

Debbie Johnson, ipresente!

written by Kris Hamel

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Debbie Johnson at International Working Women's Day program in Detroit, March 2017.

Deborah Johnson of Detroit, a longtime revolutionary and community activist, died on June 8 after a protracted illness. She was 74. Debbie, or DJ, as her friends and comrades called her, is survived by her spouse, Michael Shane, and children Deana

Johnson, Paul Johnson, Ariana Shane, and Phillip Shane, along with grandchildren and other family members.

Debbie became a revolutionary in the late 1970s as a single mother struggling to provide for her family in a racist society. For decades she was a dynamic leader in the Detroit branch of Workers World Party. Her love for working and oppressed people fueled her activism and drew in others with her no-nonsense explanations of the racism and capitalist exploitation facing so many people.

As a leader of the All-People's Congress (APC) in the early and mid-1980s, Debbie helped organize and carry out many campaigns for concrete rights for poor and working people. A skilled legal assistant by trade, she used her legal acumen to help develop programmatic demands to reach the masses in the fight against capitalism.

One such struggle -the Food Is A Right Campaign - helped win monthly distributions of cheese and other food products in Detroit, which went on for 17 years. Whether on the picket lines for welfare rights or to stop tenant evictions, at demonstrations for a moratorium to stop plant closings and layoffs, or in protests against the Pentagon wars abroad, Debbie was an outspoken leader who motivated others to keep struggling for justice.

Debbie deeply felt her oppression as an African-American woman and helped organize other women in the fight for reproductive rights and to stop mass foreclosures and evictions, which impacted women of color disproportionately in Detroit and around the U.S. She was a founder and leader of DANFORR, the Detroit Action Network For Reproductive Rights, which was formed in 2006 and recognized by the Wayne County National Organization for Women as a fighting force for all women's right to reproductive justice.

She was an internationalist and anti-imperialist through and through. Debbie supported national liberation movements in general and opposed all U.S. wars. She

was a strong supporter of socialist Cuba and Palestine, which she supported since the 1970s. She once spoke at a Detroit Public Schools board meeting in opposition to military recruiters in high schools after an army recruiter started calling the house trying to entice her son to enlist. She also mobilized against the Klan and Nazis.

Debbie was a leader of the Free South Africa movement in the 1980s and beyond. She, along with other Detroit activists raised thousands of dollars for the African National Congress (ANC) [at the time designated by the U.S. government as a “terrorist organization”] by silk-screening T-shirts which were sold around the country. She helped lead a “Free Nelson Mandela” petition and ribbon campaign which brought awareness to the plight of the imprisoned ANC leader, who most people at the time had never heard of.

The Detroit APC brought in ANC leaders many times to speak at public meetings and events before the end of apartheid, most of which were emceed by Debbie. Nelson Mandela’s organization didn’t have the funds to put people up at fancy hotels, but Debbie was proud to host these comrades in her home. Her hospitality and gregarious personality put them at ease, knowing they were with comrades in the struggle even thousands of miles from South Africa. She also hosted members of the American Indian Movement and other leaders at her home.

Debbie was a co-founder of the Moratorium NOW! Coalition to Stop Foreclosures, Evictions, and Utility Shutoffs in 2008 and played a leading role in many of its activities, including the fight against mass bank foreclosures and evictions as previously mentioned, and the City of Detroit bankruptcy. One young activist said:

“Debbie made a big impression on me years ago when I was first getting into activism, going to Moratorium NOW meetings, and meeting folks who were for the people in ways I had never seen before.”

In 2018 Debbie joined most of the Detroit Workers World members in leaving that

organization. But they continued their work against racism, capitalism and imperialist war by founding the Communist Workers League/Fighting-Words.net.

Debbie was known by comrades and friends in Detroit and around the country as a fantastic cook. She provided delicious meals for almost every public meeting and helped organize soup kitchens at national events held in Detroit. All of her delectable meals were tasty, balanced and nutritious, whether she was serving international people's leaders or homeless people on the streets. Her soul food dinners at Black History Month forums sometimes had lines going out the door. She also kept activists together socially by hosting barbeques at her home, where comrades could relax and sup together.

Debbie was a beloved comrade even as her health deteriorated and she retired from her job and political life. She will be sorely missed. Debbie Johnson, ¡Presente!

The celebration of the life of Debbie Johnson will take place on Saturday, July 6, 2024, at 11 am at Historic St. Matthew's & St. Joseph's Episcopal Church, 8850 Woodward Ave., Detroit, MI 48202.

Source: [Fighting Words](https://www.fighting-words.net)

