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Fourth International

Practical internationalism: solidarity in Germany with the Algerian anti-colonial liberation struggle

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Description:

Hans Peiffer, born in 1934, has since 1955 been active in the German section of the Fourth International (today the Internationale Sozialistische Organisation, ISO). He was interviewed by Manuel Kellner.

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In the 1950s and early 1960s, with your comrades from the section of the Fourth International in Germany, you put solidarity with the Algerian revolution at the centre of internationalist work. Why?

The Algerian war of liberation was from 1955 to 1962, and from 1956 we did this solidarity work. The Algerian revolution confirmed in a striking way our political appreciation of the rise of the anti-colonial movement in the poor and dependent countries.

In our view, liberation from colonial domination would have to evolve towards social liberation, towards the overthrow of the capitalist system. Our internationalist convictions meant that these struggles would start in different countries in order to finally lead to a process of socialist revolution on a global scale.

The World Congress of the Fourth International adopted a resolution referring to the "dialectic of the three sectors of the world revolution" in which, in equal parts, anti-colonial liberation, the socialist revolution in the rich capitalist countries and the political revolution against bureaucratic domination in non-capitalist countries (the USSR and the Eastern European countries) were seen as battlegrounds, and it was said that successes in one of these sectors would have positive effects for movements in the other two sectors.

This was in contradiction with the position of the official Communist Parties, as the Soviet leadership subordinated the interests of the world revolution to the great power interests of its own state, within the framework of the so-called "peaceful coexistence" which meant supporting revolutionary movements outside the territory it controlled only in exceptional cases and in limited ways.

In the case of the Algerian revolution, the conditions for acquiring full state independence seemed to us particularly favourable, because the right wing of the FLN, represented by Ferhat Abbas, which aspired only to partial sovereignty, preserving imperialist domination, was relatively weaker than the wing aspiring to full independence at all levels. Our view was therefore that the struggle for independence could, to the extent of its success, lead to a broader social revolution.

Moreover, Germany, the neighbouring country of France, of the colonial power, had particularly close relations with that state within the European Economic Community. This implied a specific responsibility for German revolutionaries to support the fighters for Algerian liberation.

You were in contact with senior FLN members and you supported the FLN at the material and organizational levels.

The office of the Fourth International was in Paris at the time. Through this office it was then not complicated for us to make contact with leading members of the FLN. In France, they were of course forced to work underground, and we often helped them to cross the borders to consult with us in Germany. Part of our solidarity work in Germany was also illegal; the transport of documents important for their work, the exchange of information between militants in Germany and France, the transport of money.

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For example, in February 1960, one million Deutsche Mark (DM) was withdrawn from a Deutsche Bank subsidiary in Frankfurt/M to finance the work of the FLN in Germany. This money was transported in a suitcase by our leading member, Georg Jungclas, known as "Schorsch" and the leader of the Fourth International, Michel Raptis, known as "Pablo". The distrust of the bank's employees was great, given the extraordinary amount for a cash withdrawal. But at the end of the day the operation was successful. It is from this episode that the title of the book *Kofferträger* ("Suitcase Carriers"), published later, was drawn. [1] Our comrade Jakob Moneta (1914-2009) was at that time a social attaché at the German Embassy in Paris and this position allowed him to provide various services of transmission of mail.

We also helped to receive, store and transmit weapons for the Algerian war of liberation. To do this we used a garage belonging to our comrade Helene Jungclas, known as "Leni", the wife of "Schorsch".

You published the magazine *Freies Algerien* ("Free Algeria") and carried out other public activities of solidarity.

The work of legal solidarity for the Algerian revolution in Germany was for us just as important as the work of clandestine support. To explain the aspirations of the Algerian liberation struggle in the German workers' movement and the German public in general and to propagate them, we published a magazine, *Freies Algerien*, which appeared from 1958 to 1962. There were 22 issues in all, each of eight A4 pages.

In this review, among other things, we called for the donation of money to the FLN to support its liberation struggle. There were articles on Algerian history and reality, on the course of the war in Algeria, information on activities of solidarity with the struggle in France and Germany, including activities within the trade unions of the DGB (Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund) federation, the youth of the DGB and the left wing of the Social Democratic SPD as well as the Falken (Falcons, a youth organization linked to the SPD) and the Naturfreunde (Friends of Nature, an organization linked to the labour movement). We also published policy papers, FLN positions and interviews with FLN leaders. Often these texts were taken from *El Mujahid*, the organ of the FLN. For all this, we had to do a lot of research and translation work. The packaging and dispatch of the magazine were carried out and organized by the Cologne comrades of the German section of the Fourth International.

In public and in the mass organizations of the workers' movement in which we were active, we were doing propaganda, organising public solidarity meetings, providing speakers, distributing publications from the FLN, proposing resolutions of solidarity with the Algerian liberation struggle. Especially in the youth organisations of the workers' movement, we continually succeeded in putting the Algerian liberation struggle on the agenda. In the factories, in which we worked at that time, we also distributed our magazine *Freies Algerien*.

At the demonstration of May 1, 1958 in Cologne, we presented for the first time the flag of the FLN, which our comrade "Leni" had sewn the day before. We walked in the demonstration waving this banner and shouting "Freiheit für Algerien!" ("Freedom for Algeria"). We then often brandished this flag, also in other cities, during other public meetings and events.

In November 1958 a meeting between French President Charles de Gaulle and the West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer was held in Bad Kreuznach (Rhineland-Palatinate). Our comrades "Schorsch", Michy Beinert and Helmut Schauer arrived with an FLN banner attached to a Volkswagen "Beetle" with the inscription "Freiheit für Algerien!". Reactionary bourgeois journalists tore up the banner and the flag. But our comrades also distributed a postcard of solidarity calling for support for solidarity activities: "May 1, 1958 demonstration of young workers in Cologne, solidarity, aid for Algeria". For distributing this postcard, the three comrades were arrested by the police, but they were released fairly quickly.

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On 1 November 1959, on the fifth anniversary of the beginning of the Algerian uprising, we deposited a wreath in commemoration of the victims of colonial domination in Algeria in Cologne. We were about twenty comrades. I wanted to deliver a speech. Then two members of the plainclothes political police who had hid behind a bush arrested me. I was detained for several hours at the police station. They wanted to submit me to questioning, but I refused to answer them. After a few hours, they released me. The local Cologne press reported on my arrest by publishing photos where the faces of the two plainclothes police officers were well identifiable (without being concealed by a black bar). The leaders of the Cologne police were very upset, because after that, these two men could no longer serve as plainclothes policemen.

You also raised money for the FLN?

But yes, of course, I've already talked about it. We called for the FLN to be supported with financial donations and we received a little bit of it. But we were a small organization and our opportunities to raise money were not very large, especially in comparison with mass organizations or, more importantly, with the sums that governments could have given. In this field, our contribution was therefore rather modest.

But we also helped to obtain spare parts and accessories for the production of weapons. For example, "Schorsch" found chemical substances in Denmark, the funding of which was provided by the FLN itself.

You also worked in a weapons factory in Morocco and helped to manufacture weapons for the FLN.

In the years 1957-58 the French colonial power was getting better and better at cutting off the FLN's arms supply lines. Because of this, the project to produce weapons ourselves had been developed in Morocco, which became formally independent of France in 1956, in the hinterland of the ALN (the armed organization of the FLN), which could, at the time, circulate freely in this neighbouring country of Algeria

The FLN/NLA therefore addressed Michel Raptis, known as "Pablo", a Greek comrade who was at that time Secretary of the Bureau and the most important leader of the Fourth International (after independence, he was an adviser to the Algerian government and Ben Bella). With Schorsch Jungclas, Raptis organized the mobilization of volunteers in the Fourth International organizations and their supporters to make possible the production of weapons in several locations in Morocco. That was a success, and it was important for the FLN's struggle.

Myself, I worked in 1960 for six months at one of these weapons factories in Morocco. There, we produced mostly machine guns and grenade launchers for the FLN's struggle. ALN fighters took care of our protection. Alongside comrades from various countries, there were also skilled Algerian workers residing in France in this factory.

What experiences do you find most important in this work?

The relationship between Algerian skilled workers and colleagues from foreign countries was good and very cordial, despite linguistic barriers and cultural differences. Militants from the Fourth International came from different countries: Argentina, Venezuela, France, the Netherlands, Greece, England and Germany.

This experience of understanding and international cooperation for solidarity in the fight against oppression and exploitation and for a better world was very important for all the comrades present, both for the Algerian workers and for us other activists from other countries. National and cultural differences were in the background as part of this solidarity cooperation, and everyone was burning to learn from colleagues in other countries and to pass on their know-how.

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We spent our leisure time together, playing football for example, but we also often discussed politics and exchanged our experiences. Today, where human beings from different countries, continents and cultural spheres are drawn against each other by the dominant classes and their political powers and relays in the name of religions and other ideologies, it seems all the more important to organize new experiences of internationalism lived intensely among similar lines.

That is why I am still active in the ranks of the Fourth International and I strive to pass on my experiences to the new generations. An experience of major importance in this sense seems to be our work in solidarity with the Algerian struggle for independence of that era.

In conclusion, I would like to say to the Algerian workers and youth that the Algerian revolution, if it has achieved state independence, has nevertheless stopped halfway: it remains economically dependent on imperialism, and the power of the owners of big capital remains unbroken. I can only imagine the completion of the Algerian revolution as a socialist revolution.

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[1] Claus Leggewie, *Kofferträger - Das Algerien-Projekt der Linken im Adenauer-Deutschland*, Rotbuch-Verlag Berlin 1984.