

Nina Fishman obituary

Historian, political activist and outstanding character of the British left

Donald Sassoon, guardian.co.uk, Sunday 13 December 2009



Nina Fishman always liked to help younger scholars. Photograph: Dick Pountain

With the death of the political historian and activist Nina Fishman, who has died of cancer aged 63, the British left has lost one of its most outstanding and original personalities. Born in San Francisco, Nina was a genuine "red baby". Her father, Leslie, an academic economist, was a member of the Communist party of the US. Hounded out of the University of California, Berkeley, in the late 1940s, he took refuge at Idaho State College and, later, at the University of Colorado, in Boulder. Nina attended junior school in Boulder and then Boulder high school (interrupted for a year, in 1962, when she and her family came to Britain with her father who had a visiting fellowship at the University of Cambridge). It was in Boulder that Nina gave her first public performance – as Macduff's son in Macbeth at the Colorado Shakespeare Festival in 1959. Three years later, at the age of 16, she moved centre-stage as Juliet.

The family moved to Britain permanently in 1967. Leslie taught at Warwick University and then became a professor at Keele University, in Staffordshire. Nina had preceded them by starting an economics degree at Sussex University, then regarded as a hotbed of radicalism. She graduated in 1968 with a third-class degree, unsurprisingly given that she spent most of her final year on the picket-line supporting the striking building workers at the Barbican development in the City of London. By then, she knew that history would be her abiding intellectual passion. She started a history degree, part-time, at Birkbeck College. This time she got a first.

She stayed on to write a doctoral thesis under Eric Hobsbawm, which after many years became *The British Communist party and the Trade Unions, 1933-45* (1994). The central concept of this work was that of "revolutionary pragmatism". Against those who regarded British communists as mere Moscow stooges, Nina argued that the majority of party cadres and leaders pursued a balancing act. In the grand sphere of international politics they remained loyal followers of the Soviet Union, which they regarded as the centre of world revolution; in the more earthly world of day-to-day struggles the party's strategy was determined by "life itself" – a favourite phrase of Nina's that she used to describe the ideological pragmatism of Harry Pollitt, general secretary of the Communist party of Great Britain, and his colleagues. The British communists, she explained, believed there would be a revolution when life itself would bring about a revolutionary situation. In the meantime, reformism was the thing. No wonder Eduard Bernstein, the founder of evolutionary socialism, supplanted Vladimir Lenin as her hero.

For Nina, the trade union leader who best epitomised "life itself" was Arthur Horner and she devoted the last decade of her life to writing his biography (to be published in 2010). Horner, a lifelong communist, was the architect of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), which he led from 1946 to 1959. He championed the establishment of the social democratic settlement after the second world war – an outstanding exemplar, in Nina's view, of revolutionary pragmatism – and he was one of the saner people within the hierarchy of the NUM, she would add with a smile.

In 1980, she taught shop stewards at the Harrow College of Higher Education, where she met Phil MacManus, with whom she shared the rest of her life. The college subsequently merged with the Polytechnic of Central London, and ultimately became the University of Westminster, an institution Nina always referred to as Regent Street Poly. She became professor of industrial and labour history in 2004. In 2007, she took early retirement and moved to Wales, where she held the post of honorary research professor in the history department at Swansea University.

Nina was far from being an ivory tower historian. She was always active in every day politics, first in a rather eccentric quasi-Stalinist group, the British and Irish Communist Organisation, which took a decidedly anti-nationalist stance on the Irish question, and, later, in a host of causes and battles.

Three causes stand out: the first was workers' control. She urged the British unions to accept a version of the German system of co-determination (*Mitbestimmung*) and supported the Bullock report (1975), against the opposition of many on the left. This was part of her wider vision of a modern union movement that would abandon its intransigent defence of free collective bargaining and become a partner of government in setting overall economic targets, including wages. The second cause was electoral reform. She created Tactical Voting 1987 and then supported selflessly the Electoral Reform Society, accepting, pragmatically, the findings of the 1998 Jenkins commission, which advocated a modified version of the alternative top-up system. The third cause, and the most important, was social Europe. In the mid-1970s she started Case, the Campaign for a Socialist Europe, one of the many groups that came into being thanks to her uncanny organisational skills and her strong will. She strove to instil in the British Labour movement a European perspective, wishing to deprovincialise it and present European integration as a great opportunity rather than a threat.

One could argue that all three endeavours ended in setbacks. The unions are now a shadow of what they used to be. Electoral reform is now revived only when Labour is in opposition or about to lose, and Britain is, more than ever, an impenitent laggard in all European matters. But Nina was a fighter. She was never defeated, she never moaned or whinged. When she felt something needed to be done, she organised everyone, storming into meetings and, sometimes even before bothering to remove her cycling paraphernalia, would intervene authoritatively, speaking clearly and logically and (very) loudly.

No cause was too small. When she heard (from me) that there was a rather good biography of Palmiro Togliatti, the leader of the Italian Communist party, she lobbied the Italian publisher, hassled the author to cut it down to translatable size, and when she realised that the publisher was in difficulty because of the high cost, organised a "Dining for Togliatti" event to gather funds. Saddened to learn of the death of Hugo Young, the political commentator of the Guardian, she drummed up support for the annual Hugo Young Memorial Lecture.

She was prodigal with encouragement and advice to younger scholars, promoting with unstoppable energies the cause of labour history, serving on the editorial board of Labour History Review, the editorial board of Representation, the executive committee of the Society for the Study of Labour, the committee of the Socialist History Society, and the editorial advisory committee of Socialist History. She was also a trustee of the Aneurin Bevan Foundation and of the Barry Amiel and Norman Melburn Trust.

But there was another side to Nina. For all her commitment to the British labour movement, she eschewed its puritanism. Though not a champagne socialist, she liked a glass of champagne, a bottle of fine wine, good food and above all music, especially opera. She would get a box at the English National Opera or tickets for Glyndebourne, raid her favourite Soho delicatessen and share her goodies with her friends during the interval. She would come to London regularly from Swansea to attend chamber music and lieder recitals at the Wigmore Hall. I was her lucky "Wig" companion and will miss her sorely.

She organised a supper club with challenging guest speakers. And she would go everywhere with her trusted bicycle, which she had made for herself with the £250 she won in a Time Out competition in the 1970s with an essay on Gandhi – a considerable sum at the time. She still had the same bike 30 years later – a remarkable bike, no doubt, for a remarkable woman.

Nina had no children and is survived by Phil.

- Nina Fishman, political historian and activist, born 26 May 1946, died 5 December 2009