

# “Helen Halyard educated and inspired many thousands of workers and youth”

Fred Mazelis  
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*We are publishing here the tribute to Helen Halyard given by Fred Mazelis at the memorial meeting for Helen held on December 3. Fred was one of nine members of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) who supported the International Committee of the Fourth International and opposed the SWP’s 1963 reunification with the Pabloite revisionists, and then formed the American Committee for the Fourth International in 1964. He was a founding member of the Workers League in 1966.*

Almost 60 years ago, I was one of nine members of the American Socialist Workers Party who were expelled for opposing the unprincipled reunification of the party with the Pabloite revisionists. The recruitment of Helen and comrades like her became a tremendous vindication of our fight. She contributed powerfully to the continuity of American Trotskyism and its powerful development.

It is not the slightest exaggeration to say that Helen educated and inspired many thousands of workers and youth in the course of her organizing efforts, her public speaking, her leadership in the political exposures of capitalist oppression and the building of the revolutionary party. Boundless drive and insight, compassion, humor, kindness, steadfastness—those are only some of the words that have been used to describe her. Her impact was most crucially felt within the vanguard of the working class, the revolutionary party itself.

Every party member knew Helen and many outside the party knew her as well. She was indefatigable, outspoken, fearless and forthright, and at the same time she was patient and thoughtful, especially when dealing with the objective problems of the development of the working class.

The other phrase that immediately comes to mind when describing Helen is revolutionary optimism, based on a scientific understanding of the revolutionary role of the working class. She never simply gave in. She fought to the best of her ability, and she was resourceful and persistent in fighting to solve all manner of problems—whether organizational or political.

Helen was an internationalist to the core. She joined the

Trotskyist movement, as our original tribute explained, in the struggle against petty-bourgeois nationalism, whether it was the black nationalism of the Panthers or the Third World nationalism that was prevalent and very much a part of New Left ideology when she joined the movement. She joined the Workers League in 1971 precisely on the basis of internationalism. This is attested to by this meeting itself and its long list of speakers from many different corners of the globe.

I worked with Helen over a period of many years, and she quickly became not only a comrade but also a very precious friend. She paid me a visit for a couple of days to help out after I broke my leg about a dozen years ago. I also was on the receiving end of her hospitality, staying with her on many occasions when I came to Michigan for meetings. I had the opportunity to observe as her son Jamal became a teenager and then a young man.

I had the privilege of running alongside Helen in the 1992 presidential campaign, as the Workers League’s vice presidential candidate, working with her on an almost daily basis for a good part of that year.

After the launching of the *World Socialist Web Site* 25 years ago, Helen and I collaborated in writing on several occasions, especially in connection with the history of the civil rights struggle, the fight against Jim Crow segregation, the lessons of the civil rights battles of the ’50s and ’60s—the successes, but more profoundly, the inability of this movement, under middle-class leadership, even the most radical wing personified by Martin Luther King—to solve the fundamental issues facing the African American working class and the working class as a whole. Rather, as we pointed out, integration reforms only posed more sharply than ever the questions of the class struggle. Jobs, housing, education, health care, culture—none of these could be secured without the fight to overthrow the outmoded capitalist system and build a socialist society.

Helen often wanted to discuss my experiences, especially in the SWP and in the early struggle against its reunification with the Pabloites, and also as the only US comrade old

enough to have participated actively in the earlier days of the mass civil rights movement, between 1960 and 1965. We discussed the experiences of the lunch-counter protests, the King-led mass movement in the South, the role of the Black Muslims and of Malcolm X, the rise and decline of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee.

I worked together with Helen about 10 years ago on a Marxist review of Michelle Alexander's book *The New Jim Crow*, with its false claim that nothing fundamental had changed in the past 100 years. This book became the pattern for the 1619 Project and the whole ruling class campaign to revive nationalism in recent years to divide the working class. In addition, much more recently Helen and I worked together on the review of *Judas and the Black Messiah*, the film from two years ago that shed some light, despite its serious limitations, on the struggles of the 1960s. We also worked together on a review of a significant film on Nina Simone, the well-known jazz singer referred to by Barbara Slaughter in her earlier remarks.

Helen's hostility to black nationalism and identity politics went hand in hand with a very serious interest on her part in the history of the struggle against slavery and Jim Crow, and the history of the struggles of the working class, black as well as white. When I wrote on these subjects, including cultural matters like the Harlem Renaissance and figures such as African American painter Jacob Lawrence, Helen was particularly interested, and she did some of her own writing in addition to the articles I have mentioned, as in the important article on Ebonics, the reactionary claim that the dialect imposed in part by poverty and segregation was somehow a separate language. Many of my own articles were influenced by suggestions from Helen, including the report last year on the new opera about Emmett Till, attacked because one of its creators was white.

Comrade Helen passed through all the seminal moments in the history of US and world Trotskyism in the past 52 years. She learned quickly and soon became a part of the leadership of the Workers League in the early 1970s. She participated in such turning points for the party as the struggle posed by the desertion of Tim Wohlforth, which he followed by abruptly rejoining the Pabloite Socialist Workers Party. That was the clearest proof that he had taken the road of earlier renegades such as the Shachtmanites and Cochranites—only much faster.

This was followed by Security and the Fourth International, and the party center's move to the Midwest. Helen helped to anchor and steel the party cadre when we faced the assassination of one of our young leaders, Tom Henehan. Her political and theoretical development was indissolubly connected to campaigns such as the fight for the freedom of Gary Tyler in Destrehan, Louisiana.

Helen's internationalism was tested in connection with the struggle led by Comrade North against the national opportunists in the leadership of the British Workers Revolutionary Party—Healy, Banda and Slaughter—and the split with the WRP. She passed that test, along with a unanimous cadre of the Workers League. She recognized and fought the disease of Pabloite revisionism, and thereby participated in the inauguration of what we have described as the fourth stage of the Trotskyist movement, following the early years of the Left Opposition, the founding of the Fourth International in 1938, and the founding of the International Committee 15 years later. This laid the basis for all of the achievements of the international movement in the subsequent decades.

Helen's rich legacy as a leading member of the Trotskyist movement can only be fully grasped (as Tomas has just explained) when it is placed against the fact that the last four decades—more than four, in fact—have been a period of social counterrevolution, of reaction, of the transformation of all the old workers' organizations into adjuncts of the capitalist state. The greatest development of revolutionary theory often takes place during such periods.

Helen understood that this was the necessary preparation for the next revolutionary wave. This preparation involves not simply "standing pat," so to speak, but developing the theory and practice of Marxism, in the bitterest struggle against those who capitulated, the pseudo-left and all their hangers-on. This is exactly what we have done and are doing today—in the WSWS and in the analysis of the crisis and collapse of Stalinism amid the deepening economic crisis and decline of American and world capitalism.

This has been manifested more recently in the COVID-19 pandemic, the upsurge of the class struggle, the danger of fascism, and the gathering storm clouds of a third world war—right now expressed in the genocide in Gaza. The next revolutionary wave is upon us, and the International Committee, taking the boldest initiatives in the fifth stage of the world Trotskyist movement, is building the revolutionary leadership.

In this fight, we must understand and base ourselves on the enormous contributions that Comrade Helen Halyard made in her 52 years of conscious political life, fighting for Trotskyism, the revolutionary Marxism of the 21st century.



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