

Obituary

Peter Waterman (1936–2017) Global Labour Thinker and Activist

Ronaldo Munck, Dublin City University, Ireland

It is very fitting that the *Global Labour Journal* marks the passing of Peter Waterman, given his remarkable record as a global labour thinker and activist.

Peter Waterman was born into a middle-class Jewish family in London and was a member of the Young Communist League. This activism led him to become the English-language editor of the monthly journal of the International Union of Students in Prague during the second half of the 1950s. In the early 1960s he studied politics, philosophy and economics at Ruskin College, Oxford University. He returned to Prague to work for the World Federation of Labour but left after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. He then did a Masters in West African studies at Birmingham University and began working at Ahmadu Bello University in northern Nigeria in the early 1970s. From 1972 to his retirement in 1998 he taught at the Institute for Social Studies in The Hague from where he published the Newsletter of International Labour Studies in the 1980s and launched his “real” career as a global labour scholar and activist.

The “early” Peter Waterman was part of a wave of British academics doing their PhDs in West Africa. Peter did his on the dockworkers in Lagos at a time when the “labour aristocracy” debates were raging. Were these organised workers playing a conservative and self-interested role or would they play a leading and radical role organising the mass of workers? While his PhD never attained wide circulation, an article in *Development and Change* (6(3), 1975) on “The ‘labour aristocracy’ in Africa” nicely sums up the debate and Peter’s own engagement with it.

There is continuity between this work and the phase which began in the late 1970s (when I got to know Peter), when the “new international labour studies” was launched. A continuous strand of research and engagement was with organised labour’s relationship with community groups as occurred, for example, with the emergence of the independent trade union moment in South Africa. This problematic – which generated much debate internationally – is well-captured by one of Peter’s rare articles for the academic world: “Social Movement Unionism: A New Union Model for a New World Order” (*Review*, 16(3), 1993). It was a debate that has rumbled on to this day.

The “mature” Peter Waterman became known for his critical stance with regard to international trade union leadership and his promotion of the new labour internationalism. This phase is best illustrated by Peter’s own book *Globalization, Social Movements and the New Internationalism* (Mansell, 1998), which focused on the history and prospects for labour internationalism. At this stage he was much influenced by the work of Anthony Giddens and Manuel Castells on globalisation and the rise of the network society. This period also saw the radical-democratic language and perspective replacing the Marxist-socialist paradigm. Two co-edited collections also marked this phase of Peter’s collaborative work: *Labour Worldwide in the Era of Globalization* (Macmillan, 1999) and *Place, Space and*

the New Labour Internationalisms (Blackwell, 2001). These books also mark a shift from a focus on trade unions and organised labour (the first volume) to a more explicit or total commitment (in the second volume) to the construction of a new internationalism based squarely on the radical-democratic or “new” social movements.

There is also a “late” or radical Peter Waterman who became part of the global justice movement after 2000. This tied in with his earlier pioneering work on labour communications online, of which he was an early adopter. The “Fifth International” was going to be based on international labour communications by computer. Peter was always looking to new social movements to inspire a new emancipatory strategy for labour. He collaborated with others to promote, analyse and critique the World Social Forum in the 2000s. The plural, decentralised and reflexive nature of the alter-globalisation movements suited Peter’s personality and modus operandi. He could not be further away from the Soviet tanks rolling into Czechoslovakia in 1968 while working for the stifling and bureaucratic World Federation of Trade Unions.

Peter Waterman was often stridently critical of others but no one ever doubted his commitment to the cause of labour, and there are many younger scholars across the world who benefitted from his personal generosity and interest. His work will be made accessible on a dedicated website which will continue to inspire even his critics.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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