

## DICK LEAMAN: FRIEND AND COMRADE

I find it extraordinarily difficult writing about Dick at this time. It's as though



saying what I feel and think about him is finally admitting that he is no longer here. I feel a cruel hand of fate has added his absence to the burden I too now have to bear. For me, Dick has always been here, almost from the beginning when I first arrived in

England full of the arrogance of the insecure in a new country. Dick was someone that I knew with absolute certainty would always give unstinting personal support when it was needed; someone who provided reassurance when my confidence was low after one set-back or another, someone with whom I could share a private joke when what we were doing was being criticised; most importantly, someone who held a world outlook which renewed inspiration and the joy of life in the face of adversity. To me, the foreigner, he was always a source of strength, a secure anchor in a strange country. His absence is hard.

I can only hope that he knew I kept a special fund of support for him, together with an abundance of affection.

A while back we had many discussions about work that needed to be done in the disabled people's movement; what tasks should be shared and what goals should be achieved before we might truly retire, mull over what had gone wrong and enjoy the fruits of our successes. We knew that much of what we had done up to now was only the beginning, only a rehearsal for the next, more difficult, round in gaining an equal place for disabled people in society. This is a perspective few people share but one which held us in a common bond over

a long period of time. We tried to live our lives with few illusions and we knew that the right mix for a concrete foundation to build an emancipatory struggle could only be obtained by broadening and deepening the social opportunities of disabled people. We set about encouraging this development in the organisations we created, in the ideas we shared with others and in the grass roots activities we supported.

There are not many people who accumulated such a wealth of relevant experience for the task ahead as Dick. It is not so long ago that we agreed the need to start a new Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS). Whatever it was to be called a large measure of its fate and its contribution to the dynamics of a whole new generation of ideas for disabled people to explore, I can say unhesitatingly, was going to be directly dependent upon Dick's irreplaceable contribution. For me Dick's absence, alongside Paul Hunt's, is a devastating blow to the body politic of disabled people. We are left now even more dependent on the inspiration that Dick left behind in the way he lived his life.

This he lived according to values that exemplify all that is best in the phrase 'the personal is political'. For him 'The personal is political' did not mean 'What is personally satisfying for me is politically correct for you', a middle class creed for personal advancement. Dick held and promoted unified values that never allowed him to put himself above others. For many of us he could be exasperatingly unassuming, especially when there was a need to be assertive in a debate or in making contact with new people in unfamiliar situations. But we all appreciated that he was unassertive precisely because he was not self-pursuing. He truly combined the roles of being a comrade and a friend.

We will all miss him, but I am absolutely devastated.

Vic Finklestein - October 1999