

Socialist Equality Party of Germany holds memorial meeting to honour Ernst Schwarz

Our reporter
20 March 2001

On March 10 the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party) of Germany held a meeting in Dortmund to pay tribute to Ernst Schwarz, a long-time member of the Trotskyist movement who died of a heart attack on January 13. Comrade Schwarz was 43 years old.

Comrades and fellow members of the International Committee of the Fourth International from Britain and France travelled to Dortmund to pay their respects and honour the memory of Comrade Ernst. The speakers included Peter Schwarz, a member of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG) Central Committee and the *World Socialist Web Site* editorial board, and Chris Marsden, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party of Britain. A message was read to the meeting from David North, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party of the US and chairman of the WSWs editorial board.

Also in attendance were Ernst's life partner, Almuth, and her daughter, Judith.

We are publishing here a number of the speeches and the message from the SEP of the United States.

Peter Schwarz: "Ernst Schwarz was never satisfied with the world as it was"

It is not easy to speak about a person who died much too soon and was torn away in the bloom of life. We cannot and will not console ourselves with the notion that Ernst is enjoying an existence in another realm. Ernst did not believe in a life hereafter—that is one of the reasons why he joined our party.

Ernst can only remain with us if we keep his memory alive. We do not want to transform him into an icon, into an ideal human being. That would be only another way to forget the real Ernst. We want to remember him the way he really was—full of life, full of contradictions, impulsive and sensitive, combative and sometimes stubborn. How should we understand Ernst's life and his personality?

Karl Marx once wrote: "The human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of social relations." He did not mean by this that people were only a poor copy of their social circumstances, which they could not control. His remark was not at all fatalistic, nor did he deny the role of the individual.

He meant that one could understand human essence only in connection with its environment, only as a social and historical essence. Each individual reflects the complex social problems of his or her time in a special refraction, in a special combination—and by no means in a merely passive way. What constitutes the personality in the long run is the manner in which it reacts to these problems, how it deals with them, whether it masters them or capitulates to them. Accordingly, one can understand Ernst only if one situates him within the society and the time in which he lived and fought.

Ernst was a typical German worker, and at the same time a very untypical one. He felt himself part of the working class. He lived and suffered with it. He became enthusiastic over its successes and often took its defeats personally—too personally. But he was also a fighter. He was

never satisfied with the world as it was. He wanted another world, a better world.

I well remember Ernst in the 1970s. He joined our movement in 1974, the same year in which I joined. We were, however, very different characters. I had approached the party with my head, and had studied its theoretical and programmatic foundation carefully before becoming a member. Ernst came with his heart. But that did not prevent us cooperating closely and participating enthusiastically in the fierce class battles of that time. We fought for the same ideas: for Trotskyism, for a socialist society.

Ernst was an apprentice at one of the large steel plants in the region, the Hatting Henrichshütte. The workers, and in particular the steelworkers, were bursting with self-assurance at that time. In 1972, following the defeat of a no-confidence motion tabled by the Christian Democrats, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) achieved its greatest election success since the establishment of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1949. The steelworkers, who had threatened a general strike, saw this in no small part as their own doing. Willy Brandt was *their* chancellor—not that they held him in particular regard.

They knew his weaknesses. But they regarded Brandt's accession to chancellor as their own work, just as in former times there had been a chancellor by the grace of the Kaiser. They had brought him to power and were convinced that they could force their will upon him.

We all shared this mood of self-confidence. When in the winter 1974 the public sector workers began to strike, and obtained a two-figure wage increase, we were inspired. We were convinced that this wave of militancy would flow directly into the socialist revolution, whose outbreak was only some years away, at the most one or two decades.

We fought aggressively against the bureaucratic apparatuses which held back the working class—the Social Democrats, the union bureaucrats and the Stalinists. At that time Ernst, along with a number of other party members, regularly participated in the youth meetings of the IG Metall union in Essen, and insisted they discuss not only bread and butter issues, but also the world economic crisis and its revolutionary consequences. Finally, an irritated bureaucrat banned him and all the other party members from the union premises.

Another important activity that year was the distribution of a pamphlet attacking the betrayal carried out by the Chilean Stalinists. We were deeply incensed by Pinochet's military coup and his brutal persecution of workers and intellectuals. Responsibility for the defeat of the Chilean working class lay with the Stalinist Communist Party, which preached the "peaceful road to socialism", disarmed militant workers and played down the role of the army, calling it "the people in uniform". We intervened with the pamphlet at public meetings of the DKP (German Communist Party) in order to draw the political lessons from this event for German workers. Ernst always participated—and not infrequently we were threatened with a beating by the Stalinists.

On May 1, 1975 we come to the scene that many comrades will

remember, because it was captured in a photograph that was published in *Der Funke*, our newspaper at that time. We always regarded the May Day demonstrations organised by the trade unions, and which still attracted tens of thousands of ordinary workers, as an opportunity to acquaint the workers with our politics.

Already on the nights preceding the demonstrations a wild pursuit took place along the planned route. Three comrades—one with a bucket full of paste, one with a pile of posters and a third with a wide brush—went along the demonstration route and covered walls, fences and electricity boxes with posters bearing our slogans. The police cruised around in their patrol cars, on the lookout for flying posting gangs. That was not difficult, since in Essen after ten o'clock in the evening there were not many people out on the streets. Numerous Maoist, anarchist and other groups did the same. They stuck their posters not alongside ours but over them, and so a bitter competition took place. Ernst naturally always took part.

On the May Day demonstration itself the trade union bureaucracy tried to suppress every critical voice by prohibiting any banners that did not reflect their politics. Of course, we did not accept this, and insisted on trade union democracy. We appeared with banners criticising the policy of union-management social partnership and advocated a socialist orientation.

In Essen, the trade union bureaucracy always used members of the DKP as march stewards. The DKP was a Stalinist organisation that received millions in subsidies from the East German government. It had its headquarters in Essen. DKP members were themselves harassed in the trade unions by the Social Democratic functionaries. They were not allowed to occupy higher positions. But this did not prevent them acting as the bureaucracy's guard dogs and furiously persecuting their left-wing opponents.

When we arrived at the Frohnhauser market square on May 1, from where the demonstration set off, we were immediately surrounded by a horde of DKP stewards, who pushed us away from the other demonstrators. Hardly had the demonstration turned the first corner when they fell upon us, in order to tear down our banners.

Ernst was determined not to give way. He did not strike out; he did not want a brawl. But he held on doggedly to the banner, at which three DKP stewards were pulling. To hand it over to them would have signified for him an inexcusable political concession to Stalinism. Finally he emerged the winner. The pole remained in his hand. Nothing remained of the banner, however. The stewards had torn it up.

Another activity in which Ernst played a big role at that time was the building of the Young Socialists. If I am not mistaken, Ernst was elected to the national committee and had responsibility for many organisational matters. We also understood this work as a part of our offensive against the bureaucracy. Even if the bureaucracy already controlled the trade unions, they would not be allowed to win influence among the youth.

The work of the Young Socialists was strongly influenced by activism, but it was not limited to this. We also engaged in intensive educational, political and theoretical work, which left deep traces. At the high point over 50 Young Socialists branches, with five in Essen alone, held public meetings each week. These meetings discussed current political events and also historical questions like the Nazis' conquest of power in 1933. Trotsky's writings and the basic theoretical works of Marx and Engels played an important role, and we often read and discussed them page by page. I am convinced that Ernst's socialist convictions received a firm and solid foundation at these educational classes.

As I have already said, the workers at that time possessed a firm and imperturbable self-assurance. They were convinced that they could force their will upon the Brandt government and drive it forwards. I can well remember speaking to a picketing steelworker whom I questioned about a witch-hunt being conducted by the *Bild* newspaper against the strikers. His response is imprinted in my memory. "Why should it bother an oak

tree," he said, "if a sow rubs up against its trunk?"

However, this self-confidence contained a definite admixture of political illusions. In 1975 these illusions received a sharp rebuff. On the basis of intrigues involving Herbert Wehner, then the parliamentary chairman of the SPD, and Dietrich Genscher, the Liberal Democratic (LDP) foreign minister in the SPD-LDP coalition government, Helmut Schmidt replaced Willy Brandt. Schmidt immediately turned to the right. He brought 15 union officials into his first cabinet, and with their assistance pushed through severe cuts and austerity measures against the workers.

The climate also changed in the trade unions. The bureaucracy organised a witch-hunt against its left-wing critics and systematically expelled them. This affected many of our members, including Ernst. The working class had nothing with which to oppose this. Suddenly their militancy was useless. They might have despised the Stalinists and Social Democrats, but they did not have a political response to this rightward turn. The idea that the bureaucracy could be forced to carry out the will of the working class proved to be an illusion.

We felt the consequences of this shock very directly. Between 1975 and 1976, about two thirds of our members—including many young workers—left the Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter (BSA—Socialist Workers League, the predecessor to the Socialist Equality Party in Germany). Ernst was one of them.

We found it very difficult to understand this sharp change at the time. The British section of our world movement, the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP), to which we oriented ourselves strongly, was beginning to adapt itself to opportunist forces, a process which 10 years later would lead to an open break with the International Committee. In place of systematically constructing an independent, socialist workers party—the Fourth International—a policy of tactical manoeuvres, of adaptation to various wings of the bureaucracy took hold. We were not yet conscious of this development. Nevertheless, it made the task of reorienting the party and holding on to those preparing to leave more difficult.

Ernst did not spend a long time in our movement in the 1970s, but his stay shaped him for the whole of his life. He acquired principles, which he firmly retained to his death: a steadfast orientation to the working class, which he regarded as the only possible basis for constructing a socialist society; a deep disdain for the bureaucracy in the SPD and the trade unions and for Stalinism, which he regarded correctly as the most important obstacle to the emancipation of the working class and the main force responsible for its defeats; and, finally, an unshakeable internationalism. Ernst was always inspired when he met and discussed with international comrades. He travelled several times to other sections of the Fourth International, to Great Britain and Australia, and participated in their activities.

His steadfastness on these principles constituted the strength of Ernst's personality. It is very much to his credit that Ernst, in contrast to many others who were active in the party at that time and later went in a different direction, held fast to these principles. That is also the reason why in 1991 he rejoined without hesitation, after we met him again by accident.

In the meantime, much had changed. We had gone through the split with the WRP and submitted their political conceptions, which had influenced us in the 1970s, to a thorough criticism. We had recovered the theoretical and political inheritance of the Fourth International, and had attained a far better understanding of the complex tasks involved in the building of a new leadership in the working class.

The 1980s were marked by a series of serious defeats for the working class. In the US Reagan was in power, and in Britain it was Thatcher. In Germany, Helmut Kohl, whom many had regarded as only a transitional figure, stayed in power for 16 years. In 1984-85, the one-year miners' strike in Britain was the last gasp of the union militancy that had characterised the 1970s. The miners suffered a devastating defeat.

In 1989 the Berlin Wall collapsed, as did the Soviet Union in 1990-91. While many interpreted this as the “end of socialism” or as proof of the failure of the working class, Ernst understood very well that the bureaucracy was responsible for these defeats. He saw in these events a confirmation of the counterrevolutionary character of Stalinism, something he had become deeply convinced of in the 1970s.

When the International Committee drew up a political balance sheet in 1992, and arrived at the conclusion that it was necessary to overcome not only a crisis of leadership in the working class, but also a crisis of perspective—that our task consisted of fighting for a revival of socialist culture in the working class—Ernst accepted this intellectually without hesitation. But emotionally he found it extremely difficult to resign himself to the disappearance of that invigorating militancy and that imperturbable self-assurance that had marked the working class in the 1970s. That worried him a great deal and demoralised him for a time.

This was not only a personal question. Ernst worked in an arena that could be called the minefield of revolutionary politics—in the industrial unions. There each day he rubbed up against the trade union bureaucracy, which never tired of placing new traps in his way. He put up a brave fight. I believe that we can draw many valuable lessons from this work.

In conclusion, let me say that Ernst remained to the end of his life a convinced socialist and internationalist. He supported and enthusiastically participated in all the new political initiatives of the International Committee the Fourth International—the transformation of the BSA into the Socialist Equality Party, and the establishment of the *World Socialist Web Site*. The pressure he faced inside the factory sometimes made political work difficult for him. But his fundamental convictions never wavered. In this regard, he was an exception. He towered above the rest of his colleagues. This is how we will recall him and preserve his memory.

Chris Marsden: “What set Ernst apart was his abiding respect for ideas”

Comrades and friends,

On behalf of the Socialist Equality Party in Britain, I would like to offer my deepest sympathy to Ernst's beloved partner Almut, his family and his many friends.

When I sat down to think through the remarks I wanted to make here today, I was forced to remind myself of one of the unavoidable pitfalls facing members of the Fourth International. It is not perhaps the most obvious one, but is no less real for all that.

The struggle for the socialist emancipation of humanity is a noble cause and it attracts the best and the most remarkable individuals to its banner. Surrounded by such people, it is all too easy to take for granted the fact that you are in the company of the most gifted, the most principled and the most humane, and can number them amongst your friends.

That is what I wanted to stress about Ernst. His death has forced all of us to examine what an extraordinary, indeed exceptional, man he was.

Everyone knows Ernst was physically a big man, and strong as well. But that doesn't count for very much. Often there are big bullies, big cowards, but Ernst was none of these things. To his friends he was both gentle and protective—sometimes to the point of being like an oversized mother hen.

More importantly, what set Ernst apart was his great and abiding respect for ideas. He saw his own strength in these terms. Ernst was a thinking man, who wanted above all to understand the world in order to change it. That is what brought him into socialist politics and animated him every day of his all too brief life.

I cannot claim to have been as close to Ernst as many of you here. But whenever I had the privilege of meeting him, he struck me as someone worth talking to—more than ready to listen carefully to what you had to say and equally prepared to tell you his own opinions in no uncertain terms. He was an iconoclast, who gave his support to the party because of his own profound belief in the historical principles represented by the Trotskyist movement.

I first met Ernst when he volunteered to help the British section during our joint campaign with the then-Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter, the PSG's forerunner, in the 1992 British general election. That he did so summed up the man. Ernst was an internationalist, who opposed nationalism of all stripes. He had become politically active once more, after a period of several years outside the party. It was significant that he did so at a time when the imperialist powers, with the support of the German Social Democrats, had launched their bombardment of Iraq.

Just one year later he was in Britain telling everyone he met that the burning question of the day was to establish the international unity of the working class against capitalism and its political defenders in the workers movement. From then on, there was never an international meeting between the two sections where Ernst was not, at the very least, amongst the first to greet you. More often than not he had put himself forward to pick up the “British comrades”—as he always referred to us—from the airport.

A car journey with Ernst was always an exhausting experience. First there were a half-dozen questions about the political situation in Britain, then a half dozen more on world events. Then he would want to discuss Germany—the activities of the PSG, various anecdotes illustrating the shameless opportunism of the social democrats, the Stalinists and the trade union bureaucracy. Then would seek advice on how to approach the writing of an article.

All of this would be interrupted occasionally by Ernst pointing out the car window at the location of a factory that had closed, or the site of a major battle with the employers. He was the ideal tourist guide for visiting revolutionaries!

During every joint camp Ernst would make his own contribution to the discussion and seek out your opinion during the all-important kaffee-pausen.

To sum up, I saw Ernst as a representative of everything that was fine and worthy of respect in the German working class. He rejected the post-war policy of class collaboration that has been the bane of the workers movement, and fought to the best of his abilities for the political independence of the working class.

For him socialism was not simply an ideal, but a guiding principle on which the future of humanity depended. He gave his all to the cause of socialism, unstintingly and without reservation. I for one am proud to have known him and will cherish the memory of a comrade we all valued so highly.

Ute Reissner: “Ernst never allowed himself to be corrupted”

Ute Reissner is a member of the central committee of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit.

It speaks for the depth of Ernst's political convictions that he returned to our party in 1991. That was, after all, a time when the propaganda proclaiming the “end of socialism” was to be heard everywhere.

The Stalinist regimes had turned their backs on nationalised property and thrown themselves into the arms of the “market”. Parallel to this, in the West, the Social Democrats and trade unions were abandoning any defence of the reforms and social gains previously won by the working class.

The early 1990s were also the years in which the first particularly brutal neo-fascist assaults took place in Germany. At this time a phenomenon was rife within traditional left-wing political circles: many people who had campaigned in the late 1960s and early 1970s for social change finally gave up their youthful radicalism—with a feeling of either relief or despair.

Not so Ernst. He went in the opposite direction. In his eyes, the collapse of the Soviet Union and East Germany had forcefully confirmed the Trotskyist evaluation of Stalinism. Ernst retained the powerful will to fight for a socialist perspective that he had developed in his youth and wanted to go onto the offensive.

The International Committee of the Fourth International was the only

political tendency that retained a clear head at that time. We knew that with the reestablishment of capitalism in the Soviet Union the working class on a world scale had suffered a serious setback. But we also knew that historical developments had confirmed our perspective, and that they represented the basis for a revival of the workers movement on an international scale. Ernst belonged to the few who already understood that at the time.

Ernst was a man of action. He sought to stand by his convictions. On this basis in February 1995 he stood as a candidate for the *Betriebsrat* (works council) at the HSP steel plant in Dortmund. The platform that he distributed in January 1995 was a frontal attack on the trade union bureaucracy. It linked up with the experiences of the workforce and appealed directly to them. Among the points it made were the following:

“Without the cooperation of *Betriebsrat* and the IG metal union these attacks would not be possible—whether it concerned the destruction of jobs, cutbacks in safety measures like the works' fire brigade or in technical operations, the growth of outsourcing, or the arbitrary elimination of the Christmas bonus...

“By my candidacy I would like to contribute to initiating an effective resistance. Without beating about the bush, this requires a new policy in the workers movement, proceeding not from the defence of the competitiveness of the German steel industry, but from the common interests of workers of all countries. As a socialist, I advocate such a policy.

“I decisively oppose the dirty dealing that goes on behind locked doors between the *Betriebsrat* and management. The first thing we should ensure is that membership of the *Betriebsrat* is no longer a means for feathering one's own nest. It is unacceptable for someone to conduct negotiations about dismissals and cuts in jobs if they are not even affected by them. Therefore:

“*Betriebsrat* members should not be placed in higher work groupings or enjoy other advantages!

“Full-time officials should return to the production line!

“There must be protection against dismissal for everyone, or for no one!

“The law obliges *Betriebsrat* members to be politically neutral, as do the unions' statutes, but is it not a political issue if at every twist and turn the long-term interests of workers are sacrificed to the needs of capital?”

In conclusion, Ernst referred to the fact that he was not standing as a substitute for the workforce. He could only achieve as much as his support allowed. Moreover, he stressed the necessity to defend foreign co-workers and their families as well as refugees and asylum-seekers. That was something about which Ernst felt very strongly.

It required courage to stand on such a platform. Ernst received 97 of 532 valid votes cast, i.e., about 18 percent. He was elected in sixth place among the positions reserved for blue-collar workers. This result showed that there was significant displeasure with the existing representation. Ernst's candidacy was met with respect, and he was rightfully proud of the result.

In the three years leading up to the next *Betriebsrat* election in 1998, Ernst produced seven information sheets and some leaflets, in which he drew an account for his colleagues of his activity and took up current questions. These info-sheets dealt with job cuts, flexible working, the manoeuvres of the trade union bureaucracy, various problems in the factory and concerns of the workforce over health and safety matters. The information sheets covered two to four pages, and generally concluded with an invitation to a meeting.

The fact that these gatherings were poorly attended illustrates the problem with which Ernst was confronted and which created such difficulties for him. The support that he received in his factory remained to a large extent passive. He was elected and respected, but his colleagues hesitated to become active themselves. In the *Betriebsrat* Ernst confronted the corrupt, and for him abhorrent, environment of the bureaucracy,

without receiving any significant support “from below”. That was a difficult and nerve-racking situation.

Ernst felt the strong desire to “really get something going”, and was always very inspired if he succeeded in this. For example, at a workforce meeting he was able to win a majority for a protest resolution against the introduction of annualised hours, which had been agreed by the union leadership in the 1996 contract. The use of annualised hours offered the employers many possibilities for introducing flexible working and saving on overtime payments. When the *Betriebsrat* promoted the campaign “against overtime”, which was organised by the trade union tops to cover up this sell-out, Ernst not only protested angrily, but by quickly issuing a leaflet ensured that his colleagues were able to see the whole charade as a product of the bureaucracy's trickery.

Ernst did not shrink from taking personal risks in his work in the factory and he spared no effort. He was confronted by representatives of the trade union who had been active for decades inside this apparatus and who knew all the rotten tricks for intimidating or isolating political opponents or critical workers. This was not Ernst's political terrain. He was not a man for intrigues and backroom diplomacy. But he possessed something that drove the union bureaucrats to desperation, a characteristic that differentiated him fundamentally from all the other officeholders—he never sought privileges or opportunities to advance his career. He thought of others before himself. In short, he was incorruptible. That lent him a certain impregnability.

In part, Ernst placed demands upon himself that he could not live up to—not due to any deficiency on his part, but due to the situation in the working class. He wanted to lever the world from its hinges, but the social movement to do this was simply lacking.

This fundamental problem could not be overcome in the near term or at the level of an individual factory. Ernst understood that very well. But confronted each day with the consequences of increased exploitation—accidents, illnesses, job losses—and being able to make only a small dent against such iniquities was terribly hard for someone like Ernst, who had such a thirst for action and such a deep sense of justice.

Ernst felt the setbacks that workers suffered after German reunification as a personal humiliation. And as hollow as the triumph of the ruling class was in the years immediately after the collapse of the Stalinist regimes, it nevertheless remains a fact that the working class had little with which to oppose it. And that was indeed difficult to bear.

The establishment of the *World Socialist Web Site* signified a great step forward in resolving these problems. It offered us all the possibility of illuminating the daily problems and the daily disputes in the light of the international work of our world party, and adopting a superior vantage point whereby, to quote Rosa Luxemburg, it was not necessary to poke one's nose into every bit of petty nonsense.

Ernst reacted promptly to the development of the new technological possibilities. He acquired an efficient computer and threw himself boldly into the difficulties of getting it to work. He soon got hooked up with e-mail and utilised the possibilities of the Internet. Some of those present who received Ernst's numerous impatient demands for help on that score can confirm this. In October 1998 and in July 1999 Ernst contributed articles to the *World Socialist Web Site* about job cuts in the steel industry.

Ernst was a pioneer. This word really applies to him. He was a pioneer of the Fourth International inside the working class. He was one of the first champions of an international renewal of the workers movement in twenty-first century. He was preparing the new era, in which the domination of the bureaucracies and the consequences of their policies will be overcome. And this corresponded to his personality—uniting an adventurous spirit, courage and idealism.

Sybille Fuchs: “We will keep his legacy alive”

Sybille Fuchs is a leading member of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit and a regular contributor to the WSWS.

Dear friends and relatives of Ernst, dear comrades:

I would like to especially welcome the comrades who have travelled from France and Britain to be here. We have come together not only to mourn a friend and comrade of many years and someone whom we lost so suddenly.

We were all shocked to learn that Ernst Schwarz had died on January 13. I am sure that I am speaking for everybody here when I say that we still cannot fully grasp that he is no longer with us—although many of us attended his funeral service and paid our last respects. Today we have come together because we want to speak of what remains of him for us, his political heritage and legacy, and the responsibilities that they pose for us.

Ernst was a child of the Ruhr region and felt closely tied to the working class in this area, which is dominated by the presence of coal and steel. He experienced the rise, crises and decline of the workers movement of the area.

The history of the workers and the bitter defeats they suffered in the twentieth century were for him both a source of motivation and a challenge. He sought to understand why, despite the militant struggles of the '20s and '30s, the working class was unable to repulse National Socialism and take power. He often talked of his grandparents and their life under the Nazis.

At the end of the '60s and the beginning of the '70s, as the signs grew that the post-war boom was coming to an end and America was embroiled in its bloody war against Vietnam, many youth were politically mobilised and sought an alternative to exploitation and repression. Ernst had a fine nose for the lies and historical falsifications of Social Democracy and the Stalinists and was repelled by their nationalism. This was why he was drawn to the Trotskyist movement and its internationalist perspective.

As a youth, during his apprenticeship as a fitter at the Henrichshütte in Hattingen, Ernst joined the Sozialistische Jugendbund (Socialist Youth League) and shortly afterwards the party, then called the Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter. He participated in schools, Marxist workers' circles and summer camps and rapidly learnt a great deal. In the second half of the '70s however, it proved increasingly difficult to win new youth to the movement.

There were reasons for such difficulties arising out of the objective situation, as well as our own lack of experience and the political errors made by the leadership of the British Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP), at that time the oldest and most influential section of the International Committee of the Fourth International. We oriented our own policy strongly towards that of the British party. The WRP, however, was increasingly developing an opportunist, nationally limited orientation that more and more led to the paralysis of our own political work. Activist campaigns served to increase problems rather than solve them. A whole layer of younger and older members became frustrated and left the movement at that time. Ernst was one of them.

We met him again in 1991. In the intervening period we had broken with the WRP and firmly re-established the policy of the International Committee along Trotskyist lines. This made it possible in 1988 to draw up an international perspectives document in which we were able not only to explain the phenomenon of capitalist globalisation and its consequences for the working class, but also to analyse the accompanying crisis of the Soviet Union and the Stalinist bureaucracy. We were therefore prepared for the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in 1989-91. We were the only left-wing organisation or movement that was politically prepared to intervene in this development.

In the autumn of 1991 we began preparations for an International Workers Conference in Berlin. In a public campaign in the Dortmund district of Nordstadt, I, together with another comrade, was discussing with a young married couple whom we were trying to win for the conference. Suddenly the young man stood up and said, "Wait a moment,

I'll get my neighbour. He knows a lot more about what you are talking about." You can imagine I was more than a little surprised when the young man presented his neighbour, Ernst Schwarz. I was even more astonished to discover that, although we had not seen each other for 15 years, he had retained everything we had discussed and studied together in the '70s.

In 1991 Ernst worked at a steel preparation plant for the Hoesch factory in Westfalenhütte. It was a period of mergers in the steel industry. The take-over of Hoesch by Krupp was imminent. Day and night Ernst warned his colleagues on his shift of the dangers for them arising from this development. At the time thousands of steelworkers took to the streets to demonstrate for the retention of their jobs.

As part of the reorganisation he was transferred to the HSP works. His transfer was probably (this was his own opinion) due to his readiness to agitate amongst his co-workers and warn them of the consequences of the policies pursued by their trade union, IG Metall, and the local factory committee, which was determined to facilitate the merger of Hoesch and Krupp.

The political work in the factory carried out by Ernst parallel to his demanding shift work was one of the most difficult aspects of his party work. Ernst did not find it easy and conflicts he had both with his co-workers and with us left their mark. He was profoundly affected by the death of a colleague in November 1999, who was struck by a load of treated steel.

The experiences made by Ernst in his political work in his factory are of great significance for our party. We have the responsibility of keeping alive such experiences and learning from them in order to win workers for a socialist programme. We owe him this.

Elisabeth Zimmermann: "Ernst had a developed sense of justice and international solidarity"

Elisabeth Zimmermann is a longstanding member of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit and a regular contributor to the WSWS.

Dear Almuth, dear Judith, dear friends and comrades:

We were all very shocked to learn of comrade Ernst's sudden death. I have attempted to recall the most important experiences we undertook together. One of the most significant was our participation at the international school of the Fourth International in January 1998 in Sydney, Australia. It was held on the theme "Marxism and the Problems of the Twentieth Century" and represented a milestone in the history of our movement.

Many comrades whom I met at the most recent school in Sydney, held at the beginning of this year, spoke to me about Ernst and his tragic and untimely death. They could vividly remember his attendance at the school three years ago. They recalled in particular the way Ernst vehemently defended the theory of evolution against the somewhat mystical theories about the emergence of life defended by a reader from Sydney.

I also recall a drive we took together with an Australian comrade to the steelworks at Wollongong. Peter Stavropoulos, who works there, organised a visit to the plant. As others before me have pointed out, Ernst tried to undertake discussion with every worker he met. He related his experiences from Germany, inquired after their own experiences and emphasised the necessity of the international unity of the working class.

Ernst Schwarz was an outstanding member of his class who joined the Fourth International and fought vigorously for our perspective, in particular for the unification of the working class. I met him again in November 1991, on the drive to Berlin to the International Worker's Conference against War and Colonialism, which was organised by our movement in response to the Persian Gulf War.

Ernst spoke at the conference, and David Walsh reminded me this year in Sydney of the very lively interview we conducted with Ernst for the *Bulletin*, the newspaper at that time of the American section. After the conference Ernst stayed in Berlin for a few days in order to show some of

the international comrades the sights.

Helen Halyard, the assistant national secretary of the American SEP, recalled in her letter of condolence important discussions in which Ernst spoke of the tragic experiences of the German working class, its betrayal at the hands of Social Democracy and Stalinism, and the international consequences which are still felt today. In the course of their walks through Berlin, Ernst showed other comrades the spot where Rosa Luxemburg was murdered.

The year 1992 was marked by polemics over the significance of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the enormous damage inflicted on the consciousness of the working class by decades of Stalinist domination. We saw the central task of our international movement to be the renewal of the struggle for socialist consciousness in the working class and the development of the cultural level of society as a whole.

In November 1992, Comrade Halyard, who was standing as the Workers League (predecessor of the SEP) candidate in the presidential elections, came to Duisburg as part of an international tour. She spoke there about her experiences and discussions with workers in Sri Lanka, where she had previously toured, and about the situation facing workers in the US.

In December 1992 we organised a Conference against Racism and the Danger of War in Frankfurt/Main.

A tragic and prominent event in 1993 was the arson attack by neo-Nazis on the house of a Turkish family in Solingen, in which seven members of the family died. A few days afterwards a big demonstration took place in Solingen, where violent clashes took place between some of the demonstrators and heavily armed police. Ernst helped to protect the information booth that we had set up and then, when the situation got out of control, he organised our withdrawal from the scene.

Our collaboration with Ernst in the factory where he worked has already been described at length by other speakers. Between 1993 and 1997 Comrade Ernst was always there when it was a question of taking a stand against attacks on workers internationally or on members of our own movement. I recall a lobby we held in front of the American Embassy (situated then in Bonn) to defend Roger Cawthra, a victimised American bus driver. We also organised a number of lobbies before the Sri Lankan Embassy to protest the arrest and repression of our comrades in that country.

Ernst had a powerful sense of justice and international solidarity. In 1997 he participated in our lobbies in front of and inside the local court in Moers, where our party supported the worker Duran Özel in his claim against the firm Ruhrkohle AG. The company was attempting to cut his wages because of Duran's ill-health, itself the product of years of strenuous work as a miner underground. As a result of our campaign and related political work, Duran Özel was able to win his case.

Ernst's own colleagues at work had respect and consideration for him, even though they did not agree fully with his perspective and standpoint. This was expressed in his election to the factory committee on the basis of an independent programme which he worked out in collaboration with the party.

At the end of my contribution I wish to briefly deal with the difficult conditions in the steel industry and the health problems that arise from the Konti (continental) shift system, as well as the extreme forms of stress to which workers are subjected and the callousness with which management treats the workforce in their drive to achieve productivity targets. This final point applies not just to the steel industry, but also to many other forms of work.

In the steel industry the drive to intensify productivity has led to many deaths and serious accidents in recent years. The fatal accident at HSP in November 1999 had a traumatic affect on Ernst.

I read a newspaper report on this theme just two days ago. The IG Metall trade union, which itself bears a large part of the responsibility for this state of affairs, organised a meeting on the subject and referred to a

number of studies which reached the conclusion that "The risk of a heart attack increases three and a half times with a three-shift system, and even increases seven times following the repeated completion of a considerable number of overtime hours."

Under existing conditions, the introduction of a 35-hour week would lead to considerable additional stress for workers. In light of the increase in deregulated work and widespread job-cutting, another powerful stress factor is the fear of losing one's job, even if one dislikes the work one is performing.

Shift work severely restricts the possibility of taking part in social life. It is doubly to Ernst's credit that he fought for the perspective of the Fourth International under such difficult circumstances. That speaks for him as a person as well as for the power of our perspective.

Should he have lived Ernst would have undoubtedly been very happy to witness the high regard shown for him by our international comrades.

Message from the Socialist Equality Party of the US

Dear comrades,

In behalf of the membership of the Socialist Equality Party of the United States, I join with our comrades in Germany and internationally in mourning the tragic and untimely passing of Comrade Ernst Schwarz. In extending the deepest condolences to Comrade Ernst's family, friends, co-workers and fellow party members, we simultaneously pay tribute to a man who devoted his life to the highest principles and ideals of humanity, embodied in the cadre and program of our world party.

The death of any worker at so young an age and in so sudden a fashion comes as a shock. But for anyone who had come into contact with Ernst, the first response to the news of his death was disbelief. It is hard to accept that anyone so full of life, so vigorous and so imbued at once with humour and determination could be struck down in the prime of life.

Comrade Ernst's record of struggle for Marxism in the working class, his fidelity to the historical legacy of Trotskyism and his determined fight for this legacy under objectively difficult conditions, speak eloquently of the finest traditions of the German working class. His life and work are a model for new generations of workers that will turn to the traditions and principles of international socialism as they enter into great struggles.

Comrade Ernst fought for our party within the politically difficult milieu of the trade unions, dominated as they are by bureaucracies and the culture of opportunism which they foster. That he withstood the pressure of this milieu and won the respect and support of his fellow workers, on the basis of a principled struggle for socialism, is a powerful tribute not only to Ernst himself, but also to the party that he represented.

Ernst Schwarz will be remembered and honoured by class conscious workers in Germany and around the world. His life was short, but it was lived to the fullest. He experienced, in the words of Leon Trotsky, "the highest happiness: the consciousness that one participates in the building of a better future, that one carries on his shoulders a particle of the fate of mankind, and that one's life will not have been lived in vain."

Fraternally,

David North, national secretary

Message to the memorial meeting from the relatives of Ernst Schwarz

The following words were presented to the meeting by Almuth, Ernst's life partner, and her daughter, Judith:

And always there will be traces of your life: thoughts, pictures, moments and feelings.

Thank you

for the comforting words

spoken or written;

for all the signs

of love and friendship

Almuth and Judith



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact