“Helen visited the Ruhr area in Germany, where workers still today remember her very well”

Marianne Arens
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We are publishing here the tribute to Helen Halyard given by Marianne Arens, a longstanding member of the Trotskyist movement in Germany and member of the National Committee of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party). Comrade Arens spoke at a memorial meeting for Helen held by the Socialist Equality Party (US) and the International Committee of the Fourth International on December 3.

Dear David, Sheila, Larry and all the comrades of the Socialist Equality Party,

It is with great sadness that we come together here to remember Helen Halyard. I speak on behalf of the many comrades of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei in Germany who knew her and appreciated her very much. She was not only an outstanding Trotskyist, she was a fine human being.

Peter Schwarz wrote in his condolence letter: “For many of us, she was the face of American socialism—the embodiment of the fact that America is not only imperialism, but that there is also a fighting working class in the US that is receptive to a socialist perspective.”

Just as Patrick Martin described her in his obituary, so we experienced her—always clear, unambiguous and full of strength, optimism and also great warmth. She was convincing as a socialist not only through her clear words, but also through her own example.

I first met Helen at the international school in Parwich, UK at the end of 1981, and met her again several times after that. In the spring of 1988, I spent four weeks in the US to support the presidential election campaign of Ed Winn. At the time, she led a team to Pennsylvania and to the miners in West Virginia, and I was part of this team. Before that, she had just come from Alabama, and I think that was the party’s first political intervention in the southern states.

I experienced her as a straightforward and principled comrade who never tired of explaining our aims to younger members, and who kept her sense of humor even in difficult situations. From Helen I learned a lot, especially about the committed and long-standing relationship between our section in the US, then called the Workers League, and the American working class.

I met Helen again at international educational schools, for example in Australia in 1997, and at other party events. In November 1991, when our movement organized the Berlin World Conference of Workers Against Imperialist War and Colonialism, she was part of the American delegation. The GDR [East Germany] was already history, and the bureaucracy in Moscow was preparing to dissolve the Soviet Union. US imperialism had already launched the horrific first Gulf War. Our conference was a strong answer by the ICFI to this development.

Helen was among the international leaders who took part. She had great interest in the history of the German working class, its tragic experiences, its betrayal by Social Democracy and Stalinism. And all that could still be felt in Berlin. Helen visited, among other things, the place where Rosa Luxemburg was murdered.

In memory, it is sometimes the small things that are precious and are not forgotten. After the conference, there came a cold onset of winter, similar to one we are experiencing right now. The comrades from southern countries, Sri Lanka in particular, were freezing miserably. Helen spontaneously gave her beret to a comrade, and afterwards this beret remained with me. I cherished it for a long time and remembered Helen’s

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generosity every time I put it on. Generosity and empathy—such important qualities that the ruling classes are trying to eradicate with their war policy.

When in 1992 Helen was the Workers League candidate for US president, she led an international campaign, seeking to build not just the Trotskyist party in America, but the International Committee as a whole. As part of her election campaign, she visited women workers in a free trade zone in Sri Lanka. And she visited the Ruhr area in Germany, where she discussed with our members and with German workers who still today remember her very well.

Even more recently, when I was at the SEP Congress in 2018 as part of the German delegation, Helen looked after us and didn't miss the opportunity to show Elli and me around Detroit, including the legendary place where Motown music came from. That was really good!

Helen left far too soon. We will never forget her, and we will make sure that her name remains unforgotten for party members and all socialist workers.

Thank you.

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