

“Helen was convinced the international socialist programme of our world party would resonate with the working class”

Ulrich Rippert
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We are publishing here the tribute to Helen Halyard written by Ulrich Rippert, the former national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party of Germany (Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei), founding member in 1971 of its predecessor, the League of Socialist Workers (Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter), and member of the WSWs International Editorial Board. Comrade Helen died suddenly at the age of 73 on November 28.

Dear comrades,

I was unfortunately unable to take part in the memorial service for comrade Helen Halyard because I was in hospital. In addition to the many very moving contributions already made in honour of this great fighter for world socialism, I would like to relate a few thoughts and memories.

The American section of our world party, first the Workers League (WL) and now the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), played a central role in our political work in Germany from the very outset. In this regard, Helen, who played such an outstanding leadership role in the WL/SEP, was also very important to us here.

When we founded the German section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter (BSA), in September 1971, the Workers League was not directly, but rather indirectly heavily involved.

Two years earlier, in the summer of 1969, I met Bill Brust, who had a research and teaching position at the University of Frankfurt. In a series of long conversations, Bill told me about the great struggles of American workers and explained the international socialist perspective of the Workers League. That was a revelation for me.

I had just finished my apprenticeship at a large

metalworking company and was looking for a political orientation. At that time, the anti-Vietnam War movement was raging in Germany, and on the walls of many homes in Frankfurt, Berlin and other university cities you could read the words: “Yankee go home!”

A party that relied on the strength of the American working class and set itself the goal of challenging and overthrowing imperialism at the centre of its power had to be a courageous and strong party. This had an enormous impact on me.

In the summer of 1971, I attended the Young Socialists educational summer camp in Britain and met David North, who was delighted to meet young workers and students from Germany. If my memory serves me right, I also met Helen for the first time at this summer camp.

Although we could only speak with the help of a translator—my English was at that time very inadequate—Helen immediately reminded me of Bill’s reports on the strength of American workers. She radiated self-confidence and optimism. Her straightforwardness seemed typical of workers I had also got to know here in Germany.

Later, we often met at international conferences and party educational schools. We didn’t always have time for in-depth conversations. Helen was always very busy, taking care of the so-called small and personal matters of comrades with great empathy.

But once, when I was a guest in her flat, I came back from an excursion. Comrades had shown me the huge area of the Ford Rouge complex, and I was deeply impressed. I said to Helen: “I didn’t realise that the construction of Ford Rouge started in the same year as the Russian Revolution in 1917.” We had a long

conversation about the significance for the European revolution of the fact that the ruling class in the US had managed to hold back the American working class at that time.

Then Helen suddenly laughed and said: “But you know what, Uli, the coming revolution will be different. Globalisation has changed everything. This time it will start as a world revolution and no one will be able to hold back the workers here in the US.”

Helen could laugh with her eyes and her enthusiasm was infectious. She was firmly convinced that the international socialist programme of our world party would resonate strongly with the working class.

I think it was during that stay that Helen and Sheila invited me to attend a concert with Nina Simone. It was an unforgettable evening.

Helen combined her deep convictions in a socialist future for humanity with a great zest for life. Trotsky probably had political cadres like Helen in mind when he said at a celebration to mark the founding of the Fourth International in October 1938:

Dear friends, we are not a party as other parties... Yes, our party takes each one of us wholly. But in return it gives to every one of us the highest happiness: the consciousness that one participates in the building of a better future, that one carries on his shoulders a particle of the fate of mankind, and that one's life will not have been lived in vain.

Yes, we are saddened by Helen's untimely and unexpected death. We miss her vibrancy, her convictions and laughter. She lives on, however, and will remain eternally alive in our memories and in the party in which she played such a decisive role.

Best regards,

Uli



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