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Peter Waterman obituary - “Independent-minded and provocative, but always funny and charming”

Thursday 29 June 2017, by [COX Laurence](#) (Date first published: 27 June 2017).

My friend Peter Waterman, who has died aged 81, lived many lives, as a communist activist, labour studies academic and global justice networker, among others.

He was born in the East End of London. His father, Alec, was a Polish Jew who changed his name from Nasibirski to Wasserman, then Waterman; the family of his mother, Ray, had used the surnames Shatitsky and Gold. Alec worked in many trades before managing Collet's bookshop and selling homeware. Ray was a secretary and author of two semi-autobiographical novels.

After attending local schools and joining a journalism course at Regent Street Polytechnic (now part of the University of Westminster) in 1954, Peter became English editor and chief subeditor of *World Student News* for the International Union of Students in Prague (1955-58). Following national service he married Ruthie Kupferschmidt whom he met on an Aldermaston march. The couple had two children and settled in Oxford. Peter took an Oxford University diploma at Ruskin College and a degree in philosophy, politics and economics, supporting his family with a year's truck-driving in between.

He returned to Prague to work for the World Federation of Trade Unions (1966-69), but after witnessing the Soviet crushing of the Prague Spring, he “left both the communist world and the world of communism”.

Peter then took a master's degree in social science, undertaking West African studies at the University of Birmingham, with a thesis on the Nigerian trade union movement. He worked at Ahmadu Bello University in Nigeria (1970-72) before moving to the Hague, where he worked until he retired as a senior lecturer at the Institute of Social Studies, specialising in unions of the developing world and other social movements. Ruthie worked as a Montessori teacher and, later, an artist.

The couple separated in 1986 and Peter decided to engage seriously with feminism. In 1990 he began a relationship with the international feminist writer and activist Virginia (Gina) Vargas, and Peru became his second home. Retiring in 1998, Peter remained involved with global labour solidarity initiatives.

An early enthusiast for the internet and its possibilities for activist communication, he made most of his writing available free online. His work has also been published in 10 languages and he was invited to speak at activist and academic events around the world. Peter and Gina married in 2012 and he published his autobiography in 2014.

In recent years Peter was active in the social movement journal *Interface*, with the Indian Institute for Critical Action-Centre in Movement, the *Global Labour Journal*, and Democracia Global, in Peru,

among others. He was independent-minded and provocative, but always funny and charming.

Peter is survived by Gina, his children Danny and Tamara, and his grandchildren, Joëlle and Nick.

Laurence Cox

P.S.

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<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jun/27/peter-waterman-obituary>