

Albert Dragstedt (1933-2016)

By Fred Williams
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On Sunday morning, October 30, Albert Dragstedt died suddenly at the age of 83. Albert was a long-time member of the Workers League, which he joined in the early 1970s, and a supporter of the Socialist Equality Party, its successor organization. He combined immense erudition with an unwavering dedication to Marxism.

Albert was educated in the classics and philosophy at Oberlin, the University of Chicago, and the University of California, Berkeley. As a student, Albert attended lectures by Leo Strauss and Theodor Adorno, leading members of the Frankfurt School, whose politics he did not share. He later recounted how indignant he was when Strauss criticized Leon Trotsky at one lecture, since Albert already considered himself a Trotskyist at an early age.

Albert passionately defended the principles and traditions of Trotskyism as the genuine continuation of Marxism. He was part of a relatively small layer of academics won to Marxism and the working class movement during the era of the Civil Rights movement, the opposition to the war in Vietnam, and the break-up of the post-war boom.

A resident of the Bay Area, Albert taught for close to 40 years at St. Mary's College in Moraga and lectured in the "Great Books" program at St. John's College in New Mexico. With a profound knowledge of Greek, Latin, Italian, German, French and later Russian, Albert could lecture as easily on Aristotle or Plato as he could on Marx's *Capital*.

When it came to Marx, Albert dug deeply into the original German texts. When attending SEP or IYSSE classes, he would often be seen with a volume from the *Werke*, published in East Germany, or from MEGA2, the ongoing project to publish all the works of Marx and Engels.

When Albert first joined the Workers League, he was proud of publishing two pamphlets: "The Forms of

Value," the first English translation of the appendix of the first edition of *Capital*; and "Capital, First Edition," which was an English translation of the first edition of chapter one of Marx's *Capital*. Both of these works were later republished with additional material in 1976 by New Park Publications in the book *Value, Studies by Marx*. He also co-authored a book with Cliff Slaughter in 1981: *State, Power & Bureaucracy, A Marxist Critique of Sociological Theories* (New Park), which included a critique of Max Weber's views.

In his Introduction to Chapter One of *Capital*, Albert noted: "Quite apart from the importance that this text has come to have in research, a translation which keeps closer to the philosophical muscles and tendons of the argument will prove useful." He illustrated this with the famous passage on fetishism, then added: "We make no apology for declining to liquidate the granular, craggy, dialectical diction of Marx, especially since our translation is only intended to serve a more rigorous understanding of the second edition, rather than in any sense to replace it."

Albert sought a more rigorous understanding of whatever topic he addressed: Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution (which he considered one of the greatest theoretical achievements in the history of the Marxism); the ICFI's investigation into Trotsky's assassination, collectively known as Security and the Fourth International; the rise of fascism in Germany, in which Stalin's policies allowed Hitler to come to power and crush the workers' movement in 1933; the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union and China; the wars of US imperialism, most recently in the Middle East. The lessons of all these experiences he felt should be brought into the working class as a crucial component of building a revolutionary leadership today.

As a supporter of the SEP, Albert hailed every gain made by the party. One of his last acts was to file

official papers as an elector for the SEP's presidential campaign of Jerry White in California, helping the SEP gain write-in status in the state. He expressed the deep hope that the International Committee of the Fourth International would build broadly not only in the US, but internationally, to meet its historic tasks.

On a more personal note, Albert was a lover of classical music and, like his wife Naome, an accomplished musician. They were always welcoming hosts at gatherings in their Oakland home. Albert had a rich sense of humor, and was generous in spirit.

Albert had taught himself Russian so that he could read many works in the original. Just this summer, he was reading the Russian-language edition of Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution* (which he praised as a masterpiece). He was also fascinated by Mikhail Bulgakov's novel, *Master and Margarita* (a major philosophical work that probes, among other themes, the damage done to literature by Stalinism in the Soviet Union).

Albert was unswerving in seeing the working class as the only social force capable of overthrowing world capitalism. He was optimistic about the future of socialism internationally. He will be missed.

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