“What the life of Comrade Helen shows is the power of the Trotskyist movement itself”

Wasantha Rupasinghe
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We are publishing here the tribute to Comrade Helen Halyard given by Wasantha Rupasinghe, a leading member of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka), to the memorial meeting held for Helen on December 3.

Comrades,

I bring the deepest condolences from myself and the SEP in Sri Lanka on the unexpected departure of Comrade Helen. We salute Comrade Helen’s heroic revolutionary life in defense of Trotskyism for over five decades, that is, for her entire adult life.

I was lucky to meet comrade Helen on a number of occasions, and it was in 2019 that I personally met her for the last time, when Comrade Jayasekera and I visited Detroit for the International Summer School organized by the SEP in the United States. The outbreak of the deadly COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 prevented us from making such visits and thus meeting again in person.

Throughout the last three years, though new technology has enabled us to deepen our political collaboration on a daily basis, International Committee comrades have not been able to physically meet one another.

The last time we met comrade Helen was immensely memorable. It was particularly important because what was discussed at the summer school was the historical origins and political consequences of the International Committee of the Fourth International’s split with the Workers Revolutionary Party, the consummation of a political civil war within the ICFI.

I clearly remember that throughout the school, as at previous such events in the US in which I participated, Comrade Helen made powerful contributions during the discussions. She spoke with great confidence and a deep understanding of Marxism and the history of the Trotskyist movement, drawn from her decades-long experience in the party.

On that occasion, she brought us to the Motown Museum in Detroit and also the Detroit Institute of Art. She passionately elucidated on the art works, while explaining the remarkable history bound up with them. Throughout the visit, I was amazed by her knowledge of the art works.

More senior comrades in Sri Lanka frequently recall the remarkable experience of Helen’s visit to Sri Lanka in late 1992, part of her world tour as presidential candidate of the Workers League, the predecessor of the SEP in the US. It was a very powerful political event.

She addressed six well-attended public meetings organized by the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the predecessor of the SEP in Sri Lanka. The first meeting was held in Ambalangoda in the southern province. The following day, she addressed a meeting in Kandy in the central province. The next day she spoke before an audience of about 350 students, youth, workers and academics at the University of Peradeniya in the Kandy area.

Then she addressed a meeting in Bandarawela, a plantation area about 200 kilometers from Colombo. At this meeting, in response to remarks made by an area leader of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), Helen explained the deeply rooted collaboration between her party, the Workers League, and the RCL in Sri Lanka, based upon a common program and perspective of international socialism. She pointed out that those comrades who became founding members of the Workers League in 1966 were expelled from the Socialist Workers Party over their demand for a discussion of the LSSP’s great betrayal in 1964, when it joined the bourgeois coalition government of Madam Sirima Bandaranaike.

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After that, she spoke at an RCL public meeting in Colombo. She also addressed a meeting of more than a hundred students, workers and academics at the University of Colombo.

On her way to Katunayake International Airport for her return flight to the US, Helen spoke to hundreds of Katunayake Free Trade Zone workers. Helen repeatedly recalled this experience when we met her in Detroit. Many Sri Lankan comrades who met Helen during her visit to Sri Lanka have been recalling her powerful oratory skills and also her kind-heartedness.

The comprehensive and educational obituary of Comrade Helen published in the WSWS provides a detailed analysis of her unwavering political life as an internationalist and Trotskyist. I was particularly moved by the following point made in the article: “Her decision to join the Trotskyist movement was a highly conscious political act.”

What we can see is that throughout the last five decades she fearlessly fought for Trotskyism on the basis of a deep understanding of scientific socialism. What the life of Comrade Helen shows is the power of the Trotskyist movement itself. It has the power to attract extraordinary comrades on the basis of the program of world socialist revolution, and the ability to train them as great revolutionary leaders who fight until their last breath for that revolutionary perspective.

When they die and leave the revolutionary stage, workers throughout the word feel grief, but at the same time they recall the brave struggle carried out by these comrades for the emancipation of humankind. No movement in the world outside of the ICFI is able to have this impact.

There are invaluable lessons to be learned from the revolutionary life of Comrade Helen for the entire party, and particularly for the younger generation. We will carry forward her struggle until the end.

Your revolutionary memory will be lasting, dear Comrade Helen!

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