

A life in art and politics

Mike Davis salutes Mike Jones

Artist, illustrator, mural painter, teacher Mike Jones has died aged 68 after a year long battle with cancer. The younger son of Evelyn and trade union leader Jack, whom he cared for in the later years of his long and heroic life, was like his father a staunch socialist, Labour supporter and friend of trade unions, but scathing of New Labour and the Blairite embrace of neo-liberalism, back-tracking on core values of equality and internationalism.

We met through a mutual artist friend Ray Walker in the early 1980s. Mike drew cartoons and cover illustrations for *Chartist* throughout the 1980s and 90s. Two that stand out were his Jaffa orange steamrolling over the Palestinians and his Polish Solidarnosc with jackboots and barbed wire.

Mike was born in Bideford and brought up in Coventry. He went to Henry VIII grammar school and later won a scholarship to Solihul Boys School, his time at which he hated with a passion. From there he went to Birmingham Art College, where he met his companion of later years Val Warrender, and then the Royal College of Art where he gained a degree in Industrial Design in 1966. He later went on to Goldsmiths and completed a teaching course, which enabled him to work in schools when not painting.

He won further scholarships to Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, the latter country leading to many close friends including Vaclav Havel, dissident leader and later president of the Czech Republic. He studied in Czecho, as he called it, for two years in the mid 1960s and was involved in the protests against Russian tanks that moved in to crush the Prague Spring in 1968. I travelled with him to Czecho in 1990 shortly after the Velvet Revolution. He introduced me to many of the future leaders of the country who had been in opposition. We toured the party headquarters taking in many fine ale houses and art deco restaurants to drink more than sensible quantities of Pilsner Urquell and Budweiser Budvar. Mike visited Czecho on an annual basis sustaining friendships. During the long years of underground opposition a close friend, Mirek Masak, described him as a human bridge between the Stalinist controlled state and the west.

He was a mine of information about Czech art and the little known surrealist movement, works of which we viewed in 1990 that had been shut away over the dark decades since the 1930s. Indeed he was thoroughly grounded on most aspects of art history. In the 1980s he travelled to Mexico with Anna Walker, who became his partner for several years, where he was able to see the work of the great muralists like Diego Rivera and Orozco.

This knowledge informed his rich range of work, largely commissioned by trade unions, from commemorative plates and banners to murals, paintings and stained glass, a fine example of which is to be seen in Liverpool People's Museum. Always willing to turn his considerable talents to the service of the labour movement he designed and painted the wonderful ceiling mural at Liverpool Trades Council Centre. The huge Dalston Peace mural, which still looks out over the bustling revamped station centre, was painted by Mike and Anna Walker following Ray's untimely death. His panels illustrating the history of the labour movement are displayed in the dining room of the Eastbourne TGWU/Unite Centre. His later years were spent caring for Jack, whom he admired greatly. This drew him into working with the International Brigades Memorial Committee of which Jack was President. He escorted Jack (well into his 90s) on numerous visits abroad both to commemorate aspects of the Spanish volunteers' sacrifice in the cause of anti-fascism but also in Jack's role as leader of the pensioners movement in Britain. Mike was Jack's carer, driver, defender and advocate. Last year when Jack was slandered as a Soviet agent by Russian Oleg Gordievsky he went on TV and radio to reject the allegations.

Mike had a wry sense of humour, he was reserved, generous and a Bohemian at heart who lived his life in art and politics. He had one daughter Hannah who survives him. My abiding memory of him is on his beloved Stoke Beach in Devon, where the family had a caravan on the Co-op site since the war, up to his neck in sand which my daughters had buried him in, raising an empty arm, bereft of beer mug, in imaginary salute.

Salud Mike!

Mike Jones - 5th June 1944 - 1st August 2012

