

MAX WATTS (1928-2010)

He built resistance inside imperialist war machine

By John Catalinotto (published December 11, 2010)

Following 82 years of a life filled with adventure and intimately entwined with tumultuous events concerning humanity, Max Watts died in his bed on November 23 in Sydney, Australia, surrounded by friends and comrades.

Watts' contributions were numerous, but his life's central focus was on organizing resistance within the military. This focus he shared with many of us in *Workers World Party*. We worked together an ocean apart to help GIs break the chain of command within the imperialist U.S. military.

The increase in rank-and-file awareness in the 1960s and 1970s of their own interests and power helped make a mass conscription army unreliable for imposing U.S. rule on Vietnam and intervening elsewhere.

Born Tomi Schwaetzer in Vienna in 1928, Watts and his parents had to flee Nazi-controlled Austria. He traveled through Paris and London before reuniting with his mother in New York. His father had already died. Watts trained as a geophysicist in a New York area college and was active there with the *Young Communist League*.

In 1950, wanting no part of shooting at Koreans, he left the U.S. He wound up in Paris after a stay in Israel, where he also would not serve in the army. As a geophysicist he worked in Algeria, where he did his best to aid the movement of national liberation against French rule, and later in revolutionary Cuba.

He was at the October 17, 1961, demonstration of 30,000 Algerians in Paris, when riot police, under orders to shoot at will, killed hundreds of pro-liberation Algerian-origin demonstrators.

RITA: Resistance inside the army

By 1967, with a half-million U.S. troops in Vietnam and militant youth and Black liberation movements stirring at home, some of the hundreds of thousands of GIs stationed in Europe began to slip away from the U.S. Armed Forces. A few found their way to Paris. And they found Watts.

One was Terry Klug, who wrote in a message to Watts' funeral about how Max had helped these young soldiers cope:

"It's no exaggeration to say that without him, as well as [Watts' partner] June, life would have been unbearable for scores of us during that period. They helped us with places to stay, to find work, with our permits to stay in the country and so much more.

"They introduced us to politics really and helped us give voice to what we were feeling and even doing at the time. A tireless organizer, Max gave us the tools to fight back against the U.S. military and helped us understand it was part of a broader struggle as well."

At that same time, WWP's young activists helped rebellious GIs at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, to organize and eventually call for forming the American Servicemen's Union in December 1967. One of the Fort Sill GIs, Dick Perrin, had wound up in Paris, making the first contact with Watts.

Perrin was responsible for the term, "*Resistance inside the army*," or RITA, which Watts used as a general term for the wave of GI opposition within many imperialist armies in the 1960s and 1970s. Perrin went into exile in Canada and Klug returned to the U.S., where he faced imprisonment for "desertion." He and his fellow GI prisoners in the Fort Dix, N.J., stockade carried out a rebellion against conditions there.

Tales of resistance

The post-De Gaulle French government expelled Watts from Paris to Corsica in the early 1970s. After evading his watchers, Watts wound up living in Dilsberg, West Germany, near Heidelberg. This put him closer to the 220,000 U.S. GIs stationed in that country. Watts continued to offer aid and assistance to the ever-more-successful and numerous GI organizers throughout the 1970s.

He also kept an historical record of those struggles with his "tales of resistance days," which he called "TORDS." In collaboration with ex-GI David Cortright, he wrote a retrospective on the GI organizing experience in the book "Left Face."

Watts resettled in Australia in 1981 and actively supported many struggles of Indigenous peoples in that area of the world - in Australia, East Timor, Papua New Guinea and especially Bougainville, where a local 10-year uprising kept the mining monopoly Rio Tinto from pillaging the environment. Watts insisted the Bougainville story was the basis for the movie "Avatar."

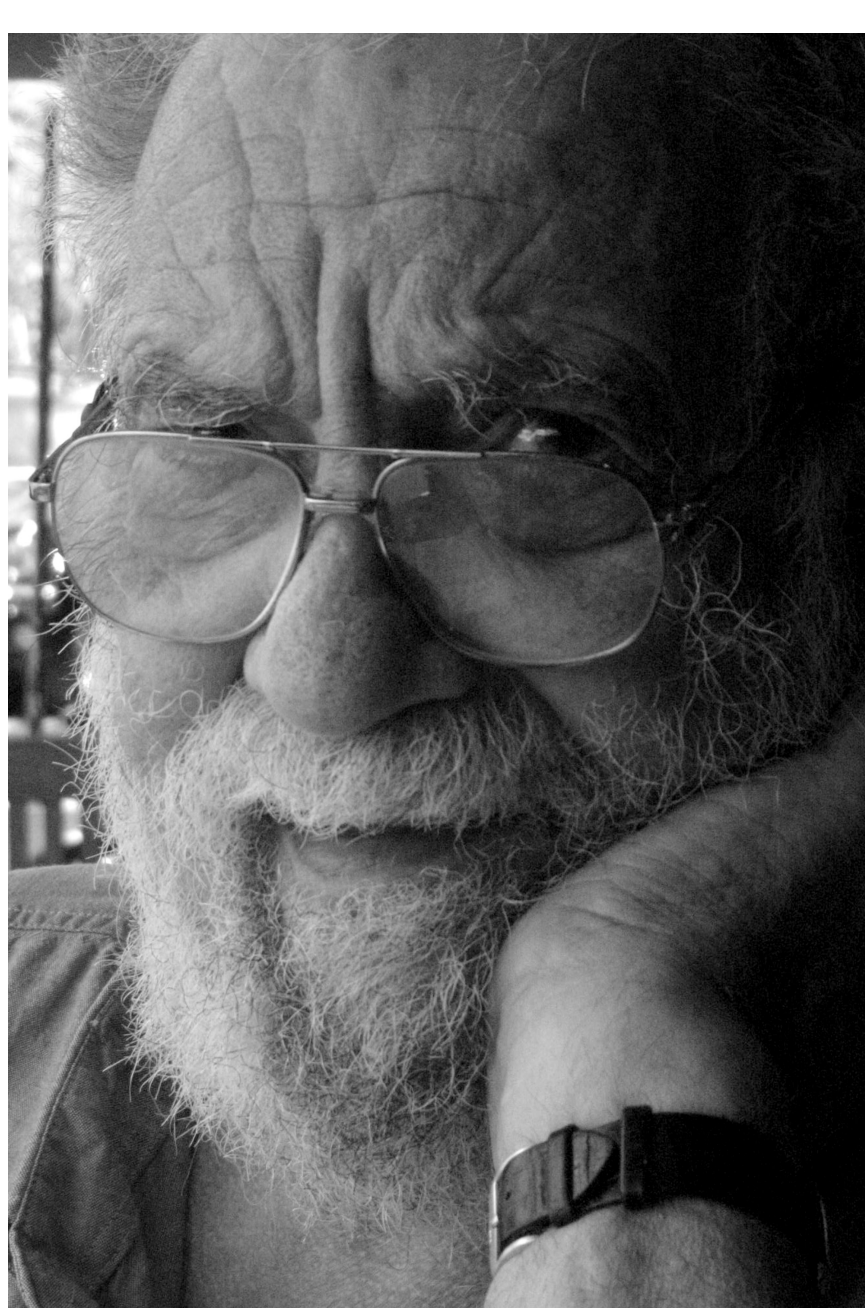
A few weeks before he died, Watts wrote the following solidarity statement to the WWP national conference:

"We - of the then - just-born Paris-based group RITA ACT - far from the USA - had never heard of the Workers World Party - until Private Dick Perrin arrived from the U.S. Army in Germany and told us of the, yes, the correct word is "heroic" assistance he and the other resister GIs received from your members, in the first attempts at organizing inside Fort Sill, Oklahoma."

"The WWP was the first, and for a while the only, U.S. organization able and willing to help these GIs take on the Green Machine, most effectively, and eventually build the American Servicemen's Union. We shall never forget!"

We in WWP will remember Watts' contribution to the GI movement and his insistence on working cooperatively with all forces that contributed to that struggle.

Catalinotto communicated regularly with Watts by phone, mail, email and a few face-to-face meetings between 1967 and a final phone call on Nov. 21.



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