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Obituary

Tribute to David Sanders (5 August 1945 – 30 August 2019), Revolutionary humanist and socialist

- Features - In Memoriam - Obituaries and appreciations -
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According to Leo Rosten, the author of *The Joys of Yiddish*, a “*mensch*” is "someone to admire and emulate, someone of noble character. Other definitions define *mensch* as a person of honour and integrity.

David was a *mensch*. He was a *mensch* in his personal relations and he was a *mensch* politically. Many of us know and admire David for his activism in the field of public health. We have heard and will continue to hear of his tremendous contribution to the struggle for the right to health for all, for equity and for a society that can guarantee a full and healthy life.

That contribution was shaped and guided by a politics I shall describe as revolutionary humanism. If there is one thing we can acknowledge about David was his care, his generosity, his love for life and for humanity. Justice and equity were principles that were embedded in his life being. This love and care had its greatest expression in his love and care for children and which would shape his personal life, his work, his academic work and the focus of his politics.

And I believe it is from this love, in spite of his privileged background he committed a kind of social suicide and joined the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe, throwing his lot in with the oppressed and dispossessed. Similarly, it is from that profound sense of care and generosity, that while in exile in the UK, and in the hurly burly of revolutionary Europe – recall it was the period of post May 68, anti- Vietnam struggles, the Portuguese revolution, mass strikes of industrial workers, the rise of the socialist feminist movement – he joined his revolutionary humanism with revolutionary socialism. You can get a sense of David’s excitement with becoming part of the revolutionary left at that time from the following, text he wrote in December 2013.

Writing a short appreciation of the life of a comrade, Charlie Van Gelderen who became a father figure to many of us and to David himself, he writes:

“I first encountered Charlie in the UK winter of 1974 at a teach-in organised by the then International Marxist Group in North London. The hall was packed with socialist activists, all seemingly already comfortable with what, for me was new and exciting material on the dynamics of world revolution, being masterfully delivered by Ernest Mandel, in a sweeping integration of history, economics and political analysis. During one of the question sessions someone whom I could not see from where I was sitting made a lengthy intervention in the broadest ‘Capie’ accent I had heard for years. The atmosphere created by erudite, sharp and challenging ideas was intimidating for a newcomer to these debates, but was instantly ‘humanised’ by the familiar accent which prompted a fit of uncontrollable giggling on my part at the unlikely presence of a Capie at this event.”

David, was not just a socialist. He regarded himself as a Marxist. I mention this not to lay claim, to label but for us to understand his intellectual, philosophical and strategic commitment that David pursued throughout his life and help understand his unwavering persistence, his deep commitment to the struggle of the poor and downtrodden and his loyalty to building and supporting working class struggles and movements: his life-long anti-capitalism.

But for David, Marxism was not a dogma, a doctrine to be loyally recited. His Marxism had nothing to do with Stalinism where Marxism was appropriated for the purposes of crushing dissent and shoring up undemocratic and authoritarian rule. His Marxism had nothing in common with repetitious incantation of a few quotes from Marx or Engels in the style of a typical Buddhist prayer wheel. It consists of a method of critical thought about the social reality with the aim of its revolutionary change.

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His Marxism was open not closed. In the words of someone whose writings had great influence on David, the eco-socialist Michael Lowy, wrote following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of the idea that there was no alternative to capitalism “Marxism must once again become utopian by drawing its inspiration from the “principle of hope”) that resides in the struggles, dreams and aspirations of millions of oppressed and exploited, “the defeated of history”.

For David Socialism meant freedom, freedom from want as well as the freedom to give expression to all our creativities. It is a freedom predicated on the overcoming of all oppressions, racial, gender, sexuality, disability and the struggle to live in harmony with and part of nature.

Key to David’s revolutionary praxis was an understanding that it is only through their own experience in the course of their own revolutionary praxis that the exploited and oppressed masses can overcome both the external circumstances that chain them (capital, the state) and their previous mystified consciousness.

In other words, the only genuine form of emancipation is self-emancipation. As Marx would later write in the founding declaration of the First International: “the emancipation of the workers is the task of the workers themselves”.

Central to David’s socialist politics was his internationalism. His international orientation came easy due to his own experience of making politics in several countries. The need to support struggles in other parts of the world, were the DNA of the politics of the 1970s when David came to revolutionary politics. We will hear how David gave expression to his internationalism via his support and involvement in the struggle for a free Palestine. However, at the centre of his active international solidarity whether on Palestine or through the global health movement, was his understanding that capitalism is an international system based on imperialist domination. Not in my name guided David’s activism with relation to Zionism. But Palestine had great strategic significance because he understood that the Middle East was at the centre of the geo-politics of US imperialism.

David’s politics absorbed key foundations of the political legacy of Leon Trotsky and the Fourth International. Both in theory and from his experience of the transition in Zimbabwe, David understood that the objectives of national liberation, meaningful democracy, based on one person one vote, land reform and wider redistribution of wealth, could not be achieved within capitalism. Central to David’s politics was the idea that the national liberation struggle would have to grow over into a revolution against colonial domination or national oppression into a far -reaching process of taking over the heights of the economy and putting the wealth of society under democratic control of the oppressed and exploited themselves. In other words, he strongly believed in the notion of the permanency of the revolution. That this did not occur in Zimbabwe nor SA did not require a review of theory and strategy on the contrary, the failure both in Zimbabwe and South Africa to fulfil the aspirations of the masses promised by the national liberation struggle confirmed its validity. The revolution in Southern Africa would have to be anti-capitalist and continuous if we were meaningfully going to change the lives of the poor.

It is this David, that I encountered shortly after he came to SA with Sue and his children in the early 1990. We had first met in Zimbabwe. I was taken to David and Sue’s house by Carl Brecker and Kate Truscott, who were part of a left political group of Zimbabwean and South African exiles. So began a political collaboration between us that resulted in 1996 in the formation of the Alternative Information and Development Centre. AIDC. Kate Truscott, Carl’s partner died in 1993 of breast cancer and left a legacy of books and a small amount of money. With this resource and the intention of creating a space where we could rebuild a socialist politics, post the collapse of “really existing socialism”, under the new conditions created by the negotiated settlement and having to come to terms with the phenomena of neoliberal globalisation – a particular phase of capitalism, we launched AIDC.

AIDC was never an end in itself. We saw it as a means to an end, i.e.. the idea behind AIDC was to contribute to the rebuilding of popular movements that could serve as a counter-power to capital and the state. The rebuilding of mass

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combative mass movement was the basis for the building a revolutionary working class party – something that David remained committed to for his entire life. To this end he joined us in 2008 in forming the Democratic Left Front and then later the United Front.

Like many of us he was excited by the Marikana moment, of course not by the massacre of workers, but the renewal of mass politics and the possibilities for a renewal of the left. So when visiting David for supper I would have to respond: “hey Brian what do you think of the NUMSA, the United Front, the Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party?”

However, David was no myopic or romantic revolutionary. He had an acute sense of realism. In fact, I would sum up his disposition as a pessimistic optimist. Always cautious about what is possible in the present while certain that, in the long term we would win.

I think his pessimism of the day-to-day predisposed him to underestimate the importance of the Rhodes Must Fall / Fees must fall movement and somewhat dismissive of the decolonisation debate opened by the students. Partly, this was because of his strong commitment to non-racialism and his suspicion of race-based politics. He found it difficult to relate to the debate on intersectional politics and was dismissive of identity politics. Getting our politics right when it comes to the way race and class are inter-related especially in a country like SA is particularly difficult. Nevertheless, in his relationships with working class people his praxis would demonstrate his hatred of racism and sexism.

One of our last discussions we had politically was on the necessity to recognise that the momentum of Marikana, what some called the NUMSA moment was over. Our discussion on the making sense of the political challenges we faced was formulated in an editorial of our magazine *Amandla*, of which David was a founding member of

"These initiatives (mass strikes of miners and farm workers, NUMSA special Congress, formation of EFF and tertiary student struggles) represented a huge opportunity for renewing radical politics in South Africa, especially as they were emerging within a context of intensifying social struggles and deepening class antagonisms. Each in their own way raised important questions of perspective, strategy and even tactics or methods of struggle. Most importantly, taken together, they represented something very significant, greater than the sum of their parts. They represented the emergence of an anti-capitalist moment with a real possibility of building a social-political movement that could fill the vacuum to the left of the ANC and the exhausted tradition of national liberation politics.

However, as we approach the end of the second decade of the 21st century we need to acknowledge “most of this energy has been dissipated and the left is more marginal than ever. “The anti-capitalist moment has gone.” "

David's approach to the ending of a huge opportunity for socialist renewal can be summed up by one of the greatest and heroic revolutionaries of the socialist movement, Rosa Luxemburg, when she said “The road to socialism is paved with defeats... from which we draw historical experience, understanding, power and idealism.”

Michael Lowy, similarly reminds us that “for two centuries, the history of socialism has been a constellation of tragic, and often bloody, defeats. The reminder is not to depress or make one pessimistic but rather, “by absorbing a failure without capitulating before the enemy, knowing that a new beginning could take unprecedented forms.” This was David's point of departure as he ranted against the drift to state capture, corruption, cronyism, and dysfunctionality of large and vital parts of the state. which has come to dominate politics in SA. Similarly, as he railed against BREXIT and the rise of the right, he would have seen flickers of possibility, of a new beginning of renewal.

He would have been excited by what is happening in Chile and the mass struggles against neoliberalism that has spread from Latin America all the way to Lebanon and beyond. From the ashes of the Arab Spring sustained protests in Sudan have led to the overthrow of the dictatorial presidency of Omar al-Bashir and a similar democratic revolution

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has ended the rule of the long-time Algerian President, Abdelaziz Bouteflika. Most inspiring, in the face of the collapse of the climate justice movement, has been the high school student mobilisations against the climate crisis in the Schools Strike for Climate and Fridays for Future where hundreds of thousands of students are not just inspiring student around the world but reinvigorating climate activism in many parts of the world.

David's view and injunction to us would be not to despair but rather to come to terms with our situation, to realise the need to review current strategies and tactics, with a profound sense of the need to rebuild and to rethink. David was of the view that it is in the course of struggle, mass action and movement building that we will find the most fruitful outcomes for our reflections and reorienting.

In concluding this tribute to David and sharing his political perspectives I end by quoting Daniel Bensaid, also from the same international political current – He writes in his memoir, an Impatient life

“Changing the world is more difficult, certainly, than Marx and our own earlier selves believed. But it is no less necessary than it ever was. From the International demonstrations of the World Social Forums, the impatient need for something new has once again begun to move. A shiver, still fragile and timid, like an uncertain convalescence. insufficient to reverse the regressive spiral of retreats and defeats. But just proclaiming that another world is needed already means shaking the yoke of the fait accompli. So that this other world becomes possible, another left is needed. Not a left in denial or shame, not a “lite” or dehydrated left, but a left of struggle, up to the mark of challenges of the age.”

As we pledge to take David's magnificent legacy forward let us recall the words of the Soviet novelist Nikolai Ostrovsky when he wrote:

“Man's dearest possession is life, it is given unto him but once and he must live to it to feel no torturing regrets for wasted years....live so that in dying you must say, all my life and all my strength were given to the finest cause of this world... the fight for the liberation of mankind”

I truly believe this was the meaning and significance of David's Life.

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David Sanders

David Sanders was a founding member of People's Health Movement (PHM) in 2000 in Savar, Bangladesh and has been the co-chair of PHM from past six years.

David Sanders was a Professor and founding Director of the School of Public Health at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), South Africa. He was a specialist paediatrician with postgraduate qualifications in Public Health, and had over 40 years experience in health policy and program development in Zimbabwe and South Africa. David had extensive experience in the areas of primary health care, child health and nutrition, and human resources for health as part of health systems development.

He had published extensively in these fields, as well as on the political economy of health, including on structural adjustment and development aid, having authored or co-authored three books: “The Struggle for Health: Medicine and the Politics of Underdevelopment”, “Questioning the Solution: the Politics of Primary Health Care and Child Survival” and “Fatal Indifference: the G8, Africa and Global Health”, in addition to many chapters and journal articles.

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He was on the Steering Committee of the United Nations Standing Committee on Nutrition from 2002 – 2006, and a member of the Knowledge Network of the WHO Commission on Social Determinants of Health. He was a founder member of the UK Politics of Health Group, of the International People's Health Council and of PHM. He was a managing editor of Global Health Watch 2.