

# Ernest Mandel 1923-1995

By Sean Matgamna

ERNEST MANDEL, the foremost post-Trotsky Trotskyist for many decades, died in his native Belgium on 21 July, at the age of 72.

He joined the Trotskyist movement at the age of 16 in 1939. Showing a fortitude and a courage difficult for us to imagine, in 1940 Mandel and other young Trotskyists set about reorganising the Trotskyist movement under the guns of the Nazi occupation forces. Arrested, Mandel persuaded his guard to help him escape. He survived a period in a concentration camp.

From the middle '40s, Mandel was a central leader of the reorganised Trotskyist movement. Over fifty years he was the representative leader of "official" Trotskyism, as well as being a talented writer who tried to reach out to wider circles interested in Marxism, producing several studies, in economic theory especially, of lasting value.

Had he died four years earlier, he would possibly have died happier, for that would have been before the collapse of the USSR — the event which showed conclusively that his version of "Trotskyism" was radically wrong and that it had been wrong for 50 years.

When, at the end of World War 2, a great wave of working-class revolt swept Europe, it was controlled or repressed by the Stalinist apparatus. In Eastern Europe systems like that of the USSR were created; in China and other countries, Stalinists made revolutions which were against the big capitalist powers, and against the bourgeoisie, but also against the working class; in the West, in France and Italy for example, the Stalinist movements, on Russia's orders, helped the bourgeoisies to rebuild their states.

Capitalism, which had seemed almost on its last legs in 1940, entered a post-war boom. The mass labour movements of the advanced countries settled in to live with capitalism.

The majority of the would-be Trotskyists followed Mandel and his associates in seeing the Stalinist states as degenerated and deformed "workers' states", socially in advance of, and superior to, capitalism. The USSR, Eastern Europe and China were, they believed, "post-capitalist", in transition between capitalism and socialism.

Thus, despite the crushing of the working class in the Stalinist states, and its quietness in the big capitalist countries, the "world revolution" was continuing to "develop" — albeit, said Mandel, in a deformed way. Mandel and others reinterpreted the ideas of Trotskyism so as to present the expansion of Stalinism and the creation of totalitarian states in large parts of the world as the first stage of the socialist revolution. He accepted on their own terms such systems as Mao's China and Tito's Yugoslavia, and for decades adopted the role of loyal critic. It was twenty years after Mao's victory before he came out for a working-class "political" revolution in China.

Mandel's adaptation to Stalinism was never uncritical adaptation — those who ceased to be critical ceased to be even nominally Trotskyist — never inner acceptance of it, never a surrender of the idea that the Stalinist states had to be democratised and transformed. But Mandel used his erudition and his intellectual talents to weave, from the ideas of Lenin and Trotsky, ideological clothing which could be draped on the expansion of Stalinism to identify it as part of the world revolution of the proletariat. Directly and indirectly, Mandel and his organisation over the years tied large numbers of anti-Stalinist militants into accepting, tolerating or justifying, "critically", aspects of Russian Stalinist imperialism.

He played a role similar to that of Karl Kautsky two generations earlier, who rationalised, from the point of view of a hollow "orthodox Marxism", what the leaders of the German social democracy and trade unions did. But Mandel was worse than Kautsky. Kautsky devised ideological schemes to depict the time-serving activities of a bureaucratised labour movement as an effective drive for working-class liberation; Mandel produced similar rationalisations for totalitarian Stalinist machines.

And then, fifty years after Trotsky's death, Stalinism collapsed in Europe. It was revealed as nearer to being pre-capitalist than post-capitalist. Far from "defending and extending, in its own distorted way, the gains of the 1917 workers' revolution", Stalinism must be judged historically to have had no relationship to socialism and working-class emancipation but that of a destroyer of labour movements and an enslaver of working classes.

In the later '40s, as a young man, Mandel saw the old Trotskyism — Trotsky's Trotskyism — go into a profound crisis and waste away. That Trotskyism had been based on the idea that — for the working class — Stalinism was irredeemably counter-revolutionary, and in its political regime akin to or (as Trotsky put it in the *Transitional Programme*) worse than fascism.

Mandel, who saw that movement come to the point of collapse when faced with the defeat and disappointment of its hopes of workers' revolution, and with the unexpected survival and expansion of Stalinism, not long before his death, saw the "new Trotskyist" perspective he had built collapse along with the Stalinism he had reluctantly redefined as the "deformed" but continuing world revolution. Mandel's personal tragedy here epitomises the tragedy of unknown millions throughout the world who to one degree or another saw Stalinism as a stage — a grotesquely distorted one, but still a stage — on the road to the emancipation of humankind from class society.

Mandel has died while the cadres of his version of Trotskyism are still trying to come to terms with the collapse of what most of them, following Mandel himself, saw as the USSR workers' state. He leaves them politically



orphaned. If they do not now face up to the facts, and critically reassess everything "Trotskyist" after Trotsky's time, then either they will drop out of revolutionary politics or, utterly defeated in the ideological struggle with the bourgeoisie, they will take refuge in fantasies and delusions of the sort made familiar to us by the Lambertists, Healyites, Posadists, the American SWP and the other sectarian — and often scarcely sane — splinters from Mandel's mainstream "official Trotskyism".

Has "Trotskyism" a future? For ourselves, we continue to believe that the future of working-class politics lies with a cleansed and regenerated Trotskyism.

Trotskyism, which took over and fought for the ideas of the early Communist International, was no arbitrary or personal creation. That International itself inherited the progressive work and root ideas of the previously existing socialist movement. The root ideas of Trotskyism are the continuation and summation of the whole history of the socialist working-class movement. They embody the best conscious expression of the working class side in an irrepressible class struggle.

Not even the terrible errors committed by the official post-Trotsky Trotskyist movement which Mandel led can destroy Trotsky's great tradition, or discredit the socialist programme, on which history has stamped the name of "Trotsky". In a post-Stalinist capitalist world wracked by economic dislocation, famines and wars, those Marxist ideas — and new ideas developed out of them — are not only relevant, they are irreplaceable for the working class.

Ernest Mandel leaves us one thing unequivocally positive to learn from: the courage and tenacity which made him defy all ordinary prudence and all narrow self-interest to join the Trotskyist movement as a lad of 16. It kept him actively loyal to revolutionary socialism all the rest of his life, through terrible disappointments and setbacks. It is because we are committed to continue that revolutionary spirit that, as we go forward, we will have to criticise and reject most of what Mandel developed as Marxist theory. ■

● The next issue of *Workers' Liberty* will carry a fuller assessment of the life and politics of Ernest Mandel.