

“When I think of the party in America, I think of Helen”

Laura Tiernan

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We are publishing here the tribute to Helen Halyard written by Laura Tiernan, a member of the National Committee of the Socialist Equality Party of Britain and writer for the World Socialist Web Site. Comrade Helen, a leader of the Socialist Equality Party (US) and the International Committee of the Fourth International for more than half a century, died suddenly on November 28 at the age of 73.

My thoughts are with Helen’s closest comrades from the Socialist Equality Party in the United States who have fought beside Helen for more than 50 years. What an enormous political and personal loss. What an extraordinary, meaningful, historic and beautiful life.

Helen was an inspiring leader who believed in the cadre and knew how to bring out the best in each of us. Her death is difficult to comprehend. She was so deeply embedded in the International Committee of the Fourth International’s fight for Trotskyism in the American and international working class that it’s hard to think of one without the other. When I think of the party in America, I think of Helen.

Helen’s life had a deep and lasting impact on our world party. She was central to the political integration of the ICFI sections in the aftermath of the split with the national-opportunist leadership of the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP), visiting Australia, Sri Lanka, Britain and Germany, where she spoke at public meetings and party gatherings. Her contribution to re-grounding the cadre in the political and theoretical traditions of the Trotskyist movement was immense.

Helen had a huge influence on comrades like me who joined in the immediate aftermath of the 1985-86 split. In a political environment in the late 1980s and 1990s dominated by a shameless renunciation of socialism by the national-reformist parties and trade unions, and by their apologists among the 1960s ex-radicals who were

embracing capitalism and the stock market, Helen made the fight for Marxism seem as natural as the air we breathe. She wholeheartedly embraced the fight to build the party, with all the difficulties this entails, leading by example.

Her clarity in party discussions was an education. Her patience, generosity and kindness toward party members will never be forgotten. Despite the intensity of practical work such as the presidential election campaigns, Helen always paid careful attention to our political education and all-round development. This made a deep impression, developing in us a lasting aversion to the mindless activism promoted by the WRP leadership.

In 1992, we were excited to learn that Helen would be running for president of the United States. It testifies to the international integration of the party’s work that while comrades from International Committee sections campaigned in the US, Helen took the US election campaign to workers worldwide.

On Election Day, I was assigned to work with Helen at a polling booth in Detroit. Not a single worker failed to stop as she spoke powerfully about her discussions with workers in Sri Lanka, counterposing the fight for the international unity of the working class to the economic nationalism espoused by the trade union bureaucracy.

Helen and Tim’s home was at the glowing centre of the renaissance of Marxism after the split. The gatherings they hosted enriched my knowledge and understanding of the history of Trotskyism, as well as film, music, literature and life in general. It was Helen and Tim who first showed me the internet in 1994, explaining its vast potential for the global integration of the party’s work.

I have just received a message from a new young

member in Northern Ireland, who writes: “I read the tribute for Comrade Helen. What an amazing inspirational woman. It’s because of amazing people like her I decided to join the SEP. What she did for the fight for socialism was heroic and truly inspirational. I hope we can continue to keep fighting for incredible people like her.”

Thank you dear Helen for everything you gave to the party. Your political legacy will live on in all that we do.

Laura



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