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Obituary

# Tribute: Ernesto Herrera (1949-2024)

- Features - In Memoriam - Obituaries and appreciations -

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**A belated tribute to Ernesto Herrera, who died on 10 January 2024. The shock had to be absorbed. A comrade-friend, with a hyphen of fraternity and not of union, in order to respect his personal trajectory.**

Born on 22 May 1949, Antonio Maria Nuñez Guglielmi was part of the Spanish and Italian emigration that settled in Uruguay, a country that experienced exceptional growth from 1910 until the early 1950s. An activist, he chose as his pseudonym the name of a writer who, among other things, wrote about the civil war that shook the Eastern Republic of Uruguay in 1904-1905, a writer with an interest in social protest and the libertarian movement.

In the second half of the 1950s, Uruguay plunged into a socio-economic crisis. It was in this climate of social tension that Ernesto, as a metalworker, became a shop steward in a factory that made valves for gas cylinders, one of the branches left over from the early policy of import-substitution industrialisation.

Compared to the trade union movement, left-wing political forces were weak and had no significant expression at the political-institutional level, a field occupied by two parties, the Blancos - a national party linked to the large landowners - and the Colorados, a party representing Montevideo's urban bourgeoisie. Ernesto initially joined the ranks of the Communist Party, which since 1955, under the leadership of Rodney Arismendi, had refocused its activities on the trade union movement. The latter underwent a process of regroupment and coordination in the mid-1960s, with the establishment of the Convención Nacional de Trabajadores (CNT), which put forward a programme of immediate demands, nationalisation and land reform.

In 1973, Ernesto joined the Socialist Workers' Party (PST). In front of the factory where he worked, Benas SA, the monthly magazine of this organisation - which claimed to be Trotskyist, opposed to armed struggle and to Stalinism and its offshoots - was distributed by an activist who became one of his closest comrades in battle, Juan Luis Berterretche.

The broad outlines of the context are as follows: from 1967, and in particular from May 1968, militarisation and the state of siege became established; social struggles developed; a very specific urban guerrilla movement, the Tupamaros, had been increasing its activities since 1966; the two traditional parties were joined by the Frente Amplio (FA), a broad grouping of centre-left and left-wing forces. The PST participated, along with other forces from this spectrum, in the creation of the Frente Amplio in 1971. Faced with this challenge, the ruling class relied on the army to re-establish order and declared an "internal war" (from April 1972) against the guerrillas and the working classes, in order to destroy what remained of the historic social gains. This was followed by the coup d'état of June 1973.

The coup, the resistance and its limits have been analysed on several occasions by Ernesto Herrera. The "recovery of memory", 50 years on, reveals the combination of his militant experience and the political and historical culture that underpinned it.

The dictatorship lasted until 1985. From 1973 to 1975, Ernesto played a decisive role in maintaining clandestine organisational structures, before the repression became even more brutal, but failed to turn most of the population into informers. For the members of the PST, clandestine activity continued, albeit on a much reduced scale, with arrests, detentions in barracks and then prisons - one for the men called Libertad, the other for the women in Punta Rieles, where Marita, Ernesto's companion, was elected spokeswoman for the internal resistance - and support for the families of the detainees.

Forced political exile contributed to the internationalisation of socio-political commitment. In 1982, repression hit what remained of the PST's militant core very hard. Along with other members, Ernesto went into exile in Brazil, where he rubbed shoulders with the initial developments of the Workers' Party (PT) and established close links with activists from Socialist Democracy, a current of the PT. They provided assistance to "undeclared" exiles from the Uruguayan PST. In 1983, Ernesto returned to Uruguay clandestinely to take part in the anti-dictatorial mobilisation and reorganisation of the PST, as well as in the political debates marking the new phase of consolidation of the Frente Amplio (FA). A complex process began: the FA's electoral fortunes began to grow in 1989, although coalition governments between the Parti Colorado and the Parti Blanco remained victorious until 2005; the Tupamaros (National Liberation Movement-MLN) became part of the FA in 1989; and left-wing forces joined forces within the FA under the name of MPP (Popular Participation Movement). The trajectory of the MPP in turn became the focus of policy debates in an international context marked by neo-liberal globalisation, the break-up of the USSR and its satellites, questions about the "Cuban model" and so on. Ernesto was a member of the federal leadership of the MPP - which brought together the PST, the MLN, the MRO-Movimiento Revolucionario Oriental, the PVP-Partido por la Victoria del Pueblo and independent activists. Far from being a sectarian, he was already anticipating the forces that were going to shake up society and, in the process, the forces claiming to be revolutionary socialists, while basing his convictions on a meticulous examination of the accentuation of the multiple forms of exploitation and oppression.

By the turn of the millennium, Ernesto was able to gauge the changes in the FA's development and objectives. In 2005, the FA won government "power". Within it, the MLN component came to the fore, which, for some informed observers, consecrated the formula "from arms to the ballot box".

Ernesto Herrera quoted Carlos Real de Azúa in his book *Política, poder y partidos en el Uruguay de hoy* (1971) to illustrate what the initial FA represented. Carlos Real de Azúa described the birth of the FA in 1971 as the expression of "a real counter-society" nourished by grassroots assemblies, social mobilisation, political radicalisation and a collective practice of "breaking away" not only from the two-party system of the Blancos-Colorados but also from the socio-economic system in the hands of the landowning classes (financial, industrial and agrarian) and imperialist organisations. In the light of this description, Ernesto stressed that there was no simple transition from "armed struggle" to "the electoral route", but a break with the Frente's historic programme - which was an extension of that of the CNT - leading to "reformism without reform", during the governmental experiments.

In Ernesto Herrera's eyes, understanding these changes and ruptures made historical knowledge and meticulous monitoring of current events even more valuable, requirements understood as a prerequisite for working out a revolutionary socialist "what to do", while "managing" the uncertainty that distanced him from "vulgar optimism".

From 1985 to 2003, Ernesto Herrera took on the task of "coordination" in Latin America in order to provide information to the authorities of the Fourth International (Unified Secretariat). He did this on the basis of his militant experience and his understanding of the changing political context in this "small" South American country. Added to this was his militant internationalism, linked among other things to political exile, which had sharpened his capacity for comparison, the better to identify what was specific and general in the various social formations.

The year 2003 saw the arrival of the Lula government in Brazil and the participation of members of Socialist Democracy in that government. In the light of what Ernesto had assimilated alongside Brazilian activists and of his experience in Uruguay, he could only express his extreme doubts, in fact his disagreement, with this subordination of DS leaders to the imperatives of Lula's government machine. The hopes raised by the dynamic opened up by the Lula government among members of the leading circle of the Fourth International made it inappropriate, in their view, for Ernesto Herrera to take on responsibility for "coordination". However, the latter was not a decision-making body, but essentially a means of maintaining links and making contacts.

With the support of those who had been able to share some of the accumulated experience and knowledge that

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Ernesto Herrera had built up, he was able to continue his militant activity in Uruguay, maintain militant links in South America and exchange ideas with comrades in various European countries. This network created the conditions for the launch of the Correspondencia de Prensa newsletter, and later the [website](#) of the same name.

In the same way that, as a "long-standing militant", Ernesto was a resource over the years for the activity of revolutionary socialists in South America, the newsletter and website extended and broadened the availability of this support. There are some tributes that make departed activists into greater figures than they were in their own lifetime. Ernesto Herrera certainly would not have wanted that, which I dare to assume on the basis of my 40 years of militant friendship. I hope I have escaped this sort of pitfall.

The posthumous publication - in French and Spanish - of a work he devoted to the history of the Tupamaros and to the present socio-political life of Uruguay and its inhabitants will help to make a reflective past an instrument for the present.

26 January 2023

Translated by **International Viewpoint** from [A l'Encontre](#).

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