

# *Max Shachtman: His Ideas and His Movement*

Tom Kahn

**Editor's Note:** Max Shachtman (1904-72) was expelled from the Communist Party in 1928 for Trotskyism. He broke with Trotsky in 1939 to found the Workers Party-Independent Socialist League (1940-58). From 1958, he was a leading figure in the Socialist Party, the author of *The Bureaucratic Revolution: The Rise of the Stalinist States* (1962) and an intellectual influence on the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Declaring George McGovern's foreign policy a 'monstrosity,' he leaned towards Senator 'Scoop' Jackson in the 1972 Democratic Party presidential primaries.

Tom Kahn (1938-92) was a 'Shachtmanite.' He played a leading role in organising the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, and served as chief speechwriter to Senator Henry M. Jackson in the early 1970s. From 1986-92 he was Director of the Department of International Affairs at the AFL-CIO. Rachelle Horowitz provides a moving account of his life in this issue of *Democrat*. This previously unpublished tribute to Shachtman was written in 1973 and has been provided by Eric Chenoweth, to whom we express our gratitude.

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It is hard to believe that Max is dead. He was a passionate man – passionate in his iron socialist faith, passionate in the brilliant theoretical writings, passionate in his unforgettably resounding speeches, passionate in his devastating polemics, passionate in his convulsing humour, and, most painful to remember, passionate in the bear hug warmth of his friendship.

Perhaps that is why Max, uniquely among American socialist leaders, was never without a youth movement. He was utterly untouched by that tired cynicism and mental vagueness that had paralysed so many once-radical victims of gods that had failed.

He believed fiercely in the need for a socialist movement, and he had little patience for those who had forsaken the responsibilities it imposed for a cloudy confidence in their private actions.

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And he insisted – as he would say, to the point of fanaticism – that American socialism free itself from past sectarianism, that it grapple with American problems in American terms, that it root itself immovably in the struggles of the labor movement, and it never compromise its hostility to totalitarianism.

It was this passionate vision of a reconstructed, modern socialist movement in America that drew young hearts to Max and bound them to the work of a lifetime. And it was the vision that underlay Max's central purpose of the last decade: the reunification and reorientation of the democratic socialist movement.

That reorientation is now an accomplished and I believe irreversible fact. It is Max's victory over the past. That he did not live to see the full fruits of his achievements, except in small and gratifying outcroppings, is inexpressibly sad.

It was shortly after the Hungarian uprising when, at the invitation of some friends, I found myself in a dingy and smoky room packed with several hundred people. They fell quiet as the speaker was introduced and moved to the podium – a bald, clean-shaven man who I remember thinking at the time looked like Nikita Khrushchev.

He began to speak in a very low voice. 'Louder!' somebody shouted from the back. He looked up from his notes, slowly got a fix on the voice, and, with an unmistakable twinkle in his eye, said: 'Don't worry!' Everybody laughed. It wasn't long before I got the joke.

Max had an incredible voice. It was capable of a kind of music – Beethovenian. It would sneak up on you in soft whispers, gently threading your uncollected thoughts together, and then burst forth, with powerful resonance, filling up the room and tingling your spine.

I still remember the portrait of horror Max painted that night – of rolling Russian tanks, of defenceless Hungarian workers and students fighting back with stones, of a heroic people's crushed hopes, and of our democratic socialist links to those hopes. Freedom, democracy – they were not abstractions; they were real and could therefore be destroyed. Communist totalitarianism was not merely a political force, an ideological aberration that could be smashed in debate; it was a monstrous physical force. Democracy was not merely the icing on the socialist cake. It was the cake – or there was no socialism worth fighting for. And if socialism was worth

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fighting for here, it was worth fighting for everywhere: socialism was nothing if it was not profoundly internationalist.

I do not remember whether that was the night I signed up. But it was the night I became convinced.

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Socialist anti-communism is a contradiction in the eyes of apologists for capitalism and communism alike. The ruling classes of the communist states declare that they are socialist, and their claim is cheerfully acknowledged by their capitalist counterparts. In certain liberal circles as well, socialist anti-communism is considered, at best, an enigma. These liberals seem stuck on a pendulum: the more 'radically' they view the sins of the West, the more benignly or indifferently they view the sons of the East and vice versa.

Max Shachtman's anti-communism grew out of fifty years of practical and theoretical experience in the radical movement (an experience recapitulated elsewhere by his comrade since the earliest days, Al Glotzer). But unlike others of a similar background, Max was never driven by the emergence of Stalinism to reject, or shelve, his socialist principles. He saw communism not as an outgrowth of socialism, however perverted; not as a form of socialism, however degenerate; and not as a step toward socialism, however misguided – but as the very antithesis of socialism and the enemy of the working class on a global scale. He perceived it as a new form of class society even more brutal in its exploitation of the masses than capitalism had been in its most primitive phases.

In one of the original and significant theoretical contributions to democratic Marxism in the last half century, Max described this new class society as 'bureaucratic collectivism.' It was indeed anti-capitalist: it destroyed private ownership of the means of production. But it was not socialist. Whenever the means of production are nationalised – taken over by the state – the key question becomes: Who owns the state? In communist societies, in which the Party allows no opposition, the state is in effect the property of the Party. The Party and its apparatus thus to come to constitute a new ruling class, in Marxian terms, by virtue of their particular relationship to their means of production.

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Workers cannot exercise social power through ownership of the means of production – they are propertyless. But being more numerous than the private owners of productive property, they can exercise power through political democracy. Thus, political democracy was to be regarded by socialists not as a dispensable pleasantry but as a necessary precondition, the sine qua non, of the exercise of working class power. If the only means by which the working class can exercise power – i.e. political democracy – is denied, the result cannot be a ‘workers state,’ however ‘degenerate,’ let alone socialism. Whereas capitalist societies can dispense with political democracy without ceasing to be capitalist – without altering the dominant property relations – socialist societies cannot eliminate political democracy and still maintain social control of the means of production.

Max’s analysis of communism was grounded in Marxism. Of course, within our socialist movement today there are many who do not come out of the Marxist tradition. But there are none who do not accept as fundamental the irreconcilable hostility of democratic socialists to the new totalitarianism which Max was among the first to analyse as a reactionary world force.

It was not merely a theory; it was a struggle. Then, as now there were so-called liberals who found criticism of the Soviet Union distasteful or ‘irrelevant.’ *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, and other liberal publications supported the Moscow purge trials. The communist press, of course, could hardly find words sufficiently abusive to express their rage. Significant numbers of intellectuals were drawn into the C.P. orbit and into disgraceful apologetics for ‘the socialist fatherland.’ Anti-communism was about as fashionable then as the war in Vietnam is today.

Yet it was one of Max’s great contributions that he and the movement he had led played a major role in ultimately stripping the communist movement of its intellectual respectability.

Max’s views on the interrelationship of socialism and democracy also led him to certain conclusions regarding the developing nations of the so-called Third World.

He rejected, from a Marxian standpoint, the notion that the Third World could serve as a launching pad for socialism – which is a way of organising abundance, not scarcity.

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Max had special contempt for those who described these societies as socialist and, in the same breath, justified their tendencies toward dictatorship on the grounds that they were, after all, backward. A favourite refrain was (and is): ‘How can you expect these backward countries to transform themselves overnight into full-blown, two-party, Western-style parliamentary democracies?’ To which Max would reply: You cannot expect it. But that’s not the question. The question is: where are the tendencies, possibilities for democratic development, do you support and encourage them, or do you oppose them?

This, Max taught, was always the central issue for a democratic socialist. And in all too many cases, ‘left’ intellectuals were to be found on the wrong side – not encouraging the democratic possibilities but supporting regimes that sought to wipe them out altogether.

In the course of his long and rich career in the socialist movement, Max participated in many splits and in the process revised a number of his theories. He was never afraid to admit past mistakes – in fact he often joked about them.

But on one matter of socialist theory he was adamant: socialism had no meaning, and no possibility of realization, except as it based itself on the struggles and aspirations of the organised working class. That meant the labor movement. Not the labor movement as radicals fantasised it, or thought it should be – but the labor movement as it was, in actuality. Not this or that ‘progressive’ union – but the labor movement as a whole.

The great failure of the American socialist movement, he said again and again, could be traced to its estrangement from the mainstream of the labor movement. But unlike the chic radicals of today, he did not attribute that alienation to the progressive arteriosclerosis of labor but to the sectarianism of American socialism.

Max scoffed at the intellectual circles who were far removed from the productive process, yet authoritatively and repeatedly predicted the imminent decline of the labor movement. Technology, they said, is wiping out the working class; white-collar workers won’t join unions; and, besides, the real wellspring of social progress is the ‘new class’ of college-educated professionals. But, as Max often pointed out, each day, as their predictions mounted, more white-collar workers joined unions, labour’s political muscle gained wider respect, labour’s programme became

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increasingly social-democratic, and in the legislative halls, labor provided increasing evidence that it was indeed the single most powerful force for social progress.

For Max, loyal socialist participation in the labor movement did not mean or require the surrender of distinctly socialist ideas. But it did mean the surrender of old radical myths – e.g., that the labor relationship was unrepresentative, and to the right of the rank-and-file; that since the militant Thirties, it was all downhill for labor, conservatised by affluence and power; that anti-communism was a manifestation of reactionary Catholic attitudes, etc, etc.

And it meant a principled and militant defense of labor against its critics on the corporate right and the playground left.

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Max was a leader.

That is a distinctive quality – quite apart from theoretical, literary or oratorical brilliance. Leadership is a special burden from which otherwise gifted people will flee as from a dentist's chair.

Max was always there – for advice, for guidance, for uplift, and for commiseration. His telephone rang constantly – calls from comrades, friends, followers, admirers. A comrade had a speech to give, or an article to write and his head was hungry for ideas. Another was stumped by a problem in his union work or civil rights activity, or Democratic Party club. Another was appalled by the latest events on his campus. Often a few sentences were enough for Max to grab of the essential problem and come up with a solution, an insight, a proposal. His range was astounding; it seemed he could stretch himself interminably.

His answers, of course, could not always be correct. But they were on target and always fundamental. He had none of that head-scratching evasiveness or coy confusion that is now regarded as attractive by the stylishly shallow. He knew that problems required solutions, not drift, and that actions had consequences which had to be faced not shirked. Max took responsibility for his political principles, never seeking convenient refuge in a popular image.

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His views on Vietnam were, and are, unpopular on the left. He had no illusions about the South Vietnamese government, but neither was he confused about the totalitarian character of the North Vietnamese regime. In the South there were manifest possibilities for a democratic development – independent and autonomous political forces which if hostile to the regime, were not less hostile to the communists. He knew that those democratic possibilities would be crushed if Hanoi's attempted military takeover of the South succeeded. He considered the frustration of the attempt to be a worthy objective of American policy and the necessary precondition for the establishment of South Vietnam's right of self-determination.

Most of the propaganda of the anti-war movement he thought to be silly at best and, at worst, intellectually disreputable. We were told [continued] war would bring China and Russia together; that the Chinese would intervene with troops; that [America] would suffer a Dien Bien Phu; that a communist victory was probably inevitable anyway – and that continued American involvement would make it more inevitable; that Hanoi would never budge on its peace terms; that the imposition of a coalition government was the only way out; that the communists would never accept free elections in South Vietnam, etc etc.

All of this, as Max so often predicted, turned out to be nonsense. The Russians and Chinese have never been further apart from each other; their relations with the US have never been better; China never entered the war with troops; if there was a Dien Bien Phu, it was not inflicted on the US but on Hanoi – the Tet offensive; Hanoi has made concessions that now seem to open the way to a peace agreement; the agreement does not provide for a coalition government; free elections are being scheduled as part of a settlement.

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The day before his heart attack, I went to visit Max in Floral Park, to talk politics and like so many other comrades to see about a hi-fi set. He had told me on the phone that he had something 'really jazzy' rigged up for me. It was jazzy, and we spent several hours listening to music and talking politics.

We talked about Vietnam. Max was cautiously optimistic about the impending settlement. We talked about the election. He greatly admired Meany's 'guts' in

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declaring neutrality. We talked about the internal problems of the [Socialist] Party and about the prospects for the YPSL in the new school year.

He was deeply concerned about education within the YPSL and the need to develop young socialist leaders who could speak and write well. He bitterly regretted not being able to attend the YPSL's Labor Day Conference, where he was to have been the main speaker. He hoped he could make it to the YPSL convention – there was still much to teach.

We chatted about people – who was doing what miscellaneous things, reminiscences, the stuff that binds people together in a movement. He recalled a prominent radical who had been a sensitive musician and then adopted 'proletarian airs.' Max strongly disapproved of that. From that we went back to hi-fi. He gave me a lecture on an intricate aspect of sound reproduction, of which I understood not one word. (I still wanted to know how an entire orchestra could be squeezed into two little speakers.)

When I got up to leave, Max, uncharacteristically, did not offer to drive me to the train station. It was a short distance, and I realised he must have been very tired.

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Thinker, teacher, writer, speaker, leader – Max's multiple joys and burdens in the struggle for socialism – how often he called it man's most ennobling struggle! – are now to be dispersed among us much, much too soon. He despised cults of the personality; and he insisted that there be no funeral, no rituals for him. But he might forgive us if we draw upon our memory of him for courage in taking up the joyful burdens and sharing in his passionate vision – ever grateful for the magic he worked in our lives and the enduring bonds he forged among us.

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Tom Kahn (1938-1992) was Director of the Department of International Affairs at the AFL-CIO.