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Obituary

Charlie van Gelderen (1913-2001)

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Charlie van Gelderen was the last survivor of those who attended the 1938 Founding Conference of the Fourth International in Paris. He attended as an observer on behalf of South African Trotskyists, though he was already living in Britain by that time. He died peacefully at home in Cambridge on October 26 after a short illness at the age of 88, still a fully paid up and until very recently an active member of the International Socialist Group (British section of the Fourth International).

Charlie was born in August 1913 in the small town of Wellington, 40 miles from Cape Town, South Africa. He became politically active as a young man, initially joining the Fabian Society, but in 1931 he became an enthusiastic supporter of the ideas of Leon Trotsky. Together with his twin brother, Herman, he was instrumental in setting up the first Trotskyist organisation in South Africa, the International Marxist League.

Charlie was also involved in setting up the Commercial Workers Union in the Cape and for a time became its full time secretary.

The South African Trotskyist movement split in 1932 in response to the "French turn", the position put forward by Trotsky at the time urging his French supporters to enter the French Socialist Party. Charlie supported Trotsky and was instrumental in founding a new organisation, the Communist League, and edited its paper Worker's Voice.

In 1935 Charlie followed his comrade and future wife, Millie Mathews (who was to become mother of his daughters) to London. Once he arrived in Britain, Charlie linked up with the Marxist Group whose best-known member was CLR James. The Marxist Group had been active in the Independent Labour Party, but was discussing going into the Labour Party.

Charlie himself was told to go straight into the Labour Party and soon became very active in the East Islington (in north London) branch of the Labour League of Youth, which was dominated by Trotskyists.

By the time of the founding Conference of the Fourth International in 1938, the Marxist Group had disintegrated. Charlie was a member of the Revolutionary Socialist League (RSL), which worked in the Labour Party as Militant, while James had gone on to found his own organisation, which he represented at the Conference. The biggest Trotskyist group in Britain at the time was the Workers International League, which then involved both Ted Grant and Gerry Healy.

During the Second World War Charlie joined the British Army Medical Corps and travelled first to Iraq and then to Italy. He openly organised Marxist Educational classes among the troops. He went on to help form the first Trotskyist group in Italy, together with American comrades also stationed in the area and Italian comrades, both those who already supported Trotskyism and others who were becoming interested because of the political situation.

The importance of Charlie's role in Italy was underlined by the fact that after the war, the leadership of the Fourth International tried to persuade him to return there and carry on that work. Charlie did not feel able to do this because he had a wife and child in England.

By the time Charlie returned to Britain, the RSL had come together with the Workers International League to form the Revolutionary Communist Party. Ted Grant was the Political Secretary and Jock Haston was the General Secretary.

Charlie became a prominent member of the leadership of this organisation almost straight away.

The majority of the RCP was against entry into the Labour Party, including Ted Grant at that time, but Gerry Healy had already formed a minority tendency fighting for entry. Charlie was himself in favour of entry but against a minority split on this basis. He also deeply distrusted Healy.

The leadership of the Fourth International, dominated by Michel Pablo, supported Healy and urged Charlie to do likewise. Soon Healy split and founded The Club, which would later become the Socialist Labour League (and subsequently the Workers' Revolutionary Party). Charlie stayed in the RCP for a time, but then this organisation decided to dissolve and go in with Healy.

Charlie remained a member of Healy's organisation throughout the period when the Fourth International split in 1953 in a confused debate over Stalinism and the role of mass Communist Parties: but he broke with Healy when he refused to re-join the reunified organisation in 1963.

He then met up with Ken Coates and Pat Jordan, who by this time had launched The Week, and decided to join with them. Charlie was therefore a founder member of the International Marxist Group (IMG), which became the British section of the Fourth International.

His main political activity was around solidarity with South Africa. Though Charlie had left South Africa as a young man he remained deeply committed to the political struggle there. He stayed in contact with comrades on the ground, and followed events closely. He was a long time member of the Anti-Apartheid Movement and served on its National Committee for some time.

In the early 1980s: the IMG changed its name to the Socialist League and then went through some serious political convulsions and divisions that finally led to its break up over undemocratic functioning. The continuity of the organisation, the International Group, later fused with the Workers' Socialist League, which itself had come out of the WRP, to form the International Socialist Group in 1987.

Charlie was a member of the Labour Party from September 1936 until March 2001. In many bitter debates in the Trotskyist movement, he argued that this was where revolutionaries should be active in order to win others to their political ideas. However the transformation of the party by Tony Blair led Charlie (along with many others) to feel that those days were now over. Thus he welcomed the formation of the Socialist Alliance, became a member of its Cambridge branch and looked forward to becoming a 'born again activist'.

Charlie never lost his deep hatred of the capitalist system and the brutal misery it brings in its wake. His column for Socialist Outlook, which he kept up until illness struck in the summer, pulsated with his fury against the burden of debt, the scourge of HIV and the profits of the multinationals, the hypocrisy of new Labour. Charlie is deeply missed by his wife Christine whom he married in 1989, his daughters Leonora and Tessa (both revolutionary socialists), and the rest of his family, and by the many comrades in Britain and across the world that knew him.