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Britain

# Celebrating the life of Charlie van Gelderen

- IV Online magazine - 2002 - IV337 - January/February 2002 -

Publication date: Saturday 9 February 2002

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**ON January 5, 2001 over 150 people spent an afternoon in Conway Hall, London celebrating the life of Charlie van Gelderen who died last October after over 60 years in the Fourth International. [1]**

Many among those present spoke of their political and personal memories of Charlie and paid tribute both to his consistent and constantly enthusiastic political activism and to him as a warm and caring person.

Co-hosted by Charlie's family and the International Socialist Group, Charlie's organisation, it was an informal and convivial event, of the type that he would have enjoyed himself.

Alan Thornett, speaking for the ISG, recalled Charlie's early life as a political activist in South Africa and how as a union full-timer in the 1930s, at a time when trade unions in there were segregated in practice though not yet in law, he fought for the union to involve both black and white workers and lost his full time position when those opposed to integration split, taking their financial resources with them.

He traced Charlie's life through his coming to Britain where he immediately became active in the Trotskyist movement and, following the rise of Hitler in Germany, the defeat of the Spanish Republic, the Moscow trials and under the clouds of impending world war, convinced of the need for the new International, as an alternative to the betrayals of Stalinism.

He participated in the decision to found a Fourth International, attending the founding conference of the International in Paris as an observer for the South Africa Trotskyists.

Conscripted into the British Army, Charlie arrived in Italy just after the fall of Mussolini when the Italian working class was very much on the offensive. He participated in enormous demonstrations, dominated by banners calling for the working class to take power for itself while Togliatti as leader of the Communist Party, reflecting Stalin's line for the Communist Parties in Western Europe, called on the workers to lay down their arms.

In Italy, Communists were called on to support the government led by a Field Marshal, whom the king had appointed to succeed Mussolini. It was in this context that Charlie participated in founding the Italian section of the Fourth International for which he held membership card number one.

But it was in Britain that Charlie spent the rest of his active political life although he of course remained very committed to the struggle in South Africa. Speaking on behalf of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International, Penelope Duggan recalled Charlie's participation in the small group of comrades responsible for the International's political work in southern Africa.

She underlined his important role in this work and how, when the situation changed in the beginning of the 1980s, he was able to reconsider the traditional positions of South African Trotskyism and turn his attention to the independent trade-union left and the new networks of the revolutionary socialist left. He was one of the few Trotskyists of the old generation who understood how to do this and how to put his experience at the service of the new networks and groups with which the International started to work from the 1980s.

## Celebrating the life of Charlie van Gelderen

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The recent strikes against privatisation in South Africa, and militant trade union action elsewhere in the continent were examples he was holding up to others in the last years of his life.

She also pointed out that ever since the first split he had known, in South Africa, Charlie argued all his life that many in the movement were far too quick to divide organisations on tactical questions.

He used every platform he could to argue for the left to fight sectarianism.

One of those occasions had been the annual camp of European youth organisations in solidarity with the Fourth International in 1998 where he was invited to speak at a commemoration of the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the Fourth International. "Sectarian splits have been a chronic ailment of our movement. Minorities (...) split off on the slightest pretext (...) to form tiny sects, impotent and without any future. How different to Trotsky who persisted in his adherence to the Third International until 1933 and the utter defeat of the German working class."

This preoccupation with the importance of unity on the radical left led Charlie to fully support the different initiatives which the forces of the Fourth International participate in different countries, such as the Left Bloc in Portugal, the Red Green Alliance in Denmark or, for him of course most importantly, the Socialist Alliance in Britain.

He was also convinced of the importance of mass youth movements as we see developing in the new global justice and anti-war movement and as such always delighted to meet the young comrades of the Fourth International as he did notably at the international youth camps in 1988 and 1998 speaking on the anniversaries of the founding of the FI.

A message from Andrea Peniche from Portugal who had spoken alongside him in 1998 showed how he had communicated his revolutionary enthusiasm to them:

"[Charlie] had a dream and during his whole life he fought for his dream. And we are here to say that his dream is also our dream. We are here to say that we will continue the struggle he started. The best tribute we can make to Charlie is to struggle for another world, a world without discrimination. A just world, a world of solidarity. A world of violet [for the struggle against women's oppression] and red [for the workers' struggle]. Thank you Charlie".

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[1] An [article on Charlie's life](#) was published in IV 336, December 2001.