

Funeral for Ernst Schwarz held in Dortmund, Germany

Marianne Arens
25 January 2001

The funeral of Ernst Schwarz took place on January 22 at the main cemetery in the German city of Dortmund. Schwarz was for many years a member of the German Socialist Equality Party (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit--PSG) and a longtime fighter for socialist perspectives at the Krupp Hoesch steelworks. He died unexpectedly of a heart attack on January 13 at the age of 43.

In attendance at the funeral ceremony were family and friends; the number of mourners was unusually large. Long after all the seats were taken, groups of steel workers continued to enter the funeral hall, intent on expressing their condolences for a beloved colleague. Also in attendance were the vast majority of members of the trade union stewards committee which Ernst Schwarz was voted onto in 1995 and with whom he had often had vigorous differences of opinion.

The coffin towards the front of the hall was extensively covered with candles and flowers and a large framed portrait of Ernst rested against its side. The picture in the portrait was the same as that which featured on many leaflets and appeals distributed by Ernst in the course of communicating with his fellow workers in the factory where he worked.

The funeral speech was also markedly different from the usual type of obituary. The lay preacher abstained from the usual religious pieties and instead paid tribute to the various stages of Ernst's short but eventful and full life.

The preacher began by saying that if you want to understand what was special about the life of Ernst Schwarz then it was necessary to look briefly at the social developments which took place during his childhood and youth.

When he was born in 1957 Germany was experiencing the beginning of its post-war boom and so-

called "economic miracle". The situation was also characterised, however, by an abundance of social conflicts. Just a few months before his birth the Hungarian Revolution was suppressed and in the German state of Schleswig-Holstein a four-month strike by workers resulted in the introduction of sick pay.

As a youth Ernst grew up with his mother and grandmother in the pulsating steel town of Hattingen. At the age of 17 he began a fitter's apprenticeship at the Heinrichshütte and at the same time became interested in politics, joining the Trotskyist movement. He took an active part in demonstrations and discussions aimed at spreading socialist principles amongst workers. In the years following he worked abroad: in South Africa, Venezuela, Saudi Arabia and in the United States.

Back in Germany at the end of the eighties and employed as a steel worker at the Hoesch factory in Dortmund he first made the acquaintance of Almut who became his wife and who, together with their daughter, was the subject of his attentive care up until his death. It was no accident that as a convinced socialist and internationalist he once again became politically active at the time of the Gulf War.

In the years to follow he worked intensely on behalf of his fellow workers as a member of the Hoesch trade union factory committee fighting for socialist policies, while at the same time required to work difficult and wearisome shifts. He never looked upon his membership of the trade union committee as a sort of springboard for his own career or securing his own job. He despised privileges.

He had many plans in mind for himself and his family when he abruptly died from a heart attack at the early age of 43.

Everybody attending the ceremony was deeply

moved when a party comrade and professional musician played an exceeding fine, sensitive and harmonious rendition of the “Internationale” on the violin.

A number of those attending the funeral, together with his wife and family, many friends and his closest work mates, gathered afterwards in a nearby café to talk further with one another. In a short speech the chairman of the German Socialist Equality Party, Ulrich Rippert, re-invoked the figure of the comrade and friend who had died so unexpectedly. He recalled that he had first met Ernst as a young apprentice more than a quarter of a century ago when there was widespread enthusiasm for socialist ideas among young workers.

Ernst belonged to those who rejected a society based on exploitation and suppression. At the same time his revulsion at such suppression did not restrict itself to its more evident social expressions such as war and fascism. He also saw it expressed in less obvious forms in the factory where he worked and in everyday life.

He fought decisively against opportunism within the workers movement, which he regarded as the main obstacle to the struggle for a better future. Rippert described the events on a May Day demonstration in the early 70s as Stalinist thugs from the DKP (German Communist Party) and trade union bureaucrats sought to rip down a banner of the Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter protesting against social cuts carried out by the Social Democratic government of that time under Helmut Schmidt.

Ernst was surrounded by three aggressive stewards, but instead of using the metal pole of the banner to beat them flat—anyone meeting Ernst knew that he possessed the physical strength to do so—he sought to argue with them. Despite his physical prowess he used words and arguments to resolve disputes, not his fists.

When, at the beginning of the 90s, there was a rapid rise in the incidence of xenophobic attacks against foreigners and asylum-seekers, he threw all his energy into the struggle against racism and attempted to mobilise workers in his factory to defend foreign workers. Rippert emphasised that Ernst Schwarz embodied something which is very rare today, he was proud to be a worker. He was firmly convinced that the working class would play an important role in the social developments to come and on that basis agitated for a political and cultural development among

workers.

Rippert concluded: “If there had been a few thousand workers like Ernst, then the political development of Germany over the last 10 years would have taken a very different course.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact