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Obituary

**"It is the Henri Weber who
sang the Internationale with
Higelin that we mourn, not the
one at the service of the
political apparatus of the PS"**

Publication date: Saturday 2 May 2020

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Henri Weber was born in Leninabad (now Khujand), Tajikistan, Soviet Union on 23 June 1944. His Polish-Jewish parents had left Poland at the time of the German-Soviet pact but, refusing to become Soviet citizens, were sent to labour camp where he was born. They returned to Poland after the war but four years later left because of prevailing anti-semitism and moved to France. As a student in Paris Weber was recruited by Alain Krivine and became a leading member of the Jeunesse Communiste Révolutionnaire (JCR) and of the Ligue Communiste (subsequently Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire LCR), French section of the Fourth International. In the early 1980s he ceased political activity and in 1986 joined the Socialist Party. A member of the leadership of the Socialist Party, he held elected positions as a senator (1995-2004) and then as a member of the European Parliament (2004-2014). He died in Avignon on 26 April 2020 from coronavirus. [IVP]

I knew Henri as a JCR activist in the years 1965-67. In the period after May 68, we were fairly close, since I was a student at the university of Vincennes where he was an assistant lecturer in the philosophy department. It was at this time that I had to coordinate the student sector of what was to become the *Ligue Communiste*. At the end of the Mannheim congress, I became a member of the central committee of the League (1969-70) following a proposal which he initiated. But in the framework of the activities of the defence service of the League, for which I was for a time responsible along with my brother Alain, Michel Canatti and Romain Goupil, we worked a lot on projects of demonstrations and political events which made the League well known, and it is for this double reason that I saw a lot of Henri.

Henri was one of the leading figures of the JCR, along with Daniel Bensaïd, Janette Habel, Alain Krivine, Pierre Rousset, and in a less public way Gérard de Verbizier. They were the embodiment of this organization which came from the fight against Stalinism, solidarity with the colonial revolution and systematic anti-capitalist and anti-fascist activities, which stood out by its sense of political initiative, its dynamism and its fighting spirit, without sectarianism. Henri and his comrades had anticipated, already in 1967, the role of "sensitive plate" that the student movements could play. They perceived the embers which were heating up under the leaden shell of Gaullism and the inertia of the union leaderships and the PCF. In the demonstrations, they pushed for the radicalization of struggles and supported strikes which escaped the shackles of the union bureaucracies. May 9, 1968, when the JCR opened up its meeting to the movement and where Bensaïd, Weber and Cohn-Bendit rubbed shoulders, illustrated this absence of sectarianism. Unlike the "maos" who two days later invited the students to put themselves at the "service of the people" rather than building barricades, the Lambertists of the OCI, who in their logic of pressure group on the trade union apparatuses counterposed the "general strike" to the battles of "petit-bourgeois students" and the activists of *Voix Ouvrière* (ancestor of LO) who learnedly explained that the battles in the Latin Quarter were only a "straw fire" with regard to the struggle of the proletariat, they understood that the straw fire was in fact "the spark that would set the plain on fire"! And when 1968 exploded, Henri and his comrades were ready, they were the ones who could be found on the barricades and in confrontations with the cops (alongside the anarchists). They knew that going to the barricades was in fact the way to the general strike. Henri was one of those who had the political intuition to understand that the events of 1968 opened a historic moment.

In 1968, he spent his days and nights between barricades, demonstrations and a small flat in rue Monsieur-le-Prince. In 1969, it was in the apartment that Henri shared with Pascale that a small group of comrades from *Rouge*, among them Bensaïd, Nair, Scalabrino, my brother, myself and others, had signed a call to join the Fourth International on the occasion of the founding congress of the *Ligue Communiste*, in order to concretely assume the internationalism of our current. Henri was the soul of the newspaper *Rouge*, which formed the backbone of the organization. He also played a decisive role in the establishment and organisation of the review *Critique communiste* He made it a space for meeting and confronting other currents and thinkers.

His great political and historical culture gave him an indisputable competence concerning "courses" of political education. His rhetorical art gave his writings a high quality by avoiding reducing the analysis to simple tactical or polemical recipes. His sense of synthesis made him an excellent political pedagogue in his editorial work in the field of Marxism; he based himself on the contributions of the main theorists of Marxism, which he rediscovered. One of his first publications in 1967 was a JCR pamphlet, *Movement ouvrier, stalinisme et bureaucratie*, which was based on texts of both Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg, but also on elements of analysis provided by Kautsky. It was reprinted in the *Cahiers Rouge* (Red Notebooks) series, n° 3 "De la bureaucratie" published in 1971.

Henri Weber had a knack for formulas and slogans, a sense of organization and efficiency in action which were accompanied by empathy for the comrades. Coming up with punchy slogans, the insolence of a flurry of public interventions, renewing our press with graphic designers and the assistance of artists, this is what was Henri's "trademark". He knew how to associate political and cultural activity, as with the camp at Prunete in Corsica, during the summer of 1970, which was the ancestor of the summer universities of the League. "Riton" was cheeky, he appreciated the mix of slogans and humour and sparked initiatives in this area. His sense of initiative and action was at the origin of his initiating role in the organization of the defence service of the League. His sense of agitation and of brilliant actions in the field of militancy led him to stimulate the carrying out of spectacular and exemplary actions in our political campaigns. Eager to renew the language of our "Agitprop" and to invent new forms of demonstration, he shook up the routinism of political activity. It was the time when Higelin was seen taking part in anti-militarist actions and painters like Chambas were being asked to contribute to the newspaper. He impelled the dusting down of our posters and our press by soliciting the talent of comrades who were graphic designers (cf. the poster for one of the *Rouge* festivals which took up in a "pop" style the work of Lissitzki: The red triangle breaks open the white circle). Henri participated in and accompanied the theoretical reflections on the new questions posed to Marxism in this period of radicalization of political and social movements and the combined crises of Stalinism and social democracy; sometimes sharing some of the erroneous conclusions they produced ...

The extension from the student and high school milieu to working class layers and the massification of the student environment, analysed by Mandel, the integration of intellectual work into the work force and the proletarianization of new, broader layers than the "historical" proletariat were at the origin of the theorizations of Daniel Bensaïd and Camille Scalabrino on the student movement as a "sensitive plate". But they induced from the radicalization of the student movement the obsolete character of the need to work in a broad trade-union organization, in favour of a line of red unions almost synonymous with the League. Likewise, Henri also participated in the theorizing of the "inevitable disappearance" of social democracy. I remember a political school in the Paris region where, facing a stupefied Mandel, Henri and some others theorized this definitive collapse of social democracy, in spite of the contradictory demonstration, backed up by examples, that Mandel tried to introduce into the debate.

Henri had a real determination to conduct political debate and critical thinking. He did not allow himself to be impressed by the dictates of the local Maoist leaders at the University of Vincennes. When, armed with quotations from the Little Red Book, Gérard Miller, who had "invaded" his class with a few Maoists, dreamed of being a red guard in the service of a thought police force, some of us were there alongside Henri, to see him stay the course and refute without hesitation the voice of the "great helmsman" concerning the history and the tragedies of the Chinese revolution. In 1975, we were again with Henri and Fabienne, his partner, in the midst of thousands of workers in revolution at the Lisnay shipyards in Lisbon.

But towards the end of the 1970s, the time when "history snapped at our heels" slowed down with the periods of ebb. It was with the entry into the long term of "slow impatience" that things got worse. Doubts arose, which led some comrades to withdraw and then abandon the fight. Henri, who with some other comrades had theorized a little too quickly the historical disappearance of social democracy, was in fact overtaken by it, to the point of losing his soul as a revolutionary militant. He left the League "on tiptoe", without a political battle, his convictions at half mast, for a lonely journey that would distance him from our current. The choice which he made of conducting research on the big French bosses' organisation, the CNPF, instead of opening up a work of critical Marxist sociology on the place and

the function of big capital, was the road which led him, from renouncing revolution, to repudiate the combat that he had conducted from the 1960s until 1981. This political collapse was expressed in 1984 by his entry into a political team which would be one of the most determined actors of social-liberalism and of the increasingly close imbrication of the Socialist Party and big capital.

The loss of his convictions led to a withdrawal from militant political activity and a gradual bifurcation towards the paths of social respectability, then to an increasingly close proximity with social liberalism, from Fabius to Hollande. Even though he maintained friendly personal relations with his former comrades, he put his talent and his rhetoric, which had become an empty shell, at the service of the political apparatus of the Socialist Party, which had long since taken on board the standards proper to the Bonapartist state. Once he had changed course, he went far down this route. The saddest thing was to see him sometimes summon the ghosts of revolutionary strategy to justify submission to those who led to the catastrophe that we know.

Today we will leave the eulogy of his renouncement to the chorus of defenders of these modern times. It is the Henri of the fight for emancipation that we mourn, the comrade, Tisserand and Samuel, the one with whom we trod the streets, *La Jeune Garde* in his shoulder bag, the one who sang the Internationale with Jacques Higelin, the one who was part of the youth that Liebknecht said was the flame of the revolution. [1]

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

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[1] Jacques Higelin was a French singer who worked closely with the League from 1968 through the 1970s and 1980s and remained active supporting the causes of the undocumented and homeless. The article published by *l'Anticapitaliste* at the time of his death "[Higelin, l'esprit de 68](#)" recalls "On the anniversary of the Paris Commune in 1971, there was a big demonstration and, in the evening, during the fête, Higelin sang the Internationale in a reggae version. The LO comrades and a number of League comrades, shocked, shouted and started singing the classical version!"