

A tribute to Wolfgang Weber: A Marxist intellectual and fighter for the working class

Clara Weiss
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This tribute was read at a memorial meeting held on January 19 for Wolfgang Weber, a leading member of the German section of the International Committee of the Fourth International for five decades. Comrade Wolfgang died on November 16, 2024.

Many comrades have referred to Comrade Wolfgang as a revolutionary and Marxist intellectual. This term encapsulates both the accomplishments and challenges of the period that he lived in and the principles he fought for.

Wolfgang was born a few years after what Victor Serge called the “midnight of the century.” His life was shaped by the aftereffects of the horrors that had preceded his birth: fascism, World War II and the betrayals and mass murder of revolutionaries by Stalinism. The working class was still a very palpable force in social and political life, to be sure, but, politically, it had been beheaded. The traditions of revolutionary Marxism had not been destroyed but severely undermined. The kind of revolutionary intelligentsia that existed in the inter-war period—only a decade before his birth—had been all but annihilated.

In West Germany, the Nazi past was still lurking in every pore of society and the intellectual and cultural climate was, despite the economic boom, suffocating. There were very serious and talented artists in post-war Germany, but they were unable to come to grips with what had happened; more than one of them was driven to suicide by historical and personal despair. Among the less talented and serious, who managed to set the tone, what prevailed was self-satisfaction and a preoccupation with their own careers.

It was only in Britain that Comrade Wolfgang was able to establish contact with the Marxist movement. At the University of Oxford, he was exposed to the world of the champagne-drinking, self-satisfied, bombastic official elite. He often recalled one literature professor who made a big impression on him, for all the wrong reasons. He was an expert on Thomas Mann, or so he said. It turned out he had read exactly one novella, about which he would talk endlessly.

But Wolfgang also came in contact with a very different world. He was extremely impressed with the working class movement that developed at the time, and the Marxist analysis and perspective that the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the Socialist Labour League (SLL), advanced in response to that movement and the breakdown of Bretton Woods. It was certainly an entirely different social milieu, and a different intellectual and political tradition than the ones he had been groomed to become part of. Judging from what he later recalled, the decision for this second world was not a hard one for him to make.

Comrade Wolfgang underwent the “internal revolution” that Trotsky said was necessary for intellectuals to break from their class and fully join the ranks of the working class. He consciously merged all the progressive elements of his humanist education, which he always cherished, with the revolutionary traditions of the working class and Marxism. He learned to subordinate his entire thinking and being to the interests of the Trotskyist movement. This is not a single decision, but a life-long struggle. It means

that one learns to approach everything in politics from the standpoint of the traditions and interests of the working class, and not the current moods, impressions and ideas of any individual. It means to have a sense of perspective and of proportion, in politics and in one’s personal life.

Without this internal revolution, this perspective and this sense of proportion, he and the other members of the German section of the ICFI, the Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter (BSA), would not have politically survived the degeneration of the WRP (Workers Revolutionary Party).

Much has already been said on this, and I don’t want to repeat other comrades. At stake in the reestablishment of the historical continuity of Trotskyism in Germany were theoretical, historical and political questions of enormous complexity and international significance. Yet by the time the BSA was founded in 1971, the WRP had begun to turn away from confronting these challenges and the struggle against opportunism.

Nevertheless, despite the immense pressures to liquidate the movement and the heavy toll this period took on the cadre, the entire German section stood on the side of the IC during the split with the WRP in 1985-1986. This is a fact worth pondering. When later reflecting upon why they held out, Comrade Wolfgang said, “We ultimately had very strong convictions.” There are two episodes from the first two decades of the BSA that illustrate what these convictions and this orientation were.

The first was the intervention of the BSA in a major struggle by mine workers in the Ruhr region in 1978. Comrade Wolfgang often spoke about how much he enjoyed and learned from hours-long discussions he and other comrades had with striking miners, the vast majority of them social-democratic oriented. He discussed with them the lessons of 1933, of how Hitler could come to power, and the betrayal of Stalinism. In generational terms, this experience was not far removed. The workers comrades spoke to were workers whose fathers and mothers Trotsky had addressed in his writings of 1930-1933. Despite the already significant problems and opportunist degeneration of the WRP, and the confusion it produced, these were discussions no other political tendency would have had with workers.

The second episode falls into the period immediately after the split. In 1989, the crisis of the Stalinist regime and the political clarification during the split made it possible for the Trotskyist movement to intervene, for the first time, in the Soviet Union and in the GDR. Comrade Wolfgang was one of the first comrades from the BSA to drive into East Berlin.

One working class woman in East Berlin said she was reading the series on the history of the GDR, which was later published as a book, when she was going to the hairdresser. “This is our history,” she said. Many workers wrote in to the BSA with questions about Trotsky and were eager to join the movement. However, while the movement was able to recruit a few important comrades out of this intervention, this mood in the GDR, as in the USSR, dissipated relatively rapidly and turned into its opposite. There were many discussions at the time about how this could be explained and what the response of the IC had to be.

The principal lessons are, in some sense, encapsulated in the experience

of meeting with Oskar Hippe. Born in 1900, Hippe embodied the revolutionary traditions of the German working class. In 1916 he attended a mass demonstration against the war where Karl Liebknecht spoke. He joined the Spartakusbund, then the German Communist Party, and later the German Trotskyist movement. After 1933, he and his wife fought in the resistance against Nazism.

After the war, Hippe fought to build a German section of the Fourth International, for which the Stalinists imprisoned him in the GDR. Upon his release, he studied the documents of the split with Pabloism of 1953, and he sided with the International Committee. But the destruction of the German section by Stalinism and Pabloism meant that for the coming decades he remained politically isolated.

Wolfgang met with Oskar Hippe and his wife, Gertrud, who had been crippled from torture inflicted by the Nazis, shortly before the first intervention in the GDR. Other comrades, including Bill and Jean Brust from the American section, the Workers League, met them shortly thereafter. The encounter with the IC, which took place just months before his death in March 1990, was likely as moving for Hippe as it was for the comrades. At one point, Hippe told them, "You are now doing what I cannot do anymore."

In the obituary of Hippe, Comrade Wolfgang wrote:

For the present generation of Trotskyists, he represented a living link, not merely to the revolutionary battles of the first half of this century, but likewise to their greatest Marxist leaders such as Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht and Leon Trotsky, all of whom he personally met with and knew. ...

He [Hippe] enthusiastically supported the activities of the Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter in the GDR and offered advice based on the long life of a revolutionary that was immensely rich in experiences. He looked upon the work of the BSA to mobilize the working class in the GDR for the struggle against capitalist restoration and to arm it with the program of the Fourth International as a continuation of the work which he himself had carried on up to 1948 and which had been interrupted by his imprisonment in Bautzen.

"The most important task," he, that is, Hippe, continuously emphasized in his discussions, "is to construct a revolutionary party and train a cadre in Marxism capable of creating socialist consciousness in the working class and laying the basis for victory in the approaching class battles."

"These revolutionary class battles," stated Oskar, "inevitably accompany the crisis of capitalism! But the working class can triumph only with a Marxist, Trotskyist party, with the Fourth International!"

The work of Comrade Wolfgang, as that of the IC, in the subsequent 30 years was the conscious result of the lessons from these experiences. In one document from 1989, David North described the situation as bearing the potential for both revolution and for counterrevolution. The response the ICFI initially encountered testified to the former, but what dominated in the end was the latter. The severe damage that decades of Stalinism and Pabloism had done to the socialist consciousness of the working class and the building of the Fourth International could not be overcome within a few weeks or months.

The principal task flowing from that recognition was to reestablish this socialist consciousness, based on the struggles and history of the Trotskyist movement, and build it as the revolutionary leadership of the working class.

This understanding found its highest expression in the struggle to defend

historical truth, which in Germany and internationally has merged directly with the struggle against fascist barbarism and war. Wolfgang played a central role in this struggle for several decades. He wrote on the denial of the crimes of the Wehrmacht in the late 1990s, and he helped organize a lecture series with Alexander Rabinowitch on the October Revolution. In the past 15 years, he helped develop the response of the movement to the return of German militarism, first with the attacks on the German writer Günter Grass in 2011-2012, and then the attacks on Leon Trotsky and direct efforts to rehabilitate Nazism by Robert Service and Jörg Baberowski.

He conducted this work with extraordinary tenacity and determination under conditions of political and cultural reaction, which created tremendous pressures, both politically and personally. Despite or perhaps because of these challenges, he always held his work to the highest standards. He had a strong distaste for dilettantism and superficiality in theory, politics and, one should add, in life in general.

That may explain why some were intimidated by him and felt that he could be hard, but it was a hardness in matters of principle that any serious revolutionary must have or learn to have. It was rooted in a deeply felt and fully thought through understanding of the price the working class has historically paid for the shallow impressionism, phrasemongering and opportunism of the radical petty bourgeoisie. Their representatives are always quick to spout radical slogans and want to "shine," but ultimately, fail to provide Marxist leadership to the working class, mislead and betray it.

Workers, by contrast, take words very seriously because they understand, if instinctively, that, in politics, words are not just words. When workers act upon the words of those who lead them, they will have to face very real-life implications. Comrade Wolfgang understood that. This is why he approached the political and theoretical work and the education of the cadre with immense seriousness.

This also meant that he took the words of workers and of comrades very seriously. He was able, like only few are, to listen to and to learn from others. He often used the phrase, "You have to understand what's going on in the heads of people." That may sound trivial, but it is not. Social being determines social consciousness. However confused or wrong a position may appear to be, it always has an objective basis. Comrade Wolfgang was able to identify the social and historical origins and the implications of political positions. And he fought to win workers to Marxism and train the cadre by relating their experiences and conceptions to the historical experiences of the working class and the Trotskyist movement.

Many have stressed his fighting spirit and optimism. They were inseparably linked. He understood struggle, however hard it may be, as the driving force of progress, in society and in life, and also of thought. And no serious struggle can be waged without optimism. His optimism wasn't conjunctural or emotional. It was part of a highly conscious, theoretically and scientifically grounded outlook. He understood that confidence in the possibility of progress and success is itself an essential factor in determining the course and outcome of a struggle for yourself and for others.

He approached the fight against his terminal illness in the same spirit. There is no denying that there was an element of cruelty in the diagnosis. He loved life, and he did not want to die. But he still fought relentlessly to continue to live and continue to contribute to the maximum of his abilities.

Trotsky once noted that only few are able to absorb Marxism as a world outlook so completely that it informs how they view every aspect of politics, society and life. Wolfgang was one of these few. He not only fought for a socialist future but also lived according to the principles of humanism and socialism in the present. He had a keen sense of the meaning that even a small gesture or note can have for those who suffer,

and how much others leaned on him. He thought about and felt very deeply the challenges that his family, friends and comrades went through, and he always sought to help in any way he could.

It takes a lot of strength to live that way. He drew much of this strength from the traditions of the movement, from music, literature and from the comrades, colleagues and friends that surrounded him. He was also fortunate to have his life-long partner and comrade, Annie, who shared his life and struggle for 47 years.

There was still a lot more that he had to give and wanted to give. He was planning projects about the German revolution of 1918/19, and was in the midst of working on an article about right-wing revisionism of the history of the Hitler-Stalin Pact and World War II.

In this sense, his life was not complete. But it was fulfilled in a higher sense: He saw and clearly understood the purpose of his life and its meaning, for himself and for others, and he lived and fought accordingly. The time when he couldn't fight anymore came earlier than any of us expected. Ultimately, his death is part of a transition of generations. He has done what he could to fight and it is now upon us, especially the younger generations in the party, to do what he cannot do anymore, to continue the fight and live up to the political and, I would add, human example that he set.



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