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Obituary

Dave Packer: a tribute

- Features -

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I am going to concentrate more directly on Dave's political contribution. I only hope it will be as interesting as the fascinating tributes we have just heard.

I knew Dave for 27 years and worked closely with him for the whole of that time - first on the leadership bodies of the International Socialist Group (ISG) and then of Socialist Resistance (SR).

Dave was first and foremost a strategic thinker. He was a big picture person who came into his own when there were difficult political or theoretical issues to be tackled.

He had a particularly thorough grounding in Marxist theory, something which is not only of immense value but is very difficult to replace. If Dave was present at a meeting you knew that the political level of the discussion would be lifted.

He is therefore an immense loss both to SR and the Fourth International today, as well as to the wider Marxist and workers movement.

My personal relationship with Dave was not always easy. We often clashed over detail but invariably agreed on the strategic essence of the issue and the direction of march. There were exceptions to this but not very many. It was a shared strategic approach which formed the basis of a very strong political relationship.

As is clear from the remarkable tributes which have been made on the SR e-list and website, and at this commemoration today, that to talk about Dave's life is to talk about the history of a section of the Trotskyist movement in Britain, and indeed at the international level. Dave represented the ISG on the international bodies of the Fourth International until his health problems made the traveling too difficult.

My first contact with Dave was at the end of 1985 when I was a member of the Socialist Group. We had been expelled from the WRP in 1974 and, in the early 1980s, had gone through a failed regroupment with the ICL - which is today's AWL.

My phone rang one day and it was Dave. He explained that he was speaking on behalf of the International Group which had recently split from the Socialist League - which was formerly the IMG. He said that the International Group wanted to open up discussions with the Socialist Group with a view to possible regroupment.

He argued that the two groups had already converged politically. We were both working in the Labour Party. We had a common assessment of the impact of the miners' strike - which had just been defeated after a whole year of remarkable struggle. We had also taken the same view on the Malvinas war, a few years earlier, opposing the British task force and supporting Argentinian national rights.

One thing, he said, however, which might be a problem was that the International Group was a part of the Fourth International and that they took this affiliation extremely seriously. The implication was that this was effectively non-negotiable and that if it was a problem for us we would have to get over it.

It proved far less of an obstacle than he anticipated, though he was quite right to take a firm stand on it.

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As many here will know that the regroupment, or fusion of the two organisations, took place in 1987 to form the International Socialist Group (ISG). It was a remarkably successful regroupment and remains fully in tact today, despite the inevitable turnover of membership over the years. Dave clearly did a very good job!

Since that time Dave played a major role in shaping the politics of the ISG and later of Socialist Resistance.

He was at the center of our debates when we were working in the Labour Party as a part of Labour Briefing. He had strong views on how to intervene most effectively and at the same time maintain a Marxist profile and build a revolutionary organisation.

He was at the centre of the debates around the fall of the Berlin wall and the collapse of the USSR in 1989 and the implications of this for Marxism and the Trotskyist movement.

He was heavily involved in shaping our response to the wars in the Balkans in the early 1990s, in particular the stance we took in defense of Bosnia, our involvement in the Workers Aid convoys to Bosnia, and our stance on the various national questions in the region.

When the rise of Blairism and new Labour brought our intervention in the Labour Party to an end, Dave was involved in the debates around what this meant for the left on the need to build new broad parties to the left of Labour in response. He had strong views on the kind of parties which needed to be built – not just in Britain but in Europe and beyond. This is an issue which remains fully with us today, in fact even more so.

Dave was active in both the debates and the practical steps the formation of the Socialist Alliances. He not only played a role in the formation of the London Socialist Alliance (in 2000) but was also involved in discussions with the SWP in advance of their decision to join it.

Throughout the period of the Socialist Alliance nationally, and then in Respect, he was in the forefront of the debates around how such organisations could be most effectively built (in particular the issue of internal democracy) and how revolutionary socialists should conduct themselves inside them. His theme was the united front, what it meant, and how it should be applied to modern conditions.

He was also at the centre of the most important political development that the ISG and SR has made in recent years – which was our turn towards ecology and the ecological crisis and the redefinition of ourselves as an eco-socialist organisation. It is an orientation which is now fundamental to everything we do. Dave was not just an advocate of this development but an enthusiast of it, and he never ceased to be so.

In fact Dave was involved in debates and discussions right up to his tragic and untimely death.

He had followed the economic crisis in great detail since it broke in 2008 and had written extensively on it. He had followed how this had translated into a profound crisis of the EU and of the Eurozone and its implications for the workers movement across Europe and beyond. He had become involved in the anti-cuts coalition CoR, to the extent which his health allowed, and worked as a part of a group of SR comrades leading that work.

As Jane mentioned, he was totally animated by the emergence of the Arab spring and what this meant for the prospects for revolution and for the revolutionary process itself. He had strong views on each of the revolutions as they broke out from Tunisia to the on-going insurgency in Syria. He knew how much the world was changing and wanted to understand it at every stage.

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Finally, as Jane has also mentioned, he felt passionately about the resistance to austerity being mounted by the Greek working class and the spectacular rise of Syriza in the elections on June 17th. He was involved in the discussions and debates around this in the period immediately before his death.

Although I did not hear him put it in exactly this way I am sure he regarded this as the sign of the kind of struggles to come and a vindication of the perspectives he had been fighting for a very long time.

He saw broad radical parties of the left as a key factor in mounting a fight back and presenting an alternative to austerity.

He saw in the Arab Spring the practical demonstration of revolution on the streets. Of mass revolutionary movements overturning powerful military dictatorships, in major countries, which had existed for decades, and what this meant for a the socialist transformation itself.

He saw this, and in the politics of ecosocialism in particular, as the key to the development of a Marxism for the 21st century. A Marxism which would draw on the traditions and lessons of the past but which would at the same time fully integrate what is new in charting a way forward.

We thank Dave for the contribution he has made during his life and for the example he has left for the way forward today.