

OBITUARY

A life for the revolution - Winfried Wolf (1949-2023)

Tuesday 20 June 2023, by [KLEIN Angela](#) (Date first published: 30 May 2023).

Winnie Wolf died on the night of 23 May. Severe liver disease had already brought him close to death once; with the help of a new kind of therapy he got back on his feet for a few months, threw himself into work again and went on lecture tours. As late as April, he had agreed to present his friend Klaus Gietinger's film about Stuttgart 21 at the ISO Eco-Socialist Conference.

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Until the end, he flourished when it came to politics. Winnie was a driven man, a project maker, a workaholic. His projects were all of a journalistic nature: newspapers, magazines, books. His favourite line of business was newspapers for mass agitation: 8-12 two-colour newspaper pages in Berlin format, each with its own editorial board and advisory board: BLIND, SoZ-extra, desert! anti-war newspaper, Faktencheck Hellas, Faktencheck Europa, Faktencheck Corona, Newspaper against the War, Zero Covid.

He put his heart and soul into it when he could support an action of colleagues in the company with such an agitation, like the Ford colleagues in Cologne with the newspaper Links eröm; or twice the GDL strike (of drivers for Deutsche Bahn). (2014/15 and 2021) with several issues of the strike newspaper on each occasion. These papers sometimes achieved circulations of up to 30,000, once even 80,000 - without any apparatus, only with the support of a few comrades, friends and his address book.

He dreamed of much higher circulations. Whenever something was moving, he wanted to intervene journalistically. Like hardly anyone else, he saw the newspaper as a collective organiser. This also means that although he was an expert in economics, and later in transport - and an author and much sought-after speaker in both fields, science was not an end in itself for him, it had to be in the service of enlightenment and mobilisation of the broad population, preferably of colleagues. First and foremost, he was a political activist. He translated his scientific findings into political messages and went on a publicity tour with them.

The activist

As an activist he naturally also tried to build political organisations - first the Gruppe Internationale Marxisten (GIM), the German section of the IV. International, and from 1986 (with the KPD/ML) the United Socialist Party (VSP). When this failed because of "reunification" (of Germany), he joined the PDS and stood for the Bundestag from 1994 to 2002 on its behalf. Since 2006 he has been "happy without a party", as he writes in the autobiographical sketch on his blog. His self-image: "radical socialist and utopian", naturally a member of Ver.di, from the very beginning. In 2008, he founded the magazine Lunapark 21 - (the) magazine for the critique of the global economy; it remained "a matter close to his heart" to the end, as he writes. Against all economic trends and at a time when printed matter is said to have less and less of an audience, he succeeded in "maintaining the magazine on the market", as the saying goes. It was in the black.

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He imagined Lunapark as a kind of German left-wing Financial Times, hence political modesty was not his thing, he liked to reach high.

The political initiative for which he worked the longest and until the end was, since its beginnings in the mid-90s, the movement against the Stuttgart 21 low-level railway station. It had the charm of fitting the content of his body and stomach topic and also of being located in Ländle, his homeland - Winnie was born near Ravensburg, Lake Constance region, and cultivated his friendships there throughout his life. On his blog, he introduces himself as a "self-confessed Swabian".

Revolution in the East?

He joined the GIM in Berlin in the early 1970s. Leading members of the Fourth International - Ernest Mandel, Alain Krivine, Tariq Ali - had played a leading role in the Vietnam Congress in February 1968, in the Paris May or also in the protests against the suppression of the Prague Spring by troops of "socialist brother states". His central point of reference in Germany at that time was Rudi Dutschke. He was on the masthead of the first issue of *Was tun*, which appeared as a monthly newspaper from May 1968. The newspaper was then continued under the direction of Lothar Boepple in Mannheim. When Winnie joined the editorial staff in 1973, he explicitly saw himself following in Dutschke's footsteps. Decades later, he was still concerned with defending the 1968 movement against its defamation, but also against its slide into sectarianism.

The international revolt against war and authoritarian regimes was, of course, also Winnie's first course in political awakening: mainly against the fascist Obrist dictatorship in Athens and against the US war in Vietnam. In the early 1980s he was active in solidarity work for Solidarnosc; he accompanied it with three paperback volumes entitled *The Long Summer of Solidarity* and *Winter Belongs to the Crows* (1981/1984).

Winnie does not mention this part of his political work in his autobiographical sketch, nor does he mention the founding of the VSP or the period of German unity. This may have to do with the fact that the hopes for a political revolution in the Warsaw Pact countries, of which Solidarnosc was the most developed expression, were so cruelly dashed. In any case, subsequent events, the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan and the speed with which the slogan "We are the people" became "We are one people" in the autumn/winter of 89, led to considerable disillusionment with that part of the Fourth International's programme which placed hopes in a "political revolution".

It led Winnie to oppose and eventually break with the Fourth because it clung too long to the distorted image of the bureaucratized "workers" state, did not condemn the invasion of Afghanistan from the beginning, and had long illusions about a progressive turn in the process of German unity. Later he also left the VSP when its remnants refused to join his move to the PDS.

Germany

The "dialectic of sectors of intervention" had worked negatively - and this has effects until today, when one sees how helpless the left is in front of the war in Ukraine. Admittedly, the path that was then taken, namely the support for the Gremliza [1] initiative "Never again Germany" with the demonstration of the same name in Berlin, also only drove the German radical left into a dead end. Ultimately, this orientation was the late consequence of an attitude that Winnie developed in the 1970s in a controversy with Günther Minnerup about the nature of the détente policy and the so-called German question, i.e. how to deal with the division of Germany.

Winnie's position was that Germany as a whole was no longer a point of reference for left politics; the national question could not be dealt with by the left in Germany. In this, he followed the left mainstream of effectively retreating to a West German identity. The events of '89 proved him right on the one hand, but on the other hand also pushed the socialist left into a pure naysayer corner, from which it is only laboriously working its way out with the help of globalisation-critical and ecosocialist positions, to which Winnie's sketches of an economic and transport alternative also contributed a lot. Winnie then moved more and more towards the positions of the peace movement - from 1999 he started publishing a newspaper against war twice a year, the last one appeared for the Easter marches in 2023.

His position on the EU was similar. With great vehemence he fought against wanting to see something progressive in the EU. That was good, right and helpful, but it did not answer the question of an alternative that did not mean a relapse into the nation state.

Automobiles

In the 1970s and early 1980s, he distinguished himself as a Marxist analyst of the economic cycle with the ambition of predicting the next downturn, which he sometimes got wrong. In the second half of the 1980s, he concentrated on catching up on his doctoral thesis. The result was a standard work of criticism not only of German transport policy, but of the automobile-driven capitalism on which the German economy depends: Eisenbahn und Autowahn. The book appeared in three editions and was also translated into English as Car Mania: A Critical History of Transport.

Winnie did pioneering work there. He was one of the first to call for the abolition of the car as an individual means of transport - at a time when this was still tantamount to a kind of insult to majesty. He waged a veritable campaign against the privatisation of the railways, the takeover of the

management of this group by managers from the car industry (Hartmut Mehdorn) and the efforts to take it to the stock market at any price.

He rejected the flight into the e-car when this technology still appeared to a majority as a lifeline. He has brought an "economy of short distances" into the debate, which is far from being spelled out. He has used the examples of Berlin and Marburg to show how a car-free city can be organised in concrete terms. He has exposed major projects such as Stuttgart 21 as a gift to the real estate industry and actively supported the initiative with his expertise. He gave the impetus for the founding of Bahn für alle (Rail for All), and later of Bürgerbahn statt Börsenbahn (Citizens' Rail instead of Stock Exchange Rail). At the very end, when he had fallen out with the majority of Bahn für alle on the issue of splitting the railway company into network and rail, he founded the group "Bürgerbahn - Denkfabrik für eine starke Schiene". Known internationally as a car critic, he has long since gone down in the history of technical literature; unfortunately, he abandoned his economic analyses in the 1990s.

Friends

Winnie was a disciple, especially in his relationship with Ernest Mandel. Later, it was always important for him to count important personalities of political and cultural life, all of them men, among his friends. He himself never built up a following; his projects were too disparate for that, although they were designed with staying power. Rather, he was likely to fall out with those who did not want to follow him into his next project. There was at times a relentlessness about him in political matters that was frightening because it was so regardless.

He easily counted people among his friends, and yet he had a relationship with them that was as naively trusting as it was instrumental. However, this was always "for the cause", never for personal gain. He always put his extraordinary working capacity at the service of those who needed it. His friendships were political friendships, with all the limitations that entails. He nurtured them conscientiously.

Winnie was one of the outstanding figures produced by the 68 movement. He had and continues to have an impact far beyond with completely new themes. The German left owes him much. The SoZ and the ISO would not exist without him. We are losing a dear comrade.

The list of his publications is impressive, he has compiled it on his blog.

Winnie was a Brecht fan and liked to accompany his non-fiction articles with appropriate poems.

In praise of communism

It is reasonable. You can grasp it. It's simple.
You're no exploiter, so you'll understand.
It is good for you. Look into it.
Stupid men call it stupid, and the dirty call it dirty.
It is against dirt and against stupidity.
The exploiters call it a crime.
But we know:
It is the end of all crime.
It is not madness but
The end of madness.
It is not chaos,

But order.
It is the simple thing
That's hard to do.[[Winfried Wolf blog](#)]

May 2023

Angela Klein

P.S.

• IVP, FRIDAY 2 JUNE 2023:
<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article8114>

Footnotes

[1] the editor of the magazine Konkret