

Obituary: Rob Windsor - 1964-2012

Socialist fighter and Coventry Socialist Party councillor

A man who helped melt the iron lady

On 14 January Rob Windsor, socialist fighter and previous Socialist Party councillor in Coventry, lost his long struggle against liver disease and died at Birmingham's Queen Elizabeth hospital. He was 47 years old. Dave Griffiths, Regional Secretary of West Midlands Socialist Party and longstanding comrade of Rob assesses his life and work:

“Twenty-five years ago a young lad walked into one of Dave Nellist's campaign rooms. He wanted to get involved.

At that time Rob Windsor was built like a human stick insect and worked helping the homeless. His cheerful, humorous and humble manner didn't hide the steely determination within to fight the injustices of capitalist society.

He had concluded that society must be fundamentally changed to improve working people's conditions. He had seen what Militant supporters had done in Coventry and nationwide and having checked we were serious, decided he would join us. Clearly a working class lad himself you could tell he was bright and meant business.

His job with Coventry Churches Housing was put in jeopardy when he supported our campaign to Save Whitley Hospital, the campaign that convinced him to join us.

It was no accident (having been fostered as a child) that he worked to help the homeless and most downtrodden and he passionately fought the abandonment by capitalist society of hundreds of thousands of people.

At 18 he went to London and ran a 900 bed homeless hostel and did soup runs while living in a Notting Hill squat. He was an expert on housing and ran an inspired campaign against council house privatisation, denouncing it in a well used



Rob and Isla celebrate a council election victory

pamphlet, with the aid of Nicholas Parsons' photo, as the 'Sale of the Century'.

Rob became a leader of the anti poll tax campaign and later a Socialist councillor in St Michaels, Coventry. He would help others often to his own detriment, so much so that many of the 'rough rogues and vagabonds' from Coventry's working class estates who joined the anti-poll tax campaign ran around 'mothering' him.

But after being encouraged to eat, Rob developed a much fuller figure in later life! His body shape changed, but his passion to change society surged on. But now that is lost to us and working people have lost one of their true champions.

No-one who heard him could forget his wonderful and vivid way of explaining events and ideas. Almost like radio can, he could make the

mind conjure up pictures. He was one of the best 'ranters' we've known, whose use of humour always made ideas accessible to people. Many comrades say they never tired of hearing him speak.

The non-payment campaign that defeated Thatcher's hated poll tax between 1989 and 1992 revealed his huge talents. He gave up his job to focus on it. One day he went away with hundreds of pages of poll tax legislation. Two days later he returned with a summary of what it was and how to fight it in a mere ten page campaigning pamphlet, and not a word of it was ever found wanting.

Inspiring

Rob inspired many an anti-poll tax meeting and the mass non-payment campaign. Others of us who rushed around to address one packed meeting after another would worry what could happen to people who refused to pay the tax. We would consult Rob who always had the legal answer, and he was always right!

He was a tiger defending the non-paying army. He baffled magistrates around the country and drove them to distraction. There was little as entertaining as Rob entangling them! And he taught others how to do it. Court after court was clogged up. He bamboozled, beat and chased off bailiffs as he cut a swathe across the Midlands. A famous newspaper headline "Mr Windsor beats Mrs Windsor" reported how Rob beat off thousands of wage attachments in her majesty's courts.

Thatcher said the poll tax was "her flagship", Rob always said it would be her Titanic and he was a significant part in beating Thatcher (who he always called the 'tin woman' instead of the 'iron lady').

But he didn't stop there. He fought on to change the system itself. To his last he still led that fight and it is as good a measure of the man as his brilliant leadership of the anti-poll tax unions, that he advanced Marxist ideas in a period of political re-

treat including in difficult environments like the council chamber.

In the early 90's capitalism appeared to have triumphed. Within months of beating the poll tax, Rob faced expulsion from the Labour Party, his opposition to the poll tax 'proving' he was a Militant! The Labour Party was moving to the right and abandoning any talk of socialism. It was embracing the market that has brought us to the dire economic position we face today. But while many were abandoning socialism and Marxism, Rob fought on to help establish the support and organisation we have today that will advance the struggle for change.

It is the greatest compliment to say that in his two terms as a Socialist Party councillor (2000-4 and 2006-10) he was utterly politically reliable and down the line. He explained and advanced our ideas unflinchingly, be it in the Council House or anywhere else. His honesty and grasp of issues always shone through. And anyone under attack could rely on Rob to be on their side. From school students on strike or pickets at Wapping (where he got a personal object

lesson in the brutality of the state) or travelling to support Vestas workers on the Isle of Wight or to speak in support of Tommy Sheridan in Glasgow.

He was 'a politician', not because he wanted to be one, but because he knew we had to fight back. He could analyse issues in seconds, he was brilliant, but with no pretensions.

Rob lived for his politics but also loved walking hills (returning to supply many of us with oatcakes) and he'd planned to combine walking with visiting branches of the Socialist Party to speak. It is so hard to grasp that this won't happen, that at only 47 he is lost to so many people who appreciated him.

But we'll have to work to make up for it, and as Rob did many times, rededicate ourselves to the fight he carried so well and try to find people with the strengths and talents to advance ideas in the way he did.

The liver transplant in December had promised to renew Rob's life, and as he was now 'more comfortable in his skin' the best of him was still to come.

But complications arose and after five weeks' struggle they could not be resisted. His surgeon said how hard he fought for life. That's because he valued it and wanted everyone to have the chance to do so.

Isla loses a husband and we lose a brother. He was a collaborative person, a human being who by his work inspired us and was inspired by those he fought alongside.

He is a huge loss to the Socialist Party. But we stand taller because of our association with him.

We'll work to compensate for this loss as Rob would want, and as we make advances in the future we wish he was with us to share in it. He deserves to be there."

Alan Thomas, a colleague of Rob's at the Cyrenians homelessness charity, said "At the end of the day... you're one of not many people on this planet who can pass away saying in all honesty that they made not one, not hundreds, but thousands of people's lives better."

Funeral arrangements and a memorial meeting for Rob have yet to be announced, but details will be posted on the Socialist Party national website and the Coventry Socialist Party website when they are available.



The press branded Rob an "extremist" for fighting the Tory poll tax



Rob addressing trade unionists at the Vestas occupation