“Helen was the genuine article, as we say in the UK—a revolutionary leader through and through”

Barbara Slaughter
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Barbara Slaughter is a member of the Socialist Equality Party in the UK. At 96, she is the longest-running active member in the International Committee of the Fourth International. The following are her remarks to the memorial meeting for Helen Halyard held by the Socialist Equality Party (US) and the ICFI on Sunday, December 3.

I am honoured to have been asked to speak at this memorial meeting to pay tribute to the life of Comrade Helen. As other comrades have said, Comrade Helen was a unique individual—a woman who spent more than half a century, her entire adult life, fighting relentlessly to build the revolutionary leadership of the international working class.

As other comrades have said, she was part of a generation that was radicalised, first by the Cuban revolution and then by the civil rights movement and opposition to the Vietnam War. But unlike the hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of others who succumbed to bourgeois nationalism of all descriptions, as soon as she came into contact with the Trotskyist movement she became committed to revolutionary internationalism.

We have to remember that the movement was very small at that time, because of the devastating effects of the capitulation of the Socialist Workers Party to Pabloite revisionism. But Helen was concerned with programme, perspectives and the record of historical struggle. She knew from the outset that there could be no liberation of black workers and youth without the combined struggle of the entire international working class.

As she said herself, she learnt a great deal from Bill and Jean Brust, who formed a living link with the revolutionary struggles of the American working class in the 1930s. And so Helen became part of that continuity of struggle which went back to the foundation of the Fourth International under Trotsky’s leadership. Helen herself played a similar role in educating the young cadre who have joined our movement during this new upsurge of the struggles of the international working class.

She soon took a leadership role in both the Workers League and the Young Socialists. She was the driving force behind the international campaign demanding freedom for Gary Tyler, a man who spent 41 years in prison for a crime he did not commit.

She played a crucial role in the struggle against Wohlforth and the investigation into Security and the Fourth International. These experiences were an essential part in the preparation of the Workers League to play an independent role in exposing the degeneracy of the Workers Revolutionary Party between 1982 and 1986.

Other comrades have spoken eloquently about the crucial role Helen played in the history of the Workers League. She developed as a leader of great stature as was evidenced when she accepted the huge responsibility of running as the party’s candidate for US vice president alongside Ed Winn in 1984. In 1992, she stood as the Workers League’s candidate for president alongside comrade Fred Mazelis.

I know from my own experience that she took on every task—from selling the party’s newspaper outside the Detroit auto factories, to collecting thousands of signatures to put the Workers League on the ballot, to visiting contacts, to speaking to groups of workers, to educating new young cadre, to addressing international

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gatherings—with the same thoroughness, energy and dedication.

Worker comrades loved and admired her because she was devoted to Trotsky's advice about the necessity for the party to "patiently explain."

I got to know Helen after the split in 1986 when it became possible for the international cadre to meet and discuss at camps of the Workers League. I have my notes from those camps, and the level of discussion, particularly from members of the Workers League, is truly amazing. It was not just a question of Healy being described as someone who had degenerated into a petit-bourgeois democrat, but of seeking an explanation for his degeneration in the social forces that were then emerging. He was a man who had lost all confidence in the independent mobilisation of the working class.

It was on the basis of that clarification that the International Committee of the Fourth International was able to take a huge step forward in building a truly united international party. Comrade Helen played an important part in that struggle. She travelled to the UK on numerous occasions to hold discussions with leading cadre in the International Communist Party [predecessor to the Socialist Equality Party].

I came to know Helen more intimately when I stayed with her on several visits to Detroit. I didn't realise at the time that I was part of a long line of international comrades whom she accommodated on their visits to the US, because she never made me or anyone else unwelcome in the slightest. She was resolute and uncompromising on political questions, but extremely kind and empathetic in personal relations. On one occasion when I stayed with her for an extended period of time, I was suffering badly from a bout of osteoarthritis. Her kindness and concern were exemplary. She did everything she possibly could to help me.

And under the right conditions she was great fun to be around. Decades of living in Detroit had not robbed her of her dry New York sense of humour.

We shared a love of jazz music, and when the party offices were in Hamtramck she took me to a tiny jazz club where a retired auto worker, who probably came from the South, used to play jazz piano. Later we visited other jazz clubs in Detroit.

Together with comrade Barry we attended what I think was the last public performance of Nina Simone at Detroit Opera House.

On one visit, Helen gave me a pair of earrings that had belonged to her mother, whom she loved dearly. I took them to be a signal of deep and lasting friendship and have always treasured them.

There was nothing phony or pretentious about Helen. She said what she thought and expected you to do the same. She was the real deal, as you say in the US, or the genuine article, as we say in the UK—a revolutionary leader through and through. She devoted her whole adult life to the struggle of the international working class.

In conclusion, I think her death was tragic, sad and untimely, that she still had so much to give to the struggles that are coming up before us in this new, unprecedented revolutionary situation.

The international character of the working class is beyond dispute. The development of a unified struggle against poverty, oppression and war is developing apace. We must follow Helen's example and devote the rest of our lives to the struggle for the unity, the successful carrying out of the revolutionary struggle of the working class and the victory of the socialist revolution.

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