

Dennis Brutus

December 31, 2009

Dennis Brutus – celebrated poet, anti-apartheid fighter and lifelong socialist – died last week. As a student activist at the University of Pittsburgh in the mid-2000s, I was privileged to know Dennis in the short time before he departed for the University of KwaZulu-Natal, where he spent his last years. Throughout the world and for a long time to come, Dennis’ outstanding contributions to peace and justice struggles will be recounted. In Pittsburgh, these included spearheading the Pittsburgh Social Forum, organizing with local Wobblies to oppose sweatshop manufacturing of Pirates apparel, and a great many more. Two in particular are prominent in my remembrance, revealing just what enabled him to so profoundly affect the lives of so many. The first was his involvement in Palestine solidarity work. Dennis made no secret of the parallels he saw between Israel’s system of oppression and the South Africa’s former regime. A member of the Palestine Solidarity Committee, he readily agreed to speak at an event launching Pitt Students for Justice in Palestine’s divestment campaign. This at a time when figures like Joseph Massad were under heavy attack from the Zionist Right, and state legislators were pushing for adoption of David Horowitz’s “Academic Bill of Rights”. The Pitt News even refused to cover the event. Dennis appeared nevertheless, assuring all present that history was on their side (save, of course, for the inevitable heckler, effortlessly shrugged off). Around a year later, I was recruited on a few hours’ notice to stand in for someone on a panel on global justice issues. Dennis shared the panel. Also present some manner of Friedmanite from an area college who assured the (receptive!) audience that mainstream critics of neoliberalism – Stiglitz was named – were “angry” individuals and nothing more. Yet our therapist-cum-economist was himself visibly perturbed at Dennis’ presentation, which was thunderous and moralistic in the best sense of the word. (Later, in fact, the moderator informed me that the other panelist had expressed to her his concerns about Dennis even before everyone was seated.) My own brief and ill-prepared spiel passed without much notice. I had Dennis to thank for salvaging this one for our side. These both were fairly mundane undertakings. Certainly Dennis had participated in – and endured – things ultimately much greater. But he understood the need for patient, diligent movement building, the stuff that both made and was made from more spectacular events, good and bad. That he lived to embody this truth gave him an indisputable authority and even, I would venture, a certain intuitive grasp of humanity. “My art is my activism,” goes a popular cliché. Perhaps Dennis would have embraced it, but only out of modesty. His poetry is a gift to the oppressed, to be sure. But his whole life was the life of a revolutionary. He was a comrade to the last. May there be more like him.