# “Helen profoundly influenced the character of the party in the US and internationally”

**Julie Hyland**
**28 December 2023**

*We are publishing here the tribute to Helen Halyard written by Julie Hyland, a member of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site and for many years the assistant national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (UK). Comrade Helen, a leading member of the SEP (US) and the International Committee of the Fourth International for more than 50 years, died suddenly on November 28 at the age of 73.*

My heartfelt condolences to Helen’s family and comrades in the US. She was an extraordinary comrade and a wonderful personality, whose sudden loss is felt by all of us who had the privilege to know her.

Writing on Helen’s place in the Trotskyist movement, comrade David North explained: “A revolutionary party educates its members. But the political, social, cultural and moral character of the party is, in turn, profoundly influenced by the character of its cadre.”

Helen profoundly influenced the character of the party in the US and internationally.

I first saw Helen at the Workers Revolutionary Party’s Marxist College of Education in Parwich. It was the early 1980s and I believe she was part of a delegation to an international school, although the exact date escapes me.

I was aware of Helen through the campaign in defence of Gary Tyler. In truth, she was one of the few American comrades I can say that about, even though I was at the time the national secretary of the WRP’s Young Socialists.

My patchy recollection is not primarily the fault of memory. In late October 1982, Comrade North had informed the WRP leadership of his disagreements with Healy’s theoretical work and the general opportunist drift within the WRP and the International Committee of the Fourth International. Mike Banda and Cliff Slaughter initially declared their agreement with the criticisms, but reneged very quickly when it became clear a principled discussion threatened the unity of the WRP leadership. Healy made no attempt to engage with the criticisms, instead denouncing Comrade North for “interfering” in the affairs of the WRP and “disrupting” his cadre. (See: Gerry Healy and his place in the history of the Fourth International).

Such was the attitude of the WRP leadership towards the ICFI and its cadre that fraternal relations between comrades internationally (and indeed, nationally) were actively discouraged, if not sabotaged.

This was ended by the struggle led by Comrade North and the US section in 1985-86, which culminated in the victory of the Trotskyist majority in the ICFI over the national opportunists of the WRP.

This is when Helen really entered my political consciousness. I was in awe of Helen and remained so over the nearly 40 years that I came to know her and count her as my friend.

She was formidable. She had earned her political spurs fighting against the stream—rejecting the petty-bourgeois protest politics that dominated the anti-Vietnam War and Civil Rights movements in favour of continuing Trotsky’s struggle to build the Fourth International as the world party of socialist revolution.

This was the driving force of Helen’s entire adult life. Working in the cockpit of world reaction, she knew very well that US capitalism cannot be defeated by pressure or persuasion, but only by the revolutionary struggle of the US working class as part of an international class movement.

That accounted in no small part for why she could be tough and straight-talking, with no time for BS or political backsliding. It’s the same reason that, just three years after joining the Trotskyist movement, she

© World Socialist Web Site

responded powerfully to the fight against Wohlforth's renegacy, and then, a little over a decade later, to the WRP leadership's own backsliding into Pabloite revisionism.

In the aftermath of the 1985-86 split, under conditions in which the Workers League, (forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party), was leading the political, theoretical and cultural reorientation of the international movement, Helen's role as its assistant national secretary was critical.

Especially for those of us who had gone through the Sheila Torrance school of organisational miseducation. In place of opportunistic short cuts, with its emphasis on "numbers," and indifference—even contempt—for the membership, Helen understood that the strength of the vanguard party is its cadre, outside of which "there does not exist a single revolutionary current on this planet really meriting the name." (See Trotsky: *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International*).

Helen was also funny, warm, generous, and had a heart of gold. She lived life to the max and with such panache—I have to smile at the photographs of her campaigning outside steel works or auto plants, with her statement necklace, rings and bangles. I always looked forward to the chance to spend time with her because it was guaranteed that I would come away knowing more than I did and having enjoyed myself.

Looking through email correspondence between us over the years, I am struck by her constant emphasis on the importance of cadre—not as a general, abstract category, but as living, breathing, *real* comrades.

In one, for example, she wrote:

> In honor of international woman's day I forward you the reminiscences I wrote about Jean [Brust] on the occasion of the 15th anniversary since her death. I really feel that it is critical to interview Barbara [Slaughter] and review the political and theoretical struggles through which she has passed for the education of a younger generation.
>
> Love ya and all the best,
>
> Helen

In another:

> Our work has such tremendous meaning… I am fortunate to be in a world movement with so many brilliant, compassionate, and warm members.

Of course, Helen played a leading role in making this so.

I can think of no more fitting conclusion than to quote Helen's own words on Comrade Jean Brust:

> Small-minded people sometimes suggest, particularly concerning women, that a devotion to a great cause and great historical principles makes you an insensitive and uncaring person. Nothing could be further from the truth. Jean, who spent her entire life fighting for the betterment of mankind and the cause of the working class, was among the most caring and sensitive people I have ever worked with.
>
> (*Jean Brust: An example to the new generation*, Helen Halyard, 26 November 2007)

Helen too leaves an example that will inspire and educate future generations of class fighters.

Long live the memory of Helen Halyard!

Julie Hyland

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**wsws.org/contact**

© World Socialist Web Site