

## **Peter Waterman 1936 – 2017: in memoriam**

**Laurence Cox**

Our friend, comrade and co-editor Peter Waterman, who has just died in the Hague aged 81, lived many lives to the full. After over a decade within the movement, Peter broke with orthodox communism after 1968. As a labour studies academic he contributed important insights on the development of a “social movement unionism” and new labour internationalisms. After his retirement in 1998 he contributed extensively to the World Social Forum and other processes of networking emancipatory social movements across the planet.

Peter was born into a London Jewish Communist family in 1936. His father, born Nasibirski, later Wasserman and finally Waterman, was a Polish Jewish leftist who arrived in England as a stowaway and worked in many trades, at one point as general manager of the major UK Communist bookstore Collets. His mother, whose East End parents were interchangeably known as Shatitsky and Gold, was a trained secretary who spent much of her life working at low or no pay for leftist groups, working with Willie Gallacher and being arrested for protesting the Rosenberg executions in the House of Commons. She would go on to write two semi-autobiographical novels.

After much Young Communist activity and a one-year course in journalism in London, Peter became the English (and de facto chief) sub-editor of the monthly of the International Union of Students in Communist Prague (1955-8). Following compulsory UK military service (1959-60) he studied at the union-identified Ruskin College, Oxford, during which time he married Ruthie Kupferschmidt and became the father of two children, worked as a truck-driver and went on to do a bachelor’s degree at Oxford University. Ruthie also had many jobs, lastly as a Montessori teacher; after retiring with a disability she became an artist.

With a family to support, Peter worked as a labour educator for the World Federation of Trade Unions, again in Prague (1966-9), where he witnessed the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and the crushing of the Prague Spring. The experience left an indelible impression on him, and he “left both the Communist World and the World of Communism” as he put it. To the end of his days, Peter remained deeply hostile to Stalinism and other forms of statist organisations that claimed to act for human liberation – and kept his ability to recognise them in new disguises.

But he also felt strongly that what was sauce for the goose was sauce for the gander – and challenged other left projects that he saw as repeating these mistakes, be it unquestioned loyalty to a party line, mythologising leaders or blurring the truth in pursuit of the supposed greater good. In this sense Peter embodied the experience of 1968 and the New Left – and represented the spirit

of a left that is capable of learning from its mistakes. If at times he was a purist or as one critic put it, “an anti-sectarian sectarian”, his provocations came from an abiding commitment to liberation as a practice.

The crushing of the Prague Spring had propelled Peter out of orthodox communism and into a great freedom of spirit, independence of thought and commitment to honesty: more than once he gently pulled me up on something I had said and I had to admit that it was more rhetoric than reality. He brought these qualities, along with his great energy and engagement, to the question of how the labour movement could transform and renew itself, how the World Social Forum and other parts of the global justice movement could avoid falling into the traps that had defeated a previous generation, and how the 21<sup>st</sup> century left could inhabit cyberspace. In all of his work he kept the goal of human emancipation central, resisting pressures to think in approved ways or to be bound by organisational logics, and he left few stones unturned in the attempt to communicate widely and effectively – as well as chattily and at length.

Remaking himself in many dimensions, Peter now did a one-year Master’s in West African Studies, Birmingham (1969-70) and first became an academic at Ahmadu Bello University in Northern Nigeria (1970-72). He moved to the Hague in 1972, where he stayed, teaching and researching at the Institute of Social Studies initially on Third World unions, later on labour and other social movements, their internationalisms and on (computer) communications around these. A “long-distance internationalist”, as he subtitled his autobiography, Peter kept on learning from different countries and cultures without ever settling down in one. With his Jewish birth family, his children in the Netherlands and Gina in Peru, his many lives in England, Czechoslovakia, Nigeria and the Netherlands, and his companer@s and colleagues around the world, he was was a “rootless cosmopolitan” in his own words, a true citizen of the world and its many movements.

In particular, from this period Peter continued to reflect on what needed to be learned from struggles in Latin America, Asia and Africa in particular. He founded and edited the *Newsletter of International Labour Studies* through the 1980s, and was (co-)author of numerous books and articles. His PhD (Non-Western Studies, Nijmegen, 1983) was on the political and theoretical significance of portworker and dockworker relations in Lagos (Nigeria). During this period, especially the first half of the 1980s, he made a number of trips to India, some with Ruthie, meeting with like-minded researchers, teachers, and trade unionists. Ruthie was commissioned by the movements in Bhopal to do a sculpture in honour of the victims of the Bhopal Gas tragedy, something that Peter was always proud of.

In 1986 Peter and Ruthie separated and he began to engage seriously with feminism, leading him to add a strong gender critique to the focus on class issues he had started from and the concern for race and imperialism he had learned in Africa. Peter brought all of these concerns and more into his influential academic arguments around “social movement unionism” and the “new labour internationalisms” – the question, which he did much to put on the

agenda of trade unionists and scholars alike, of how labour struggles were remaking themselves, in the majority world, among women workers, in rural struggles, in non-traditional forms of employment and so on, and in the new wave of capitalist globalisation – and how existing labour organisations could engage with and learn from these changes. Many of the political and intellectual questions he raised, then and later, remain alive and significant today.

In 1990 Peter began a wonderfully colourful relationship with his longtime compañera, the international feminist writer/activist Virginia (Gina) Vargas, which seemed to bring him alive in a new way. Peter and Gina married in 2012, with one ceremony in the Hague and another in Lima organised by Gina's daughter Alejandra Veas and one of Gina's networks, the *Mujeres por la Democracia*. He divided his time between the Netherlands and Peru when not travelling internationally.

On retirement in 1998 Peter continued his involvement with labour internationalism, always seeking to support emancipatory directions, arguing for the need to see beyond existing union institutions to new forms of organising and relationship with the wider community and other movements. These broad perspectives brought him to engage more closely with other kinds of social movements, in particular with what he would later call the global justice and solidarity movement. From the early 2000s he played an important role in the latter, particularly in debates around the World Social Forum that brought together movements across the world against neoliberalism. Peter's great commitment to nonsectarian and dialogical communication was a real strength here, as was his commitment to balancing optimism of the will with pessimism of the intellect and avoiding a new kind of mythmaking.

He observed of his final collection of essays that it revealed a return of emphasis towards labour internationals and internationalism: in keeping with this he had hoped to organise a special issue of *Interface* on the theme of manifestos, perhaps following his own efforts towards a global labour charter earlier in the century. Consistent across this long trajectory was less a search for an organisational ideal to uphold at the expense of all else and more a concern to discover the forms that struggles for emancipation were taking in concrete places, and how they could be joined up without losing this radical edge.

In retirement he wrote and edited extensively, making as much as possible of his work available free online. An early enthusiast for what he called Cyberia, Peter engaged actively with many different forms of online social movement media. He brought his great talent for networking, honed in many different international movements, to linking his newfound dot.comrades to one another in creative and transnational ways. He was always relaxed enough to find some humorous or ironic side of things, even in tragic circumstances, something which made working with him easy and pleasurable in a world of often intense sectarian conflict.

Peter was in wide demand as an activist thinker: he had invitations for teaching, lectures, and seminars from universities and/or movement-oriented bodies in

Peru, South Africa, Sweden, Finland, Hong Kong, Germany, South Korea, the US, Ireland, and the UK. His writing has been published in Dutch, English (UK, USA, Canada, India), French, German, Hindi, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese and Spanish. He also put great effort into the infrastructure needed for committed scholarship, updating his own previous work, editing collections of what he saw as important voices or contributions, publishing annotated bibliographies and the like.

Peter was an active collaborator of Jai Sen's Indian Institute for Critical Action - Centre in Movement (CACIM) in New Delhi, where they co-edited books on the World Social Forums; of the *Global Labour Journal* and *UnionBook*; and *DemocraciaGlobal* in Peru as well as many other labour- and movement-linked projects and mailing lists. In these contexts he was a continually probing, provocative and challenging presence, seeking to assert the need for independence of thought and avoid organisational closure, but doing so with great grace and charm and a deep commitment to the wider picture of human emancipation. More than one companion@ has spoken of his ability to reconnect after what seemed like a permanent falling-out.

Since his death tributes both public and private have been coming in from trade unionists, activists in other social movements and scholars across the global South as well as in the North. They mention his endless curiosity, his warmth and enthusiasm, and his generosity. Face to face and in the virtual space where many people knew him, Peter was gregarious, chatty and witty. People found him deeply responsive and engaged despite his many commitments and increasing health issues.

In recent years Peter was a leading light of *InYerFace* (as he sometimes put it), where he and I collaborated with David Landy on the international / transnational section and where he kept the whole journal on its toes by constantly arguing at right angles to many of us. He was an extraordinary presence at *Interface* – continually provocative where he disagreed, but with a generosity of spirit and a supportiveness for the wider project that is rare to find. For a younger editorial collective his different and often wider vision, and his refusal to be bound by institutional procedures were a huge gift, and the grace with which he handled our differences and disagreements was liberating in a world of tight perspectives:

“I don't want or need to puff *Interface*. I think the site speaks for itself. But I have found this a simultaneously laid-back and efficient publication, in which a bunch of people, some of whom have never met each other, and most of whom are heavily involved in surviving within neo-liberalising universities, seem to both take on and carry out various necessary editing, designing and other tasks. If this is the rose-garden promised by the global justice and solidarity movements that it is inspired by and writes about, it is not without its prickles. Or its prickly team members – of which I have occasionally been one.”

After one internal argument he wrote, apologising for his own part in it and thanking others for their criticism:

“IFace happens to be, it seems, a community in which such openness and frankness can be found - something which I have not earlier found during a lifetime of activism, political or academic.

Let it continue to be so.”

If *Interface* manages to live up to this at times, it owes much to Peter’s presence.

In 2014 Peter had published his autobiography, *From Coldwar Communism to the Global Emancipatory Movement: Itinerary of a Long-Distance Internationalist*, online; it is reviewed by David Featherstone in the previous issue of *Interface*. While completing his final collection of essays, Peter was the driving force behind that issue, on social movement auto/biographies, to which he characteristically contributed or co-wrote several pieces, all in different formats. His piece “Of icons, of myths and of internationalists” says something important in response to the tendency to mythologise internationalist “myths and icons”:

“In reference to the active or outstanding bearers of internationalism, I strongly suggest that we consider them as neither saints nor sinners but rather as *compañer@s* (an androgynous Spanish-language form that can mean friend, workmate, associate, sexual partner, or political comrade). A *compañer@* is, surely, someone one dialogues with, not someone either glorifies or lies about - or to. Today the Internet makes it increasingly possible to both talk about and sometimes even to those we admire.

It seems ... that the creation of a new internationalism requires not so much the right ideology (in the sense of a pre-existing discourse backed by one or other kind of authority) but a particular kind of behaviour, a way of relating to other people, and to their ideas. And here we return to the necessity and possibility of a growing number of people and peoples (armed with information, disposed to tolerance and flexibility, culturally sensitive, equipped with technology, committed ethically) creating global solidarity communities of their own. In order to achieve this, I think we need to publicise internationalist (h)activists in such a light that the public response may be ‘I admire her/him’, but might be ‘I should do that’, ‘I could do that’ and (previously here unconsidered) ‘I think I could enjoy doing that’.”

Peter was very much a *compañero* in this sense: someone to talk and argue with, someone busy creating a global solidarity community online, and someone who enjoyed doing it to the end. It is hard now to get used to his voice *not* chipping in at surprising moments with a perspective at right angles to everyone else.

Suffering from heart problems and leukemia, Peter eventually decided to forego further treatment and died peacefully in the early hours of June 17<sup>th</sup>. In keeping with his own practice, his many comp@s, friends, colleagues and comrades have been publishing tributes online and are working collectively to develop a Wikipedia page. Peter archived his own work online, and it will probably now be brought together in one place: a partial bibliography is below. Our current call for papers includes a special section for work in the spirit of his political and intellectual projects as well as personal tributes and memories. As a number of people have said, the real tribute is to keep these struggles and questions alive: on the page (or more likely the screen), in the world and also in our own activism and scholarship.

Peter is survived by Gina; his children Danny and Tamara, and his grandchildren Joëlle and Nick. He is sorely missed around the world.

*Many thanks to Jai Sen, Raphael Hoetmer, Patrick Bond, Orsan Senalp and other Interface editors for their comments and assistance with this piece.*

### **A (very) partial Peter Waterman bibliography**

Many, but not all, of Peter's works are available free online. This is particularly the case for his own essays and collections, often published directly online with social movement organisations of various kinds.

#### **Critical World Social Forum collections, with Jai Sen**

Sen, Jai and Peter Waterman (eds.) 2004. *World Social Forum: Critical Explorations*. [http://www.into-ebooks.com/book/world\\_social\\_forum/](http://www.into-ebooks.com/book/world_social_forum/)

Sen, Jai and Peter Waterman (eds.) 2007. *World Social Forum: Challenging Empires* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). Vancouver: Black Rose.  
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### **Labour studies and social movement books and reports**

Gutkind, CW and Peter Waterman (eds.) 1977. *African Social Studies: a Radical Reader*. New York: NYU.

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Waterman, Peter. 2011. *Under, Against, Beyond: Labour and Social Movements Confront a Globalised, Informatised, Capitalism*. [First collection of essays, 1980s – 2000s.] <http://www.into-ebooks.com/book/under-against-beyond/>

Waterman, Peter. 2012. *Recovering Internationalism and Creating the New Global Solidarity: Labour, Social Movements and Emancipation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. [Second collection of essays, covering the 2000s.] [http://www.into-ebooks.com/book/recovering\\_internationalism/](http://www.into-ebooks.com/book/recovering_internationalism/)

Waterman, Peter. 2017. *The Old is Dying and the New is Hardly Yet Born: Questioning the Global Legacies of Labour and the Left: Devising New Languages of Struggle*. [Third collection of essays, mostly 2010s.]  
<https://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article41348>

### **Interface special issues co-edited by Peter:**

*Interface* 2/2 (November 2010): special section on labour communications  
<http://www.interfacejournal.net/2010/11/interface-issue-2-volume-2-voices-of-dissent/>

*Interface* 4/2 (November 2012): For the global emancipation of labour: new movements and struggles around work, workers and precarity  
<http://www.interfacejournal.net/2012/11/interface-volume-4-issue-2-for-the-global-emancipation-of-labour/>

*Interface* 5/2 (November 2013): Tenth issue celebration  
<http://www.interfacejournal.net/2013/11/interface-volume-5-issue-2-tenth-issue-celebration/>

*Interface* 6/2 (November 2014): Movement internationalism(s)  
<http://www.interfacejournal.net/2014/12/interface-volume-6-issue-2-movement-internationalisms/>

*Interface* 8/2 (November 2016): Social movement auto/biographies  
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### **Autobiography**

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More of Peter's work can be found via links on his academia.edu profile at <https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=oe6Qa4AAAAJ&hl=en> and elsewhere in "Cyberia": hopefully a complete, linked bibliography will appear in due course.

