

In memory of David McReynolds (25.10.1929 - 17.08.2018)

By Guido Grünewald

His biographer Martin Dubermann called him "a saving remnant", one of those few people who do not allow themselves to be intimidated by repressive conditions and who openly challenge the powerful. David Ernest McReynolds, born on 25.10.1929 in Los Angeles, was active until his death on 17.08.2018. The New York Times dedicated a detailed obituary to him. I had the privilege of meeting him several times in international peace work.

Growing up in a conservative parental home, David briefly became involved with the Prohibition Party in 1948. In high school he had followed the military successes of the Allies with enthusiasm during the 2nd World War. After a transitional period with first doubts, the sight of the war destruction on his visit to Bremen in 1951 led him, according to his own statements, to "a deep religious experience", which made him a staunch pacifist.



David McReynolds and Sonnhild Thiel from the DFG-VK group in Karlsruhe in the WRL office in New York City in August 2011 at a talk during the study trip of German peace activists "Following the footsteps of Martin Luther King"

While studying political science at the University of California, David became involved in the small Socialist Party of the United States (SP) and the War Resisters League (WRL) and became a well-known non-communist left-wing speaker on campus. In 1954, he resisted being drafted into the Korean War; a prison sentence was spared him by a fortunate coincidence. David moved to New York and worked for the left-wing pacifist journal Liberation from 1957 to 1960.

From 1960 until his retirement in 1999, he worked full-time for the WRL, first as travel secretary, later as undisputed unofficial spokesman for the organisation. For several years he was also active on the board of the US section of the Fellowship of Reconciliation as well as internationally in the International Confederation for Disarmament and Peace (ICDP) which was merged with the International Peace Bureau (IPB) in 1978. David was one of the vice-presidents of IPB from 1983 to 1989 and served as a member of the Council (1969- ?) and as chairman (1986-1988) in the War Resisters' International (WRI).

David has worked with (and sometimes argued with) well-known US pacifists, including A.J. Muste, Bayard Rustin, Dave Dellinger and Barbara Deming. He showed great courage in 1969 when he outed himself as a gay man at a time when in most US states homosexual acts were still punishable and gays (even in left-wing organizations) were outlawed. David himself did not consider himself particularly courageous; for years he suffered from periodic anxiety and lack of self-esteem and at times had a severe alcohol problem. However, he not only proved to be a good organizer, but also an outstanding speaker and astute article writer. He had a special talent for position papers and strategy papers. David listened and took note of other opinions; he could discuss with war supporters not only morally, but also within their frame of reference. Especially in later years he acted as a respected mediator in disputes. David was aware that any philosophical or political attitude had "holes" and that he had been wrong several times; he considered himself a permanent learner.

Since 1955, a small group around Dorothy Day and the Catholic Workers resisted compulsory civil defence exercises in New York State, they were arrested regularly. David first participated in 1959 and was instrumental in the fact that in 1961 about 2,000 people took part in this action of civil disobedience; in the city of New York the exercises were stopped afterwards. David joined the civil rights movement in the 1960s and established numerous links with black churches in the southern states.

He was jointly responsible for the first protest demonstration against the Vietnam War in 1963 (organized by the WRL) and burned his draft card with four other young men during a larger demonstration on November 6, 1965; burning draft cards had been banned by law shortly before. In 1967 he travelled to Saigon (the

focus were conversations with Buddhist monks opposing the war) and in 1971 to Hanoi. David called for the immediate unconditional withdrawal of US troops; in December 1964 he had argued "Vietnam is our Hungary" in a fundamental article. David was aware that the National Liberation Front was dominated by Communists and would not allow free elections if it won. He condemned acts of violence on both sides, but defended the right of the Vietnamese people to decide for themselves on their way.

From the late 1970s onwards, the issue of disarmament came to the fore for David. He pleaded for unilateral and complete disarmament; in his opinion, the abolition of only one type of weapon (e.g. nuclear weapons) led to a dead end. It was clear to him: "Either war goes, or we go". In 1978 he stood with a small group on the Red Square in Moscow with a banner "USA - USSR Disarm! ". Shortly before the beginning of the 2nd Gulf War he travelled to Baghdad in 1991 with a delegation. Even in the last months before his death, he tried to end the bombing of Yemen that continued with US support. David was imprisoned several times (mostly for a short time) because of his peace activities. On the basis of the Freedom of Information Act, he was given access to several hundred pages of spy records that US authorities had created about him as part of the COINTELPRO (Counterintelligence Program).

David was not only a pacifist, but also a determined socialist. Paid employment for all and a fairer distribution of wealth were essential for him. His aim was to create a society in which people could do a job they liked and with which they could create social benefits. In his opinion, this could not be done with the capitalist economic order. David pleaded for social ownership of the means of production, not necessarily for nationalization.

Several times he was an active candidate in election campaigns: for the Socialist Party in 1958 (US Congress) as well as in 1980 and 2000 as presidential candidate, in 1968 for the short-lived Peace and Freedom Party (House of Representatives) and in 2004 for the Green Party (Congress). More than respectable achievements were not possible. For David, election campaigns were a referendum on ideas. His aim was to bring disarmament, peace and democratic socialism back into the public debate. He was aware that changes were only possible through public pressure and street activities.

David has always distinguished himself from Soviet communism and the Moscow-loyal Communist Party USA (CPUSA). In 1956 he protested in front of the Soviet embassy against the suppression of the popular

uprising in Hungary and he signed a petition in favour of Soviet dissidents in the 1960s. In 1968 he happened to be present in Prague when the troops of the Warsaw Pact invaded. However, he rejected the repressions of the McCarthy era with its oaths of loyalty and lists of subversives as well as the persecution of individuals. David was decidedly anti-authoritarian; he condemned all censorship and stood up for the right of individuals to be different. When he became aware that under Gorbachev important changes in the Soviet sphere of power were in the winds and cautious easing became visible in the World Peace Council (WPC) which was largely financed by Moscow, David tried to persuade the WRI and the WRL to adopt a more open attitude towards the WPC. This cost him his re-election as WRI chairman (a very painful experience for him), as his attitude was classified as naive or even pro-communist by some.

David, who lived a modest life due to the low WRL salary and a small pension, was active until the end. With several newsletters by e-mail, in which developments in the USA and internationally were reported and discussed, he networked activists and interested parties worldwide. His hobbies and the ability to see and enjoy the beautiful sides of life gave him the strength for his ongoing commitment: David was a very good photographer, he loved music, occasionally wrote poems and mixed perfumes. He was a reasonably good cook (especially his hummus with lots of garlic was famous), cultivated friendships (often his small, paper-laden apartment served as a meeting place) and loved animals, especially his two cats, with whom he lived together for many years.

And above all David was in his own words "an atheist with a faith". He firmly believed that a socially just society and a peaceful coexistence of people are possible.

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