

“To mark Helen’s life is to recognise her place of honour in the history of the Fourth International”

Chris Marsden
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We are publishing here the tribute to Helen Halyard given by Chris Marsden, the national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (UK), to a memorial meeting held on December 3. A leading member of the International Committee of the Fourth International and the Socialist Equality Party (US) for more than half a century, Comrade Helen died suddenly at the age of 73 on November 28.

I offer the sincere condolences of all members of the Socialist Equality Party in Britain to Helen’s comrades, family and friends in the United States and throughout the world.

Helen was not only respected by those who knew her, but also loved. The outpouring of messages from all over the globe, from comrades of decades-standing as well as those responding to the tributes written by Comrades David North and Patrick Martin, is a testament to an extraordinary leader in our world party.

Helen was intelligent, compassionate and cultured. She possessed a wonderful sense of humour. She was a great friend, a reliable confidante offering excellent and, if necessary, frank advice, and she was immensely cultured. Being her house guest was, for me, a privilege and a joy.

But all of this was an expression of the profound socialist convictions that had shaped her over a lifetime of political struggle. And Helen’s best advice, to me and so many others, was always political, rooted as it was in both study and struggle.

In all things, Helen was true to the core of her being. She was a Trotskyist, an enemy of nationalism, an opponent of Stalinism and Pabloism, dedicated to the struggle for the international unification of the working class for world socialist revolution.

It is in the sphere of politics that she will be remembered by future generations.

Helen was a political leader in the proper sense of the term. In the US and throughout the International Committee, as an internationalist she fought tenaciously for our perspective and to educate others so that they could do the same.

I, like others, have been reading some of Helen’s writings over the past days. They are steeped in an all-rounded appreciation of the significance of the International Committee of the Fourth International’s struggle against Pabloism, which culminated in the split with the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP). Some of her articles have already been quoted. Permit me to cite two more examples.

In her 1997 essay, “Ebonics and the danger of racial politics: A socialist viewpoint,” Helen drew attention to Claude McKay’s series of questions posed to Trotsky during the Fourth Congress of the Communist International in 1922 on the “Negro question.” Helen described Trotsky’s response as elaborating “the perspective of proletarian internationalism against all forms of nationalism.” This is what Trotsky wrote:

It is of the utmost importance, today, immediately, to have a number of enlightened, young, self-sacrificing Negroes, however small their number, filled with enthusiasm for the raising of the material and moral level of the great mass of Negroes, and at the same time mentally 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.

That is the tradition in which Helen stands. After explaining that this socialist perspective was betrayed by Stalinism and Pabloism, which facilitated the growth and dominance of black nationalism, she then wrote:

The only party that opposed nationalism in the sixties and seventies was the Workers League, the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party. Our party, firmly based on the perspective of proletarian internationalism, understands that not a single problem that faces the working class in any country can be solved within the framework of national boundaries. Workers cannot take a single step forward without recognizing and understanding the international character of the struggles they are engaged in and the need to organize as an independent international force.

In 2000, she replied to a reader's question on the Workers World Party and why we said it supported the Democratic Party. Helen responded once again by returning to political fundamentals, writing:

In the mid-1950s [Sam] Marcy joined those elements within the Fourth International who began to abandon the struggle against Stalinism, claiming that in order to fight imperialism it was necessary to adapt to the Soviet bureaucracy. He rejected the perspective of international socialism and the revolutionary role of the working class in favor of supporting the bureaucratic regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, as well as the bourgeois nationalist movements and governments in the former colonies...

In the WWP several ideological tendencies of an essentially reactionary character converge. These include the outlook of protest politics, Stalinism, bourgeois nationalism and forms of identity politics such as black nationalism. All of these are hallmarks of what we have often called middle-class radicalism, i.e., a political perspective that reflects the interests not of the working class, but rather of middle class layers that are dissatisfied with their position in capitalist society, but incapable of advancing a genuinely revolutionary opposition to the status quo. In capitalist society,

only a program that articulates the independent interests of the working class and fights to establish the unity of the working class and its political independence from all sections of the bourgeoisie—liberal as well as conservative—can provide the basis for a revolutionary socialist movement.

Her writings, which are so clear, and every single aspect of her life and work confirm that Helen was an extraordinary person. She was won to Trotskyism, consciously and fully, as a student, and went on to dedicate half a century of her life to the liberation of humanity from class oppression. Precious few people can make a similar claim.

But Helen was one of a generation of leaders in the United States that kept to the same path, who dedicated themselves to opposing Pabloism in all its manifestations as the essential basis for building the Fourth International—those who fought alongside her and remained her closest comrades and friends.

It was they who led the fight against the degeneration of the WRP. And by educating the generations of cadre that have followed, mine and others, and in this way ensuring the continuity of Trotskyism, they have provided the working class with the revolutionary leadership it must have.

This is the universal within the specifics of what is being said of Helen today. Helen was among the best of her generation, and, as was proved in 1985-86, was one of the guardians and partisans of a world perspective and the Fourth International, which will determine what future awaits humanity, socialism or barbarism.

To mark Helen's life is to recognise her place of honour in the history of the Fourth International. And for all our members everywhere, young and old, this also means taking to heart Trotsky's advice to comrades on Lenin's death, recognising that, under conditions of a mounting global revolutionary crisis, "Your responsibility has increased."



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