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In Memoriam

Ahmed Shawki (1960–2023)

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He served as the central figure in the leadership of the International Socialist Organization (ISO) for the better part of his life, presiding over its rise to become the strongest organization of the US revolutionary left – but also the crisis which eventually led to its dissolution in 2019. Now, Ahmed “Shawki” Sehrawy has died, at only 62 years of age.

Of Egyptian origin, Shawki grew up in London, where he joined the British International Socialists (Socialist Workers Party, or SWP after 1977) as a teenager and was trained by SWP founder Tony Cliff before moving to the US in 1976, where he began studying at Brown University and joined the US International Socialists.

The IS in the US stemmed from a specifically American strand of Trotskyism, the Independent Socialist Clubs around Hal Draper and Joel Geier, inspired by Max Schachtman’s theory of bureaucratic collectivism and centred around the concept of “socialism from below”. Despite some differences vis-a-vis Tony Cliff’s analysis of state capitalism, both organizations had maintained strong relations with each other for a long time. Beginning in 1976, a part of the International Socialists strongly influenced by Cliff instigated a faction fight and split from the organization one year later, constituting themselves as the ISO and soon joining the SWP’s International Socialist Tendency (IST), which did not officially emerge until the early 1980s.

Shawki quickly gained a great deal of influence within the ISO and became part of its leadership in the early 1980s. The ISO was strongly oriented towards the SWP under his influence, but Shawki also played an important role within the IST itself. He regularly attended its informal meetings and successfully aided in the building of ISO-Zimbabwe, which even succeeded in electing a member of parliament in the 1990s.

In line with Cliff’s analysis of the “downturn”, the ISO, like other sections of the IST, opted against the turn-to-industry approach dominant in other Trotskyist organizations at this time, and instead shifted the focus of its agitation away from factories to the universities. Shawki participated in this campaign by building an ISO student organization at Brown University. Based on the theory of state capitalism, the ISO, like the other sections of the IST, welcomed the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and saw the 1990s as a decade of growth opportunities. Growth opportunities that they knew how to use: from around 150 in 1990, ISO membership skyrocketed to around 1,000, surpassing organizations like the American SWP or the Communist Party, both of which were once much stronger. Ahmed Shawki played an important role in this upswing of the ISO against the backdrop of a collapsing radical left.

In the 1990s, he regularly spoke at the SWP’s 8,000.-strong “Marxism” congresses at the University of London, where I also had the opportunity to hear this great speaker several times. I will never forget Ahmed’s incredibly energetic, albeit somehow dishevelled and yet charming and eccentric performances, wolfing down a pizza and smoking countless cigarettes before and after giving a speech on “China since Mao”, delivered with sparkling eyes and a thundering voice

Shortly after Tony Cliff died and Alex Callinicos took his place in the leadership of the IST and the SWP in 2000, a conflict broke out between the SWP and the ISO concerning their different positions vis-a-vis the anti-globalization movement. The conflict between the London headquarters and Chicago grew even sharper after Ahmed Shawki was accused of having forced the split of the “Internationalist Workers’ Left” (DEA) from the Greek IST section, SEK. In 2001, Callinicos forced the expulsion of the ISO from the IST – against which I and several others in the German IST section, “Linksruck”, unsuccessfully sought to resist. Splitting our International and expelling our second-most important section (and in the heart of the imperialist beast, no less!) right in the middle of the upswing of the anti-globalization movement due to petty disagreements struck us as an utterly grotesque manoeuvre.

This experience was one of the reasons why I and several others left the IST and Linksruck a few months later during a split caused by revelations of sexual harassment cases within the leadership of the organization, highlighting the obvious democracy deficit within the IST. The IST, which had grown to up to 30 sections in the 1990s, was massively damaged by the expulsion of the ISO and the splits in Linksruck, SEK and other sections. It would never fully recover from these blows.

As he now needed his own publishing house and conferences, Shawki founded Haymarket Books in 2001 and the Socialism conferences in 2002, which have been held in Chicago every year since. Additionally, he served as the editor of the *International Socialist Review*, with a wide readership beyond the ISO. Even after its expulsion from the IST, the ISO stayed loyal to its political roots, especially to its resolute anti-imperialism, which led to its resistance against the patriotic wave and the “War on Terror” after 9/11. At the same time, however, the group endeavoured to adopt a more open Marxism in comparison to the British SWP, integrating intersectionality and concepts taken from identity politics into its theory as well as political practice. When I attended an ISO meeting in Los Angeles in 2005, I was struck by how diverse the chapter was, led by gay, black, and brown people. Shawki’s organization now began to move towards the Fourth International, whose world congresses it attended as an observer. An internationalist with his whole heart, Shawki regularly travelled to Latin America, visited Egypt several times after the 2011 revolution to support the development of the Revolutionary Socialists and, together with DEA, accompanied the process of Syriza’s rise and fall in Greece.

I met Ahmed Shawki several times in the 2010s while attending the Historical Materialism conferences in London and most recently at a “Marx-is-muss” conference in Berlin, where he laid out his critique of the lack of democracy in the SWP tradition to me in detail. This led to a deep crisis within the party in 2013, when the SWP Central Committee tried to cover up a rape allegation against a member of the leadership, failing to deal with it properly due to the lack of a culture of democracy within the organization. It is a bitter irony of history that this same mechanism would soon lead to the disintegration of Shawki’s ISO.

The ISO adopted an increasingly defensive political stance in the second half of the 2010s, initially in response to Bernie Sanders’s campaign and the subsequent growth of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), astronomical by US standards. While its strict rejection of activity within the US party system, with its polarization between Republicans and Democrats, and its insistence on the necessity of building a left completely independent from the Democrats had long been a condition of the ISO’s success, sticking to this line under different political conditions increasingly became a hindrance. A growing number of members left the ISO and joined the DSA.

The crisis of his increasingly isolated organization pushed Shawki into a minority position within the ISO leadership for the first time. In 2019, a rape allegation against a member of the leadership became public, similar to the events within Linksruck in 2001 and the SWP in 2013. Trust in the leadership dwindled among the ISO membership, and a lack of strategic orientation eventually caused the newly elected majority to dissolve the ISO following a survey of the members, who now either joined the DSA, withdrew into private life, grouped around the Tempest collective and magazine of the same name, or worked in local revolutionary groups.

Shawki and his long-time partner Sharon Smith (who had also been part of the ISO leadership for nearly 40 years) sought to continue their politics in the small “International Socialism Project”. Shawki was hit hard by the cover-up allegations against his partner in particular, and by the self-destruction of his life’s work, the ISO. His health was also in serious decline, not least as a result of his sometimes excessive consumption of alcohol and other drugs. Now, he has died.

With him, a giant among the dwarves of the US revolutionary left has passed. While most of these organizations were crumbling, Shawki proved successful in carrying the tradition of a “socialism from below” and a vibrant organization into the 21st century – and bringing new generations of activists into contact with this version of

Marxism.

Yet Shawki was also a tragic figure. For decades, he dedicated his life to the revival of socialism in the US and struggled tirelessly to prepare this revival politically and organizationally. But when new movements like BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo and the climate strikes came onto the scene and millions of young Americans got excited about democratic socialism and trade unions in the wake of the Sanders campaign, Shawki and his organization proved unable to relate to these developments productively. Unable to escape decades of marginality, they were ultimately broken by them.

By the end of his life, Ahmed had lost almost everything: his party dissolved, his magazine closed, his publishing house and his conferences taken away from him, his reputation damaged by harassment allegations, his health ruined, his right leg amputated. And yet at least some of his work is likely to last for the decades to come. Thousands of American leftists were politically inspired by him. The successful Haymarket Books will continue to distribute Marxist literature, and the annual Socialism conferences (with 1,700 attendees and another 1,600 online last year) will continue to offer an important platform for debating the socialist ideas to which Ahmed Shawki dedicated his life.

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