

Michael Lebowitz, presente! (1937-2023)

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Marxist economist Michael A Lebowitz passed away at home on April 19. With his death, the international left has lost one of its most insightful and original thinkers, whose contributions to reviving Karl Marx's vision of socialism are essential reading for activists.

Lebowitz built on his groundbreaking work, [Beyond Capital: Marx's Political Economy of the Working Class](#), to compile an indispensable collection of texts for 21st century socialists, many of which have been translated into numerous languages. These ranged from theoretical books dedicated to critically rethinking the errors of twenty-century socialism, such as [The Contradictions of Real Socialism: The Conductor and The Conducted](#), through to shorter education pamphlets aimed at new activists, such as [Know your enemy: How to defeat capitalism](#).

[Green Left](#) readers would know Lebowitz from his articles and interviews that appeared in the paper and its sister publication, [LINKS International Journal of Socialist Renewal](#). They might also know Mike from his two visits to Australia to speak at the 2009 World at a Crossroads conference and the 2016 Socialism in the 21st Century conference, both co-hosted by GL.

Mike came from a working-class background. In an interview with Mark Fischer, recently republished on [LINKS](#), he outlined how early life experiences stoked his interest in Marxism: "Like many working-class people, I was determined to make money when I was young. I went off to business school [in the late 1950s] — although lack of money meant I had to work during the day and attend school at night.

"I was studying economics with a focus on marketing research, so I ended up in an electrical manufacturing corporation doing market research full-time. As I did this, I saw lots of contradictions... There I was, taking economics classes at night, learning the neo-classical orthodoxy about how prices are set through perfect competition and all that. Yet during the day I was working in a corporation that was involved in price-fixing...

"That whole experience led me to conclude that I was being lied to... I began to read Marx. I was not yet an activist, however: it was a purely intellectual rejection of the fact that I was being told lies about the way the world worked."

Having enrolled at the University of Wisconsin in 1960, Mike got his first taste of activism with the Wisconsin Socialist Club, Cuba solidarity campaigns and participating in the founding of Students for a Democratic Society. He also collaborated with the New Left journal *Studies on the Left*. Like most activists in the United States, Mike spent the early '60s campaigning against the Vietnam War and in support of the civil rights movement.

"From my experience of working with student movements and other campaigns," he told Fischer, "I saw the basic truth that people transform themselves through their struggles. That idea became the central concern of my political world view — how do you put people into motion; how do you develop their capacity to self-transform?"

In 1965, Mike moved to British Columbia, Canada, where he took up a job teaching economics and economic history at Simon Fraser University, remaining there until retirement in 2000. There, he got active in local community organising as well as the left faction of the social democratic New Democratic Party (NDP).

Talking about this time as NDP Party Policy Chair, Mike said: “I was the policy chairman during its period of government in British Columbia, constantly pushing for policies that would lead people to understand the role of their struggles.

“Thus, I didn’t just say, ‘Let’s nationalize the forest industry.’ I fought for the books of the forest industry to be opened to the government and to working-class scrutiny, for forms of workers’ control within industry. In other words, modes of struggle that I saw would allow people to develop a greater understanding of how the society worked and to make further demands, rather than simply shouting the slogan, ‘Nationalize everything under workers’ control,’ at them.”

Mike later left the NDP, concluding it was “just another electoral machine rather than a means of self-liberation of the working class”. He developed some of the lessons he learnt from his time in the NDP in a chapter dedicated to social democracy in his 2006 book, [Build It Now: Socialist for the Twenty-First Century](#).

Instead, Mike chose to dedicate himself to reviving Marx’s ideas of working-class self-liberation, human development and revolutionary practice. In a 2009 [interview](#) with Christopher Kerr for GL, Lebowitz outlined his belief in the need for “a rejuvenation of Marxism”, one based on going “back to Marx’s premise and goal, which was the concept of human development”.

“It is no accident that the *Communist Manifesto*, written in 1848 with Frederick Engels, talked about how the free development of each depends upon the free development of all. By free development, they meant the development of human potential and capacities. In Marx’s writings from 1844 through 1858, and in *Capital*, he kept talking about developing a rich individuality and rich human beings. He argued that capitalism distorted human development, while socialism was necessary for it.

“We lost that in the 20th century. Marxism became interpreted as having to do with a way to develop the productive forces, in which the question of economic development became everything. The question of the nature of the relations between people in economic production, the nature of the circumstance in which we function, became forgotten or ignored.

“One of the key parts of Marx’s emphasis on human development is that it only occurs through practice. That’s the concept of revolutionary practice — the simultaneous changing of circumstances and self-change.”

In 1973, Lebowitz began the work of writing down his ideas and tackling head-on what he called “one-sided Marxism”. The result was *Beyond Capital*, first published in 1992 and which won the 2004 *Deutscher Memorial Prize* for its second edition.

In this seminal work, Lebowitz took aim at a Marxism that focused solely on capital’s tendencies and viewed workers as mere wage labourers — a commodity within the cycle of capital reproduction — rather than human beings with their own needs. In contrast to this one-sided Marxism, Lebowitz wrote in [Hats and men: Marx’s faulty symmetry](#), “Marx understood quite well that not only is capital produced within [capital-labour] relations but that there is as well a second product, a crippled human product.”

What is therefore required, he told Fischer, is a “focus on the many-sidedness of the working class. We have to attempt to understand all its aspects under capitalism. When you do that, you don’t focus simply on the struggles of trade unionism. You look at all the needs and struggles of the workers, all the ways in which they attempt to satisfy their needs as humans in this inhuman society”.

It was workers’ desire to satisfy their human needs, together with their ability to transform through struggle — and not their place in capitalist production — that gave workers their revolutionary potential for Lebowitz. In “[What makes the working class a revolutionary subject?](#)” he wrote: “Struggles are a process of production: they produce a different kind of worker, a worker who produces herself or himself as someone whose capacity has grown, whose confidence develops, whose ability to organise and unite expands. But why should we think this is limited to wage struggles?”

“Every struggle in which people assert themselves, every struggle in which they push for social justice, every struggle to realise their own potential and their need for self-development, builds the capacities of the actors. And, those struggles bring us up against capital. Why? Because capital is the barrier that stands between us and our own development.”

It was a shared belief in the revolutionary potential and creativity of ordinary people engaged in struggle that brought Mike and Marta Harnecker together in the ‘90s. Excited by the revolutionary developments unfolding in Venezuela, along with an invitation from then-president Hugo Chavez, they moved to Caracas in 2004.

I first met Mike in Caracas in 2005, where he and Marta warmly welcomed me as if we had been comrades for many years. This warmth, I quickly found out, was extended to all they met, always keen to strike up discussions and listen.

By the following year, I was working with them at the Miranda International Centre (CIM), a space they helped set up for Venezuelan and international intellectuals to contribute their ideas to the revolution.

For the next three years, we shared many experiences travelling around Venezuela meeting with organised communities and workers to learn from their struggles, and then often inviting them back to CIM to debate with intellectuals from Venezuela and overseas. All the while, Mike continued to plug away at writing, including numerous papers for Chavez and his ministers that occasionally got converted into pamphlets for free, mass distribution and discussed on Chavez’s weekly TV program.

The two moved back to Canada in 2011. From there, they continued writing and helped establish a program on Socialism for the 21st Century in Cuba. But with Marta’s passing in 2019, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and Mike’s own health issues, his work rate slowed down.

His last few years were dedicated to following the activities of Vancouver Ecosocialists and going through old papers to find texts that might be useful to new activists. With the help of long-time friend and comrade Bill Burgess, Mike set up a website where he collected these writings, michaelalebowitz.com.

Along with this invaluable collection of text, Mike leaves behind his sister, Gloria, two daughters, Jessica and Rachel, and Camila Piñeiro Harnecker, Marta’s daughter.

Federico Fuentes

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