

Betsy McDonald: 45-year cadre of Socialist Workers Party

BY BETSEY STONE

LOS ANGELES — A meeting to celebrate the life and political accomplishments of Betsy McDonald was held here Dec. 13. McDonald, a 45-year cadre of the Socialist Workers Party, died Dec. 7 in Tucson, Arizona, at the age of 95. She had been active in SWP branches in Tucson, Phoenix and Los Angeles.

As participants entered they saw a display highlighting events in McDonald's political life, including a message from Isabel Garcia, Guadalupe Castillo and Raquel Rubio-Goldsmith, members of the Coalición de Derechos Humanos in Tucson, which organizes in defense of immigrant workers.

"From our earliest memories of you, protesting the Vietnam War, supporting the Cananea miners when the Grupo Mexico bullies devastated the strong Mexican labor union town, organizing against police abuse, to every action and social movement in Arizona," they wrote, "your image as a fierce fighter for full cultural and economic justice for all will remain with each and every one of us."

Born in 1920, McDonald lived through the hardships of the 1930s Great Depression. During World War II she was in the WAVES, the Navy women's auxiliary. She raised six children.

A collage sent to the meeting by her daughter Jan McDonald included a description by Betsy about how she got involved in working-class struggles in Tucson in the 1950s. "My first political activity was picketing the segregated Pickwick Inn," she recalled. "I finally came to realize that the only thing that could explain that level of racism is that we live in a class society."

"In the 1950s and '60s Betsy earned respect as a fighter in the labor, Black rights, Mexican American and anti-Vietnam War movements," Dave Prince, a member of the Socialist Workers Party's National Committee, told the meeting. "She was a 100 percent. Someone you could count on."

In the late 1960s, McDonald began to work with members of the Socialist Workers Party and Young Socialist Alliance, as the party expanded its work in the Southwest. They included Morris Starsky, a professor at Arizona State University who was a leader in the fight against the Vietnam War, against racism, and active in labor struggles.

Starsky was targeted by the FBI's notorious COINTELPRO operation. The governor of Arizona pressed the Board of Regents to fire Starsky, and they did in June 1970. McDonald joined the fight to get his job back. This became part of



Inset: Militant/Eric Simpson

Betsy McDonald, left, campaigns in defense of Cuban Five at 2013 Tucson Book Fair. Inset, SWP National Committee member Dave Prince speaks at Dec. 13 meeting celebrating McDonald's contributions as a cadre of the Socialist Workers Party for 45 years. "She became convinced working-class revolution is not a dream, but can be reality," Prince said. Others on platform, from left: Dan Fein, Willie Cotton and Ellie García.



the historic Socialist Workers Party lawsuit that exposed and helped push back FBI spying and disruption against political activists and organizations.

In 1968 McDonald campaigned for Socialist Workers Party candidates Fred Halstead for president and Paul Boutelle for vice president.

"Betsy made a political decision in the face of big developments in the class struggle in those years that was to guide her life and conduct from then on," Prince said.

The Southwest at that time was a stronghold of the Communist Party. CP members were active in the unions and many of the organizations and struggles McDonald was part of. They tried to recruit her, Prince said. But she decided to throw in her lot with the SWP.

Confidence in working class

"She chose to build a revolutionary party looking to the example of the Russian Revolution and the Bolshevik party led by Lenin. To have confidence that the working class can take on and win that struggle here, that it's not a dream, but can be a reality," said Prince.

McDonald rejected the CP's support for the capitalist Democratic Party. At the same time she continued to work with everyone she could, including members of the CP, without compromising her principles, Prince said.

In 1978, when the party decided to get the large majority of its members working in industry and carrying out politics based in the working class and industrial unions, McDonald jumped in. She was 58 at the time. The question for her was not if she could do it, but *how* to do it.

With the worldwide capitalist recession in 1974-75 "the capitalists began to attack the unions, seeking to drive down wages and get more production without regard to health and safety on the job," said Joel Britton, organizer of the Socialist Workers Party in Oakland. "And workers resisted."

"It opened up new vistas for waging fights from *within* the unions," Britton said, "in support of the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, protesting cop brutality, opposing imperialist war moves in Central America and the Middle East." There was a political fight in

the SWP over this perspective, he said. An opposition that argued it should not and could not be done was defeated.

"As a union member and as an SWP candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives from Arizona in 1978 and in 1990, Betsy put forward our program — for revolutionary change, for a class-struggle perspective in the unions, for breaking with the parties of the bosses and forging a labor party based on the unions, and in defense of the Cuban Revolution," Britton said.

Ellie García, a member of the party in Los Angeles, chaired the meeting. When the party made its turn to industry, García said, she was working as a farmworker organizer. They won some important victories, and then saw this channeled by the union leadership into support for the Democrats. McDonald convinced her that she should be in the party and its work in industry.

McDonald's first industrial job was at the Reynolds Metals Extrusion Plant in Phoenix, organized by the United Steelworkers. "Betsy always built the party," wrote Josefina Otero, who worked there at the same time, "talking politics, introducing co-workers to the *Militant*, building solidarity at work for strikes and social movements and helping to convince workers to see the SWP as their party."

Dan Fein, SWP candidate for mayor of Chicago in the recent election, described how party members, including himself and McDonald, joined the mass picketing that shut the plant down during the hard-fought Phelps Dodge copper miners strike in 1983. Democratic governor Bruce Babbitt called out the National Guard, armed with tanks, to reopen the plant.

Recruitment of youth

McDonald helped win new members to the Young Socialists and the party. One was Willie Cotton, a student at the University of Arizona and a Navy ROTC member when he first met her.

Cotton described how McDonald organized a campaign in Tucson against the U.S. imperialist war drive after the Sept. 11 attack on the World Trade Center. And she debated with him and won him to see the need to join a party based in the industrial working class.

In 1992, while McDonald was a member of the Los Angeles branch, a social explosion followed the acquittal of cops who brutally beat Rodney King, a 34-year-old African-American. Over four days businesses were set on fire. Cops and troops occupied the area and killed over 50 people, most of them Black and Latino, and arrested 17,000.

The party headquarters was destroyed after flames spread from a shoe store that was targeted. McDonald helped raise funds to rebuild the hall and the Pathfinder bookstore there.

Betsey Stone described the solidarity that poured in, and how the SWP condemned the brutal government response to the anti-cop riot while pointing to the need for disciplined, mass protests of the kind we are seeing today in the movement that is pushing back cop brutality.

While enjoying a tasty buffet, participants studied the displays, including a section on McDonald's work in recent years in the party's print project. Project volunteers turn completed manuscripts into Pathfinder books that the party campaigns with in the working class.

Members of the party, supporters and others from Oakland, San Diego, Seattle, Chicago and New York as well as Los Angeles came to the celebration. Thirty-six people attended. Messages were received and read from the Communist Leagues of Canada and New Zealand and many individuals.

Participants contributed more than \$1,300 to advance the work of the Socialist Workers Party.

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Collage by Jan McDonald includes her mother Betsy's words explaining why she joined civil rights struggle. "That and the Vietnam War are what radicalized me and made me a Marxist," she said. Photos show Betsy with her kids and a young Vietnamese woman and children.