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Obituary

Claude Gabriel, Claude Jacquin (1947-2016): Comrade, friend and mentor – an immense human being

- Features - In Memoriam - Obituaries and appreciations -
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This tribute was made at the the funeral of Claude Jacquin (see [Claude Jacquin \(Gabriel\) – an internationalist commitment to the end](#)) at Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris on 27th April 2016 by Brian Ashley and Mercia Andrews.

For over 35 years we have been comrades, friends and close collaborators with Claude. So important has he been in our own political and even personal development that we are experiencing a profound sense of loss; a great difficulty to come to terms that he is no longer part of our collective endeavour at rebuilding radical politics in South Africa. While many might have known him as Claude Jacquin, for us he was Claude Gabriel. Our daughter, Alexandria Gabriela was named after Claude and an important revolutionary Neville Alexander who first introduced us to Claude.

Ours was a comradeship that started during the dark days of repression and at the height of the postcolonial struggles in Zimbabwe, Namibia, Angola, Mozambique Mauritius etc. Describing this period speaks to the difficult nature of those early years. South Africa was completely isolated and hemmed in- for many of us this isolation even meant an absence of books and an international political milieu to relate to.

Despite this bleak backdrop, it was also an intense moment of heightened struggle, resistance, the construction of organisations and political formations. Claude played an important role in this period.

In our youthful days it was not an easy relationship, we were militants in the trenches and often we were less concerned with theory and analysis and much more pre-occupied with direct forms of resistance and “smashing the state”. We were impatient and very ‘rough’.

In those early years he worked alongside us with great patience and a huge capacity for solidarity to develop and deepen our method of analysis and activism. Claude was very special in the way he introduced these issues to us. He never proselytized. He wanted us to think the issues through with him. In spite of the frenetic way he took up tasks he was extremely patient in the way he worked with comrades. He stood alongside rather than above.

Of course Claude was an internationalist and introduced us to the Fourth International. Through him we met many revolutionaries that would enrich our politics. He facilitated meetings, tried to create links and open debates, always patient never telling us what to do and never insisting that our first task was to build an FI section. Rather, his approach was to be useful and unify. This set Claude apart from many internationalists that came to South Africa to build their local franchise and sectarian grouplets.

Today we are in touch with political activists around the African continent with whom we continue to work towards building a network of the African anti-capitalist left. This was another important legacy of Claude linking us with comrades from Senegal, Mauritius, Congo, etc. This work started decades ago and reflected Claude’s profound interest in Africa. One of our comrades worked with Claude already in the 1970s in publishing ‘Africa in Struggle’, that grouped a small collection of Africans living in the diaspora, most of whom were in exile engaging clandestinely in left politics. Claude was the architect of ‘Africa in Struggle’, and it established a foundation for on-going political work on the African continent.

In the last five years as he battled with cancer, his contribution to our political work in South Africa became even more intense. He would welcome and host all activists from South Africa that travelled through Paris. He continued to follow everyday politics closely. We would see emails from him daily and he showed impatience when we did not

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respond quickly enough (as in 10 seconds after receiving his email.) There was a new urgency: it was as if everyday mattered more. We spoke on the phone and we would Skype weekly.

This urgency had less to do with his cancer but rather the new situation that was developing in South Africa, as the hegemony of the ANC unravelled in the face of challenges from the left. Like us, he saw possibilities for the re-emergence of left politics at a mass level, as mineworkers, farmworkers and now students embarked on waves of mass protests.

Claude was a man of immense courage. He suffered greatly during his 10-year struggle with cancer mostly in silence, never complaining and always expressing concern for others and their minor ailments. In fact one of his last emails on hearing of a minor stomach ailment read:

“And you eat yogurt for your stomach !! it is a resolution of the FI Usec !!”

We share this insignificant anecdote and insight because we suspect not many people were privileged to get to know Claude, the human being.

One thing is for sure he was an extremely private person and despite his warmth and empathy he did not allow people, even those he was close to, access to his personal life, his anxieties, doubts, disappointments and regrets. We were privileged to see Claude's soft interior on a just a few occasions. One such occasion was after watching the documentary of the Marikana massacre in which 34 mineworkers were killed, Claude broke down and cried, just as he did when he left South Africa for what was going to be the last time we would see each other.

For us this was a new side to Claude. We are sure that Silvie, his great love, companion and partner is responsible for the emergence of a softer Claude. Silvie's love for Claude was immense and eased the suffering he endured in the last years of his illness. A great love affair had blossomed between the political animal and the actress. Silvie and Claude found joy in art, theatre, film and of course traveling. Claude found it extremely difficult to be separated from Silvie. There was a great gentleness and tenderness to the way he nurtured this love for Silvie. We can only imagine the extreme pain and emptiness that Silvie is experiencing with the Shakespearean tragedy, that Claude's death represents for her and to all who loved him.

We were not aware of Claude as someone into art and culture. And certainly, on our many visits to Paris, Claude did not take us to the art galleries, museums and music halls. Rather it was to find a café where we could enjoy a good meal as a means to facilitate a discussion on the current state of the balance of forces in South Africa. Of course Claude was a Parisian, with many things that this implied – not least a love for good food and for cooking. In this regard it might be appropriate to share an anecdote that captures our relationship with Claude. Brian arrived in Paris with an important leader from SA and Claude thought he would impress this activist and endear himself to Brian by taking them to a fancy restaurant. He was thus dismayed when Brian ordered cream with his chocolate mouse. The waiters could not understand; Claude could not believe this outrage of ordering cream with chocolate mouse. “Don't you understand the cream is part of the mouse” Nevertheless, he was forced to explain to the waiters that this odd South African wanted cream with his chocolate mouse. Of course you could imagine Brian's dismay when the cream came it was sour cream and not the whipped desert cream he was expecting.

So for the next 20 years this became our joke which he would share as part of the teasing close friends do - more as a sign of love than anything else. “These South Africans are so uncivilised they order cream with their chocolate mouse” – he would tell everybody as away of introduction.

You can imagine that over 35 years there were many incidents and occasions where we tested Claude's

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comradeship and friendship. Possibly the most difficult was when we were attending the Fourth International school in Amsterdam and Brian's visa ran out. Pierre and Sally were strongly of the view that Brian should leave the school so as to avoid a possible incident with the police and a possible crack down on the school. We rebelled. How can revolutionaries be so afraid of the police for a possible minor visa problem and we caused such ructions. When Claude heard of this, he was in his car like a shot and drove all the way from Paris to fetch us and take us back with him to Paris, where he duly entertained us by hosting many meetings with various comrades. He ensured our education continued even after leaving the school.

Up to the end he retained an optimistic exterior and displayed incredible courage by traveling to South Africa as late as February this year. During this occasion he was able to meet with the student leaders of the student movement that our daughter is active in. It was a good moment – he teased her and called her like he did Brian (little gangster) he was proud, listened to their views, encouraged and shared his own experiences, after all Alex is named after him.

Many will miss Claude. Many did not have the privilege to learn and understand the incredible strategic insights that our friend and comrade had. It is a shame there will be no revered place for Claude in the legacies of the great individuals that made and changed history. Yet in our memories and in our actions as we fight for another world, that Claude and ourselves believe is possible, his contribution will live on. He was a special man, perhaps his fault was to be too humble, too self effacing.

Hamba Kahle – go well our big brother. We miss you already

Brian and Mercia

April 27, 2016