Helen Halyard's legacy lends immense power to the building of Trotskyism in Brazil

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We are publishing here the tribute to Helen Halyard given by Tomas Castanheira, a leading member of the Socialist Equality Group of Brazil, to the memorial meeting held for Helen on December 3.

On behalf of the Brazilian Socialist Equality Group, I would like to express our deep sorrow at the loss of comrade Helen Halyard. But above all, I wish to pay tribute to her lifelong dedication to building the international Trotskyist movement, a struggle that we intend to carry forward in her name.

Helen's long and inspiring political trajectory was determined by the courageous choices she made from the very beginning. Most critically, Helen consciously rejected the nationalist outlook that dominated political radicalism in her youth. She committed, instead, to the historical cause of international socialist revolution.

The party that she joined, the Workers League, did not give pragmatic answers to political problems. It challenged the prevailing moods and superficial appearance of reality. Unlike other parties, its existence was based on the fight for political principles and on a wide historical and international perspective.

The Workers League was born out of the struggle against the Pabloite degeneration of the Socialist Workers Party. Carrying out its revolutionary activity in the heart of world imperialism in the midst of the post-war boom, the SWP succumbed to the violent pressures of hostile class forces. It liquidated the prestige won through unyielding struggle for socialist internationalism to hail anti-Marxist, petty-bourgeois leaderships.

The SWP leaders not only betrayed, but systematically slandered the American and international working class. Obscuring its objective revolutionary role, the SWP labeled the working class as passive and conservative, and contrasted it to the image of long-bearded men in olive green uniforms taking power with guns in their hands.

The former Trotskyist James Cannon, trampling on his life's work, proclaimed the Fourth International to be virtually non-existent. He claimed the creation of an international revolutionary party was an open task, now centered "on Cuba and the Cuban Revolution and the leaders of this revolution." If not Castro and his friends, he asked, "where will we find better candidates" to build such party?

The task of overthrowing capitalism and fighting imperialism was transferred by the SWP to such petty-bourgeois leaderships of anti-colonial movements. This philistine political theory shifted the grounds of revolutionary struggle away from the actual centers of capitalism, with their explosive class antagonisms. And in the social struggles within the advanced capitalist countries, it diverted the axis from the working class and its socialist aspirations.

"The Cuban Revolution," wrote a Chilean spokesman for the SWP, "has signified not only the breaking up of the inter-American system imposed by imperialism, but has had an impact in the United States itself, influencing the Negroes and Mexican workers who labor there."

In its 1961 pamphlet, "How Cuba Uprooted Race Discrimination," the SWP declared that "one of the most important lessons that the Cuban Revolution has for us in the United States" is in how the "Negro people of Cuba became the first of any country in the Americas to win full economic, social and political equality."

In the year that it finally broke with the International Committee of the Fourth International, in 1963, the SWP gave a lecture on the centenary of the Emancipation Proclamation that indicated a revised attitude towards the long-completed bourgeois revolution in the United States. The next stage of historical development was not presented by the SWP as the abolition of capitalism by the American working class as part of the world socialist revolution. As the SWP declared, it was the "Cubans of the 1960s" who "took up where the American revolutionists of the 1860s left off." The lecture continued: "After all, the Castro regime which Kennedy is so intent on destroying has uprooted racial discrimination in Cuba."

The implication of this view was to assert that the struggles within the United States should assume an

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essentially democratic, i.e., bourgeois, character, and to locate precisely in this its connections with the anti-colonial movements developing internationally.

This represented a complete break with Marxism, and particularly with the Theory of Permanent Revolution advanced by Trotsky. It was a capitulation to the supposed might of the decrepit and historically doomed Stalinist bureaucracy and to bourgeois nationalism, both agencies of crisis-ridden imperialism.

The ICFI proudly refused to bow to these forces. It was not afraid to call things by their names, and refused to associate the terms "socialist" and "workers state" in any way with the bourgeois nationalist regime in Cuba. Despite relentless attacks and slanders by the infuriated petty-bourgeois Pabloites, the International Committee's uncompromising defense of principles won to its ranks the revolutionary elements who carried on the struggle for Trotskyism in the United States.

The Workers League developed the fight against the increasingly reactionary forms of nationalism promoted by the ruling classes to divert and derail a renewed revolutionary movement of the international working class in the late 1960s. In particular, the American Trotskyists had to fight a national separatist trend that took the form of black nationalism.

The SWP Pabloites' unlimited prostration before the Castroites and black nationalists may have won them some recruits. But it could not win Helen Halyard, much less develop the kind of political leader she became.

Comrade David pointed out in his written tribute that Helen was deeply rooted "in the heritage and fighting traditions of the most advanced sections of the African American working class."

In her 1997 lecture on Ebonics, Helen quoted passages from Trotsky's answer to the poet Claude McKay that had been previously cited by the Workers League in its 1969 response to the SWP's support for black nationalism, the pamphlet *Black Nationalism and Marxist Theory*. Trotsky's words certainly spoke deeply to her.

Trotsky stressed the utmost importance of developing a cadre within the black working class "capable of grasping the identity of interests and destiny of the Negro masses with those of the masses of the world, and in the first place with the destiny of the European working class."

Helen's life represents the fulfillment of this task. It demonstrates that the revolutionary potential of the African American working class was (and is) not of a "national" or "racial" character. It can be realized only as part of the international struggle of the working class for socialism.

Helen fought resolutely for these principles during decades characterized by the deep isolation of revolutionary socialists, in which objective conditions did not allow the Trotskyist party to lead struggles for power.

She has passed away under conditions of a great historical shift, in the initial years of what we have characterized as the decade of socialist revolution. I feel honored to have been able to participate in discussions examining these historical developments along with Helen, in the course of which I could witness her revolutionary character and presence.

I want to conclude by making comrades around the world aware of the immense power of the figure of Helen Halyard in the construction of the Trotskyist movement in Brazil.

This is a country where the working class has largely been formed by the descendants of African slaves. The rise of capitalism and wage labor did not end social misery, brutal class violence and racial discrimination in Brazil. However, by subjecting the masses to universal exploitation, the capitalist ruling class has spawned an objectively unified working class and created conditions for the abolition of every form of oppression.

Massive multi-racial struggles of the working class marked the history of the 20th century in Brazil. But they were successfully diverted by the betrayals of Stalinism, Pabloism and the Workers Party (PT)—all based on the subordination of the working class to the national bourgeoisie.

Today, these forces have been completely discredited. The Brazilian bourgeoisie increasingly resorts to racialism as its preferred tool to divert the revolutionary struggles that are on the agenda.

In our fight to build the leadership required by these struggles, Helen Halyard will be invoked many times. Her name, along with the names of all of the historical fighters for the Fourth International, is inscribed in the flag of our party.

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