“Helen was one of the greatest products to emerge out of the ranks of the American working class”

David Walsh, Joanne Laurier
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We are publishing here the tribute to Helen Halyard written by David Walsh and Joanne Laurier. Walsh is the arts editor of the World Socialist Web Site and Laurier is a major and regular contributor to the arts section of the website. Helen, a leading member of the American and international Trotskyist movement for more than 50 years, died suddenly on November 28 at the age of 73.

Last Sunday’s memorial meeting was very powerful. We knew Helen for 50 years. All that time, in one way or another, directly or indirectly, she was central to our lives. It is challenging to grasp her loss and challenging to express it adequately in words.

Helen was one of the most remarkable people we have ever known, or will ever know. She was one of the greatest products to emerge out of the ranks of the American working class.

She was an indispensable part of this movement’s fabric and substance. She worked with people, talked with them, was curious about and interested in them, tried to figure them out politically and personally, tried to assist them to develop. She wanted to help people understand the party, history, their own role, their potential. She was very serious about serious things, and laughed at other things, including herself sometimes.

That kind of depth and understanding, and sympathy, doesn’t come along every day. We will speak frankly: Younger people should learn from and emulate Helen’s example in many ways. First of all, her study of and concern with the party’s perspective and history. But, as well, Marxist politics is not simply about the right ideas or orientation, it’s also an attitude toward other human beings, their capacities, their failings.

Traveling and petitioning with Helen in Alabama in 1988 was a particularly unforgettable experience. We petitioned from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. six days a week, sometimes six and a half, for seven weeks. We spoke to tens of thousands of black and white workers. In this work, Helen was calm and determined, indefatigable. We succeeded in getting Ed Winn on the presidential ballot. These are episodes that become embedded in you, part of you.

Helen was an irreconcilable revolutionist dedicated to training a new generation of youth as Trotskyists. She was also warm, and the most solid comrade and friend.

We would like to cite some of Helen’s written comments, or comments on which she collaborated.

It is fitting that we include Helen’s observations in 2007 on the death 10 years before of Jean Brust, another remarkable figure in the history of this movement. Helen might have been writing about herself when she remarked that “I will never forget the fierce determination that [Jean] brought to all of her political work. She seemed to enjoy reserves of energy that just welled up from the principled convictions that constituted the core of her existence.”

Furthermore, “Jean encouraged me to read the classics of Marx and Trotsky and to study the role of socialists in the early struggles of the American working class. What became even clearer to me in speaking with this comrade was the thoroughly reactionary character of black nationalism. In Marx’s *Capital* he makes the point that the white workers can never be free as long as the black workers are in chains. This can be said in another way. There can be no liberation of the black workers and youth without a combined struggle of the entire working

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class."

Helen returned to these themes innumerable times in her political life. Once learned, they were inseparable from her.

Hatred of racism and backwardness, promoted by the ruling classes, was an essential part of her being. In 2004, writing about the US Justice Department's opening of an investigation into the horrible death of Emmett Till in 1955, Helen wrote that "the methods of racist violence and cover-up remain as American as cherry pie. Only the form has changed. In the 1950s the Southern power structure portrayed blacks as subhuman. Today American imperialism, in its drive to colonize Iraq, depicts the Arab masses in the same vein, and uses methods against the prisoners at Abu Ghraib that the Ku Klux Klan would recognize."

Helen spoke and wrote scathingly about the privileged African-American layer that developed from the 1970s onward and its indifference to the poverty of the mass of the black and white working class. She and Fred wrote a comment in 2012 about *The New Jim Crow*, by Michelle Alexander. They noted that those presiding over the appalling conditions of inner-city youth and workers "include many thousands of black elected officials, mayors of major cities and state and local officials. In fact, the criminalization of the poor that has led to the vast expansion of the prison population is only one side of the equation. The past 40 years have seen a historically unprecedented stratification of the African American population alongside the immense growth of social inequality in America as a whole."

Finally, in her lecture on Ebonics from 1997, Helen argued that the "great unmentionable in American politics is that we live in a society that is becoming more and more polarized socially. Everything in this country is described in racial and ethnic terms, rather than from the standpoint of class.

"As socialists we reject these false views and call on black, white, Hispanic and immigrant workers to unite in the struggle for social equality…

"We see human progress as bound up with the fight to unify workers internationally for the purpose of reorganizing society on the basis of human need, not profit. As socialists, we have a firm belief in the ability of mankind to overcome backwardness and oppression.

"Throughout history, the greatest minds have held the perspective that mankind could overcome the conditions of poverty and hunger and fight for a just and humane society. As Marxists, it is to this goal that we subscribe."

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