Sherrl Yanowitz: 1942 – 2016

written by Jonny Jones | July 1, 2016

Sherrl Yanowitz, who has died aged 74, was a lifelong revolutionary socialist and anti-racist fighter.

Sherrl was born Shirley Grosse – she hated the name – on 13 January 1942, in Toledo, Ohio, an industrial city in the US Midwest. Toledo had seen the great Auto-Lite strike of 1934, but Sherrl didn't encounter much in the way of radical politics at home; she later reflected that it had never even been mentioned at school, even though the fathers of some of her schoolmates had likely been involved in the strike. Sherrl's father was Jewish and had moved to the US from Kosice in modern Slovakia; most of his family didn't make it out and were murdered in the Holocaust.

As a seven year old, Sherrl decided to mark Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, by wearing drab clothes. When her grandmother shouted at her to wear something nice because people will see her at the synagogue, she burst into tears and decided that she wasn't interested in a God who only wanted people to show off. Her family were staunch Zionists. Indeed, one of her uncles was an advisor to the fledgling Israeli colonial-settler state. He once hit Sherrl for suggesting there were black Jews as well as white ones. At an early age, Sherrl had embraced the anti-Zionism and anti-racism that would guide her politics throughout her life.

Sherrl rebelled against her family as a teenager, hanging around gay clubs, and visiting Black store-front churches to listen to the singing. She was an avid listener of Black radio stations broadcast from Detroit, less than 60 miles away. Most dramatically, in her mid-teens, she and some friends stole her father's car and drove thousands of miles from Toledo to California along Route 66!

After graduating from high school, she spent a short time at the University of Toledo and then the University of Southern California (USC) in Los Angeles. Whilst at the latter she attended a screening of the notorious propaganda film *Operation Abolition*, which had been produced by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) to undermine student protests at the University of California, Berkeley. As Jo Freeman wrote:

> HUAC saw enormous propaganda value in the student protests and subpoenaed

> television film of the demonstrations. The resulting film, *Operation Abolition*, was made part of HUAC's official report and shown to millions all over the country. Juxtaposing clips of protesting students next to Communists who had been subpoenaed by the Committee, the film said the demonstrations were Communist led and inspired. Operation Abolition put Berkeley on the map as the protest capital of the country; for years to come it attracted politically conscious students to come to where the action was.

Sherrl was one of them, transferring from USC after just a few months, first to Oakland Community College, then to Berkeley itself. Prior to going to college Sherrl had not been involved in politics, though she had been a supporter of JFK. At Berkeley she joined a range of organisations. As Joel Geier, her comrade and a current member of the International Socialist Organisation in the US, remembers, he had known Sherrl:

> since 1963 when we both members of the Berkeley YPSL (Young People's Socialist League) and of Berkeley Campus CORE (Congress of Racial Equality). It was CORE's mobilization of students for sit-ins against racist employers that led to Clark Kerr's attempt to ban student political action, producing the Free Speech Movement, of which Sherrl was a dedicated activist. She was then a militant in the next stage of the 1960s movement, against the Vietnam War and American imperialism. I knew Sherrl in those days as a young, uncompromising fighter against injustice.

She was also a member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), formed by young black activists. During her time in California, Sherrl helped young men fleeing the draft during the Vietnam War to get to Canada, and was involved in organising boycotts in support of Cesar Chavez's National Farm Workers Association.

In 1965 Sherrl married Richard Yanowitz, a red-diaper baby who, like her, was involved with the newly formed Independent Socialist Clubs that met in Hal Draper's living room. In 1967, they decided that the US was turning fascist and decided to leave for Europe once Sherrl completed her degree. In August 1968 they arrived in Paris. They met Richard's uncle, Hy, who had been a member of the French resistance in World War Two and was a friend of Sartre.

On January 13, 1969 they moved to London which would be Sherrl's home for the rest of her life. Her marriage broke up on arrival and Sherrl had to rebuild her life from scratch in a new country. She started writing for Peace News, and covered the Isle of Wight festival in 1970.

Throughout the 1970s Sherrl was heavily involved in the women's liberation movement attending most of the national conferences. In the early 1970s she helped to run a women's centre in South London and was roped into teaching a women's studies course in Tulse Hill school – something she had no training for. Later she was heavily involved in the National Abortion Campaign, particularly in Central London.

In 1974 Sherrl took a job at Dillon's bookstore on Malet Street in London (now Waterstones). The pay was low but workers there supplemented their wages by liberating books. Sherrl initially worked in technical mail order. During this period, the French composer Olivier Messiaen ordered some books on birdsong from the store, which Sherrl sent him without charge with a note telling him she loved his music. The shop was unionised and Sherrl became a keen union member. During a strike at the shop the Communist Party historian Eric Hobsbawm crossed the picket line – buying books came before his solidarity with striking workers.

The International Socialists (the forerunner of the Socialist Workers Party) had several members at the shop who formed a workplace IS branch. One was Noel Halifax who helped recruit her into the IS. Through Noel she met Neil Rogall, another IS member. After Neil was flooded out of the flat he was staying in, he moved in to Sherrl's new rented flat in West Hampstead in the summer of 1975. That December they entered a relationship at the end of the year which lasted for over 40 years.

In 1976 Sherrl became the secretary of the Central London Right to Work campaign, delivering solidarity to the Grunwicks strike along with members of the local Women's' Voice group, and marched from London to Brighton on one of the Right to Work Campaign marches. She was centrally involved in the campaign against a fascist National Front election candidate in Swiss Cottage in 1976, organising everything from leaflets to a jumble sale. When the Anti Nazi League and Rock Against Racism were formed she naturally became deeply involved.

Sherrl had been collecting badges (or buttons as they were known in the US) since her late teens. By the time she left the US, she had a large collection of radical political badges. The rise of punk in the mid 70s saw an explosion of badge wearing, and Sherrl's collection grew dramatically. In the run-up to the Queen's Silver Jubilee in 1977, Sherrl decided to produce a badge to mark the occasion – the now infamous Stuff the Jubilee badge. As Sherrl herself put it in 2011:

> I designed this badge with Neil McFarlane . It was my first badge design. When I ordered 4000 badges from the Universal Button company in Bethnal Green, they sort of laughed at me. The same company had the order for hundreds of thousands of pro-monarchy items. We advertised the badge mainly through a small advert in *Private Eye* and in*Socialist Worker*. The badge became a campaign. In the end we sold over 40,000 badges in less than three months. There were stickers too. and Stuff the Jubilee parties in a number of cities.

She was arrested on Jubilee eve for spray painting anti-Jubilee anti-cuts slogans on the Finchley Road but was released without charge

In 1976 Sherrl began a decade of working as a clerical worker in newspapers on Fleet Street, getting a job in the *Observer* cuttings library. She was an active NATSOPA, later SOGAT 82, union member. She helped to organise Fleet Street against the Nazis, but resigned from the *Observer*after one too many arguments with a co-worker who was going out with a National Front organiser. After coming back from an eight month trip with Neil to South Asia in 1981, she trained as a Pitman's secretary. Working as a temp at the *Times*, she was asked to gather some dirt on Arthur Scargill, leader of the National Union of Mineworkers; Sherrl told her boss to fuck off and resigned on the spot. Later, while working at the *People*, Sherrl was involved in a strike which prompted her to re-join the SWP a number of years after resigning in protest at being called an "anarchist".

Sherrl was a member of the Fleet Street Miners' Support Committee during the Great Miners Strike of 1984-85. The Fleet Street SWP branch was twinned with the pit village of Hemsworth and she and Neil put up miners and miners' wives who were visiting London to raise funds for the strike. When the first miners visited she panicked and called Noel Halifax to ask him "What do you feed miners?" Noel replied "Ask them what they like." It turned out they liked Indian food, which was Neil's speciality. One of the miners came home one night in tears after collecting money at pubs in Kilburn. An ex-soldier who had served in the north of Ireland, he was stunned by the generosity of Irish workers.

In November 1985 Sherrl got a permanent job working for the features editor at the News of the World. Soon afterwards, it was revealed that Rupert Murdoch's News International corporation, which owned the paper, had secretly built a new plant in Wapping with the intention of transferring production and undermining the unions. Sherrl became the face of the SWP during the strike and a leading fighter in the dispute as part of the *News of the World* clerical chapel committee. She attended at least two demonstrations a week over the year long strike and toured the country speaking at strike rallies organised by union branches and the SWP.

Tim Evans recalled:

> In 1986, when the Wapping dispute kicked off, I was branch secretary of NATFHE (now UCU) at Dacorum College, Hemel Hempstead. Since the defeat of the miners the previous year, a sense of demoralisation had gripped much of the trade union movement, including the Dacorum branch. Whenever proposals for industrial action came up, there were always some who argued "If the miners couldn't win, what hope have we?"
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> Although it was a defensive action, and was in essence a lockout, the Wapping dispute showed, I felt, that despite the defeat of the miners, there were key sectors who were still prepared to fight. It was a two-way process – the print workers needed solidarity, and our NATFHE branch needed to see that workers were still fighting, so through the Socialist Workers Party I made contact with print workers who were prepared to come and speak.
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> It was Sherrl who came up. Her speech at our branch meeting was exactly what was needed. Clear, inspiring and humorous, it proved that the assault on the trade union movement could still be resisted. Several NATFHE members were also surprised, and impressed, that a woman was an activist in such a male-dominated industry. The collection at the end raised a decent amount of money, and we began posting regular updates on the progress of the dispute on the NATFHE noticeboard.
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> Several of us also began travelling down to Wapping to join the Saturday night mass pickets to block the fleets of lorries from distributing Murdoch's rags.

Sarah Cox, who was a teacher and National Union of Teachers activist in Brent at the time, remembers inviting Sherrl to speak at a meeting of her branch, which was dominated by the Communist Party:

> I proposed that we invite a speaker from the print dispute to the branch and that speaker was Sherrl. (Because the officers left it to me to convey the invitation). She arrived just before the meeting and sat at the back of the room. When the long winded and boring business of the meeting was concluded, I reminded the chair about the print worker. "You can bring him in now," said the chair to which I replied, "She's here already". Audible intake of breath, but of course Sherrl spoke brilliantly and a donation was agreed. She told me afterwards that ours was the most bureaucratic union branch she had ever been to.

Despite such efforts, the strike was defeated in February 1987. Sherrl was shattered; the campaign

had been physically and emotionally exhausting, especially after the death of her mother in the middle of the strike. She inherited a sizeable amount of money from her mother and decided not to go back to work. She spent the next 15 years taking courses at a number of colleges and universities, many in photography and the visual arts.

Sherrl left the SWP in the mid-1990s but decided to throw herself back into political activity after the 9/11 attacks, attending the founding meetings of the Stop the War Coalition. She helped to organise Newington Green Against the War and was a steward on the enormous protest against the Iraq war on 15 February 2003. She volunteered at the offices of Globalise Resistance and attended a number of European Social Forums, exhibiting her artwork at the London ESF in Alexandra Palace as part of Artists Against the War.

Sherrl was a committed anti-Zionist activist throughout her life. In 1987 she renounced publicly her 'Right to Return' to Israel along with many other anti-Zionist Jews, and was one of the first signatories of Jews for Justice for Palestinians. In the last few years, she became active in the London Palestine Action direct action group, attending pickets of Sabon, an Israeli cosmetics shop in Covent Garden and was involved in the attempt to shut down the Israeli owned arms factory in Shenstone near Birmingham.

During the SWP crisis of 2012-13, Neil became heavily involved in the 'In Defence of Our Party' faction. Around this time, Sherrl began to meet some of the younger members of the party who were involved in the faction and developed friendships with many of them. When hundreds of members left the SWP and formed Revolutionary Socialism in the 21st Century (rs21), Sherrl joined the new group and experienced a political renaissance. As Shanice McBean recalls

> Sherrl and I used to have heated conversations where I'd make sweeping statements such as "feminists in the 60s and 70s didn't care about women of colour". She'd stop me, with her usual matter of fact but loving tone, and remind me of all the working class, socialist and black heroes of feminism for whom it is not the case they never existed, but were just whitewashed from history… In all the conversations we had she was so willing to learn about your experience, as well as offer her own.

Tragically, Sherrl was diagnosed with lung cancer in late April 2016, and died on 2 June. She had spent more than half a century in the heart of the struggle, a contributor to some of the most crucial and inspiring campaigns in the US and Britain. While our movement is diminished by her loss, her inspiration and insights have imbued members of a new generation of revolutionaries with her spirit and tenacity. As Jaz Blackwell Pal puts it:

> The thing that always struck me about Sherrl, apart from her wicked sense of humour, was her complete no-bullshit attitude to life, politics and people. She would cut through the crap in a conversation like a laser, she wasted no time, and everything she said came from passion and conviction. Talking to her was to be reminded of why you were a revolutionary in the first place.

Originally posted here.