This biography will be of special interest to many readers of the Socialist Standard. While Paul Mattick (1904–1981) never joined the World Socialist Movement (WSM), his views were sufficiently close to ours for him to be a major contributor of articles and book reviews to the Western Socialist, journal of the World Socialist Party of the US, from the late 1940s to the late 1950s. Mattick’s life spanned eras and continents. In his youth he participated in the grassroots upheavals in Germany that followed in the wake of World War One as an activist in the movement that came to be known as ‘council communism’ (Rätekommunismus). In 1926 he moved to the United States and settled in Chicago, where his main involvement was with the unemployed movement that developed in the early 1930s. He was a prolific writer in several genres – journalism, fiction, and travel writing as well as social criticism and political economy.

It is convenient to consider the book in three parts. Chapters 2–4 portray the life and activity of the young Mattick in Germany. Chapters 5–9 focus on his activism in the US in the late 1920s and the 1930s. The main theme of the remaining chapters is Mattick’s tireless efforts to develop and disseminate his ideas.

Paul Mattick grew up under harsh conditions in the poor family of an unskilled worker, first in rural East Prussia (now in Poland) and then in Berlin. He left school at the age of 14 to become an apprentice toolmaker in the Siemens concern. At about the same time he became politically active – first in the Free Socialist Youth, the youth group attached to the Social Democratic Party, and later in the Communist Workers’ Party of Germany (German abbreviation – KAPD), a ‘left communist’ breakaway from the Communist Party of Germany (KPD). Chapters 3 and 4 provide a valuable account of the formation, evolution, and decline of the KAPD. The KAPD and like-minded council communist groups in other European countries opposed both the classical social-democratic model of the parliamentary party and the Leninist model of the vanguard party (‘the revolution is no party matter’). As their name indicates, they envisioned workers’ councils as the organisational vehicle of revolutionary action.

In contrast to the KPD, which quickly came to depend financially and politically on the Bolshevik regime, the KAPD maintained an independent outlook and developed an analysis of the new state-capitalist system emerging in Russia. During the first few years after his emigration Mattick was preoccupied with the practical problems of adapting to life in a new country. He found a provisional political home in the syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW or ‘Wobblies’).

From 1932 onward Mattick played a prominent role in the effort to organise the unemployed in Chicago, who at the height of the Great Depression accounted for 40 percent of the city’s workforce. He worked through the Workers’ League, an unemployed affiliate of the Provisionalist Party – a group that (like the WSPUS) had its origins in the Socialist Party of America. Mattick and his colleagues – a word he preferred to ‘comrades’ – based their organising work in the network of abandoned storefronts that unemployed workers took over and used as local ‘relief stations’ (with kitchens and sleeping quarters), meeting places and print shops.

Mattick also succeeded in creating a fairly small but active group of council communists under the name of the United Workers’ Party, with a journal entitled International Council Correspondence. The author devotes a great deal of space to the efforts made by Mattick over many years to interest left-wing editors and publishers in his writings. With few exceptions, such as the Western Socialist, the influence of Leninism within the left made these efforts fruitless until the New Left finally came to his rescue in the late 1960s. The West German student movement in particular began to show an interest in Mattick as a living link with the country’s ‘revolutionary’ past.

Mattick was in touch at various times with numerous left-wing scholars who he hoped would help him gain public recognition and get his work published. The author provides considerable detail about these interactions. However, it is disappointing that for some reason he ignores Mattick’s close relations with the WSPUS and its members during the period when he and his family were living in Boston.

There is also some scattered information about the content of Mattick’s writing – not as much as the reader might wish but as much as can reasonably be expected in a biography. Special attention is rightly paid to Mattick’s main contributions to Marxian political economy. Best known is his critique of Keynesian economics, which finally appeared in book form in 1969 under the title Marx and Keynes: The Limits of the Mixed Economy. Mattick showed that government intervention could modify the workings of capitalism only temporarily and within definite limits. Mattick also had a persistent interest in the theory of the business cycle and capitalist crisis. Here he was greatly influenced by Henryk Grossman, whose work The Law of Accumulation and Breakdown of the Capitalist System happened to come out just before the stock market crash of 1929. Grossman’s analysis relied heavily on the schema at the end of the second volume of Marx’s Capital and the first section of the third volume, and stressed the crucial role played by the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, as well as constraints on an ever-rising mass of profit. Following Grossman, Mattick believed that capitalist crisis does not automatically lead to socialist revolution but does create an ‘objectively revolutionary situation.’ However, Grossman – a member of the Communist Party of Poland – had concepts of revolution and the post-revolutionary society very different from those of Mattick.

Besides its political and theoretical content, Roth’s biography of Mattick is of great human interest. It tells us a lot about what life was like at various times for working people in both Germany and the United States. The book is worth reading for that alone.

STEFAN