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Obituary

A personal tribute to Dave Packer

- Features -

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Dave Packer's life was one of triumph – over disability, over ill health and the kind of personal and political adversity that would have immobilised less determined comrades. His tenacity enabled him to apply his sharp analytical and propagandistic abilities to fight for revolutionary Marxism over four decades. To the end he was engaged in a sustained effort to analyse the new situation in world capitalism and the international left and apply the lessons for the socialist movement in Britain and elsewhere. For more than 30 years his work was sustained by a close political collaboration with his partner Jane Kelly.

Dave maintained his pugnacious political defiance in the face of the severe political difficulties in the 1980s and 1990s that inflicted defeat after defeat on the international workers movement that enforced relative political marginalisation on the supporters of the Fourth International in Britain, a marginalisation from which they always sought to escape by being part of the wider movement.

Dave joined the International Marxist Group (IMG) with a group that split from the Militant in the early 1970s. In the mid-late 1970s he was the Manchester organiser of the International Marxist Group, at a time when that organisation was at its height, propelled by the Socialist Unity election campaigns, its role in anti-racist and anti-fascist campaigns – and also by its unique political profile as a champion of the liberation movements of the oppressed. Many of the features of today's far left, in particular the commitment to anti-racism as a priority, were pioneered by the IMG in that period.

I first talked at length to Dave in 1980 when he was working on the newspaper Socialist Challenge, a role that lasted only a short time because writing to strict deadlines wasn't exactly Dave's forte. I sided with him in a dispute over an article he wrote in April 1980 about the election of Robert Mugabe's Zanu-PF in Zimbabwe in the post-liberation elections. Dave stressed the reactionary role of bourgeois and petty bourgeois nationalism in a way that some comrades considered 'sectarian'. We became best political buddies; but what we didn't foresee was that the movement – in Britain and internationally – was entering a zone of severe turbulence. The IMG was descending into intense faction fighting which eventually destroyed it.

The IMG (now renamed the Socialist League –SL) could not cope with massive external pressures, including the offensive launched throughout the Fourth International by the 'Castroist' American Socialist Workers Party, whose supporters had a strong faction in the SL. By the mid 1980s the organisation was hopelessly split into three groupings – the pro-US SWP faction, a leadership apparatus grouping making significant political concessions to the Labour left in general and Ken Livingstone in particular, and our third faction that was defending, as we saw it then, revolutionary Marxism in Britain and internationally against liquidationist tendencies. Dave played a central role in elaborating our critique of the other tendencies and on the steering committee of our faction that included among others Jane Kelly, Stephanie Grant, Davy Jones, Bob Pennington, Terry Conway, Dave Sheppard, Grant Keir and myself. Dave wrote in this period on many questions including the united front, Labourism, workers control and many international questions.

I am absolutely sure that we were politically correct on the main points. Faced with what we regarded as an undemocratic and hopelessly factionalised regime, we split from the organisation in 1985. One hundred and ten people joined the new organisation. In the next two years we were strengthened by the fusion with the Socialist Group among whom Alan Thornett and John Lister were leading figures. This resulted in the 1987 fusion conference establishing the International Socialist Group as a new organisation with around 180 members. Dave played a key role in bringing this fusion about. This fusion didn't just grow the organisation but enabled a qualitative political development, with the addition of comrades with a different background solidly rooted in working class intervention.

A personal tribute to Dave Packer

Dave and Jane developed a strong personal and political friendship with Alan Thornett in particular.

Dave's political work was complicated by intervention in the political debates of the Fourth International. We strongly felt that some of the strategic elaboration by some majority FI leaders was leading in a dangerous direction – and we thought that the decision of the significant Spanish state section to merge with a Maoist organisation and to leave the Fourth International to enable this was a disaster. We also suspected that the orientation of the FI comrades in the Brazilian section (who were part of the mass Workers Party [PT]) was dangerously ambiguous and could lead at a future time, if the PT entered the government, to disaster. This was unfortunately only too prescient.

At this time we entered into a more or less informal alliance in the International with a tendency in the French Ligue Communiste led by Gérard Filoche (known by the party name 'Matti') and also, at greater political distance, with Socialist Action in the United States. These alliances were brokered in large part by Dave; I was more sceptical about whether we were really on the same political wavelength as these French and American comrades.

One thing that certainly united us with the Filoche tendency was our feeling that revolutionary Marxists should prioritise an orientation towards 'the traditional organisations of the working class' and that this was underestimated in the International. This was reflected in Britain in the ISG's participation in the Labour Briefing projects; for a time Graham Bash and other leading Briefing comrades worked closely with the ISG. Once again Dave was closely involved.

After the split with the SL, our priority to the 'traditional organisation of the working class' was in part the result of the influence that the late Peter Gowan had on us. Dave and myself had a series of political discussions with Peter which made a big impression. He also helped Dave in particular to develop an analysis of the European Union that stressed the completely undemocratic nature of its decision making and the domination of the more developed, mainly north European, states over the 'periphery'.

A lot of people on the left didn't see the relevance of this kind of analysis, but twenty years later its political validity is only too clear.

Whatever the balance sheet of our role in the international debates, Dave relished his participation in international meetings and long discussions with comrades from the International who came to Britain, whatever their take on the political debates. Jane and Dave's house in Crofton Road was often the scene of convivial gatherings of British comrades with international guests; there was no doubt that the political culture of the organisation benefitted enormously from these contacts, with for example Alan Thornett moving from being quite sceptical about the Fourth International at the time of the fusion, to becoming a strong supporter and enthusiast for the International. The British comrades often felt they were misunderstood internationally, being cast as 'sectarian' for defending exactly the same positions that FI leader Ernest Mandel had defended but a few years before.

In 1990 Dave's participation in the movement was knocked temporarily sideways when Jane suffered a severe accident and he became her carer. As her condition improved somewhat he was able to gradually raise his level of activism, but he remained Jane's carer. It was a phenomenal effort on his part to deal with this, as well as his own disability and periodic bouts of illness, and remain politically engaged in a leading position.

During the 1980s, if we weren't at a political meeting together Dave and I spoke on the phone nearly every day; naturally I got to know him extremely well. He had a wide-ranging Marxist culture and his especial enthusiasm was ancient history. He was incredibly knowledgeable about the Roman Empire and had a deep fascination with feudal Japan (later translating itself into his collection of medieval Japanese prints and Samurai swords). Encouraged by Jane's profession as an art historian he was very knowledgeable about the history of art and contemporary art. He was, in effect, a self-taught intellectual.

Dave was also, to the extent that his health allowed, a bon viveur. He loved to cook, to drink the limited amount of red

A personal tribute to Dave Packer

wine that Jane allowed, and to intersperse meals with friends and comrades with his infectious laughter. The venality of the imperialist bourgeoisie and the cowardice of the labour bureaucracy never ceased to amaze and outrage him. On numerous occasions you would meet him at the ISG centre in Finsbury Park grasping a copy of the Financial Times and declaring in outraged tones, "Have you seen this?!" Dave's lack of personal mobility was partially compensated for by the fact that he was a demon driver, rushing himself and Jane at high speed to political and social events.

The ISG (former name of Socialist Resistance) was formed during the start of a series historic defeats of the working class in Britain and internationally. Dave was, like many of us, reluctant to accept that the defeats of the 1980s and the collapse of the Soviet Union (as well as the defeat of the revolutions in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala) had ushered in a period of relative isolation for the left in which it would struggle to make its voice heard.

But the anti-World Trade Organisation demonstrations in Seattle at the end of 1999 sounded a different note and dramatised the gradually consolidating rebellion against neoliberalism. Something new was in the air.

This found its echo in 2000 with the foundation of the Socialist Alliance, leading into eventually the huge anti-war movement and the foundation of Respect. Dave championed this new spirit of left unity (enabled by a sharp turn by the SWP) and was active in the Socialist Alliance both locally and nationally. This also involved developing friendly relations with the leadership of the Scottish Socialist Party. Dave was again absolutely central, together with Alan Thornett, in developing the organisation's political response to these developments.

The new millennium has recast the left organisationally and politically on an international scale. The world (and the left) is unrecognisable from the one we encountered in the mid-1980s and Dave was enthusiastic as ever to help develop a revolutionary Marxist response to it. He was one of the comrades at the forefront of trying to engage with the environmental crisis and (under the influence of John Bellamy Foster's writings in particular) develop an ecosocialist response. He helped lead the turn towards redefining the political programme and profile of the organisation as 'ecosocialist'.

The financial crash of 2008 propelled Dave into a new analytical effort, together with Raphie de Santos, to come to grips with the crisis and especially to develop the political themes and demands that could guide Marxists in the fightback. These remain some of the best analyses that have emerged from the organised left. He was naturally inspired by the emergence of new left wing forces and followed the events in Greece and France with particular interest.

Dave played an outstanding role in the last two decades as an educator, especially of younger comrades new to the movement. He was always keen to engage comrades from around the country in discussion and debate, to collaborate politically with them, without any of the stand-offish self-importance that characterises some leaders of left wing organisations. These qualities ensured his standing within the organisation; a lot of Marxist leaders are respected but not much loved. Dave on the other hand was always admired and held in deep affection by the vast majority of the ISG/Socialist Resistance – and by many on the wider left as well.

People make their own history, but not in the circumstances of their own choosing. Dave would certainly not have chosen many of the circumstances, politically and personally, within which he had to conduct his political struggle. The generation of the 1960s thought that the movement had been through 'the long march in the desert' in the 1950s and '60s, and that from now on it would be onwards and upwards towards ever greater successes. We underestimated the immense resources of world capitalism and its ability to come back from crisis and throw the workers movement and the left into headlong retreat.

A personal tribute to Dave Packer

Defeats in the 1980s and 1990s sapped the will, the energy and even the belief of many in the militant left internationally. Dave never stopped believing and never stopped fighting. It is the achievements of comrades like Dave that enable others to go on, to take the revolutionary socialist programme to the new generation of rebels emerging from the debacle of neoliberal capitalism.