

“Helen was one of those comrades in the leadership that I and other members looked to for clarity on the political issues involved and an internationalist perspective”

Kate Randall
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We are publishing here the tribute to Helen Halyard written by Kate Randall, a member of the World Socialist Web Site editorial board and a member of the Trotskyist movement in the US for more than 50 years. 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.

The great revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg sent a letter from prison to an old comrade, which included the following:

“To be a human being means to joyfully toss your entire life ‘on the giant scales of fate’ if it must be so, and at the same time to rejoice in the brightness of every day and the beauty of every cloud. ... the world is so beautiful, with all its horrors, and would be even more beautiful if there were no weaklings or cowards in it.”

Comrade Helen Halyard would have concurred with these words about the beauty and horrors of the world. And as anyone who ever crossed paths with Helen would testify, she was not one of those weaklings or cowards, but was the strongest and bravest of individuals who would take to task such scoundrels referred to in the quote.

I joined the Workers League not long after Helen did, in 1972, as a college student. Some of my earliest recollections of Helen are related to the party’s struggle against the role of revisionism in the anti-Vietnam War movement. This intervention came less than a decade after the Socialist Workers Party’s reunification with the Pabloites, which rejected the principles of the Open

Letter of 1953.

I remember walking over with Helen and other comrades to the venue where the Student Mobilization Committee (SMC), which the SWP was pivotal in organizing, was holding an event. The Workers League fought indefatigably against the protest politics of the SMC, which were limited to ending the draft and bringing the troops home. Our comrades fought for a revolutionary opposition to the war, for the unity of the international working class against imperialist war and the capitalist system. To a college student unschooled in Marxist politics, this perspective came as a revelation.

The Workers League was imbued, as we are today, with a fight against Pabloite revisionism, and any perspective that substituted a petty-bourgeois or nationalist perspective that rejected the revolutionary role of the working class and the necessity of building the Trotskyist movement to lead it to power. Workers League branches in the early 70s, which included many new, relatively inexperienced members, studied works by Trotsky and writings of the International Committee to steel ourselves in these crucial political questions. These were never considered abstract theoretical questions, but issues of life and death. It was in this spirit that the SEP dedicated our 2023 Summer School to the struggle against Pabloite revisionism.

In the turbulent period in the Workers League leading up to the removal of Tim Wohlforth as national secretary, Helen was one of those comrades in the leadership that I and other members looked to for clarity on the political issues involved and an

internationalist perspective. The same can be said of the split with the Workers Revolutionary Party.

Helen was a powerful speaker and communicator. Whether she was delivering prepared remarks to a public meeting, speaking impromptu to a gathering of workers, or discussing one-on-one with a worker at a factory gate or a student, she was able to bring out the universal in the particular in a way that could be grasped and appreciated while in no way watering it down. Helen was a force of nature, and that power was based not on God-given powers of oratory, but on a grounding in Marxist principles and a determination to fight. I can confidently say that no one who encountered her could easily forget her.

As others have noted, Helen was a precious presence in the lives of the “party kids,” including my own. I honestly don’t know how she found the time with all her political and personal responsibilities to attend birthdays, weddings, graduations, performances, or to just sit and talk. On a very personal note, I was able to turn to her for political advice in the face of discouragement, or a shoulder to cry on when one of life’s roadblocks, detours or tragedies inevitably struck. She could be frank and didn’t hesitate to “take me up sharply,” as is said, when warranted, or provide insight. Her humanity was woven equally through both the personal and political. The personal and political shock I feel with her passing will take time to come to grips with and appreciate, and I know this will take quite some time.

Although the last few years were very difficult for her, she made a point to attend the meeting in Detroit with Gary Tyler, whose struggle for freedom she fought for over decades. She attended online meetings and classes. She marched in a demonstration to oppose the Israeli genocide in Gaza. She identified with the working class and all those oppressed by the capitalist system. She was able to witness the current international upsurge of working class struggles, and the worldwide outrage over the complicity of the imperialist powers in the war on the Palestinians.

Comrades have used many adjectives to describe Helen. I’d like to suggest just a few more—tenacious, hilarious, understanding. She was the best friend and comrade a person could hope to have. But she was *our* comrade. The party will carry forward her memory, but it is the struggle of all us, as conscious revolutionaries,

that will decide.

In closing, I want to quote from a letter Luxemburg sent to a comrade on her arrival in Berlin. She wrote: “I want to affect people like a clap of thunder, to inflame their minds not by speechifying but with the breadth of my vision, the strength of my conviction, and the power of my expression.”

Helen did that and more, and the Socialist Equality Parties and the International Committee of the Fourth International will never forget her contribution to the fight for the World Socialist Revolution, nor will I.

Thank you, comrades.



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