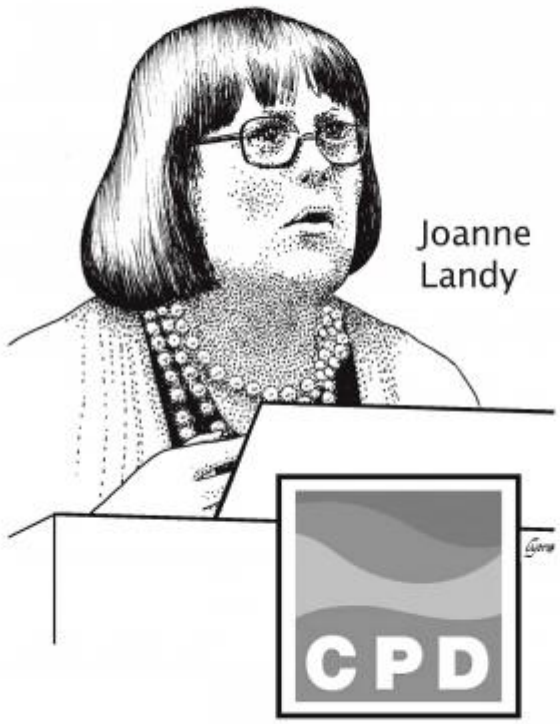
Remembering Joanne

written by Thomas Harrison | February 16, 2018

In June 2017, the *New Politics* editorial board organized an event to honor Joanne Landy. She had been diagnosed almost a year before with stage 4 lung cancer. We all knew her prognosis was very grim and thought it would be a fine thing to show Joanne, while she was still with us, how much she was loved and admired by so many, many people.

The event was splendid, joyous, a great success. About 150 people showed up, and there was a long list of speakers as well as a video sent by a popular Polish rock group, Big Cyc, performing the song "I Disagree!" in Joanne's honor. We knew, as I said, that Joanne probably did not have too long. Meanwhile, however, she was doing well, even with chemotherapy and immunotherapy. She didn't really feel "sick," just tired, and she was able to continue her work with *New Politics* and the Campaign for Peace and Democracy, albeit at a slightly slower pace. So when Joanne was felled by a massive stroke on October 1 and died two weeks later, her friends and comrades were completely stunned.

Now she is gone. Our loss is immeasurable, literally. Perhaps no one is truly irreplaceable, but in my opinion Joanne came pretty close. At the event in June, I began my remarks by paraphrasing something Mary McCarthy wrote in a tribute to Philip Rahv: If no two people are alike, Joanne is less like anybody else than anybody. She was, truly, utterly exceptional. You might find others who are as dedicated, as honest, as empathic, as intellectually gifted, as effective as an organizer; but it would be extremely hard to find anyone who possessed all these qualities in such abundance and so thoroughly integrated.



Joanne's polestar, the guiding light that directed her through the entire course of her life's journey, was something that she, and I, and others in our political tradition, call Third Camp Socialism. The term was invented during World War II and the Cold War by a socialist tendency—the Workers Party, later renamed the Independent Socialist League, led by Max Shachtman—that had developed out of the Trotskyist movement of the 1930s. By the time Joanne came around it in the late 1950s, its leading figures included Hal Draper and Julius and Phyllis Jacobson—the last two being the founders and longtime editors of *New Politics*. Third Camp Socialism meant socialist independence from and revolutionary opposition to the two hostile American and Soviet imperialist camps. It was a way of applying to the contemporary world Marx and Engels's concept of self-emancipation—the insistence that socialism, the emancipation of the working class, the vast majority of society, can only be achieved "from below," by the working class itself. Profoundly anti-authoritarian, Third Camp Socialism has always rejected any kind of accommodation to all the many undemocratic regimes and movements that have tried to cloak their aims in the rhetoric of socialism.

It was a commitment to this vision that Joanne embraced as a teenager and to which she remained loyal for the next 60 years of her life. Joanne was a revolutionary to the marrow of her bones. Far from the bloody-minded "revolutionary" of caricature, she had an almost extreme, visceral abhorrence of violence. Joanne was a revolutionary because she was convinced that no matter how much reform is applied to class societies, ruling elites will continue to hold sway over an oppressed and exploited population until those in power are removed; class societies have to be thoroughly upended and ultimately abolished by conscious, empowered masses. Nothing thrilled her more than the sight of popular movements challenging their rulers through direct action—Occupy Wall Street, the massive Iranian street protests in 2009, the Movement of the Squares in the Arab world, the anti-austerity movement in Greece, the great democratic uprising against the Assad regime in Syria, to take some recent examples. In them, she always saw the potential for revolution and real democracy.

But she was never content to admire and support these movements from afar; insofar as she could, Joanne had to be part of them, had to be on the scene and in their midst. In the 1970s, she went to Portugal during the revolution and to Brazil under the military dictatorship to visit the jailed leader of the steelworkers union and later founder of the Workers Party and president of the country, Luis Ignacio da Silva—Lula. She traveled to Poland several times in the 1980s and early 90s, befriending leaders and rank and filers in Solidarity; to Czechoslovakia to stand with Charter 77; to East Germany, Hungary, and the Soviet Union to meet with dissidents; to Greece on several occasions, where she and I attended Syriza's founding convention. While vacationing in Rome at the time of Occupy Wall Street, Joanne spotted an Occupy demonstration. Hopping off her bus, she managed to create a handmade placard and with it marched up to the speakers' platform to deliver greetings and solidarity.

If Joanne couldn't make it to where the main action was, she did everything she could from her base in New York. When a group of young Iranians formed Havaar: Iranian Initiative Against War, Sanctions, and State Repression, Joanne "showed up." In a tribute written right after Joanne's death, Havaar members recalled that she "came to play a unique and invaluable role in our organization. She was among the most consistent of our members, rarely missing a meeting or event, despite her age and declining health." They went on,

Even though her age made her a contemporary of many of our parents, she fit in easily with our group, with her combination of political seriousness, lightheartedness, and humor. She celebrated birthdays with us, grieved with us, and danced with us. She somehow knew exactly how much and when to weight in and to step back, utilizing her vast experience to gently guide us and support us in leading and shaping the organization.

Joanne was a true socialist intellectual. At the event in June, we presented her with a bound volume containing most of her writings—articles, statements, op-ed pieces, leaflets, and other items. It came to 375 pages. But she was also a woman of action—of demonstrations and rallies, petitions, conferences. As an activist, an organizer, she had few if any peers. Joanne was indefatigable in publicizing the plight of political prisoners and persecuted dissidents everywhere from Iran to Chile, Communist Poland, Egypt, and other countries all over the map. The big sign-on statements that she organized, many of which appeared as paid ads in *The New York Times*, the *New York Review of Books*, *The Nation*, and other publications, offered solidarity and some measure of hope to the repressed, hope stemming from the realization that hundreds of peace and social justice activists, many quite prominent, stood with them and spoke out against their tormentors. Joanne could be relied on to show up at the tiniest demonstration. And she could pull together an intrepid band of protestors to confront officials in person at the consulates of repressive regimes. There was nobody like her.

After 1980 Joanne's life took a major turn in response to the simultaneous emergence of the mass movements against nuclear weapons in the United States and Western Europe, and Solidarity in Poland. Suddenly she, like many others from the independent socialist tradition, could see a real embodiment of the Third Camp ideal beginning to appear. It was a heady time. It looked like a common struggle reaching across the Cold War divide was possible, a struggle against the placement of American cruise missiles on European soil and against dictatorship in the Soviet bloc. Joanne saw it as her mission to help make that commonality real, to build links between progressives and peace activists in the West and movements for workers' rights and democracy in the East.

In the summer of 1981, Joanne flew to Poland. "I went to Solidarnosc headquarters," she said,

and it reminded me instantly of our days in Berkeley and the Free Speech Movement [of 1964]. There was a kind of delicious chaos of people having meetings on every floor of this building that

they had taken over. On one floor there were intellectuals, in another place would be steelworkers. It was just a beehive of activity of people who were disenfranchised but asserting their power through their self-organization.1

Joanne's visit had a special poignancy: Back in 1965, as a member of the Independent Socialist Club in Berkeley, she had led protests against the imprisonment of Jacek Kuron and Karol Modzelewski, co-authors of *The Open Letter to the Party,* which condemned the bureaucratic ruling class in Poland and called for workers' democracy; it was first published in English by *New Politics.* Kuron and Modzelewski were two of Solidarity's leading figures.

In 1982 Joanne got together with Gail Daneker, a veteran peace activist and radical Green, to set up the Campaign for Peace and Democracy/East and West.2 The Campaign was always small, never a membership organization, but it was able to punch far above its weight. It never defined itself as socialist; as Joanne put it, "we were radical democrats who opposed the elite-driven foreign policy of the United States and supported social justice, democracy, and freedom from great-power domination everywhere."3 Arguing that supporting struggles for democratic rights in the Soviet bloc would actually strengthen the anti-war movement in the United States—rather than "play into the hands of U.S. imperialism," as many on the left had always insisted—Joanne and the Campaign persuaded the major U.S. peace groups to reach out to dissidents in the East. By the same token, prominent Russian, Polish, Czech, Hungarian, and East German oppositionists were enlisted to sign statements condemning U.S. policy in Nicaragua and Chile. During the subsequent decade, Joanne paid frequent visits to Eastern Europe, while working closely with the newly formed German Greens, at that stage an anti-establishment alliance of radical pacifists and environmentalists led by Petra Kelly, and with European Nuclear Disarmament (END) and its outstanding spokesperson, the great historian E. P. Thompson.

Tragically, however, the 1980s was also a deeply conservative decade, in which neoliberalism acquired an almost hegemonic position internationally. Despite the tremendous support with which they began, END and the U.S. Freeze Movement were eventually defeated, and the politics of Thatcherism and Reaganism triumphed. By the latter part of the decade, Joanne was uncomfortably aware that many Soviet bloc dissidents were moving toward embracing the economics of the Chicago School and the politics of NATO. They had begun on the left, and Joanne hoped that Solidarity, Charter 77, and other movements in the East would champion pro-working-class policies, such as democratizing nationalized property rather than privatizing it. So when 1989 came, Joanne's elation at the collapse of authoritarian Communism in Europe quickly gave way to deep disappointment, as the region was swept by a wave of brutal shock therapy programs. As a result, she began to write and speak prolifically in opposition to the neoliberal frenzy that had overtaken the former Soviet bloc and enriched the erstwhile nomenklatura while immiserating the mass of citizens.

This is not the place to summarize Joanne's long career, especially because Aaron Amaral provides such an excellent account in his article, reprinted from *Socialist Worker* to accompany my piece. Suffice it to say, at this point, that from the 1990s on, Joanne continued to spearhead the work of the Campaign until her death. With the Cold War over, it was no less vita*l to* oppose nuclear weapons and militarism, to demand the withdrawal of U.S. troops and bases from all foreign countries, to support movements of resistance in all authoritarian states, be they friends or enemies of Washington, and to call for international economic aid and development policies based on popular rather than corporate needs.

In this, Joanne never flagged or faltered, never succumbed to despair, despite the countless bleak moments when carrying on might have seemed quixotic at best. As a Marxist, Joanne not only believed that persevering was a moral obligation—with Eugene V. Debs, she might have said, "While

there is a lower class, I am in it, and while there is a criminal element I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free"—but also that it never makes sense to give up because the potential for rebellion is always present, even in the most seemingly unlikely places. When for example, the Arab spring burst forth, Joanne was thrilled, and, like almost everyone else, surprised—but on the other hand, not really surprised. Her response to the smug paladins of order, who assure us ad nauseam that "there is no alternative" to the status quo, was always like Rosa Luxemburg's: "You foolish lackeys! Your 'order' is built on sand. Tomorrow the revolution will rise up again, clashing its weapons, and to your horror it will proclaim with trumpets blazing: I was, I am, I shall be!" This insight was Joanne's touchstone, the fixed point to which she oriented herself analytically and in practice.

For most of her life, Joanne lived modestly, often on a very limited income in cramped rental apartments. But no one could call her unfortunate—save for her untimely and painful demise, of course. Joanne made for herself the life she wanted, a life without compromise, in which she could cultivate her truly enormous talents and have a real impact on people and events. Her playfulness and sense of humor were legendary. Joanne was a *riot*. Our conversations were nearly always punctuated by raucous outbursts of laughter. How often I got off the phone in tears of mirth after talking to Joanne. She had incredible guts, too. I don't think she ever experienced the slightest hesitation in getting up before an audience of hundreds or thousands and speaking her mind. Few, if any, ever succeeded in bullying her.

Also legendary among Joanne's friends was her kindness and generosity. If you came to Joanne asking for advice about a personal problem, she would often devote days of *research* to finding a possible solution. In fact, she would sometimes do this even if you hadn't asked for advice. This was not about her ego, not about wanting to seem important. Joanne couldn't bear to see people suffer, and especially the people she cared about.

I had the immense good fortune to know Joanne—as a comrade, a co-thinker, and an extremely close friend—for more than 50 years. We met soon after I had turned 18 and started out at the University of California, Berkeley. I was listening to a rally in Sproul Plaza, the political agora of the campus, when a tall, thin young woman (although she was six years my senior) with a mass of bushy chestnut hair approached me. She was carrying a piece of cardboard on which were affixed a variety of political buttons produced by the Independent Socialist Club, of which she was a leading member. We got into a conversation, and a few hours later I was recruited. Joanne, incidentally, was the ISC's star recruiter. From that day until her death, hardly a week passed when we did not laugh, fume, commiserate, marvel, even conspire (benignly) together. What else can I say? She was a wonder and an inspiration.

Footnotes

1. Joanne Landy, "Regretting the Region's Right Turn," interview by John Feffer, Huffington Post, April 23, 2013.
2. When the Cold War ended, the "East and West" was dropped.
3.See Kent Worcester, "The Third Camp in Theory and Practice: An Interview with Joanne Landy and Thomas Harrison," forthcoming in Left History. This extensive interview is full of information about Joanne's life and political career.