

In Memoriam - Hans-Peter Dürr

A warrior is no longer with us

In October we would have celebrated his 85th birthday - now we will have to do this without him. On May 18, 2014, Hans-Peter Dürr died. His fighting heart ceased to beat.

There are many issues we can associate with this intense, even restless, life. Hans-Peter Dürr was a great critical physicist who always questioned himself and his science with a considering and self-reflecting mind. He considered the insight that there are limits to our planet Earth to be a challenge to science and research, unceasingly striving for a paradigm shift in the scientific world.

Limits were immensely important to him. He pleaded with us to respect them and live within them – to maintain moderation and peace with Nature. He was passionate about this plea: “If the whole world adopted our Western lifestyle this would completely overstretch the Earth: in fact, we would certainly need at least five more Earths.”

This insight led him to adopt a radical, fundamental criticism of the Western capitalist system. Again and again, he expressed this critical attitude publicly; even though after the end of the east-west conflict this was a controversial approach, since many assumed the story had already found its end. However, he knew that a peaceful, harmonious life will never be possible as long as Nature is being exploited and destroyed. That is why he was so fundamentally opposed to nuclear energy and a fervent supporter of the “Energiewende” transition to renewables – well before this position became popular.

Going against the tide was characteristic of his approach.

Peace was his lifeblood - ever since he survived the air raids on Munich as a young boy. As a physics student he engaged in passionate debates with his teacher, the nuclear weapons designer Edward Teller. Rid the world of nuclear weapons: he repeatedly asserted this necessity and unswervingly kept working in this direction, despite all the resistance. He helped to prevent the implementation of Ronald Reagan’s insane SDI program, succeeding in making his own prophecy come true: that “SDI” would become a “dirty word”. For this he was awarded the Right Livelihood Award. The jury’s reasoning for bestowing the award on Hans-Peter Dürr included the recognition of “his profound critique of the strategic defence initiative (SDI) and his work to convert high technology to peaceful uses”.

War was simply a horror to him. So he actively worked to support civil conflict resolution and peace science and was a consistent opponent of the politics of intervention pursued on both sides of the Atlantic.

No event was too small, no journey too far if he had the opportunity to argue for peace. He attended the mass demonstrations organised by the peace movement (often as an inspiring orator), as well as peace congresses for natural scientists such as the “Mainzer 23” or Munich Security Conference events. He continued these activities in his roles as Chair of the Federation of German Scientists [VDW], Advisory Board member of the scientists’ initiative for peace “Naturwissenschaftlerinitiative Verantwortung für den Frieden”, within Pugwash International, and as part of many other organisations. He never balked at the “troubles of the plains” (Brecht) - the often frustrating, minor everyday tasks needing to be performed.

At home and abroad his network was unique: reaching out to civil society, politics and business. Consequently he became an advisor to Mikhail Gorbachev, who, in spite of all the resistance and in the end despite his failure, actually made a significant contribution to overcoming the east-west confrontation and ending the Cold War.

He sought out controversy and wanted to convince others to join in the efforts to face the major challenges of securing peace, justice and planetary survival.

He succeeded. We will continue his work. We will remember him in many ways: his graphic examples, his figurative language, his powers of persuasion, and his stamina.

Dear Peter, in this regard we will continue. And we will miss you.

Berlin, 19.05.2014

Reiner Braun

Reiner Braun, Executive Director, IALANA, Co-President, IPB, until February 2014
Executive Director of VDW. He worked together with Hans-Peter Dürr in many capacities and projects.