

Xuyet, Ngo Van, 1912-2005

A short biography of Vietnamese libertarian socialist and metal worker Ngo Van Xuyet

Nick Heath

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Ngo Van Xuyet, author of *The Saigon Commune*, started his political career as a Trotskyist but by the end of his life had developed libertarian analyses.

“The so-called ‘workers’ parties’ (Leninist parties especially) are embryonic state regimes. Once in power, these parties form the nucleus of a new ruling class, and can only give rise to a new system of exploitation of man by man.”

He joined the Vietnamese Trotskyist movement in 1932 at the age of 19. He left his village at the age of 14 to work in a metalworking factory in Saigon. He became involved in the demonstrations and strikes against French rule.

The hard life that the Vietnamese masses experienced under the French yoke meant that his formal education had suffered. He began reading Marx in the Saigon public library after work. He made contact and joined the Trotskyist left opposition within the Communist Party of Indochina. Trotskyists and Stalinists cooperated in Saigon for 3 years (1933-1936) around the weekly magazine *La Lutte*. The Trotskyists then left to form the League of International Communists for the Construction of the Fourth International. Van learnt to set type for the group’s underground literature.

He organised a strike for better wages in his factory. He was finally arrested in the factory storeroom at the age of 24. He was put in the *Maison Centrale* in Saigon, where he was tortured. He joined a hunger strike demanding political prisoner status equivalent to that in France. Van and members of his group were constantly arrested, tortured and then freed for a short length of time. He was eventually exiled to Travinh, an island in the Mekong delta. A peasant uprising broke out in the surrounding area. The French then executed 200, and killed thousands in bombing raids. Around about this time Van realised he had contracted TB.

In March 1945 the Japanese occupied South Vietnam. The Trotskyists called on the Vietnamese masses to rise up against all oppressors whatever their nationality, unlike the Communist Party, which called for an alliance with the Allies. 30,000 miners set up councils to run the mines public services and transport and started a literacy campaign.

After the collapse of the Japanese occupation, a wave of revolutionary action swept through the country. The Trotskyists called for the arming of the people, and the setting up of workers’ and peasants’ councils. The Saigon Commune was born. By October the uprising had waned. The Stalinists slaughtered hundreds of Trotskyists. Van fled Vietnam in spring 1948. He later learned that some of the comrades he had left behind had been horribly tortured to death by the Stalinists.

Van ended up in Paris, where he joined the *Union Ouvriere Internationale* (UOI). This group included the Spaniard Grandizo Munis, the leading Surrealist Benjamin Peret who had fought with the *Durruti Column* (named after Spanish anarchist Buenaventura Durruti) in the Spanish Civil War and Revolution, and Sophie Moen. This group had left the Trotskyist *Parti Communiste Internationale* because they could not agree with its defence of the USSR as a “degenerated workers’ state.”

Van and Moen became partners. The UOI collapsed in 1954 and Van and Moen joined an informal discussion group around Maximilien Rubel and the writer Jean Malaquais. Most of the group were factory workers and they adopted many council communist ideas. The group corresponded with Pannekoek and Paul Mattick, among others. Readings of the council communists made Van break completely with the need for a Leninist party elite. Van preferred the term Marxian to Marxist, and like Rubel had an anti-authoritarian reading of Marx.

Van worked in the Mors factory making railway signals. He founded a factory group there. In 1957, at the initiative of Trotskyists, a *Liaison Committee* of metalworkers of the Paris region was set up, following an assembly in October where activists from 11 factories, including Renault and Mors met together. A bulletin started appearing. The last meeting of the metalworkers decided to broaden the liaison to include activists in other industries. The events of 13th May 1958 overtook this. The fascist and OAS threat led to the convoking of an assembly attended by Trotskyists of different persuasions, anarchosyndicalists, members of the syndicalist group around the paper *La Revolution Proletarienne*, members of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and other groups attended.

The Trotskyists of *Tribune Ouvriere Renault* launched *Voix Ouvriere* and various factory bulletins. *Socialisme ou Barbarie* saw the future in their industrial newsheet *Pouvoir Ouvrier*. Van and others on the other hand, advanced the concept of workers autonomy.

Following a split within *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, *Information Liasons Ouvrieres* was set up. This advanced the need for liaison committees between workers in different industries. A distinct nucleus, *Regroupement Interenter-*

prises, was set up, and Van was one of those involved in this. The assemblies organised by this grouping were small, usually between 10 to 20, but they slowly began to grow in the run-up to 1968.

Both the ILO and the Regroupement collapsed, and the bulletin produced by the various factory militants became the monthly Information Correspondence Ouvriere (ICO) which ceased publication in 1973. Van often contributed to its pages.

Van worked in the same factory up until 1978 and his retirement. His partner Sophie Moen died in 1995.

Van continued to collaborate with the magazine set up by Henri Simon after the collapse of ICO, and continued to do so up until his death in January 2005.

He was deeply interested in Asian peasants movements and wrote several articles on that subject. He wrote an autobiography *In the Land of the Cracked Bell* starting with his arrival in France and published two volumes on recent Vietnamese history. He also brought out a collection of Vietnamese folk tales for children. Some of Van's writing circulates within Vietnam.

In 1968, Van predicted on the Vietnam situation in an article that he wrote for *Cahiers de Discussion pour le Socialisme des Conseils* that "One day the massacres of America; will end... the survivors will return to the factories, offices and farm; busted faces, armless and legless, dragging on through the remainder of their decorated existence. Back there, the 'heroes of the resistance' - peasants and workers of Vietnam, will return in the ricefields or will be thrown into the factories of the new industrialisation... neither the capitalist system American-style or the state capitalism of Ho Chi Minh will put an end to their situation as the exploited submitted to a police dictatorship, and if the bourgeois and the big landowners are chased off, it is the bureaucracy that will perpetuate exploitation, with more efficiency."

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