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Veteran Vietnamese Trotskyist dies

Hoang Khoa Khoi, 1917-2009

- News from around the world -

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HOANG KHOA KHOI (Robert): 1917-2009

Our dear Vietnamese comrade Hoang Khoa Khoi has just died at the age of 92, on Thursday April 9. His family and friends gathered a week later in front of the crematorium of Père-Lachaise to pay him a last tribute.

He was the oldest Vietnamese Trotskyist still alive. He arrived in France in 1939 with the 20,000 ONS (ouvriers non specialises – non specialised workers) that the colonialist government had requisitioned to replace the workers sent to the military front.

In 1942 he was imprisoned for three and a half months in the prison at Sorgues for "Communist propaganda" although it was only the following year that he joined the Fourth International. While coming out of prison he came across a young Vietnamese, Dang Van Long, who had committed the crime of signing a petition against the commandant of his camp. Long became his best friend and 4 years later joined the Fourth International also.

From 1945 Khoi participated in the activity and then in the leadership of the Parti Communiste Internationaliste (Internationalist Communist Party, French section of the Fourth International) and with some compatriots they set up the "Vietnamese Trotskyist Group in France" first as members of the PCI and later as members of its successor organisation, the LCR. Two Vietnamese members, of whom he was one, were elected to the Executive Committee at the 5th Congress of the Fourth International in December 1957.

I was very affected by the first Vietnam war which I had campaigned against from 1947, joining the Jeunesses Socialistes (the social democratic youth organisation, which was unaware of the Trotskyist nucleus developing within it). After their dissolution by the Socialist leadership, I joined the French Communist Party and remained there, after having joined the Fourth International in 1956. It was in the 1960s that I met Khoi, who we knew by his pseudonym, Robert. Attracted by his culture, his charisma, his kindness and his internationalist spirit, I joined the Vietnamese Group of which I was the sole "white" member.

Our weekly meeting took place at his residence on rue Saint-Ambroise in the 11th arrondissement of Paris and it was truly thanks to him that I developed a passion for Vietnam which I have had the chance to visit 5 times. The first two were the most interesting since they took place during the US war, in 1967, in the context of the "Russell Tribunal". Knowing that I was in the PCF (which I only left in 1970), the North Vietnamese took me down to the 17th parallel (the border with the US occupied South), which was rare for foreigners. Then a trip was organised for me among the guerillas in the South.

The Vietnamese Group brought out a review in their native language, "Nghien Cuu", of restricted circulation. We decided collectively in 1986 to end production and publish a quarterly review in French, "Chroniques Vietnamiennes", but as the cover read "Edited by the Vietnamese Trotskyist Group in France (LCR)", Robert wrote nearly all the editorials under the name HA CUONG NGHIE.

I wrote sometimes under my own name and sometimes as BUI-THIEN-CHI. This review appeared from September 1986 to the summer of 1991, with a print run of 2,000 copies. A special number came out in autumn 1997 with an article written by Robert (under his real name) in 1992: "Who killed Ta Thu Thau and the Vietnamese Trotskyists?" A special dossier on the subject had been printed in 1987.

I should also say that after my return from Vietnam in 1967, at the request of health minister Pham Ngoc Thach, we created a Franco-Vietnamese Medical Association (AMFV) for urgent health aid. I was very active until 1973. Of course Robert was neither a doctor nor a nurse but his advice was very precious to us.

I should add that in the 1970s and the 1980s the Fourth International went through a heated debate on the danger of bureaucratisation of Vietnamese society on the model of the countries of "actually existing socialism". A number of comrades thought (and hoped) that given the exemplary struggle of the Vietnamese CP this risk was "avoidable" and that there would not be a "crystallisation" of a bureaucratic caste as in the USSR or the Peoples Democracies. Robert and his comrades were of the opposite opinions and affirmed that Vietnam was already under a "bureaucratic dictatorship". It is enough to read one of their texts, written in French in 1976 and published in 1985 in "Nghien Cuu": "La bureaucratie au Vietnam". I participated under the name of L. Couturier.

In 2001 his dear friend Dang Van Long died at the age of 82. Robert wrote a moving text paying tribute to him, which was read at the funeral in Montreuil. Its conclusion seems to me the best way to say goodbye to him also: "On this day of mourning and sadness, if I recall some memories, it is to tell you how dear your friendship was to me. Your death is a great loss for us all. We have lost a comrade, a friend, a brother. We have lost an exceptional being whose qualities will long serve us as an example. Farewell, dear brother, may your soul rest in peace!"