

David Hyland and the fight for socialist consciousness

Ulrich Rippert
22 January 2014

We are posting here the contribution delivered by Ulrich Rippert, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party of Germany (Partei für Soziale Gleichheit), to the memorial meeting held January 18 in honour of Dave Hyland, the party's former national secretary, who passed away on December 8, 2013 (see "Memorial meeting pays tribute to Dave Hyland's political struggle").

Comrades and friends,

I am very proud to be here and participate in the commemoration of the life and political struggle of comrade Dave Hyland.

Dave embodied something that will prove to be of decisive importance in the coming upsurge of the class struggle internationally—the strength, confidence, revolutionary energy and determination of the working class. But the key to Dave was his understanding that these capacities in the working class can only be developed on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective, and through the building of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

When I met Dave just a few weeks before he died, his illness was very far advanced. Nevertheless, his optimism and his confidence in a socialist future of mankind were very strong. And his belief that our party will lead the upcoming struggles of the working class internationally was unshaken.

We spoke about the inspiring days of October 1985, during the split from the Workers Revolutionary Party, and how important it was that Dave took the initiative and established a relationship with Comrade David North, joining the struggle of the Trotskyist opposition against the national opportunism in the WRP.

For both of us, this struggle was a political rebirth, and the beginning of a very close political collaboration and personal friendship.

One question we discussed again and again during that struggle was: How is it possible to develop socialist consciousness in the working class?

The leadership of the WRP waged a relentless struggle against the position of Lenin and Trotsky that socialist consciousness cannot develop automatically through the class struggle. Through the mechanism of the revolutionary party, this consciousness must be brought into the working class from outside the immediate forms of the class struggle such as the picket line.

In his famous work *What Is to Be Done?* Lenin explained that it is necessary to have all-sided analysis, exposures and political education. For Dave and myself, this question was decisive.

We were both factory workers and knew that during a strike, workers are able to develop very radical political positions. They can

confront the capitalist state, and sometimes an insurrectionary mood develops among workers in struggle. Dave told me about his experience during the miners' strike here in 1984, which lasted a whole year when he was party organiser in Yorkshire.

But even the most radical forms of militancy remain within the framework of bourgeois consciousness. Socialist understanding, socialist consciousness, demands all-sided, international political information and an understanding of very profound historical questions. Only on that basis can a cultural development take place in the working class that is so critical for socialist revolution. Dave understood these questions, and we had many discussions on the importance of the political education of the working class.

This is important because I often have the impression that here in Britain class differences are more direct, more pronounced and more conscious than in many other countries. The arrogance of the British middle class, its haughtiness, is openly expressed. At the same time, the statement "I am a worker" is here spoken with a certain proletarian pride and an undertone of challenge and confrontation. Dave represented this self-consciousness of workers, but he understood that this class standpoint is used by trade union bureaucrats and petty-bourgeois intellectuals to cultivate a form of workerism, which aims to keep workers away from political education and turn them away from culture.

That is why we had many discussions about how necessary it is to study and understand the most profound theoretical questions, which is only possible on the basis of a concrete study of the history of the Trotskyist movement. And that is why the struggle taken up in the International Committee to rebuild socialist consciousness is of absolutely decisive importance.

Behind that struggle in our movement were profound changes in the objective situation. The breakdown of the trade unions and the old labour movement had catastrophic consequences. It became clear that the crisis of proletarian leadership, which Trotsky had described in the *Transitional Programme* as the central question of the whole world situation, cannot be overcome just by tactical initiatives or militancy. It was necessary to rebuild socialist consciousness and a socialist culture in the workers' movement. In the last decade and a half, the *World Socialist Web Site* has become the central instrument to achieve this aim.

Despite his progressive illness and the terrible impact it had on him, Dave became a very intense collaborator on the *World Socialist Web Site*. I was often surprised how well informed he was. When I arrived for discussions in November, he greeted me with the words, "Did you read the report of the SEP demonstration in Detroit to defend the Detroit Institute of Art in the US?"

He was deeply impressed and inspired that our American comrades were able to rally several hundred workers to defend the DIA. He recognised it as an important step in the cultural and political development of the working class.

Dave's decision nearly 30 years ago to support the struggle of comrade Dave North and the Workers League, and through that the international socialist perspective of the International Committee, was of historic significance. The whole history of the Fourth International was at stake.

For our work in Germany, this was absolutely decisive. We developed a very, very close collaboration between our sections on that basis. In the many joint schools that we organised, summer schools, discussions and conferences, we elaborated the lessons of that split. And it became clear that it was an expression of very profound changes in the objective political situation—in particular the breakdown of the Stalinist regimes, which found its highest expression in the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Without the split and the political and theoretical struggle against the opportunism of the WRP, we would not have been able to survive politically in Germany. The disintegration of the Stalinist regimes in 1989/1990, and the transformation that began almost 25 years ago, was the opening up of a massive offensive against the working class internationally. The destruction of social systems that is taking place today did not begin with the economic crisis in 2008. Rather, those now leading this offensive had been cultivated during the period of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and they then set out to eradicate the social gains of the working class all over the world.

That offensive was not only organisational, but also theoretical and ideological. Together with the Stalinist organisations, the Social Democrats, the Labour Party, the trade unions, all of the petty-bourgeois leftist organisations transformed themselves into direct agencies of imperialism.

We spoke of the phenomenon of renunciationism at that time, when these organisations totally changed their political orientation. Today their right-wing turn takes a very open form.

Everywhere these pseudo-lefts are in the forefront of social attacks, the destruction of democratic rights and the building of police states.

The destruction of the social system in countries like Greece, Portugal, Ireland and Spain is now the model for every single country.

One can ask the question, Why are they able to do this without a revolution developing? To answer it, one must examine the role of the trade unions and all the pseudo-left organisations, which support the unions in suppressing the independent movement of the working class. We had many discussions where we explained that the building of a revolutionary party, our party, in the working class, requires a political and theoretical struggle against the pseudo-left tendencies.

All the unresolved problems of the twentieth century, of war and revolution, are back.

As in the 1930s, the crisis develops in the direction of war. Since the beginning of the year, there has been a political campaign in Germany around the 100th anniversary of the First World War. Several books have been published, including Christopher Clark's *Sleepwalkers*, which was first published here in the UK.

There are other recent books on the First World War that all have one aim—to attack a scientific and Marxist understanding of the relationship between capitalism and war. They reject the position that imperialist war is rooted in the contradictions of capitalism. They dismiss this view as “deterministic” and outmoded, having been disproved by new information or new discoveries.

Theirs is a totally subjective interpretation of history. They say the German Kaiser, the chancellor, the ministers, the generals all took wrong decisions, looked at the situation from the wrong angle and therefore came to wrong conclusions.

The conclusion they draw is that it is necessary to have an educated elite. You have to have a government of experts. Elected politicians are not able to function in this way, they argue, because they are too much under the influence of the people. And these elites have to have full power to push through their decisions against the population.

The second conclusion they draw is that it is necessary to intervene in regional conflicts very early—not only politically and diplomatically, but militarily, and therefore it is necessary to build up strong and professional armies.

In other words, in the name of the struggle against war, they demand the build-up of military forces and the preparation for dictatorship. And again the pseudo-left are at the forefront of this argument—for “humanitarian imperialism” and wars for human rights.

I raise this is because the basis of the ideological campaign around the First World War is the attack on historical materialism, on Marxism.

It was exactly this question that was at the centre of the split in our movement 30 years ago. The struggle taken up was directed against the subjective idealist positions that were developed in the leadership of the WRP. The critique of Healy's *Studies in Dialectics* by David North was one of the first documents we received at the time, and it was absolutely decisive in preparing for the struggle against the opportunism of the WRP.

The questions fought out in our movement 30 years ago have become the key questions in the political struggle against war and dictatorship today.

I think it is very important to understand the enormous objective political and theoretical strength represented by this party and its history. Comrade Dave Hyland took the decision to join the struggle of the internationalists against the WRP leadership, and build the forces here to defend that historical perspective.

If you ask yourself how best to commemorate the life and political work of Comrade Dave Hyland, there is only one answer. You have to make yourself familiar with these ideas and this perspective. You have to study the history of this movement and join the struggle to build the world party of socialist revolution.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact