Tribute by Sheila Brehm

“Helen’s achievements live on in our fight today under conditions of the emergence of the international working class.”

Sheila Brehm
6 December 2023

Sheila Brehm worked with Helen Halyard for more than 50 years. She made these remarks to the memorial meeting held by the Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee on Sunday, December 3.

Helen touched the hearts and minds of everyone who knew her. For more than a half century, she left an indelible mark on party members from all the sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International that she met, as well as the hundreds and thousands of workers and young people who came to know her. Helen was a powerful orator, always educating and inspiring those who heard her. She was a tireless fighter for the party, while campaigning as the party’s candidate for Congress, mayor of Detroit and US president. She became well-known and admired for her tenacity at the factory gates; she was highly respected. She influenced all those with whom she had political discussions, as well as discussions of a broader character.

Helen also had an enormous impact on the children of party members, as well as the children of the children of party members. Helen’s family deeply respected her values and politics. Helen’s son Jamal, her niece Kenyetta and Kenyetta’s husband Mike and her dear cousin Lorraine with whom she took her memorable trip to South Africa in 2019, were profoundly impacted by Helen—as she was by them. The same is true of Tania, Marco and Angel, and many others who are attending today.

She always took a genuine interest in those with whom she met and worked. Naturally, Helen would stress the great principles of the Trotskyist movement and their relevance for the present, to explain why she had dedicated her entire adult life to the struggle for the liberation of the working class and the oppressed masses from capitalism and for the socialist transformation of society.

She was the real thing. Falsification, pretentiousness, backwardness and arrogance were alien to Helen. She helped form the culture of the party, both its high theoretical and political level, as well as the meticulous attention to organization. Continuity lives through us, through the cadre of the revolutionary party. Helen was always conscious of this. She located herself in the historical character of our epoch, the epoch of the death agony of capitalism.

She based herself on the historical significance of the October Revolution and the revolutionary capacities of the American and international working class. This was expressed in the energy and enthusiasm with which Helen dedicated her life to the work of constructing the revolutionary party, our international party, which will lead the working class in the taking of power.

When Helen joined the Workers League in 1971, like all of us of from our generation, the struggle against the Socialist Workers Party’s reunification with the Pabloites in 1963 was still very fresh—it was less than 10 years from the time we joined the party.

What were the great issues that educated Helen and our generation? That the Socialist Workers Party did not represent Trotskyism. While it claimed to, and while it had a much larger membership than us, only the IC defended the principles of Trotskyism—internationalism against nationalism, the

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fight for political independence of the working class, the revolutionary role of the working class, and the necessity of the revolutionary party in preparing the working class to assume its decisive role in the socialist transformation of society.

At the time, there were dozens and dozens of parties and organizations claiming to be socialist. In addition to the SWP, there were Maoists, all varieties of middle-class radicals, the Stalinist Communist Party, state capitalists, black nationalists, and so on. Helen was steeled in the understanding that what defines the character of a party is not its numbers, not its ties to "movers and shakers," but to great principles, and that Trotskyism was the only alternative. The fight to demarcate our party from everyone else at the time made Helen, and I think our generation, very fierce fighters!

In sharp opposition to all the other political formations, who took neither themselves nor their own organizations or their history too seriously, Helen was guided by the unshakeable conviction and optimism that the party she was building would lead the working class in the overthrow of the capitalist system.

She took enormous interest in the political education particularly of the younger generations who joined the party. In addition to politics, Helen would always ask about one's interests in music, literature, art and encourage them to broaden their cultural horizons. Many of you here today had such discussions with Helen.

She would recount the seminal political struggles through which she and our generation didn't just live through, but were active participants. The struggle against black nationalism and all forms of nationalism used to divide the working class; the fight against Tim Wohlforth's renegacy; the move of the party headquarters from New York City to Detroit after the political assassination of Tom Henehan; the split with the Workers Revolutionary Party; the launching of the WSWS—these are but a few of the many events that shaped Helen. Helen played a critical role in shaping and influencing those events as well.

Helen was like a sister to me and also an important part of my family, who got to know her and love her. Helen and I grew up together in the sense that the seminal political events of our time and the historical and theoretically guided political campaigns of the party in the working class were always aimed at differentiating our party from all those who betrayed the historic interests of the working class.

We met in 1971 and developed a close personal bond both through our political experiences as well as through our shared personal tragedies and joys that life brings over a period of 52 years. Like everyone here, I will miss the irreplaceable Helen, but I know that her achievements will live on in our fight today under conditions of the emergence of the international working class. Millions are now protesting on every inhabitable part of the globe against imperialist genocide in Gaza and against their own governments who are waging war against the working class while at the same time they are accomplices of the Israeli regime.

The outpouring of support we have received for comrade Helen's life-long struggle testifies to the very changed relationship of the IC to the international working class. The very advanced stage of the political, social, and economic crisis of the world capitalist system positions the ICFI as a powerful pole of attraction in the struggle of the working class to end the source of imperialist genocide and war, inequality, and the aggressive assault on democratic rights.

Leon Trotsky wrote *Son, Friend, Fighter* after his son, Leon Sedov, was assassinated in 1938 by the Stalinist GPU agent Mark Zborowski. While Trotsky's tribute to his son was written under very different conditions, if I might take the liberty of paraphrasing Trotsky in my tribute to Helen—my dearest comrade and best friend. ***For revolutionary youth and workers of all countries! Helen will rightly live in the hearts of all those who work, suffer and struggle for a better world.***

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