Helen Halyard (1950-2023), a tribute to a life dedicated to the victory of world socialism

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We are publishing here the tribute given by David North to Helen Halyard, a leading member of the Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee of the Fourth International for more than half a century, who died suddenly at the age of 73 on November 28. North's remarks opened a memorial meeting for Helen held Sunday, December 3.

Comrades, today we are paying tribute to Comrade Helen Halyard. The death of Comrade Halyard on November 28, 2023 has brought to an end a life of immense personal, political and social significance. Helen devoted 52 of the 73 years of her life to the building of the world Trotskyist movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International. In his speech celebrating the founding of the Fourth International in 1938, Trotsky said that every cadre carries on his shoulders "a particle of the fate of mankind." In respect to Helen, it is appropriate to introduce an amendment to that observation: She carried on her shoulders considerably more than a single particle.

As Marxists, accustomed to assessing the work and progress of the socialist movement in the context of a revolutionary epoch, we tend to view and speak of years and even decades as if they were mere "moments" in the vast expanse of history. This understatement, however justified in assessing the evolution of society, actually contradicts an individual's personal experience of the passing of time, the different stages of one's life, and the human ageing process. We often cannot but wonder "where all past years are." Yet we understand as historical materialists that the revolutionary process and the tempo of events are not determined by and cannot be measured by the span of our individual lives.

The cause to which we have devoted our lives began before we entered the world, and it will continue after we have left it. We build upon the foundations created by our predecessors and, during the years allotted to us, do all that we can to ensure the victory of socialism and the forward march of mankind.

The ability to locate one's life in a broader historical context is an essential element of serious revolutionary work, avoiding both discouragement when confronted with setbacks and unwarranted euphoria when one's efforts are rewarded with success. There is nothing fatalistic in this approach. But we learn from experience that it is wiser to see setbacks and successes in their dialectical relationship, as interconnected contradictory manifestations of a complex objective situation within which we work and which we seek to influence through our practice. Moreover, what appears at first to be a setback may subsequently come to be seen as the first stage of a future advance.

Today our focus is not on the historical process in a general sense, but, rather, its refraction through the life of one particularly outstanding member of our party. Within this more specific framework, we cannot help but recognize how much of the history of the Trotskyist movement is bound up with Helen Halyard's life. We have been marking during the past two months the centenary of the founding of the Left Opposition in October 1923, which led 15 years later to the founding of the Fourth International. We are also celebrating the seventieth anniversary of the International Committee, which was established in response to the publication of James P. Cannon's Open Letter in November 1953.

Helen's political work spanned more than half the entire history of the Trotskyist movement. Her decision to join the Workers League (the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party) in December 1971 was taken only five years after its founding in November 1966 and just 18 years after the issuing of the Open Letter.

During her long political career, Helen witnessed fundamental changes in the social, economic, technological, geopolitical and political structure of the world. How is one to explain, amidst all these changes, her unyielding commitment to the ideals of her youth, her irreconcilable hostility to the existing social order, and—despite a reactionary political environment and cultural regression—her utmost confidence in the program and perspective of the Fourth International and the victory of the World Socialist Revolution?

Helen's political personality was shaped by the always complex interaction of the active influence of the historically formed social and cultural environment, objective events, and personal experiences. Helen was born in Brooklyn, New York, in the aftermath of World War II, a period that was characterized by a growing movement of the working class. The most militant element of that movement in the United States, notwithstanding the limitations of its bourgeois and petty-bourgeois leadership, was the mass struggle for civil rights by the African-American working class and broad sections of the youth. Confirming the point that we have already made about the protracted character of the historical process, that movement was to no small extent driven by an acute awareness that the ideals proclaimed by the American revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had not been fulfilled.

Helen, from an early age, imbibed the militant spirit and culture of the civil rights movement. She read the works of Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and was deeply moved by Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, and, one should add, a novel written by a white author, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird.* Helen also loved the songs of George Gershwin, especially as rendered by Ella Fitzgerald, and the great composer's opera *Porgy and Bess*.

In the late 1950s and 1960s, school children in New York City were occasionally taken to afternoon rehearsals at the Metropolitan Opera House. An introduction to classical music was still considered an essential part of a young person's education. The racial barriers that had denied black artists access to the great cultural institutions were being swept aside. The black soprano from Laurel, Mississippi, Leontyne Price, who had, at the insistence of Ira Gershwin, recreated the role of Bess in *Porgy and Bess* in the early 1950s revival, finally made her debut at the Metropolitan in 1961 and went on to conquer the opera houses of the world.

Helen was influenced and inspired by these progressive cultural tendencies. Later in life, when visiting Berlin for political work, she would not miss the opportunity to attend a performance at the German

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Opera House.

It was, however, the political environment that exercised the greatest influence on Helen's social consciousness. Her teenage years coincided with the increasingly violent character of the struggle for civil rights. The pacifist sermons of the Reverend Martin Luther King, supplemented with appeals to the Democratic Party, could not contain the explosive contradictions of American society and the anger of the working class.

Black nationalist movements and their spokesmen, especially Malcolm X, found a growing audience among the youth in northern cities. The urban rebellions between 1964 and 1968—in Harlem, Watts, Newark, Detroit and other cities—certainly contributed to Helen's political radicalization. But Helen was not attracted to the racial rhetoric and program of black nationalism. Her father was a sanitation worker. Her mother, Ruby, was a member of the International Ladies Garments Workers Union (ILGWU). The Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn in which she grew up was a polyglot working class neighborhood with a substantial population of Jews —many of whom retained their traditional socialist sympathies—Puerto Ricans, Italians and other ethnic communities. She tended to view society through the prism of class, not race.

The war in Vietnam and the anti-imperialist struggles sweeping across the world had contributed to her awareness of the broader global context and character of the social conflicts that were raging in the United States. By the time Helen turned 20, she had become convinced—like so many of her generation—that nothing less than the overturn of capitalism and its replacement by socialism was necessary. But how was this to be accomplished? How were the forces necessary for the realization of this colossal task to be assembled and organized? Did such forces even exist? Was there any power greater than that of American capitalism and the imperialist military-industrial complex? For these questions neither Helen nor other members of her idealistic and angry generation had any obvious and ready-made answers.

As the social and political upheavals of the post-World War II era were unfolding in the United States and internationally, and as Helen and her generation were passing through the critical experience of their youth, another struggle, beyond the sphere of their political consciousness, was raging within the Fourth International. This conflict went largely unreported in the bourgeois press, which haughtily ignored the "squabbles" among small Trotskyist groups—just as the bourgeois press had ignored the squabbles over program and perspective in the aftermath of the 1903 congress of the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party that had ended in a split between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. And yet the conflict in the International Committee—centered on fundamental issues such as the fate of the 1917 October Revolution, the dialectical materialist foundations of Marxist theory, socialist strategy and revolutionary practice—was of infinitely greater historical significance than the daily cock fights between bourgeois politicians.

The 1953 split in the Fourth International—spearheaded by the struggle led by James P. Cannon, the leader of the Socialist Workers Party in the United States—against the anti-Trotskyist revisionism of the Pabloite tendency, proved to be only the opening round in a protracted struggle by the International Committee, spanning decades, to defend the international revolutionary perspective and program upon which the Fourth International had been founded. The Pabloite tendency, drawing support from sections of an emerging left-leaning middle class, repudiated every fundamental programmatic principle of Trotskyism. It rejected Trotsky's insistence, stated in the opening sentence of the *Transitional Program*, the founding document of the Fourth International, that "The world political situation as a whole is chiefly characterized by a historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat."

The upshot of Pabloite revisionism was the total denial of the necessity of the Fourth International as the essential factor of conscious Marxist leadership in the working class; of the central and leading role of the working class in the struggle for the overthrow of the capitalist system on a world scale; and, therefore, of the conquest of state power by the working class—the dictatorship of the proletariat—as the necessary stage in the transition to a socialist society.

From the Pabloites' repudiation of the world historical perspective of world socialist revolution followed their rejection of all the other critical elements of the Trotskyist program. The Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union and its satellite regimes and parties throughout the world were not to be denounced, opposed and overthrown as counter-revolutionary agencies of world imperialism, as Trotsky had insisted. Rather, attributing to the state and party bureaucracies a revolutionary potential, the Pabloites sought the liquidation of the Fourth International as an independent political force. Its cadre was to be dissolved into the mass Stalinist organizations, where it would function as left advisers to their bureaucratic leaderships, gently urging them to respond to the pressure of the masses.

The Pabloites' revision of the Trotskyist insistence on the counter-revolutionary role of Stalinism was only one element of their liquidationist program. The sections of the Fourth International that remained under Pabloite control after the 1953 split were instructed to prostrate themselves before any political tendency—whether Stalinist, social democratic, bourgeois nationalist, or even right-wing populist—that exercised significant influence over the mass movements in one or another country.

Despite the central role that it had played in the struggle against Pabloism and the formation of the International Committee, the Socialist Workers Party retreated during the 1950s, under the pressure of the Cold War environment, from the principles that had been clearly stated by Cannon in the Open Letter. It steadily shifted the political axis of its work away from the struggle to build the Trotskyist leadership in the working class toward establishing alliances with middle class tendencies. Within the United States, the SWP's political retreat and preparation for reunification with the Pabloites was most clearly expressed in its growing adaptation to bourgeois reformist and nationalist leaders of the civil rights' movement.

The rightward movement of the Socialist Workers Party was resisted by the British and French sections of the International Committee. The struggle came to a head between 1961 and 1963. Hailing Castro's rise to power in Cuba as proof that a socialist revolution did not require the leadership of the Fourth International, or even the existence of a politically independent workers' movement, let alone specific organs of workers' power, the Socialist Workers Party split in June 1963 with the International Committee and rejoined the Pabloites in the newly-formed United Secretariat.

Nine members of the Socialist Workers Party, led by Tim Wohlforth and supported by Fred Mazelis, among others, opposed the unprincipled reunification. One year later, in September 1964, they were expelled from the Socialist Workers Party after they demanded a discussion of the entry of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, the Ceylonese section of the United Secretariat, into the bourgeois coalition government of Madam Bandaranaike. Based on the defense of international Trotskyist principles, the expelled supporters of the International Committee formed the American Committee for the Fourth International (ACFI). Two years later, the ACFI formed the Workers League as a party in political solidarity with the International Committee.

This critical struggle waged by the International Committee occurred before Helen and others of her generation were to become politically active. But it established the foundations for, and made possible, their future development as Trotskyists. There would be no Trotskyist movement in the United States, or any other part of the world, had the International Committee not opposed and waged war against Pabloite revisionism.

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There is no question but that a conscious break with all forms of black nationalist politics was a critical element of the fight for Marxism and the building of the Trotskyist movement in the United States. The SWP did everything in its power to prevent such a break. It sought to glorify the proponents of black nationalism, and even to portray them—and Malcolm X in particular—as the political model for youth. For example, after the assassination of Malcolm X in February 1965, George Breitman, a long-time leader of the Socialist Workers Party, wrote:

> I was still a young man 25 years ago when another great revolutionary was assassinated – Leon Trotsky. Perhaps I did not fully realize his leadership, advise and political wisdom would be missed … Anyhow, I did not cry when Trotsky was killed, and I could not help crying when Malcolm was killed.

No one disputes the courage of Malcolm X. But however tragic the fate of Malcolm X, the placing of the latter on the same plane as Trotsky, and Breitman's cynical utilization of lachrymose emotionalism to suggest that the assassinations of Trotsky in 1940 (when Breitman was 25) and Malcolm X in 1965 were events of similar historical and political magnitude, to suggest this, exemplified the SWP's efforts to disorient the youth and impede their political development.

It is instructive to compare Breitman's opportunist tribute to the response of Michael Banda, then a leading member of the Socialist Labour League (SLL) in Britain, to the death of Malcolm X. Banda denounced the assassination as "wholly foul, barbarous and criminal and reflects the base hatred of the white ruling class and its black allies against Negro workers and urban poor." However, Banda made no political concessions to the nationalist politics of Malcolm X and, despite his break with Elijah Muhammad, his ambivalent attitude to the Black Muslims. "There is nothing progressive about them," Banda wrote. "They are completely reactionary, indeed counter-revolutionary."

Concluding his assessment of the Malcolm X's life and the political significance of his assassination, Banda wrote:

> If there is one conclusion to be drawn from this barbarous act it is this:
>
> **Only the unity of white and black workers in and through a revolutionary Marxist Party dedicated to the overthrow of capitalism can bring about the complete emancipation of the Negro people.**
>
> On this road, black nationalism remains a major obstacle and a dangerous distraction.
>
> Those, who, like the SWP leaders, proclaim that black nationalism is progressive … are consciously deceiving and betraying the heroic struggles of the Negro workers. They are helping to perpetuate a gigantic fraud.

Historical experience has fully vindicated this condemnation of black nationalism, and indeed of all nationalisms, which persist to this day as a political ideology and program that, if anything, is even more reactionary than it was sixty years ago.

The broader political implications of the International Committee's struggle against the Pabloites for the perspective of Trotskyism in the United States was stated clearly by Gerry Healy, who was the national secretary of the SLL and the principal leader of the International Committee, in his fraternal greetings to the founding congress of the Workers League in November 1966:

> The working class in the United States is the most powerful force in the world and it is within this class that you must build your party.
>
> This is a basic principle of Marxism and one which applies with particular urgency to the conditions existing inside the United States. It is not Black Power or the dozens of peace and civil rights movements which extend throughout the country which will resolve the basic questions of our time but the working class led by a revolutionary party.
>
> It is at this point that we separate ourselves completely from the revisionists. We emphatically reject their idea that the Negroes by themselves as well as middle class movements can settle accounts with American imperialism. Whatever critical support we are called upon from time to time to extend to such movements the essence of our support must be based on making clear our criticisms of their shortcomings.

The later capitulation of Healy and Banda to Pabloite politics does not detract in the least from the struggle they waged in defense of Trotskyism in the 1950s and 1960s and their critical contribution to the founding of the Workers League and the education of its cadre won to Trotskyism in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In fact, they supplied us with the weapons that we used in the 1980s in the struggle against the Workers Revolutionary Party's betrayal of Trotskyism.

Helen was among those who were won to Trotskyism on the basis of the fight that had been conducted by the International Committee over the previous two decades. That was the foundation upon which all the subsequent work of the ICFI and the Workers League/Socialist Equality Party developed in the decades that followed.

My first recollection of Helen dates to the founding conference of the Young Socialists, the youth movement of the Workers League (and predecessor of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality), on December 18, 1971. We both joined the staff of the Workers League in January 1972 and became members of the Political Committee one year later. Our systematic daily collaboration in the leadership of the Workers League became possible only after the removal of Wohlforth from the post of national secretary in August 1974 and his replacement by Comrade Fred Mazelis, who firmly reestablished principled and comradely relationships and methods of work.

It is not possible within the framework of this memorial meeting to adequately sum up Helen's contribution to the building of the Workers League, the Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee of the Fourth International. Those who will speak today will recall one or another aspect of her work, different elements of her personality. A comprehensive summation of her contribution would require a review of the political work of the Trotskyist movement over the last five decades. Her life is deeply embedded in all aspects of the history of this movement. In the course of innumerable interventions in the class struggle, Helen contributed significantly to the education of countless workers, who respected and admired her fearless devotion to the fight against an unjust and brutal system of exploitation.

But not even a detailed record of her political activities would adequately convey the extent of her contribution to the Trotskyist movement and its cadre. The revolutionary party does not exist only as a succession of formal political events and organizational routines. It does not dwell in some sort of supra-human celestial empyrean. Its cadre consists of real people, with passions and problems, conducting their work amidst the joys and misfortunes of life, "the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to." The persistence of revolutionary work over years and decades would not be possible without the friendship of comrades, those

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with whom one can confide, and the friendships formed in the shared struggle for a great cause are the strongest and most enduring.

Helen was the truest of friends. She could be hard in her judgments. If one wanted a sugar-coated response to a political or personal problem, one was well-advised to steer clear of Helen. She was blunt, to the point and always honest. But that honesty expressed genuine sympathy and concern.

The last several years were difficult for Helen, as she confronted mounting health problems. But she recognized and derived great satisfaction from the rising tide of class struggle and the growing influence of the party. She was well-equipped to measure the progress of our movement.

Helen joined the Workers League barely four months after the collapse of the Bretton Woods system on August 15, 1971, which had functioned as the foundation of the post-World War II economic system. Its bedrock was the convertibility of the dollar into gold at the rate of $35 per ounce, which is more than $2,000 less than an ounce of gold is valued today.

The political world of 1971 was very different than that of today. The Stalinist regime—or what was referred to as “real existing socialism”—still existed in the Soviet Union, and parties based on Stalinism or one of its national variants held power from the Oder River in East Germany to the Northern Pacific and the South China Sea. Outside of the International Committee, there did not exist a single party that even imagined the possibility that within just 20 years these regimes would be swept from power and that the mass Stalinist parties in Western Europe would cease to exist as significant political forces.

The Social Democratic parties and the trade unions with which they were allied still commanded the active support of working class militants. Castroism and Peronism were hailed by the Pabloites as genuine revolutionary alternatives to Trotskyism. Salvador Allende held power in Chile. Throughout Africa and the Middle East, bourgeois nationalist movements dressed themselves in pseudo-revolutionary garb and were celebrated by the Pabloites as unconscious pioneers of a new national path to socialism that refuted the theory of Permanent Revolution. China, under Mao, was still in the throes of the Cultural Revolution.

Only the International Committee based its perspective on an understanding of the global crisis of capitalism, the historical obsolescence of the nation-state system, the decline of US imperialism, and the revolutionary power of the American and international working class.

The fate of all the Stalinist, revisionist and bourgeois nationalist movements has vindicated Trotsky’s statement: “Outside of the cadre of the Fourth International, there does not exist a revolutionary party worthy of the name.” Helen lived long enough to witness the vindication of that statement.

The truest measure of the significance of a life is what it leaves behind, its lasting effect upon the world. By this exacting standard, the life of Helen Halyard is of an enduring character. She will never be forgotten. The International Committee of the Fourth International is her legacy. It will continue the struggle for the liberation of the working class and humanity to which Helen devoted herself, body and soul.

Long live the memory of Comrade Helen Halyard!

Long live the International Committee of the Fourth International!

Forward to the World Socialist Revolution!

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