

“Workers could see in Helen the potential for what they as a class could and must become”

Keith Jones
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We are publishing here the tribute to Helen Halyard given by Keith Jones, the national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (Canada), to a memorial meeting for Comrade Helen held by the Socialist Equality Party (US) and the International Committee of the Fourth International on Sunday, December 3. Helen died suddenly at the age of 73 on November 28.

To Helen’s family and to all the leaders and cadre of our American section, I would like to extend—on behalf of the members and supporters of the Socialist Equality Party (Canada)—my deepest condolences at the sudden death of Helen, our Helen.

I am proud to have been Helen’s comrade and friend. As one who had the privilege to work with her over many decades, I can attest that there was no element of exaggeration or rhetorical flourish in Comrade North’s *World Socialist Web Site* tribute to Helen. For half a century, she was a powerful force in the US Workers League, the SEP and the International Committee of the Fourth International.

Helen’s selflessness and energy were matched and animated by her commitment to revolutionary internationalist principles in the fight for the liberation of the working class.

Helen was among that exceptional group of younger Workers League members, led by Comrade North, who came forward politically in the aftermath of Wohlforth’s despicable betrayal and determinedly drew its lessons. They worked systematically to reforge the party’s Trotskyist foundations, placing the struggle against Pabloism and to reappropriate the entire legacy of the Trotskyist movement at the centre of an audacious turn to the working class.

Within that leadership group, Helen made her own unique contribution, one that drew on her many strengths—the bugle that complemented, amplified and

enriched the whole orchestra.

As Helen was at the centre of the party’s work for a half century, it is impossible to even begin to acknowledge all her contributions. But I do think it important to note that in 1985-86, during and in the immediate aftermath of the split with the neo-Pabloite Workers Revolutionary Party, at a time when Comrade North was necessarily travelling, Comrade Helen as the assistant national secretary of the Workers League played an important role in anchoring the party on a day-to-day basis, politically and organizationally. A vital part of that included ensuring that the membership was being clarified about the fundamental issues of program, perspective and class orientation at stake in the split with the nationalist-opportunists of the WRP.

Workers responded powerfully to Helen—to her indignation at social injustice, her confidence in the revolutionary role of the working class, and her commitment to socialist principles—because they could see in her the potential for what they as a class can and must become.

In the work of the revolutionary party, there are many difficult and at times stressful discussions. I can recall numerous times when at the conclusion of such a discussion, Comrade Helen succinctly summarized the hard-won political conclusions and, on that basis, directed us to the political-organizational tasks that flowed from them and would enable those conclusions to temper the party cadre and find root in the working class.

Helen was the real deal. There was no artifice about her. She was generous, concerned with comrades’ well-being, exuded a zest for life, great intellectual curiosity and a true tenderness. But when the political issues became clear and the chips were down, she could be counted on to be all in on the political struggle.

Helen’s indefatigable spirit was not based on any superficial optimism, on unwillingness to recognize problems or the hope that they could be wished away. Her revolutionary optimism was founded in Marxism, in her fidelity to principles and deep political-theoretical knowledge and understanding.

Helen had nothing but contempt for the pseudo-left purveyors of identity politics, including black nationalism and feminism, and for the privileged middle-class elements who point to the difficulties and backwardness that mar the working class, not to indict capitalism, but to justify their immersion in their personal lives, complacency and self-satisfaction.

For those of us who collaborate closely with the American section, as no doubt for its leaders and members alike, it is difficult to conceive of the US SEP without Comrade Helen, such was her role in the life of the party. That said, she has left a rich political legacy embodied in the cadre of the party she did so much to build and train. That legacy lives on. It will inspire and, above all, politically educate the masses of workers and young people now being propelled into revolutionary struggle by what Trotsky rightly called the “death agony of capitalism.”

That characterization, whose aptness is ever more starkly brought home to us on a daily basis by the squall of inter-connected global crises—economic, geopolitical, health, political and environmental—comes, of course, from the founding document of the Fourth International.

The *Transitional Program* begins by defining the central problem of the epoch. That is the problem that formed the content of Comrade Helen’s life—the struggle to resolve the crisis of revolutionary proletarian leadership. While that problem endures, in so far as the world Trotskyist movement today is in a far stronger position to bring about its resolution, it is in no small part due to Comrade Helen’s five-decade-long struggle for socialist internationalist principles as a leader of the Workers League, SEP and ICFI.



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