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OBITUARY



Walter Kendall (1926–2003)

Walter Kendall, best known as the author of *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain*, died after a long illness in October 2003. Walter was unusual in combining over a lifetime both a high and sustained profile as an activist and a serious academic standing.

Born in East Ham, he was rejected for military service through extremely poor eyesight and, as he later wrote, ‘first joined the ranks of organised labour’ at the age of eighteen in 1944 as a clerical worker in the Ministry of Economic Warfare. A member of USDAW, he served on its London District Council and was an activist in the Labour Party. In the early 1960s he became the managing editor of *Voice of the Unions* and was involved in the other rank-and-file papers of that group, such as *Engineering Voice* which was of some importance in supporting the rise of Hugh Scanlon and the ‘Broad Left’ of the Engineering Union. He was also one of the founders of the Institute of Workers’ Control in March 1968.

Meanwhile he had gone to Ruskin on a Labour Party scholarship, and it was while he was there that he began the research which eventually became *The Revolutionary Movement*. Much of this was completed as a B Litt thesis on ‘The Formation of the British Communist Party’ at St Catherine’s College, Oxford, after which he spent a year as visiting professor at Wayne State University, Detroit. Walter’s politics were regarded with sufficient suspicion by the US State Department for him to have had two visa applications rejected earlier. Fortunately, his third try was successful. *The Revolutionary Movement* was published in 1969.

Some disliked the conclusions he reached, but with six detailed appendices and 120 pages of endnotes – few of them simply single references –

he could hardly be accused of neglecting the 'apparatus of scholarship'. *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain, 1900–1921* was subtitled *The Origins of British Communism*. The aim of the book was made clear in its introduction. 'This study, by seeking to show for the first time the trends, tendencies and events which preceded and influenced the character and composition of the Communist Party, as well as the precise methods by which the party itself was founded, is intended to provide material for an understanding of this strange phenomenon.' The book caused controversy, much of which centred on the evidence revealed about the importance of 'Moscow gold' in setting up the CPGB. This has now become commonplace, but it was quite novel and, to some, shocking at the time. Walter's central thesis was that the Communist Party 'absorbed . . . practically the whole pre-existing revolutionary movement' and replaced one that had been 'ultra democratic, opposed to leadership on principle, opposed to the professionalization of the Labour movement almost as an article of faith' with a highly-professionalized one centrally directed by Comintern. The result as he saw it was the tragic decline of a variety of promising native traditions, 'the end of the SDF-BSP tradition, the demise of the SLP, the end of the shop steward movement and the burial of its ideas, the decline and disappearance of the movement for Guild Socialism, Syndicalism and workers control.' It was of course particularly these last strands that related directly to his work with *Voice* and the IWC.

Even before publication, Walter was well aware what the reaction was likely to be in some parts of the Left.

This work, and its conclusion, will inevitably be decried as 'anti-Communist'. They are nothing of the kind. The author re-asserts his belief in human dignity, in human liberty, in the right of the working man to control his own destiny free from oppression or exploitation. If these motives have in the past led people to join the Communist Party, the author does not for that reason remain any the less in accord with them. The evidence shows, however, that the Communist Party is not, and never was, a proper means for their realization, a fact to which the number of ex-Communists which many times exceeds the number passing through the party's ranks at any one time bears witness.

Perhaps the most lonely political stand that Walter took was his support in the mid '70s for the European 'Common Market' which was almost universally opposed and reviled across the whole Left spectrum. On this he was far more isolated than on his advocacy of workers' self-management or even his hostility to Leninism in all its manifestations. Central to his argument was that what is now the EU did not have to remain a 'capitalists' club' but could be a means of beginning to move concretely towards a real internationalism. That it could be made to serve the interests of the working class and human progress generally was, he thought, evident in the

widespread Left presence in the then 'Six' including the large electoral constituencies of the French and Italian Communist Parties. He could see, he said, why people on the Right were – correctly from their point of view – opposed to British membership, but for the Left to be opposed was barmy. The vision of such as Michael Foot and Tony Benn effectively co-operating with Enoch Powell in the 'No' campaign baffled as well as pained him. This commitment informed his next book.

He was a Fellow of the Centre for Contemporary European Studies at Sussex University by the time *The Revolutionary Movement* was published. A period as Senior Research Fellow at Nuffield College, Oxford followed before his return to Sussex for a spell with the Institute of Manpower Studies. Walter had his own inimitable way of coping with academia. He gave a paper at a Nuffield seminar attended by the academic great and good. It was entitled 'Some problems of methodology encountered in a study of European Labour Movements'. Reportedly, he began with an apology.

I have to introduce this paper with at least two disclaimers. The first is to confess that due to occupation in other directions, I have travelled this far on my journey through life without ever giving a seminar paper before. The burden of probability suggests therefore that in form and perhaps in content, this contribution may leave a great deal to be desired. The second confession, even more disturbing than the first, is that I am not a sociologist, I have never been trained in the discipline, nor read the masters of the faith. This paper may then be political sociology: it may not. I shall leave it to the audience to judge.

The main outcome of this period was the publication of *The Labour Movement in Europe* in 1975, by which point he had also been Chair of the Society for the Study of Labour History. The aim of this second book was simple and straightforward. 'Internationalism', its introduction began, 'has been a watchword of labour for more than one hundred years. Yet information regarding the international labour movement remains astonishingly hard to find. This work in its own limited and pioneering fashion sets out to remedy that omission'. And later he expressed the hope that it would help '... to introduce, across national frontiers, the workers and intellectuals of each nation to the other' and to 'eliminate past misunderstandings and contribute towards the creation of a common consciousness and sense of purpose, towards a rise in practical working-class and human solidarity ...' Chapters summarizing the industrial revolution and the rise and current state of the Labour movement in Europe were followed by chapters on each of the 'Six' (except Luxembourg) and Britain. It concluded with a chapter on 'Europe International' and another on the European motor industry. Much of the value of the book as a work of reference was to be found in the sixty-eight pages of the 'Statistical Appendix', for which he

acknowledged the help of Bob Holton and Tony Carew. And at this point I must thank Tony for supplying much useful material for this obituary.

The over-arching theme was the importance of taking into account and respecting the specific histories, circumstances and traditions of the labour movements in different countries rather than assuming – usually unconsciously – that ‘the mode of operation of labour movements in Britain and the USA conforms to some objective norm from which the labour movements of other countries diverge, for unexpected, but by implication, irrational, reasons’. A sort of ‘pocket version’ of the book (minus the British chapter) was the substantial pamphlet *Unions in Europe – Organised Labour in the Six*, published by the Centre for Contemporary European Studies at Sussex University. It greatly appealed to Walter’s sense of humour – and once heard his laugh was unforgettable as was his peculiar taste for bootlace ties – that he wrote this jointly with another Fellow of the Centre, Eli Marx. ‘Kendall and Marx, that’ll show them!’ he would chortle.

Subsequently he had other temporary appointments including a visiting fellowship at Trinity College, Dublin, and a year teaching at Ruskin. For many years Walter worked on the mammoth and still unpublished – ‘The World Revolution, the Russian Revolution and the Communist International, 1898–1935’, typescripts of which are now lodged in the library of Nuffield College and in the British Library. This work has seen the light of day only in the form of occasional articles and papers. A similar fate befell his critical history of the British CP which exists only as an unrevised draft. He was dogged by a variety of illnesses and for the last several years of his life was virtually physically paralysed by a Progressive Supranuclear Palsy while remaining intellectually as lively as ever. He conducted a long-running correspondence over the wartime role of James Klugmann in SOE in *Labour History Review*. His disagreement with the Leninist ideologies did not prevent him from collaborating in *Revolutionary History*’s 2001 issue on *The Comintern and its Critics* with a piece on the ‘Turn from “Social-Fascism” to the Popular Front’.

Walter was knowledgeable about not only the labour and socialist movements in Europe but also those of Canada and the USA and, to a somewhat lesser extent, Japan. His work also encouraged others to take seriously the history of the pre-1917 Left and the importance of national particularities within an overall context of internationalism, both as intellectuals and as activists. He was partly responsible for the renewal of interest in workers’ control/self-management in the ‘60s and ‘70s. His insistence that it was inexcusable in the second half of the twentieth century for socialists to refuse to think in any detail about the nature of a socialist society until ‘after the revolution’ was wise but went largely unheeded.

Ian Bullock