

“Helen Halyard gave to the party, its program, and the international working class, the ‘full measure’ of her life”

Richard Phillips
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We are publishing here a tribute to Helen Halyard written by Richard Phillips, a writer and editor for the World Socialist Web Site and long-time member of the Trotskyist movement in Australia. 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.

Helen’s sudden death has come as a great shock and one that we are all still coming to terms with. My heartfelt condolences go out to all her comrades in the Socialist Equality Party in the US, and especially to those who most closely collaborated with Helen during her decades of unwavering struggle.

Helen was a product of the party’s fight for Trotskyism and against national opportunism—Stalinism, black nationalism, the labour and trade union apparatus and the various manifestations of Pabloite liquidationism—a conscious and fully committed fighter for the political independence of the working class. She was a living expression of the revolutionary nature and fighting capacities of the working class.

As many here have already noted, it is impossible to think about the political struggle waged by the Workers League and the Socialist Equality Party in the US and not have a kaleidoscope of thoughts and images of Helen come rushing into one’s mind. Photographs of Helen speaking with youth, auto workers, Detroit bus drivers and other industrial workers, campaigning with Tom Henahan, in the forefront of the “Free Gary Tyler” campaign, addressing national and international meetings of the movement, and her exceptional work with Nadezhda Joffe and Soviet historian Vadim Rogovin. And perhaps the most electric image of all, Helen’s beaming smile as she is surrounded by scores of women workers at a Sri Lankan free trade zone in 1992.

I first met Helen in late January 1979 in London after being sent to work with the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) in Britain. My first contact with the Socialist Labour

League in Australia was in mid-1975, just prior to the November 11 sacking of the Whitlam Labor government by the governor general, and I joined the party in early 1976.

Helen was the first American Trotskyist that I’d ever directly campaigned with and her revolutionary optimism and energy, her thirst for knowledge and devotion to historical and political truth was inspiring and, like her all-embracing sense of humour, very infectious. Helen explained to me the divisive political role of the Black Panthers in the US and the dead-end of black nationalism. It was a revelation.

We worked for a couple of weeks in London—in Brixton and East Ham—and then along with other international comrades, including Barry Grey, Peter Schwarz, Uli Rippert, Wolfgang Weber, travelled to the WRP’s Marxist College of Education in Parwich, Derbyshire.

It was a bitterly cold winter—England’s worst since 1963—and we were snowed in at Parwich for about two weeks. No one could get in or out of the college, which meant that we had to conduct our own education classes.

We studied Lenin’s *What is to Be Done* and *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back* and presented lectures to each other on these Marxist classics. I remember discussions with Helen and Barry on the Workers League’s 1978 Perspective document and its pamphlet *The Fourth International and the Renegade Wohlforth*. These weeks were seminal in my political development and a world away from the political confusion being created nationally and internationally by the WRP leadership.

Within days of the WRP’s fourth party congress in March 1979, the minority Callaghan Labor government fell, and an election was held that brought the Thatcher Tory government to power.

Helen stayed on in Derbyshire and I was sent to South Yorkshire, both of us participating in the WRP’s election intervention. We remained in these areas following the election, regularly coming into contact with each other on a

fortnightly basis when I was assigned to security at the Parwich college during the rest of that year.

Helen and I were both engaged in distribution of the WRP's daily *Newsline* and other organising work in our respective areas with little time for political discussion. Helen returned to the US later that year. I returned to Australia in July 1980, in the aftermath of the betrayal of the national steel workers strike by the union leadership, a rotten sellout endorsed by the *Newsline* and the WRP.

These were difficult and politically confusing times inside the WRP. Gerry Healy, Michael Banda and Cliff Slaughter were increasingly repudiating Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution—promoting the bourgeois nationalist leaderships in the Middle East—and orienting towards the British Labour Party “lefts,” the Stalinists and the trade union leaderships.

The WRP leadership did all it could to block discussions between members of different sections of the ICFI. And, in the aftermath of David North's Marxist critique of Healy's dialectics and the WRP's opportunist political line in 1982 and 1984 respectively, the WRP leaders threatened a split with the Workers League.

David North was eventually able to present his analysis of the political degeneration of the WRP leadership to the British party membership and all other sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International in 1985, following the eruption of a political crisis inside WRP in the aftermath of the betrayal of the British miners' strike.

North's analysis politically clarified many, many things and won a clear majority in the WRP and the ICFI and there was a decisive break with all the nationalist and liquidationist factions inside the British section. This opened the way for a renaissance of Marxism inside the Trotskyist movement and an unprecedented expansion of its work internationally.

Helen, as assistant national secretary of the Workers League, played a key role in this development, fighting for audacious new interventions in the working class in the US, and collaborating closely with international comrades to develop the work in their sections.

Helen's US presidential election campaign tour that included visits to Sri Lanka and Australia in late 1992 were awe inspiring and had an indelible impact on the hundreds of workers she spoke to.

In the aftermath of the split with the WRP, I had the privilege of visiting the US in the late 1980s and several occasions during the 1990s working with Helen and other US comrades on various ground-breaking campaigns. I also had the good fortune of staying with Helen, enjoying her legendary generosity and good humour. We discussed at

length the political lessons of the degeneration of the WRP. Helen approached this with the utmost objectivity.

Every stay with Helen was an eye-opening cultural experience, enriching my understanding of the democratic gains of the American Revolution and the Civil War, the cultural achievements of the Harlem Renaissance and the significance and political limitations of the civil rights movement. And always a deeper immersion into and appreciation of America's greatest blues and jazz performers.

The last time we spoke together in person was in 2004, a day before I returned to Australia, having spent three months in the US. We had coffee and she generously gave me a wonderful multi-CD collection of Nina Simone, one of her all-time favourites. It was a memory that I'll never forget and is always rekindled whenever I hear Nina Simone.

Helen stands tall as a powerful foundational figure in the struggle for Trotskyism in the past fifty years and lives on in the growing and combative reality of the International Committee of the Fourth International and its fight for world socialist revolution.

In his October 1938 speech “On the Founding of the Fourth International,” Trotsky declared: “We are not a party as other parties. Our ambition is not only to have more members, more papers, more money in the treasury, more deputies. All that is necessary, but only as a means. Our aim is the full material and spiritual liberation of the toilers and exploited through the socialist revolution.”

This was Helen's *raison d'être*, and she gave to the party, its program, and the international working class, the “full measure” of her life. She leaves behind an enduring political contribution to that struggle and one that must be studied and emulated by all who follow.



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