

Halil Celik, a fighter for socialism (1961-2018)

By Peter Schwarz
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On December 31, 2018, Halil Celik, founder and leader of the group *Sosyalist E?itlik*, died of cancer in Istanbul at the age of 57. He had dedicated over 40 years of his life to the struggle for socialism, the last quarter of that period to building a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) in Turkey.

Halil came to Trotskyism and the ICFI after critically examining numerous political tendencies and clarifying fundamental political issues. This required political steadfastness, personal courage and inexhaustible energy—qualities he possessed in abundance. Based on long, bitter experience with the unprincipled, nationalist and opportunist policies of pseudo-left organisations, Halil understood that the development of the Trotskyist movement in Turkey can take place only on the basis of revolutionary internationalism and requires a thorough understanding of the strategic experiences of the international working class in the course of the 20th century. He found both in the documents and the history of ICFI.

Stalinist beginnings

Halil Celik was born on November 23, 1961, in Istanbul. His father was a sailor, his mother a housewife. At the age of 16, as a pupil, he joined the youth organisation of a pro-Albanian Stalinist party. One year later, in 1978, at the party's request, he left his school and his family to work as a full-time organiser and propagandist in various factories and working class residential areas.

It was a period when many Turkish youth were radicalised. As in other countries, the years 1968 to 1971 had been marked by a militant wave of class struggles in Turkey. There had been numerous strikes, factory occupations, student protests, land occupations by poor peasants and fierce protests against the US. In March 1971, in coordination with Washington, the Turkish military intervened. It forced the civilian government of Süleyman Demirel to resign and seized power itself, holding it for two years.

The coup was followed by a wave of bloody repression, bans on political parties, arrests and executions. But the military was unable to control the situation. The 1970s were marked by fierce class struggles, unstable governments and ever-new waves of repression, until finally, in September 1980, the military again organised a putsch and established a brutal dictatorship under General Evren.

During this period, left-wing radical organisations were thriving. The Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions of Turkey (DISK), founded in 1967 as a left-wing alternative to the pro-government Turk-Is trade union federation, grew to 300,000 members and was ruthlessly persecuted by the state and the fascist right. According to one source, in 1978 some 1 million workers and students belonged to mass organisations under the control of various groups, parties and currents that called themselves socialist.

Most of these organisations were characterised by nationalist and Stalinist conceptions. Some were guided by the teachings of Mao Zedong or Che Guevara, some advocated armed struggle. However, the revolutionary Marxism defended by Leon Trotsky and the Fourth International against Stalinism was hardly known in Turkey. This was due

not only to the lack of Turkish translations of Trotsky's writings, but also to the policies of Ernest Mandel's Pabloite United Secretariat, then the best known "Trotskyist" tendency internationally, which also glorified Mao Zedong and Che Guevara.

The growing repression and the military coup exposed the bankruptcy of a policy that relied on nationalism and militant actions by small groups rather than the systematic mobilisation of the working class on the basis of an internationalist socialist programme. The state intensified repression and smashed many leftist organisations.

Halil himself was arrested in September 1978 for his political activities and spent a year and a half in a military prison, where he was maltreated. In prison, he began to distance himself from Stalinist politics, but did not want to openly break with his organisation, as he felt this would be treason under conditions of repression.

After the military coup in September 1980, he worked in an illegal Stalinist print shop. Soon he was caught distributing leaflets against the military regime, and after some four months he was arrested again. Since he did not reveal anything, he was released in the summer of 1981. When he learned through a lawyer that most of the Stalinist leaders had betrayed others in prison, he finally broke with Stalinism.

"I decided to walk alone," he wrote three decades later about this stage of his political life.

In the following years, Halil completed his vocational training. Repeatedly interrupted by arrests, he succeeded in passing the university entrance examination and began studying sociology at Istanbul University, graduating in 1985. Due to a professional ban on communist activists, however, he was unable to work as a teacher and continued his studies, securing a master's degree in 1987. He earned his living as a painter, porter, proofreader and journalist.

At about the same time that he turned away from Stalinism, that is, at the age of 20, Halil first came upon Trotsky's writings. In a political curriculum vitae that he wrote for the International Committee in 2013, he stated: "It was in this period that I found the book of Leon Trotsky on German fascism, *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany*, which had been translated and published in the late 1970s. It was the first book by Trotsky I had ever seen and read. The book was a strong blow against all my prejudices about Trotsky and Trotskyism. I started to re-read Marx, Engels and Lenin, and recognised that Stalin was the enemy of Marxism."

The protracted road to Trotskyism

The road to Trotskyism proved to be long and difficult. Halil and the circle of comrades with whom he worked closely throughout this period became acquainted with almost all the political tendencies in Turkey and internationally that had broken with the programmatic principles of the Fourth International in the period after the Second World War and sought to falsify them in the sense of an adaptation to Stalinism, social democracy, the trade union bureaucracy and national movements—the Pabloites, Lambertists, Morenoites, etc. He collaborated with them in various journalistic and political projects, all of which led nowhere.

While in the 1980s, and especially after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, this milieu moved continuously to the right and

finally fully integrated itself into the structures of bourgeois rule, Halil and his closest comrades moved in the opposite direction. They were looking for an orientation to the working class and a truly international, socialist perspective.

This eventually led them to the International Committee of the Fourth International. When Halil, after a thorough study of the perspectives and history of the ICFI, was convinced that it alone embodied the continuity of the Fourth International, he devoted all the energy of his last years to the building of a section of the International Committee in Turkey.

After his break with Stalinism, Halil tried to come to terms with his past experiences and establish new contacts with workers and young people. He organised educational circles for young workers and carried out propaganda activities at universities. He tried several times to establish publications and form organisations in cooperation with tendencies that referred to themselves as Trotskyist. But these initiatives all ended in a dead end.

At times he worked in trade unions. In 1983, he was active in the independent trade union Otomobil-Is, which had been banned by the military dictatorship and re-organised by members of DISK. In 1992, he served as head of the training and press department of DISK, which had resumed its work after the ban. However, because of the articles and leaflets and the “Platform of the Left Opposition” written by him, he was soon dismissed and sued by a specially authorised prosecutor.

In 1987, Halil’s group took part in a joint election campaign for “independent” socialist candidates. In 1988, it participated in the publications *İsci Sözü* (Workers’ Word) and *Sosyalizm* (by the PGBS—Socialism without bosses, generals and bureaucrats), of which Halil was the official editor. In retrospect, he wrote: “The founding of the PGBS was actually the result of an unprincipled unification, of which we were not aware due to our theoretical backwardness, political naivety and blind confidence in our ‘old Trotskyist comrades.’”

Due to political differences over Stalinism and the PGBS’s adaptation to right-wing trade union bureaucrats, Halil’s group left the organisation in early 1991. Later, it collaborated with a Morenoite group with which it issued the joint monthly publication *Enternasyonal Bülten* (International Bulletin).

In 1996, Halil’s group for a short time joined the ÖDP (Party of Freedom and Solidarity), which was formed through the merger of several Stalinist and left-wing petty-bourgeois groups and attracted many workers and militant youth. Halil’s group joined the ÖDP with the aim of winning the best elements from it, not turning it into a socialist party, which Halil’s group considered impossible. Within this framework, the PGBS was reorganised, but soon broke apart again. Halil’s group now put out a monthly publication called *Socialism Without Borders, Classes and Exploitation* (sss-S) and a *Left Opposition Bulletin* in the trade unions.

When the civil war with the Kurdish PKK reached its climax, political repression increased and Halil was threatened with a decades-long prison sentence. His group decided at the end of 1994 to send him abroad. The day after he left the country, his home was invaded by “anti-terror” special forces.

Outside of Turkey, Halil was to make contact with international “Trotskyist” tendencies. He lived for several years in Bremen in northern Germany, where he earned his living as a social worker.

On an international level, Halil now went through the same experiences as in Turkey. He contacted Pabloite and Morenoite tendencies and got to know several of their leaders, but it proved impossible to find a principled basis for cooperation. Later, Halil often spoke with horror about his experiences at international gatherings where alliances were forged without political agreement and where the participants included not only hardened Stalinists but also open right-wingers.

His most intensive contacts were with the Coordinating Committee for the Refoundation of the Fourth International (CRFI), which is dominated

by the Argentinian Partido Obrero (PO) of Jorge Altamira. In 1999, Halil was invited as an observer to a conference of that tendency in Athens, and in 2000 in Buenos Aires. However, the organisers were not interested in clarifying political issues, but only in making their group appear as large as possible.

The CRFI “was founded on the ‘principle’ that there was to be no discussion of past differences or the historical development of the various tendencies that adhered to it,” as the *World Socialist Web Site* later commented. The Fourth International was to be “refounded” on the basis “that each adherent of the CRFI would remain free to pursue its own national opportunist politics without criticism or interference.”

In Greece, Halil worked for a time with Savas Michael-Matsas’s Workers Revolutionary Party (EEK), which had broken with the ICFI in 1985 and now supported the CRFI, as part of the Christian Rakovsky Balkan Socialist Centre. The Balkan Socialist Centre pretended to oppose imperialist interventions in the Balkans and to promote a Socialist Balkan Federation. In fact, it was an unprincipled amalgam of tendencies that were neither socialist nor Trotskyist. It consisted mainly of friends of Michael-Matsas from the Stalinist and nationalist milieus. The whole enterprise turned out to be political fraud.

Building the Turkish section of the ICFI

Halil later wrote about the lessons he learned from this period of his life: “After these experiences, I reached the conclusion that all these unprincipled splits cannot be explained by referring to the corrupted individuals or groups, and there must be historical and universal material factors behind them. Thus we decided to study the history and experience of the Fourth International, as well as capitalist economy. This work took almost five years.”

Already after he had gone abroad, Halil, according to his own account, had begun to “translate almost everything I could find about the Fourth International”—documents of the International Left Opposition, founding documents of the Fourth International and much more. In 1999, he first came across the *World Socialist Web Site* and began translating articles from it.

In 2003, Halil attended a National Committee meeting of the EEK in Athens. There he confronted Savas Michael-Matsas with the documents of the International Committee concerning his behaviour in 1985, when Michael-Matsas was secretary of the IC’s Greek section. When a crisis broke out in the British Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP), he refused to attend international leadership meetings discussing the opportunist degeneration of the WRP and broke with the International Committee. He concealed from the membership of his organisation all information about the international discussion.

Michael-Matsas speculated at the time that, freed from the constraints of the International Committee, he could pursue an uninhibited nationalist and opportunist course in Greece. Even before the split with the ICFI, he had travelled behind its back to Iran, where he supported the Khomeini regime. After the split, he developed alliances within Greece with the bourgeois Pasok party, the Stalinist Communist Party and the trade union bureaucracy. At the international level, he supported Mikhail Gorbachev, who initiated capitalist restoration in the Soviet Union.

Halil later told this writer, with a mixture of ridicule and contempt, what happened when he confronted Michael-Matsas with the documents of the International Committee. The latter reacted with a hysterical outburst of rage, yelling at the leading members of his own party and insulting them in obscene terms. Halil concluded that Michael-Matsas was a charlatan and that the EEK was a cult. This experience encouraged him to study the documents of the International Committee more thoroughly.

From this study he concluded “that everything we had learned from our Pabloite leaders about the history of the Fourth International was wrong” and “that the founding principles of the Fourth International found their

expression in the documents of the ICFI.”

He now began to follow the WSWS more closely and to conduct internal education on important ICFI documents. Among others, he translated nine lectures given by leading representatives of the International Committee on the theme “Marxism and the Fundamental Problems of the Twentieth Century” at an international summer school held in January 1998 in Sydney, Australia, as well as “Globalisation and the International Working Class,” a polemic against the Spartacist tendency.

The study of these documents enabled Halil and his comrades to clarify important questions of political orientation. They changed their attitude to the unions after discussing the lecture “Why are Trade Unions Hostile to Socialism?” by David North, the national chairman of the Socialist Equality Party in the US and chairman of the International Editorial Board of the WSWS.

North opposes the widespread view that socialists “must acknowledge the trade unions as the workers organisation par excellence, the form most representative of the social interests of the working class.” Based on a careful historical and social analysis, he proves that “standing on the basis of capitalist production relations, the trade unions are, by their very nature, compelled to adopt a hostile attitude toward the class struggle.” He concludes, “The organic development of trade unionism proceeds, not in the direction of socialism, but in opposition to it.”

In November 2007, the editorial staff of *Socialism* wrote to the ICFI concerning the discussions at that time: “You are aware of the fact that we have been following the ICFI closely for the last two years through the WSWS and discussing some of its documents internally by translating them into Turkish. Through the meetings and discussions we held, we managed to find answers to many of the questions we had in our minds. In a nutshell, the discussions we have conducted in Istanbul have accelerated the process of understanding the basic positions of the ICFI by our comrades and sympathisers.”

In 2008, Halil and his comrades established a publishing house named “Prinkipo Yayincılık” (a reference to the island off of Istanbul to which Leon Trotsky was exiled) and published three books: *On Historical Materialism* by Franz Mehring, *The Red Book—On the Moscow Trials* by Leon Sedov, and a book by Halil titled *The First International*.

In June 2007, Halil met for the first time personally with leading members of the International Committee in Berlin. I remember this encounter very well. Not only did Halil speak English and German very well, he also spoke the same political language as we did. He knew the history and political positions of the International Committee and was interested in deepening his understanding in the discussion.

In contrast to many other international contacts I got to know in the course of time, he was not concerned with making use of the authority of the ICFI for his national work in Turkey, but with clarifying fundamental questions of political orientation and perspective. He was also personally free of the vanity and arrogance that one usually finds in abundance among the leaders of pseudo-left organisations. He was a highly political person, but always interested in questions of culture and other topics.

Already at this meeting it became clear how complex and demanding is the construction of a section of the ICFI in Turkey. In a country where Stalinist and nationalist currents had dominated the workers’ movement for decades, a variety of political issues had to be addressed, clarified and developed: the character of the bourgeoisie in a country with a delayed capitalist development, the national question in Turkey and throughout the Middle East, the relationship between the working class and the peasantry, etc.

After the meeting, Halil conducted a series of seminars in Turkey on the history of the Fourth International, globalisation, the national question, the trade unions, Stalinism and other issues. After another meeting in Istanbul, the editors of *Socialism* decided to work closely with the

International Committee.

During the meeting in Istanbul there was a long discussion about the Kurdish question, which was an important mechanism for subordinating the entire “left” to a bourgeois programme. In the Turkish “left,” the attitude prevailed that the discrimination against the Kurds by the Turkish state obliged them to unconditionally defend the Kurdish right to self-determination. They translated this into complete subordination to Kurdish nationalism. “Left” groups campaigned for the pro-Kurdish present-day HDP (the party changed its name and composition several times due to repeated prohibitions), although the party advocates a purely bourgeois programme.

Halil and his comrades, based on the documents of the first congresses of the Communist International, had also advocated the Kurds’ right to self-determination, but had not so uncritically adapted to the HDP and its predecessors. After a thorough discussion lasting about one year, they changed their position in 2007.

The International Committee had thoroughly reviewed its position on the right of nations to self-determination after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Nationalist, ethnic and religious tensions were deliberately stirred up during this period by the imperialist powers in order to assert their own interests. The national movements in Yugoslavia, the former Soviet Union and the Middle East did not seek to unite different peoples in a common struggle against imperialism, as had been the case with the national movements in India and China, but to split existing states in the interests of the imperialist powers and local exploiters. The International Committee took a critical and hostile stance toward such separatist movements and counterposed to them the international unity of the working class. In the Middle East, this meant that the democratic rights of national, ethnic and religious minorities could be secured only within the framework of the United Socialist States of the Middle East and not by drawing new borders.

In the ensuing years, the cooperation between the International Committee and Halil’s group became increasingly close. In the summer of 2014, Halil participated in a plenum of the International Committee. He gave a detailed report on the economic and political situation in Turkey, which he analysed in the context of the global crisis of capitalism. He addressed the massive increase in social inequality, the growth of the Turkish working class, Erdogan’s domestic and foreign policies, and the role of the various petty-bourgeois “left” parties.

The plenum unanimously passed a resolution that read: “The plenum of the International Committee of the Fourth International formally accepts the application of Comrade H on behalf of the organisation *Toplumsal Esitlik* (Social Equality Group) to open discussions with the aim of establishing a section of the International Committee in Turkey. The IC will work closely with the Turkish comrades to assist them in the political and theoretical preparation of a Founding Conference.”

In the discussion, David North emphasised: “It is now a major challenge that must be taken up by the IC to develop a section in Turkey. The decisive question is not the number of comrades involved. The most important issue is the degree of political clarification and understanding of the history of the Trotskyist movement and the strategic experiences through which the working class has passed. Only on that international foundation is it possible to respond to the political challenges in any country.”

Halil then deepened his cooperation with the International Committee. The Turkish editorial board was gradually integrated into the *World Socialist Web Site*. Translations and articles in Turkish appeared almost daily on the WSWS, and from the spring of 2014 the English-language site regularly published articles under Halil’s byline. He wrote mainly on the political and social developments in Turkey and the wars in the Middle East.

On April 5, 2017, the WSWS published a comprehensive statement of

the group *Toplumsal Esitlik*, which called for the rejection of constitutional referendum and for the United Socialist States of Europe and the Middle East. The statement examines in detail the threat of war in the Middle East, the crisis of the nation-state system, Kurdish nationalism and the petty-bourgeois defenders of imperialism. It advocates an independent policy for the working class and calls for the construction of sections of ICFI in Turkey and the entire Middle East.

In the summer of 2018, *Toplumsal Esitlik* changed its name to *Sosyalist Esitlik* (Socialist Equality Group) for two reasons, as it stated: “(1) The SE is assuming a name in line with that of all the official sections of the ICFI (Socialist Equality Party, Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei, Parti de l’égalité socialiste) and thereby stressing its determination to become the Turkish section of the Fourth International; (2) By adopting the word ‘socialist’ in the group’s name, the SE underscores its basic goal: uniting the Middle Eastern workers and youth across all national, ethnic, religious and sectarian lines with their class brothers and sisters internationally to overthrow capitalism and build a socialist society.”

One of the most important tasks Halil undertook was the translation and publication of the International Committee’s books—a major undertaking, which, in addition to a considerable amount of work, represented an organisational and financial challenge.

Halil translated *The Heritage We Defend*, a contribution of several hundred pages to the history of the Fourth International by David North. The Turkish edition appeared in January 2018 with a new foreword by David North, requested by Halil, published by *Mehring Yay?nc?l?k*, which had been founded the year before.

Halil wrote for the WSWS about the importance of its publication: “In a country where the working class and socialist movement in general have been dominated by Stalinism, Maoism and petty-bourgeois nationalist tendencies for decades, these books are of prime importance in developing socialist consciousness among workers and youth. Publications of the contemporary Marxist literature produced by the world Trotskyist movement in Turkish, we believe, will contribute to laying the theoretical and political foundation for the building of the Turkish section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).”

David North explained in the foreword to the Turkish edition the importance for the Fourth International of building a Turkish section: “It is not only the relationship between Trotsky’s Turkish exile and the history of the Fourth International that imparts special significance to the publication of this new translation of *The Heritage We Defend*. The critical position occupied by Turkey in the geopolitics of the world imperialist system guarantees that the class struggle in this country will assume gigantic dimensions. The building of the Trotskyist movement in Turkey is, therefore, an essential strategic task of the Fourth International. This requires the education of the advanced sections of the Turkish working class and youth in the history of the long struggle waged by orthodox Trotskyists against the different forms of anti-Marxist revisionism—especially that associated with the liquidationist conceptions of Michel Pablo (1911-1996) and Ernest Mandel (1923-1995).”

Together with *The Heritage We Defend*, four other books were published: *Castroism and the Politics of Petty-Bourgeois Nationalism*, *2017 International May Day Online Rally*, *The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (US)*, and *Socialism and the Fight Against War*.

In the last months of his life, Halil completed the translation of another book by David North, *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century*, which summarises important political and strategic lessons from the last century. Shortly afterwards, in September, his fatal illness was diagnosed.

Parallel to his work for the publishing house and the WSWS, Halil conducted intensive political and educational work and familiarised young workers with the historical and political foundations of the ICFI.

His early death at the age of 57 is a severe blow to the International Committee and his comrades in Turkey. But Halil has laid a firm foundation for the establishment of a Turkish section of the International Committee. His life’s work will continue. The greatest tribute to Comrade Halil is to realise his goal of establishing *Sosyalist E?itlik* as the Turkish section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>