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# NORMAN BETHUNE

## An inspiring example of an anti-imperialist fighter

On November 12<sup>th</sup>, 1939, Norman Bethune, "people's doctor" as he was nicknamed, died in China. He was 49 year-old. He had spent several years on battlefronts in Spain, then in China. His role was to tend to injured civilians and revolutionary fighters. This committed and courageous doctor has become a model of excellence, not only because of his devotion to the cause of the powerless and the poor, but also because of his commitment to the cause of the Chinese revolution and Communism. In these times of warmongering by imperialist States who are waging battle with the most powerful weaponry available, where only the lives of innocent civilians have been lost in Afghanistan, one cannot forget the "life of resistance" of Norman Bethune—a life dedicated in the fight against fascism and imperialism.

Born in Ontario in 1890, Norman Bethune graduates has a surgeon in 1923. Since his first days of medical practice in Detroit, Bethune is struck by the great gap that exists between health services available to the poor and the ones available to the rich. The rest of his life is clearly indicative that he will never have forgotten this. His fortitude will soon be put to the test: he becomes ill with tuberculosis, a very serious and often fatal disease at that time. Disregarding his doctors' recommendations, he opts for a fairly new type of treatment called pneumothorax. The remedy will have been found for his malady. His perception of life will be altered from there on: "Looking back I can see how my fears and hopeless attitude in regard to the future were wrong. Fear is the great destroyer of happiness and most fears are unjustifiable. It can be said that man lives by hope alone."

These thoughts, seemingly of no particular great import, will however materialize through his political activism. But before he engages in politics, he will distinguish himself as an audacious and innovating doctor. He is credited with having taking part in several medical breakthroughs, among which are an improved version of artificial pneumothorax. In 1933, he worked at the Sacré-Cœur Hospital in Cartierville. In a short time, he cared for twice the usual caseload of tuberculosis patients and performed 300 operations on patients with this disease.

At the time, health care services are private and come with a hefty price tag. Back from a conference in the Soviet Union in 1935, Bethune undertakes a genuine crusade to "socialize" health care. He establishes in Montréal a Group for Community Security. It is at this epoch that he met, during left-wing demonstrations and by frequenting unemployed workers defence movement that is gaining in breadth after the crisis of the 30's, members of the Communist Party. In 1935, he will become one of its members.

### No victory against capitalism is possible without revolutionary struggle

From the very day Bethune gained the ranks of the communists, he was

espousing the idea of revolutionary violence to end capitalism. "Creation has never been a matter of etiquette. It is of a rough, violent and revolutionary nature." Comparing revolution to a birth, he adds: "What do we see when we see for the first time the act of giving birth [...]? The blood, the pain, the apparent cruelty of the medical staff, and all the revolting technique of birth assistance? Tell the observer of such a scene that what he was witnessing what the coming to be of a new life, and that the pain will pass, and that the suffering and the ugliness were necessary and will always be necessary in such circumstances..." (translated from French) Bethune soon distanced himself from the left-wing intellectuals of the CCF (the old NDP) who claimed that reforms within the system would suffice. On the contrary, Bethune emphasized that "...force and only force are the true way to persuade. The rich will never let go of their wealth and their power unless a mightier force that there's wrestles it from them..."

### Bethune joins the ranks of the revolutionary struggle

After having drastically changed the treatment of tuberculosis and made his mark as the doctor of the poor, Bethune will henceforth bring his work to the battlefront, joining the 1,200 Canadians who will take part in the International Brigades to fight Fascism in Spain. In 1936, as soon as he arrived, he set up a mobile unit that performed blood transfers on the battlefield itself. After this undertaking, he returned to Canada. He intended to organize international support. From coast to coast he vigorously denounced inertia, and even the complicity of the imperialist States—of which Canada was part of—in front of the ever growing threat of fascism: "Wars of aggression, colonial wars, are they nothing but a mercantile undertaking? This is quite apparent. War only serves the purpose of gaining new markets; assassinations are committed for the purpose of controlling natural resources. Theft is better business than trade, broad scale butchery easier than barter. Profit reigns implacably on this empire as an ugly and bloodthirsty business God.

Behind militarism hides money; and behind capital and capitalism milita-

ism. Both our brothers, united in blood, in crime. All the hurt comes from these people."

As Bethune's series of conferences wind to an end, new fascist aggressions are reported in the news. Hundreds of thousands of Japanese soldiers have landed in China. Bethune will go there. As soon as 1938, he met with Mao Tsetung. Mao greeted with enthusiasm Bethune's project of setting up medical units in guerrilla war zones. Appointed medical counsellor for the Shansi district, Bethune mobilized the local population in less than five weeks as well as the local body of practitioners. A new type of hospital, to serve as a model, will be built in the region.

Bethune's reputation will soon spread as he becomes known to soldiers of the Red Army and the peasantry. The reason is that Bethune is always on the move, accompanying the troops within the very heart of the battle. For several months, with the guerrillas, he carried on surgical operations beyond the Chinese lines of defence. On some occasions, he performed operations for 18, 24, 36 consecutive hours without resting. Despite fatigue and numerous difficulties, the spirit of the troops are uplifted when they know he will be among them, on the battlefront, to take care of them: "Pai Chu En [this is the name given to Bethune by the Chinese] is with us!"

In July 1939, Bethune is thinking of returning for a few months to Canada and the US to gather donations and ship medical goods that are direly needed in China because of the Japanese blockade. However, he keeps postponing his departure and in October a new Japanese offensive demands once again that he stays to tend to the injured. This is when he will become infected by a cut he involuntarily inflicted upon himself a few days before. Because of lack of medication, he died of blood poisoning on November 12<sup>th</sup>. A few days before he died, he wrote his last letter to general Nieh, chief commander of the regional army: "These two last years have been the richest, the fullest of my life. Sometimes I felt lonely, but it is here, among my dear comrades, that I felt the most useful."

Norman Bethune is a product of the struggle of the people, not only those of Spain and China, but also a living synthesis and a model of what is best in each of us. In his time, Bethune fought against illness, poverty, war and fascism. He inspired thousands, millions of people in following in his foot steps. For us today, Bethune's life is not simply an historic reference. His revolutionary struggle, his love of the people, his will to fight till the bitter end, are examples for all those who struggle against oppression and exploitation wherever it may be. Bethune's life is an inspiring example, one to be followed. ☆

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