

“Helen was imbued with confidence in the revolutionary capacity of the working class and the power of political principle”

Clara Weiss
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We are publishing here the tribute to Helen Halyard written by Clara Weiss, the national secretary of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (US) and member of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site.

It is difficult to do justice to an individual like Helen. I would like to highlight only two elements that stood out to me.

The first was her extraordinary firmness of principle. Everyone who ever met Helen knows that she was tremendous fun and a deeply human, sensitive and empathetic individual, who radiated love of life and joy of struggle. But she was above all a figure of exceptional political and moral firmness and character.

She had a very objective attitude toward all historical questions, above all the history of the movement. She had not only thoroughly assimilated the great historical questions on the basis of which she herself and her entire generation had been won to Trotskyism, but she also continued to rework them, based on new developments in the class struggle.

She often spoke about the struggle against black nationalism, which won her to Marxism. She understood the lessons from that struggle, not simply from the standpoint of her individual political biography, but rather from the standpoint of the tasks facing Marxists in the struggle to train revolutionary workers. She therefore continued to place great emphasis in her own work, over decades, on the struggle against racialism and all forms of nationalism that are deployed by the bourgeoisie to divide the working class.

It is worth highlighting some of the works she wrote or co-wrote for the WSWS: *Ebonics* and the *Danger of*

Racial Politics, the review of Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow*, and a review of the movie *Judas and the Black Messiah*. All of them were thoughtful, principled and serious Marxist works.

Many comrades, especially young comrades, have noted how much they learned from Helen as a teacher, mentor and friend. While true, none of these terms fully captures the complexity and richness of her relationship with the party cadre, of which she was such a central part and leader for an entire historical period. To the terms above, I would add that she was like a political rock.

She was someone everyone knew they could lean on for advice, both as individual cadre and the party as a whole. She was imbued with a deep, lived confidence in the revolutionary capacity of the working class and the power of political principle. This shaped her entire conduct toward the cadre.

She dedicated great energy, thought and attention to political education, especially of the newest and youngest members of the party, for whom she always had curiosity, time and understanding. When she was asked for her views on political, historical or cultural matters, her comments would always be thoughtful, honest, to the point and informed by a serious and very objective consideration of the history and principles of the movement.

When she criticized, it was never personal, but a matter of principle and politics. When she praised, it was never flattery. Precisely because of that, her words carried enormous weight. She always articulated her views from the standpoint of the development of the revolutionary cadre, the vanguard of the working class. She was “the real thing,” a worker won to Trotskyism,

a true revolutionary fighter for great historical principles, and she knew it.

The other element that stands out to me is how cultured and dignified she was. I know I am not the only one who learned a tremendous amount from her about the Harlem Renaissance and other fascinating elements of American and African-American culture, especially in music. She was an avid reader, and took interest in all aspects of politics, history and culture, from the Soviet Union, to Europe, South Africa and the United States. But she was cultured in a broader sense.

She had a keen awareness of the fact that the Trotskyist movement contains within it all the progressive traditions of human society and culture. In the last longer letter I received from her, she commented on the implications of the dissolution of the USSR and the record of the ICFI's intervention in the crisis of Stalinism.

She wrote: "Only the ICFI carries forward the heritage and legacy of the Marxist movement and the struggle waged by Trotsky against the monstrous counterrevolutionary bureaucracy. ... Stalin murdered more communists than Hitler and Mussolini combined. Stalin's aim was to stamp out the flower of Marxism, but he did not succeed. Trotskyism is the revolutionary alternative and lives through our movement."

I believe this consciousness accounts for her sense of personal and class dignity. There was nothing vain or presumptuous about Helen. But there was a certain pride, a sense of dignity, which was informed by her revolutionary and historical perspective.

This sense of dignity was not lessened, but rather heightened by her deep personal and political understanding of the oppression and suffering that workers often go through. Yet she always saw the working class as a fighting and revolutionary force, first and foremost. She herself had the courage, the dignity and the calm heroism of the conscious fighter from and for the working class.

Someone like Helen cannot be replaced. She was a truly unique personality. Like every great teacher and leader, she taught and led above all by example. Her passing is not only a great loss. It also heightens the political, theoretical and moral responsibility for the entire cadre, including the young members, to fully assimilate the principles and the history to which Helen dedicated her life and to live up to the example she set.

In that sense, she will genuinely live on in the entire movement, in all of its layers and generations, including those that are only now beginning to join our ranks.

Clara



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