

“To Helen ours was a party of the great principles of internationalism and the central revolutionary role of the working class”

Paul Sherman
8 January 2024

It has now been a little over a month since the passing of comrade Helen. In many respects I still find it somewhat unbelievable that after working with her for nearly 50 years I will no longer have the opportunity to talk with her, to share political experiences, to hear her insightful comments. Above all, I will miss her deep concern for the development of the party, and particularly its cadre.

I first joined the Young Socialists and the Workers League in 1975, just a few months after the desertion of Tim Wohlforth, a founding member and leader of the Workers League. Living in New York at the time, I met Helen very shortly after joining. I had many discussions with her about the desertion of Wohlforth and the role of Pabloism and its followers' adaptation to Stalinism.

I particularly remember a discussion we had one Saturday as we took a lunch break while selling the *Bulletin* on Utica Avenue in the Crown Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn. In that discussion she explained to me the betrayal of the LSSP in Ceylon, now Sri Lanka, when it joined the bourgeois government in 1964.

She explained how serious this was—the first time in history a party claiming to be Trotskyist joined a bourgeois government. This betrayal confirmed the struggle waged by the International Committee of the Fourth International against the Socialist Workers Party's (SWP) reunification with the Pabloites the year before.

Nine members of the SWP, including Tim Wohlforth, demanded a discussion within the SWP on how such a betrayal could take place, knowing that it would lead to their expulsion. Helen was extremely proud that our party was formed on such powerful revolutionary principles, which is why she said not a single member followed Wohlforth back into the SWP.

To Helen ours was a party of the great principles of internationalism and the central revolutionary role of the working class. She would explain that there was no reforming the capitalist system or hoping that bourgeois

nationalist or Stalinist parties could be pressured to the left. She would often paraphrase Trotsky, stating that the crisis of mankind can be reduced to the crisis of revolutionary leadership of the working class, and it was to resolve that crisis of leadership that Helen dedicated her life.

These were the principles which drove our many discussions in those early years. While campaigning on high school campuses, she would explain that single issue protests which were promoted by the SWP against the Vietnam War were a trap for the students and kept them within the orbit of the Democratic Party.

I remember the report Helen gave to a Young Socialists regional committee meeting a few days after she read a brief piece in the *New York Times* reporting how a 16-year-old youth, Gary Tyler, was facing execution in Louisiana for a crime he did not commit.

In the report, Helen explained that the frame-up of Gary Tyler was an attack on the entire working class, an example of capitalist justice. She said that we needed to oppose those who would try to limit this to an issue of “southern racism” and appeals to the Democrats to grant his freedom. Instead, Helen explained that this was authored by the Democrats, including Louisiana's then-governor, Edwin Edwards. Gary's case, she insisted, was an example to the whole working class of what the ruling class was prepared to do to maintain its power. Gary's freedom would be won through the struggles to unite both black and white workers against capitalism.

Helen was extremely affected by the assassination of comrade Tom Henehan on the night of October 15, 1977, while he was supervising a Young Socialists dance in support of Gary Tyler. Tom and Helen had worked very closely together in building the Workers League.

But Tom's assassination did not deter Helen from building the revolutionary party. In a discussion I had with her about two months afterwards, she stressed that the most decisive issue of our time was the building of a revolutionary

leadership in the working class and that Tom's murder was an attempt to prevent that from happening. Far from representing its strength, his murder represented the fear that the ruling class felt from the building of a revolutionary party.

In 1984, Helen was extremely proud to represent the party as its vice-presidential candidate alongside Ed Winn. This was the first time that the party was able to field candidates in a presidential race.

After five years of massive concessions and industrial layoffs, as well as the out-and-out union busting of the air traffic controllers, the Phelps Dodge copper miners and many others, the working class was looking for a way forward against the collaboration of the trade union apparatus with the Democratic Party.

Helen worked tirelessly during that campaign to expound the party's platform to workers. She was especially critical of the role played by Jesse Jackson in his bid for the Democratic nomination, explaining to countless workers and youth that Jackson was a safety valve to keep the anger of the working class tied to the Democratic Party.

Helen explained that his Operation Push was not a vehicle to end inequality, but a means of developing a black upper-middle class that would be used as a buffer against the working class.

Helen opposed all forms of identity politics that sought to divide the working class along racial, national, and ethnic lines. She understood, as she often wrote, that only through the unity of the working class could capitalism be destroyed, and war and inequality ended.

Helen was often sharp and unyielding when she detected an incorrect political position. The first, but I must say, not the only time I found myself on the receiving end of her criticism was when I was conducting the task of contacting other YS branch secretaries to discuss their progress and the distribution of the *Young Socialist* newspaper. In discussing means of increasing the circulation I proposed to one branch secretary that he organize a sale of the *Young Socialist* and call all their members and ask them to come out and "help" sell the paper.

As soon as I got off the call, Helen asked me if I thought we were part of the Catholic Charities asking for donations. She went on to explain that we don't ask for "help" because this is the fight of the working class. For Helen, the building of the revolutionary party was an objective necessity that workers had to take up. It was not something for liberal dogooders, but a necessity that arose from the contradictions of capitalism.

On another occasion, I organized a walkout of just students at my high school to oppose budget cuts in the district. Afterwards, Helen was critical because such actions divided

the students from the teachers and left the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) leadership off the hook. She explained that it was the responsibility of youth to turn to the working class and work to expose the reactionary role of the trade union bureaucracy.

Helen especially showed her strength during the struggle against the betrayal of Trotskyism by the renegades of the Workers Revolutionary Party—Gerry Healy, Michael Banda and Cliff Slaughter. Their adaptation to Stalinism and the bourgeois-nationalist movements in the Middle East represented the greatest betrayal of the principled positions for which the Socialist Labour League had fought for decades, in particular in the major splits in the ICFI in 1953 and 1963.

For Helen, the building of an international revolutionary movement around common principles and ideals was the most important task a person could dedicate their life to.

I last saw Helen in December 2019. Unfortunately, the outbreak of the horrific COVID-19 pandemic prevented us from meeting again personally, although we of course continued to collaborate over the phone and in meetings.

At our last meeting in 2019, Helen gave me a copy of a biography of Frederick Douglass. I had at that time been reading a biography of John Brown. We discussed the political ideas and different tendencies within the abolitionist movement and how those ideas developed over decades and prepared men's minds for the Civil War. In our talk she compared the long period of reaction that preceded the Civil War to the period of reaction today, as we are again headed to massive revolutionary upheavals. She emphasized that our party was laying the foundations for that movement through the work of educating and developing cadre in the working class.

Helen understood that she was fighting for great ideas, that our party represents the only tendency in the working class that stands for internationalism, for socialism, for the complete physical and spiritual liberation of the working class and all of humanity from capitalism. She was hostile to all those who sought to keep the working class tied to reformism, identity politics and nationalism.

It is a pity that Helen will not see the triumph of the working class and socialism, but she was deeply confident of that triumph. Her ideas and work will live on in the party that she built and the cadre that she inspired.



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