“Helen was our comrade, friend and fighter. She was an indefatigable fighter for the working class and socialism”

Larry Porter
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We are publishing here the tribute given by Larry Porter, the assistant national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (US), 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. Porter delivered his remarks to a memorial meeting for Helen held on Sunday, December 3.

Dear comrades, friends and supporters,

We gather here today to honor our dear Comrade Helen Halyard.

I too wish to paraphrase Trotsky’s beautiful appreciation of his son Leon Sedov: Helen was our comrade, friend and fighter. She was an indefatigable fighter for the working class and socialism. She had an enormous impact on everyone she worked with in the party, and on the tens of thousands of workers and youth she spoke with over the last 50 years in the course of fighting to build an international party based on Trotskyism. Millions will come to know her name.

Helen was an extraordinary comrade who will be sorely missed. She was selfless, highly intelligent, courageous and deeply principled. We appreciated her immense personal warmth, but knew she would give no quarter on political differences.

Those of us who worked with her almost daily until the end of her life find it hard to accept that she is no longer with us. This heartfelt memorial expresses both an outpouring of love and our admiration.

Helen represented the imperishable human continuity in the historical struggle for Trotskyism against all forms of Stalinism, Pabloism and revisionism. She epitomized the words “party cadre.” She distinguished herself from those who abandoned revolutionary policies and rejected the revolutionary role of the working class. She often concluded her remarks by emphasizing that the task of the “full material and spiritual liberation of the working class” is the task of the working class itself. That was one of her favorite lines.

Helen exemplified the high intellectual and cultural level of the human material that was attracted to our party. She brought a dogged determination—she would never give up—a determination based on principles. Once she joined the party, she never turned away.

What made Helen into the person she became? As the history of the Marxist movement has shown, “Revolutionaries are not born. They are forged. They are trained out of the experiences of the movement, out of the intervention of its leadership, out of the whole struggle of past generations.”

Helen was so forged, and she, in turn, helped forge the party. As David North said in his tribute to Helen, “A revolutionary party educates its members. But the political, social, cultural and moral character of the party is, in turn, profoundly influenced by the character of its cadre.”

I first met Helen in 1972 while in college at Lehigh University. She came to the area with a team to campaign with the *Bulletin* newspaper, the political organ of the Workers League. At that time, the Stalinist Angela Davis was wildly popular, considered an icon of revolution by many young people. This was symptomatic of the various forms of petty-bourgeois influence on the working class, such as feminism, black nationalism and reformism. At this time, many of us knew Black Panther members personally. Many of them were courageous and left-wing, anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist. As a result, they were viciously repressed and many were murdered by the state. But they never broke from black nationalism, a petty-bourgeois outlook.

Upon meeting, Helen and I immediately struck up a discussion on black nationalism. We had both been in the party only a short time. She had joined the Young Socialists in December of 1971, and I followed a few months later. Both of us were won to the party in a fight against various forms of petty-bourgeois nationalism.

The Workers League, in an important and widely circulated pamphlet, *Black Nationalism and Marxist Theory*, had explained why this was a dead-end orientation. Our party stood in opposition to every other movement that claimed to be socialist.

We explained that capitalism was not based on race, but on the economic divisions of society. The basic conflict in our society and the source of all forms of oppression was capitalist

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ownership of the means of production, and the basic conflict was between the capitalist class and the working class in America and all over the world. We came to learn and agree that race was subordinate to class, and that racism was deliberately fomented by the ruling class to divide and weaken the working class.

We predicted that those who based their perspective on race—no matter the anti-capitalist rhetoric—would end up in the camp of the ruling elites. This largely took the form of supporting black Democratic Party politicians and "black capitalism." This outlook, against which Helen fought courageously—at that time "against the stream"—has been completely discredited and exposed by the role of a black upper-middle class layer that promotes such racialist historical falsifications as the *New York Times*' "1619 Project."

Helen was a fighter for the whole working class internationally. She was a Trotskyist internationalist, a materialist, a fighter for permanent revolution.

Our class orientation and perspective was tested in the case of Gary Tyler. It was a critical experience, in which Helen played a major role. In 1976, Gary, then 17, was falsely charged and convicted of first-degree murder by an all-white jury. A racist mob had organized a violent protest against the busing of black youth to the high school in Destrehan, Louisiana. Gary was framed up for the death of a 13-year-old white youth and sentenced to die in the electric chair.

Helen and David North traveled to Louisiana in May 1976 to speak to the Tyler family. There, they interviewed members of the family, including Terry, Gary's brother, and Mrs. Juanita Tyler, Gary's mother. Helen also traveled to the prison to meet Gary personally.

The Workers League and Young Socialists pledged to defend Gary and take his case into the working class. Helen played a critical role in developing the campaign. She was the chairperson of the powerful December 1976 march held in Harlem, New York to fight for Gary's freedom. Hundreds of workers and youth participated.

Over 100,000 people signed the Workers League's petitions demanding his freedom. Helen maintained close contact with Mrs. Tyler throughout Gary's incarceration, until Juanita's untimely death in 2012. Helen's moving obituary of Mrs. Tyler appeared on the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Various petty-bourgeois groups portrayed Gary's frameup simply as the product of Southern racism, and directed appeals for his freedom to black Democratic Party politicians. Our approach was the opposite. We explained that Gary was a *class war prisoner*, i.e., a representative of the working class, not just a black youth. We warned that the attack on Gary was an attack on the entire working class, black, white and immigrant. We fought to mobilize the full strength of the working class in Gary's defense, as part of the defense of the democratic rights of all workers.

The response to this class appeal was enormous. We won the support of workers in trade unions that represented literally millions of workers.

This past July, Helen and many members of the party had the opportunity to see Gary when he visited Detroit, which was the first time we were able to see him since he won his freedom. It was a wonderful reunion. At the event, Gary paid tribute to both the party and to Helen and those who fought for his defense, recognizing that they played an absolutely critical role in providing him the resources necessary for him to carry out his fight.

I will close by quoting from the heartfelt letter Gary sent to me upon hearing of Helen's death. Gary wrote:

> Larry,
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> I am very sorry to hear about the unfortunate passing of Helen. I most distinctly remember meeting her back in 1976 when she bravely visited me in Convent, Louisiana.
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> I admired her strength and tenacity to get the story out about what happened to me. She had become highly respected and loved by my family and became especially close to my mother. I am forever grateful for the endless support and dedication she unselfishly rendered to the campaign to free me. She was a true comrade, who was willing to sacrifice so much, even her life, if it was meant to be, like Tom Henehan.
>
> Once again, we lose another soldier in the struggle. May her soul rest in peace. Thanks for informing me of this tragic news. My heart is heavy tonight.

In closing, as we say, "Well done for Trotskyism, Comrade Helen."

Hers was, indeed, a life from which we draw inspiration, political lessons, and renewed determination to finish the job she so courageously devoted her life to carrying out.

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