

Wolfgang Weber (1949-2024): A revolutionary intellectual and fighter for Trotskyism

Ulrich Rippert, Christoph Vandreier
21 November 2024

In the early hours of November 16, Wolfgang Weber, a longtime leader of the German section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, died at the age of 75 after five years of serious illness.

Wolfgang devoted over 50 years of his life to building the Trotskyist party and fought tirelessly politically and theoretically for the independence of the working class.

A political appreciation of Wolfgang's life leads to an assessment of the fundamental historical questions and tasks facing his entire generation. This was above all the struggle for the continuity of revolutionary Marxism. This had been attacked by Stalinism, fascism and Pabloism to such an extent that, historically speaking, it hung by a thread. It was defended and further developed, in the years in which Wolfgang became politically conscious, only by the International Committee of the Fourth International, whose leading section at that time was the British Socialist Labour League under the leadership of Gerry Healy.

Wolfgang's life is inextricably linked to the construction of the ICFI and its German section, which had been destroyed by Pabloism. As a child of the postwar period, he drew the conclusion from Nazi rule that the working class had to be freed from the crippling influence of the Stalinist and social democratic bureaucracies in order to prevent another catastrophe. He dedicated his life—and his enormous intellectual capacity—to this task.

Youth in postwar Germany

Wolfgang was born on June 6, 1949 in Schliersee, south of Munich, where his parents, grandparents and two older brothers lived together in a cramped summer house where they had fled from bombed-out Munich after the war. Two years after his birth, the family moved to Munich and four years later to Würzburg, where Wolfgang spent his entire schooling. The soon to be six-member family could not significantly climb the social ladder on the salary of his father, who was an insurance agent, and later rose to become branch manager.

His school years were marked by the unbearable misery of the postwar period. Old Nazi teachers who wanted to prepare the students for a new war of revenge, a church in which nothing had changed since the end of the war, and an omnipresent anti-communism in petty-bourgeois layers shaped his childhood and youth. Wolfgang looked for the contrast in classical literature, reading in particular Friedrich Schiller and Theodor Storm and enjoying the programs on these authors on the radio from East Germany (GDR), where he also had family ties.

He was attracted to classical humanism, and as social conflicts

intensified and May 1968 approached, Schiller and Storm were increasingly supplemented by Bertolt Brecht and Franz Kafka. Wolfgang turned away from the church and became a conscious atheist. Like so many of his generation, he was increasingly driven by the question of how, in the land of poets and thinkers, the catastrophe of fascism was possible, which was now being swept under the carpet by the ruling elites.

In particular, the French documentary film *Nacht und Nebel* (Night and Fog), which brought together original shots from several concentration camps, made a deep impression on Wolfgang. As one of his first political experiences, he followed the Eichmann trial in Israel and later the Auschwitz trials in Germany on the radio, at the age of 12. But he found no answer to his questions in school and in the politically cleansed libraries. He found the countless misanthropic or social-psychological explanatory models that prevailed to be totally inadequate.

Wolfgang graduated from school as the best high school graduate in the state of Bavaria. He therefore received the highly regarded scholarship of the Maximilianium and later also a talent grant from the Studienstiftung des deutschen Volkes. He studied law in Munich, where he was again confronted with numerous former Nazis as professors, and switched to economics after the intermediate examination.

Development as a Trotskyist

He began there to read Marx and followed intensively the growing struggles of the working class throughout Europe. But Wolfgang only found a satisfactory answer to the question of how National Socialism had been possible when he met the Socialist Labour League (SLL), the British section of the ICFI, during his studies in Britain in October 1971.

One of the first books he bought at an SLL literature table was Leon Trotsky's writings on Germany, which were also published in German for the first time in the same year. Trotsky explained fascism as the reaction of the ruling class to the extreme intensification of the class struggle. Fascism is the mobilization of the ruined petty bourgeoisie to completely crush working class organizations. With this understanding, the question of the leadership of the working class in this life-and-death struggle, for which Trotsky had fought vehemently, took center stage.

"Hitler did not come to power because the majority of the German people were inspired by an irrepressible urge to kill Jews. He owed his rise to the dull-witted and treacherous policies of the SPD and KPD, which politically paralyzed the labor movement and increasingly undermined its ideological resistance to the poison of racism and antisemitism," Wolfgang himself stated 28 years after his first reading of

Trotsky's writings on Germany, in the preface to a new edition.

In the following period, Wolfgang devoted a considerable part of his great intellectual abilities to Stalinism's betrayal of the October Revolution and its other countless crimes. During his stay in Britain, Wolfgang also experienced the enormous strength of the working class, which led mass strikes against the conservative Heath government and temporarily paralyzed the country. He understood that this force could only achieve its goal if the question of Stalinism was clarified.

In November 1971, at a meeting of the All Trades Union Alliance, Wolfgang first heard Gerry Healy speak. Healy had led the SLL and had defended Trotskyist principles against Pabloite revisionism in the 20 years before. Wolfgang was deeply impressed by how Healy addressed the workers and placed the construction of the revolutionary party in the historical continuity of Bolshevism and the Trotskyist movement. Subsequently, he devoured the texts of the SLL on the reunification of the US Socialist Workers Party with the Pabloites, on the betrayal by the LSSP in Ceylon and on the Hungarian Revolution.

For Wolfgang, the decision to clarify the political issues was a decision for the working class. "I had a lot of very intelligent fellow students, but it ultimately depends on what you make of it. You have to make a class decision," he once remarked. On this basis, he declared war on the various petty-bourgeois theories which, like the Frankfurt School, dismissed the working class as a revolutionary force or, like postmodernism, denied historical development in general.

Wolfgang had enormous respect and esteem for the history of the working class and understood himself in this sense as a pupil of the working class. He could listen like few others, was always curious and open to workers' experiences and thoughts, and was very careful to thoroughly analyze workers' conceptions and then fight them out. He recognized in the working class, within all the problems of its historical development, the social force that will realize the ideals of the Enlightenment, socialism and humanism that had so shaped his youth in the struggle for world revolution. This attitude also defined his personal dealings with comrades.

League of Socialist Workers (BSA)

In 1973, Wolfgang returned to Germany full of enthusiasm, energy and political drive. He immediately became a member of the League of Socialist Workers (BSA), which had been founded two years earlier in the autumn of 1971, as the new German section of the ICFI.

As in other European countries, fierce class struggles raged in Germany at the time. Since the 1960s, the economic crisis of world capitalism had worsened. Europe and Japan had emerged as economic rivals to the United States. The dollar came under increasing pressure. In 1966, a recession rocked the global economy. In 1971, the American government abandoned dollar-gold convertibility, thus removing the basis for the Bretton Woods monetary system, which had formed the foundation for the postwar boom. In 1973, the world economy plunged again into a deep recession. The working class responded with an international offensive of revolutionary proportions.

Wolfgang resumed his studies in economics at Munich University and lived in the Maximilianeum. But his main work was now the establishment of local groups of the BSA in Munich and later also in Nuremberg.

When the leadership of the BSA asked him in 1977 if he would be willing to work full-time for the party, Wolfgang, without hesitation, broke off his studies and devoted all his energy to building the party. He was elected to the national committee and for many years headed the

editorial board of the *Neue Arbeiterpresse* (New Workers Press), the central organ of the BSA at the time.

Around the same time, his friendship began with Annie, who became his lifelong partner and was herself passionately involved in the political struggle. When two children were born later, they both tried to provide them with an optimal education despite intensive party work.

In the 1970s, the question of the SPD played a central role in discussions with workers and young people. After the general strike of May-June 1968 in France and the September strikes of the steelworkers in Germany, who fought for a high wage demand against the opposition of the trade union bureaucracy, Willy Brandt, who described himself as a "democratic socialist," was entrusted with the government.

Brandt had been a leading member of the centrist Socialist Workers Party (SAP) in the 1930s and had played a key role in his Norwegian exile in isolating the Trotskyists in the SAP youth organization and preventing the SAP from joining the Fourth International.

Many workers had illusions in Brandt. Wolfgang participated intensively in the discussions on how best to fight for a socialist program in the working class under these conditions. The BSA's demand at the time, "Throw the FDP [the bourgeois liberal Free Democratic Party] out of the government and fight for an SPD-only government committed to socialist policies!", was based on Trotsky's tactics in the Transitional Program and was always associated with exposing the true character of the SPD.

Wolfgang wrote several articles that focused on the historical understanding of the role of the SPD. In the article series, "Ruhr Struggle 1928—Its History and Lessons," which appeared in the *Neue Arbeiterpresse* and later also in *Marxistische Rundschau* (*Marxist Review*), the theoretical organ of the BSA, he wrote:

The role that the SPD leadership played in the 1928 lockout found its logical continuation in the following years, from the support for the Brüning regime and its emergency decrees up to the call of the trade union leaders to march together with the fascists under the swastika to express the positive attitude of the trade unions towards the Nazi state.

Only half an hour's drive from Munich is Dachau, with its memorial to the first concentration camp, which was already built before Hitler came to power and served as a model for all that followed. The BSA and its youth organization, the Socialist Youth League (SJB), visited the memorial repeatedly with groups of young people and workers. At that time, one could still talk to survivors, and Wolfgang used his knowledge to prove why one cannot understand fascism without understanding Stalinism.

But the work of the young party became increasingly difficult due to the increasing degeneration of the Workers Revolutionary Party, as the British section now called itself. The WRP, which increasingly adapted to the left wing of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy as well as to the nationalist regimes in the Middle East, put pressure on the German section to do the same. It systematically sabotaged the political and theoretical work of the BSA and pushed the comrades into opportunistic large-scale campaigns. The *Marxistische Rundschau* was discontinued after only four issues under pressure from the WRP.

The split with the WRP

When Wolfgang became acquainted with the Marxist criticism of the WRP's line presented by David North and the Workers League in the US in 1985, he reacted enthusiastically. Years later, he wrote in a letter, referring to Peter Schwarz, another leader of the BSA: "When Peter handed over the documents of David North's fight against the national opportunism of the WRP leadership at the end of September 1985 and communicated the expulsion of Healy to me, it was a tremendous incentive for me to participate in the fight against the renegades."

And that's precisely what he did. He wrote a series of articles under the title "Leon Trotsky and the October Revolution." He used a speech given by Healy in London in August 1987 as an opportunity to explain the great importance of Trotsky in the preparation, leadership and defense of the 1917 October Revolution. Healy had praised Gorbachev in his speech, repeating some of the vile Stalinist lies against Trotsky. Wolfgang not only refuted Healy's lies and explained the reactionary role of perestroika, he above all worked out the importance of the political lessons from the October Revolution for today.

Around the same time, in another series of articles, he developed the fight against Pabloism and its German offshoot, the Group of International Marxists (GIM). The GIM had joined forces with the Maoist KPD to form the "United Socialist Party" (VSP). Stressing the importance of the struggle against Pabloism in building the party in the working class, Wolfgang drew on the lessons of the split from the WRP and on the ICFI's 1988 international perspectives resolution, *The World Capitalist Crisis and the Tasks of the Fourth International*.

He wrote:

The decisive lesson for the coming class struggles to be drawn from the strategic experiences of the proletariat during the postwar period, in particular during the years 1968-1975, is the following: The unification of the international proletariat through the reconstruction of the ICFI as the World Party of Socialist Revolution, which alone can ensure its victory, requires an uncompromising and intransigent struggle against opportunism and all forms of nationalism.

The split from the WRP and the conscious reappraisal of the history of the Fourth International—summarized in David North's *The Heritage We Defend*—laid the foundation for an enormous political development of the party and formed the decisive preparation for the subsequent collapse of the Stalinist regimes.

In his work *Solidarity in Poland 1980-81 and the Perspective of Political Revolution*, Wolfgang not only examined the development of the huge eruption of the class struggle in Poland but also shed light on the betrayal of the political leadership and the role of the Pabloites and the renegades of the WRP in covering it up. The book is a polemic for the political revolution against Stalinism and for the world socialist revolution:

In connection with the crisis of the Stalinist regime, a wide variety of oppositional currents may arise in petty-bourgeois layers and also in working class circles, characterized by courage and radical demands against the ruling regime—so long as they do not adopt the perspectives and principles of Trotskyism, for the strategy of the world revolution and the political revolution as part of it, they will inevitably capitulate like Kuron and Modzelewski under the combined pressure of the Stalinist bureaucracy and imperialism and form, as they ultimately did with their limited perspectives, an obstacle to the struggle of the working class.

The end of the GDR

When mass demonstrations developed in Eastern Europe and the GDR (East Germany) in 1989, Wolfgang reacted with great enthusiasm. His article, "The background to the mass flight from the GDR—harbinger of workers' uprisings," in August 1989 was the prelude to an intensive intervention in the GDR. A little later, the BSA wrote its statement "Down with the SED bureaucracy! Build Workers' Councils!"

As the uprising grew in autumn 1989, Wolfgang took an active part in intervening in the working class of the GDR. At the end of October, the BSA set up a political operations center in a comrade's apartment in West Berlin. The wall was still standing, and everyone who crossed the border was closely monitored. Nevertheless, the BSA managed to smuggle a dozen comrades and thousands of copies of a call for political revolution across the border and distribute them at the Berlin mass demonstration on November 4, in which over a million participated.

Wolfgang was thrilled. For the first time, it was possible to make contact with the East German working class and to make known and discuss Trotsky's perspective of political revolution against the Stalinist bureaucracy. When Oskar Hippe tried to build a Trotskyist organization in the Soviet Occupation Zone (SBZ), from which the GDR later emerged, after the Second World War, he was arrested immediately and remained incarcerated in the Bautzen Stasi prison for eight years.

Wolfgang met Oskar Hippe and his wife Gertrud personally in the spring of 1989. He visited the Trotskyist veterans together with Bill and Jean Brust, both of whom had played a key role in the struggle for Trotskyism in the US for decades, as well as with other BSA members.

Oskar Hippe had a lot to tell. He had met and discussed with Trotsky several times. He supported the BSA's struggle in the GDR but warned against too much euphoria. The damage that Stalinism had done to the consciousness of the working class could not be overcome overnight, he stressed.

Wolfgang wrote many articles, exposures and reports in the fight against the dismantling of industry in the former GDR and the reintroduction of capitalist exploitation. Three years later, he made an important contribution to understanding the history of the GDR with his book *GDR—40 Years of Stalinism*. He began the foreword by saying:

Three years after the end of the GDR, the jubilation over the "victory of the West" and the "triumph of capitalism" has given way to a feeling of dull disillusionment. In the east of Germany, an industrial desert has been created in place of the promised "flourishing landscapes." Half of the employees in the territory of the former GDR have lost their jobs. ... It is time that, after the shifting emotions, after the blind euphoria, shock and numbness, which have been triggered by the onrush of events since 1989, reason and sober reflections now prevail.

He then analyzed the origins and history of the GDR in nine chapters. He refuted the big lie that Stalinism and socialism are the same, which exploits the crimes of Stalinism to foment anti-communist sentiments. He concluded with the following words:

The balance sheet of the history of the GDR signifies a devastating historical indictment that must be indelibly fixed in the consciousness of the international working class: Stalinism does not lead to socialism but back to capitalism! Stalinism is not a

“flawed attempt,” not a “false model” of socialism, but its gravedigger.

Even in later years, Wolfgang kept returning to this question. He was firmly convinced that a clear understanding of Stalinism, especially in Germany, where the Stalinist and capitalist regimes had coexisted side by side, was crucial for the working class to be able to reconnect with its great socialist traditions.

Defending historical truth

When, after the end of the GDR and the Soviet Union, it became increasingly clear that the bankruptcy of Stalinism had ushered in a new epoch of imperialist wars and fierce class conflicts, as foreseen by the ICFI, a new wave of attacks on Trotskyism began. In Britain, no less than three Trotsky biographies—by Ian Thatcher, Geoffrey Swain and Robert Service—based on lies and falsifications that sought to slander Trotskyism, appeared within five years. David North thoroughly refuted them in his book *In Defense of Leon Trotsky*.

Wolfgang played an important role in the ICFI’s struggle to defend historical truth. When Robert Service’s slanderous Trotsky biography was to be published in German, he seized the initiative. He contacted the well-known and then already very elderly historian Professor Hermann Weber. His interview with Professor Weber, “Robert Service has written a diatribe, not a scientific polemic!”, still impresses today.

Wolfgang persuaded 12 renowned historians to take a stand against Service’s diatribe, and Suhrkamp Verlag was forced to make extensive corrections and postpone the publication for over a year.

When the right-wing historian Jörg Baberowski invited Service to Humboldt University in February 2014 to rescue his damaged reputation, Wolfgang participated in refuting his historical falsifications and antisemitic stereotypes. At an event attended by a hundred students, he spoke out against Service’s tract.

When Baberowski forcibly excluded the critical public from the event with Service, Wolfgang addressed the university president at the time, Jan-Hendrik Olbertz, in an open letter. He demonstrated that Baberowski’s defense of Service was related to his own falsification of history. At the same time as the Service event, *Der Spiegel* had quoted Baberowski as saying: “Hitler was not a psychopath, he was not vicious. He did not want to talk about the extermination of the Jews at his table.”

Wolfgang concluded:

A specific policy requires specific means...

Baberowski’s attack on basic democratic rights and academic freedom serves the aims of those forces who would like to transform the Humboldt University into a center for right-wing and militaristic propaganda. It is well known that Baberowski has close links with the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, which is an academic center of right-wing politics in the United States.

Even when he learned five years ago that he had terminal cancer and the doctors gave him little hope, Wolfgang continued his political work. The fight against the disease was tough, but Wolfgang did not avoid it. He liked to fight because he understood fighting as the driving force of life and social progress.

In recent years, he concentrated in particular on training young

comrades in historical issues and fought tirelessly for the historical heritage of Trotskyism. He always understood himself as part of a collective and international cadre developed in the elaboration and application of the historical heritage of the Trotskyist movement.

In November 2023, at a Socialist Equality Party event against the massacre in Gaza, he answered the questions of young Palestinians who wanted to know why it was necessary to build a party. Wolfgang’s answer is not a bad summary of his political life:

In Russia, the working class actually conquered power. But not in Germany. Why? Because it lacked a party, as it was constructed in Russia, which for years enlightened the workers, which for years built up a cadre that is prepared when the objective crisis breaks out, which has also begun again today. The working class must know that it must not fall for tricks and manoeuvres and must not support any part or wing of the bourgeoisie that behaves progressively, as the Greens did for a while, but that it must build an independent party that fights for the conquest of power by the working class.

Wolfgang defended the Fourth International and its Marxist perspective of world socialist revolution at a time when social democracy dominated the workers movement and anti-Marxist theories prevailed in “left” circles. He defended it after the collapse of the GDR and the Soviet Union, when the “failure of socialism” was proclaimed everywhere.

In his last years of life, he was able to experience how important and significant his work had been. Capitalism is in a terminal crisis worldwide, producing only war, social inequality, cultural decline and fascism. And the international working class is more extensive and more closely connected than ever before. A tremendous storm is brewing in which it will find in Trotskyism the decisive weapon for the victory of the world socialist revolution.

We will miss Wolfgang, and his death is a heavy loss for the International Committee of the Fourth International in Germany and around the world. But his tireless struggle for the independence of the working class and for the world socialist revolution lives on in the party he helped build. His confidence, which permeated him to his last breath, is an inspiration to us.



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