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Chatting with an old Trot

- Reviews section -

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As a 25-year-old revolutionary South African-born Charlie Van Gelderen was a delegate at the founding conference of the Fourth International in 1938 in Paris. When he died in 2001 he was the final living link with that small group of militants who had tried to keep the continuity of revolutionary Marxism alive under the enormous pressure of fascism and Stalinism. I remember a well-attended memorial meeting for Charlie was held after he died in Conway Hall.

Just last weekend on the 100th anniversary of his birth his daughter, Tessa, organised a special meeting for family and friends to launch a small book of his writings and a long interview. Ironically it was held in the midst of the celebration of Mandela's life. Charlie always worked to build the solidarity movement here but also tried to build the left currents critical of the ANC's essentially reformist approach. He worked and with and knew many of the more left-wing opponents of apartheid such as Neville Alexander or Tabatha.

At the meeting Tessa admitted modestly that she herself had questioned the point of having a 100th anniversary event. It was not really her dad's style. However Charlie's writings and ideas had not been collected together in one place and so the event was as much about a book launch as anything else. We should be very grateful that she did put all the effort into producing this little gem of a book – ably assisted by Terry Conway, Pam Singer, Ted Crawford and Mark Shotter.

Charlie was known well enough on the radical left and among the South African/African émigré and solidarity milieu and he also won positions within the mass movement as a councillor and trade union representative. However he is probably not a household name among most left activists today. So why is his book relevant to us today?

More than the insights into strategy and tactics which are scattered throughout the book, the long, often rambling interview with Mark Shotter really grabs the reader by the lapels and says a life in politics, fighting all systems of oppression and exploitation can be fulfilling, stimulating and fun. Yes, Charlie was never dull and never, never totally obsessed with politics. He knew that you needed space and time away from another political meeting or leafleting whether it was playing bridge, watching Coronation street or just organising a damn good party. One of the criticisms of the degeneration of some of the British radical left is how it can take in young militants and burn them out with 24 hour political activity.

Humour bubbles out of the pages when he regales us with gossipy stories about 'womaniser' George Brown, who later became number two in Wilson's Labour party, or about Ted Willis, creator of the TV series Dixon of Dock Green, who as a Stalinist made sure Charlie did not get to speak at a meeting. Through some of these stories you also get an idea about how attitudes to women in the radical movement were not particularly progressive on many occasions.

His accounts of militancy as an entryist in the Labour League of Youth in the 1940s are illustrative of how different the Labour Party was in the past. He talks of branch meetings in Islington of a 100 or more where the Stalinists and the Trotskyists slugged it out – the CP were also entryist at the time. At that time and through into the 1950s the LP really did organisationally and ideologically organise hundreds of thousands of workers in a way that has totally changed today. Today many Labour parties exist as small 'managerial' support groups for councillors or nurseries for future councillors and operate mostly at election times.

Another theme very relevant to the situation today when the SWP is fracturing and there is serious talk of regroupment, is his criticism of how the revolutionary left has been far too quick to split at the first opportunity in the

most unprincipled way. He cites the way that the alliance between two opposing factions in the 1980s IMG forced the third component out of the organisation and consequently led to its overall demise. At the same time Charlie was already voicing some of the criticisms made by Luke Cooper and Simon Hardy in their book *Beyond Capitalism* on the need to re-evaluate democratic centralism:

“I’m a bit of a renegade on this question of the Leninist party. I think that Lenin’s conception of the Leninist party before the revolution was correct for a country where the activities were illegal, but I don’t think it’s correct or a country like Britain, you see?” pg. 100

He criticises Trotsky and Lenin for their shortcomings in the early 1920s on the issue of banning political tendencies and defending socialist democracy. Charlie also makes a very pertinent point – in the light of the fuss created by the wording on the transition from capitalism in the Left Unity constitution – when he defends the idea that a variable degree of private ownership of business will remain after central power of capitalism is defeated.

“But I don’t think that immediately after the revolution you’re going to nationalise everything. And I think that as far ahead as we could see, maybe a century or more you could have pockets of private enterprise, small-scale but maybe small-scale industry and farmers” pg 99

Activists interested in the history of the British Trotskyist movement will get some useful background in this book. There are pen portraits of the notorious Gerry Healy, fellow south African Ted Grant – who became leader of the Militant, predecessor to today’s Socialist Party – and of somebody else with a Jewish background, Tony Cliff. The latter famously turned up at Charlie’s very modest flat and said there was loads of space compared to conditions in Palestine so that he and Chanie (his partner) were going to move in the following week! Actually Charlie recounts that it was great fun living with Cliff and that the latter was very correct in his behaviour, paying for all telephone calls. What comes out is how the correct approach to the Labour Party and labourism was often the basis for divisions and splits. His two articles in the book – arguing from both sides of the debate about entry captures this well.

The articles on South Africa, which are mainly from the early 1990s when the crucial negotiations on transition were carried out, have stood the test of time insofar as his point ‘South Africa may be non-racist but it will remain capitalist’ (pg 161) is undoubtedly the case today. The article supports WOSA (Workers Organisation for Socialist Action) leader Neville Alexander’s call for a workers party in South Africa. Recent developments, such as the emergence of the EFF and one major union’s moves to discuss that, show the call is still relevant today. Anyone watching Question Time from Johannesburg the other week will have seen there is a significant gap opening up between not just many radical activists and the ANC but also between its corrupt government and broad masses of the population.

Finally Charlie always had a sense of proportion. If you re-read the speech he made at the 1998 international youth camp on why he was right in 1938 to help found a Fourth International it is remarkably free of the bombast you get from the Trotskyist sect groups:

“We cannot take refuge in blaming the objective conditions (for why we were unable to make any real impact)...perhaps if we had had a strong leadership and a united international we could have made some impression...sectarian splits have been a chronic ailment in our movement.” Pgs 173/4

If we can take one thing from the life of Charlie we should take his advice about reversing the centrifugal impulse of the revolutionary left in order to try and bring them together in honest, transparent regroupment. As long as there is broad agreement about the central tasks of the day we can continue our debates about those and everything else.

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In the meantime if you want a good read over the holidays you can do worse than this – a bit of theory and analysis but lots of humanity and joy. What a pity that the conversation is not a current online blog because I sure there would have been many people like me who would love to butt in and ask for more detail, more gossip and more discussion.

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