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Obituary

Helena Lopes da Silva (1949-2018)

- Features - In Memoriam - Obituaries and appreciations -

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Helena died on September 8, 2018 at the age of 69, after a life dedicated to socialism. In the early 1970s, she was in Lisbon one of the few activists of the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC), the party that led the armed struggle against the Portuguese colonial regime. She also joined the International Communist League (ICL), which became the Portuguese section of the Fourth International (after 1979 the LCI took the name Revolutionary Socialist Party, PSR).

She took part in the political life of both countries.

In Cape Verde, after independence, some of her comrades played an important role in the ranks of the government, before being expelled because of political differences. She was always part of the struggle for a socialist orientation, and her influence increased over time. In 2011 she supported the election of the current President of the Republic of Cape Verde, Jorge Carlos Fonseca, an independent, and she was a member of the Council of the Republic.

But it was in Portugal that she lived and campaigned the longest. She was a doctor at one of Lisbon's main public hospitals, where she headed the department of surgery for over twenty years. She was an active member of the LCI, then of the PSR, of whose Central Committee she was a member for a time, and she became the first black woman to be the head of an electoral list in the 1994 European elections.

In 1999 she was one of the founders of the Left Bloc, which brought together the majority of the independent radical left in Portugal. From then, she remained an active member of this party.

Her death caused widespread grief and a large number of her party comrades and her friends, gathered to celebrate his memory, were surprised to hear the messages of condolence from two Presidents of the Republic, those of Portugal and Cape Verde.

We reproduce below the unpublished testimony of Helena Lopes da Silva, collected in June 2017 in the context of the project "Women of April", dedicated to women who were active participants during the revolution of April 1974, published by Esquerda.net on September 9, 2018.

April 1974 Women: Testimony of Helena Lopes da Silva (1949-2018)

In June 2017 I had the privilege of meeting Helena at her home to collect her testimony for the project "Women of April". Our conversation of more than three hours – with several breaks to look at photographs and flip through books – was recorded and transcribed and sent to Helena. We had agreed to meet again to continue. Having lived through militant anti-fascist activism, struggling so intensely for the liberation of the former Portuguese colonies, Helena thought she had much more to say. Time passed and, unfortunately, we postponed the continuation of this discussion.

In one of the last e-mails we exchanged, Helena wrote that "time flies " while emphasizing the importance of publishing such testimonies "concerning a domain where the archives of the recent past are rare". And even though

Helena had much more to tell us about this period of her history and ours, here at least, as a tribute to her, is the testimony as I recorded it.

The awakening

Helena Lopes da Silva was born in Cape Verde. After high school, she came to Portugal to go to university. Coming from a family of the Cape Verdean lower middle class, the daughter of a writer, she had always had access to a range of books, which was one of her passions.

From an early age, Helena became aware of the poverty and inequalities that prevailed among the Cape Verdean population.

The clandestine reading of the book of the Cape Verdean writer LuÃ-s Romano, *Famintos, romance de um povo* ("Starving, novel of a people"), when she was only 12 years old, had an importance in her awakening: "I did not always understand it very well, but I began to wonder why there were people dying in the streets without help. It affected me."

Several other episodes marked Helena, such as the day when – at 13 years old – she was confronted with the existence of political prisoners.

"I lived behind the courthouse and I heard a hubbub. We went down the street and saw that the police were there, as well as Cape Verdean political prisoners, but we did not understand the reason for all this because we did not know about the liberation struggle. We started to wonder why some people were arrested and we heard that they were against the Portuguese government and that they wanted better conditions for Cape Verde and Cape Verdeans."

At the age of 15, the first forms of her resistance emerged: "At that time, we were all going to Praça, as we called the central garden, from 6 pm to 8 pm. When Radio Clube from Cape Verde, which was heard in the park, played the national anthem, everyone had to stop and stand up: children, adults, old people... I started to think that there was no reason to stand up. Today, when I think back about it, I realize that nobody told me to do it, nobody explained to me that it was a form of resistance – that's how I see it today, a form of resistance.

At the time, the PIDE already existed [\[1\]](#) and this fear of being seen, of being pointed at, but I did not stand up and I tried to make sure that my friends did not either. "

Helena was particularly marked by another episode:

"One day I went to the dentist in Praia Hospital – Dr. Santa Rita – and while waiting to be treated, I was approached by a political prisoner, watched over by a policeman. He must have found me agreeable and he started talking to me. We established a very moving complicity. The policeman was also an accomplice, letting us talk freely and then agreeing to be our intermediary for exchanging letters and books. I sent this political prisoner the record with the song San Francisco ("Be Sure to Wear Flowers in Your Hair").

As the cover of this record was damaged, he made me a new one with his own drawings of flowers. Later I learned that he was Luandino Vieira, a writer, from Casa des Estudantes do Imperio".

First contact with "the continent "

Aged 15 or 16, Helena took a boat trip to Portugal, an excursion offered to the best students, mostly boys, by the Portuguese Youth (*Mocidade Portuguesa*). It was her first contact with what was then called "the continent".

On her return, she met a ship's commissioner whom she later learned was an activist of the clandestine Portuguese Communist Party. "He drew my attention to the issues of discrimination, exploitation ... He did not say good things about the colonies, but talked about what was wrong here and also in Cape Verde, Angola, Mozambique ... He aroused in me an interest in the liberation struggle, of which I had no knowledge.

He sent me several books, including *O Rio* by João Cabral de Melo e Neto. It was one of the episodes that helped to awaken my political consciousness, without me being aware of what was happening to me. This commissioner had gone to Cape Verde, he had even met my father. We corresponded. In one of his letters he told me about the Pink Ballet [2], ministers who abused young girls. He told me that the regime in Portugal was rotten."

Beginning of political education

At the age of 18, Helena was sent by her father to Porto, having obtained a scholarship. She was first attracted by the University Catholic Youth (JUC), "a very politically advanced group". Then, in a cafe she frequented, the Piolho, she came into contact with a Trotskyist group, including Manuel Resende [3]. It was in this group that she began her political education. "We met at night, clandestinely, reading *Capital*, Rosa Luxemburg ... and discussing until very late. I studied *Capital* the way I studied anatomy. But of course, at the time a lot of things escaped me."

As her sister was studying in Coimbra, Helena went there every weekend. It was there that she was approached to attend meetings where the struggle for liberation was discussed and where the political education of students from the colonies was conducted. "We were talking about relations of production, the proletariat ... These meetings were camouflaged; we were having a dinner dance – *picapada* – and before it began some people got together for a meeting. It was a way of organizing meetings without being noticed. It was in this group that I began to be informed and educated about the national liberation struggle, within the framework of the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC), by reading the texts of Amílcar Cabral."

In Coimbra, Helena took part in the 1969 university movement, which "was largely influenced by May '68" [4].

Double clandestinity

After spending two years in Porto and having gained autonomy, Helena asked to study in Lisbon, where the majority of her Cape Verdean friends were. As soon as she arrived in the city, she became part of the PAIGC's clandestine organization in Portugal.

"The structure of the PAIGC included a committee, a subcommittee, and then cells that organized so-called core groups. I started being active in a cell. We held clandestine meetings, received information on how the struggle in the maquis in Guinea was progressing and instructions on what our structure should do. I was responsible for a core group. It included students and workers from the Lisnave shipyard, where we had a very strong group. I brought them together and tried to make them aware of the necessity of the liberation struggle. Then I was promoted to the subcommittee. "

Alongside her activity within the clandestine organization of the PAIGC, Helena was part of the group of Trotskyists linked with the Fourth International, which, in Lisbon, was mainly composed of medical students.

"At the time we were very few and we were not well regarded, because Trotsky was considered a "traitor". But we were stubborn and very enthusiastic. We were in all the struggles and we worked and studied at the same time. We were even good students. We ended up imposing ourselves and being recognized in our community. At the Faculty of Medicine in Lisbon, there was an organized Trotskyist structure: Alfredo Frade, Jose Manuel Boavida ... Then came João Cabral Fernandes, who was a prominent student leader of Coimbra. I became a member of the organization which would lead to the formation of the Internationalist Communist League (LCI, later PSR). Our meetings were held secretly, including in the home of Cavaco Manuel on Rome Avenue. We distributed propaganda among students and workers ... We also had meetings with leaders of the Fourth International, such as Michael Löwy, which could last a whole day."

Helena's political education and activity always followed these two currents: the LCI, linked to the Fourth International, and the liberation movements, concretely within the PAIGC, which fought for the independence of Cape Verde and Guinea. "At the time, we were strong supporters of the unity of Guinea and Cape Verde, as Amílcar Cabral advocated. In Lisbon, there were three of us who, in the PAIGC, were also part of the LCI. If we were arrested, it would be a problem, because not only was the LCI involved, but also the clandestine structure of the PAIGC. But at the time, we had the courage to do everything and, fortunately, we avoided being arrested."

It was nevertheless a situation of double clandestinity, because the PAIGC could not know of her links with the Trotskyist group. "Even after April 25, 1974, no one could say that they belonged to the LCI. This dual activism gave me very important training, which was both theoretical, especially within the LCI, and practical – the awareness of the need for the liberation struggle, for independence and the fact that the liberation movements were the only representatives of the peoples of the colonies."

These activities were unfolding on many fronts. In the Faculty of Medicine, this also involved challenging the educational system and the method of evaluation, debating the issue of the colonial war, and linking the student struggle with the workers' struggle. "I was taking part in anti-colonial demonstrations, escaping from the riot police. At the Faculty we had created a Commission to Combat Repression. We produced documents and leaflets that we distributed, we tried to influence students, we took part in general assemblies."

The activities were unceasing and sometimes it was difficult to handle the fatigue. "But everything was done with enthusiasm. I remember an episode where I took the bus to go from the Spanish Steps to a meeting on the South Bank. I gave the money to pay for the ticket and fell asleep instantly, before receiving the change. I slept very little because I did not have time to sleep. But everything was done with enthusiasm."

I also remember that later, during a demonstration in support of Bobby Sands [5], we broke the window of a bank. To escape the police, we had to run. I was exhausted. We went to the Largo do Rato district to try to find a bus going to the medical school; at that time, the police did not pursue us in the hospital, they had great respect for hospitals. Later, this limit disappeared ... When I reached the hospital, I vomited, I was so stressed and tense.

Because of her participation in the Law Enforcement Commission, Helena was denied access to the university restaurant because of her "inappropriate political behaviour". Prior to April 25, Helena also had contacts with progressive Catholics. "At that moment, I did not even know his name and I did not know why he (Luís Moita) [6] had contacted me. He brought me some documents, I believe from the Anti-colonial Commission, to let me know of the existence of his struggle."

In this way, I began to receive the information that he brought to me and I used it in my work with the PAIGC. Later, LuÃ-s explained to me that he had approached me because a Cape Verdean activist from the PAIGC, a member of the committee – a structure superior to mine – had told him that I was the person with whom he could make contact."

The publications that LuÃ-s Moita passed on to her were also the source of a great fear that she never forgot. "I lived with my sister, who had studied in Coimbra and was living in Lisbon, – she was working in the Overseas Ministry and already had a child, – and with another sister, who was there for her studies. In my room there was a picture of Che Guevara hanging on the wall. One day, very early in the morning, my sister came into my room, frightened, saying that the PIDE was there. Both agents went to my sister's room.

I ran into the scullery – which was always full of things, messy – and I threw the documents of LuÃ-s Moita and another book onto the highest shelf. Then, with my little sister, we went to the bathroom, tore up the rest of the material and threw it in the toilet. As for Che's photo, I hid it under the mattress and lay down. Fortunately, the PIDE were only interested in my sister, who had no political activity. She had probably been denounced by a ministry colleague who did not like her and who said she had political connections. The PIDE found in my sister's things a calendar where there was a map of Africa and they wanted to know what this map meant.

I did not even see them, they did not care about me. My sister was taken to Ant3nio Maria Cardo Street for interrogation, and until April 25 she was obliged to attend every week."

Such situations were very frightening because they could endanger the organization if we were tortured and could not stand it. "I was very afraid of being arrested. We thought that we would hold on and not talk, but I thought that anything could happen, that we did not know in advance. And anyone who spoke would have put the whole organization in danger."

The House of Students from the Colonies (CEC)

After the 25 April, they began to call for the immediate independence of the colonies and to demand "not one more soldier for the colonies".

On May 3, Helena and two other classmates from the LCI and the PAIGC gathered as many African students as possible in the student room of Santa Maria Hospital, where student general assemblies and meetings of the Commission to Combat Repression were held. During this meeting, Helena's task was to get it to vote for the occupation of the Overseas Students Office (PEU). "The PEU was a structure of the regime whose function was to regiment African students, so that they were against independence and against liberation movements. A fascist structure. Students were often encouraged to denounce those among them who did not follow the line of support for the fascist and colonial regime. There were rewards: trips to their countries of origin, books, concert tickets, among other things. With the support of the Portuguese students, especially the Trotskyists who were in the Faculty, we left for the Avenue of May 28 (today Armed Forces Avenue) and we occupied the PEU. And we transformed it into a House of Students from the Colonies (CEC)."

Helena was elected president of the CEC, which was recognized by the Armed Forces Movement (MFA). The leadership was also composed of two comrades from Angola, one from Mozambique and one from SÃo Tom3. "Our activity was really considerable. We had countless meetings where we discussed everything and more. We had strong support from the LCI. The majority of the students had never participated before in a general assembly, did not know what a meeting was, a motion, a point of order ... It was an incredible learning curve. As a leadership, we

produced education material for students, especially on the liberation struggles. Starting from the CEC, the students participated in all the demonstrations, in an organized way, during which they carried placards saying: "PAIGC, MPLA, MLSTP, FRELIMO ... the only representatives of the peoples of the colonies', 'Immediate independence!' and 'Not one more soldier for the colonies'."

The CEC students also took part in our first big meeting at the Voz do Operário. [7] "We defended the fact that the liberation movements were the only representatives of the peoples of the colonies and that negotiations should begin immediately, just as it was necessary immediately to stop sending soldiers to the colonies. When, shortly after April 25, the UN Secretary General came, students from the CEC joined thousands of protesters demanding independence for the colonies and wrote a letter with their demands."

The CEC was an important part of political education: "We mobilized a lot of people. Many of those who went through the CEC and had no previous political background subsequently joined the governments of their country. For this reason, many other far-left parties were attracted to the CEC; nevertheless, because of the direct links with the LCI, "the Trotskyists had very great influence" in the organization. Ernest Mandel even gave a lecture.

The CEC was also threatened by phone calls like "Blacks, we will kill you!" For this reason, the management of the House received a request for a meeting from the LUAR [8], at which Palma Inácio proposed sending armed activists to the headquarters of the CEC to ensure our security. However, this offer was refused.

Following the example of the CEC, other student houses were formed: that of Angola, Mozambique and also the Democratic Action Group of Cape Verde and Guinea. "The House of Cape Verde had been a structure linked to the regime, which was used mainly to organize social events for the Cape Verdean bourgeoisie. Shortly after April 25, we learned that they were going to a ball, at a time when independence had not yet been won. We went there and ended their party: "Now is not the time to dance, it's the time to fight!"

We occupied this house and transformed it into the Democratic Action Group of Cape Verde and Guinea (GADCG). The GADCG was our base to work in the neighbourhoods where Cape Verdeans lived: we organized literacy classes, we encouraged Cape Verdeans to participate in residents' committees to improve their neighbourhood, we discussed the question of the struggle for independence and for the recognition of the PAIGC. The GADCG played a key role in the process of affirming the PAIGC and representing the people of Cape Verde and Guinea."

Helena believed that "the group of Cape Verdean Trotskyists, who were not contaminated by Stalinism, was of great importance for the fact that there is a more advanced democratic regime in Cape Verde today than in the other former colonies."

"Already at that time, we had posed the question of the day after. We did not just want independence. We wanted independence also to be directed against exploitation, towards a more just, democratic, participatory society. We already had this idea before April 25. This stemmed from our internationalist political training. We were against the revolution by stages, we wanted the permanent revolution. All this had a great influence on our way of seeing the world and greatly influenced the construction of the new Cape Verdean society. I think it is not by chance that Cape Verde today has a democratic regime. Insufficient, without a doubt, which must be deepened, but more advanced than in the other former colonies."

According to Helena, "in Cape Verde and the former colonies, the education – or rather the miseducation – of many Stalinist leaders who were educated in the Soviet Union resulted in a narrow way of seeing the world, a narrow horizon".

"It's as though they have blinkers. They cannot be democrats. They only know 'if you are not with us, you are against us'. They do not know how to listen to others, to allow the expression of other sensibilities. This is what happened in Cape Verde, for example, with the single party – 'the force, the light and the guide of the people' – in which all those who thought otherwise were treated as counter-revolutionary. The Trotskyists were considered as counter-revolutionaries and expelled. That's why I did not go back to Cape Verde when I finished my studies. If I had, I would probably have been arrested. So I continued the work here (in Portugal)."

When the colonies gained independence, the CEC no longer had any reason to exist. "With the end of the CEC, we focused on the work of the GADCG, especially intervention in the neighbourhoods. Later, the GADCG evolved, giving birth to the Cape Verde Association, because Cape Verde and Guinea separated."

Mobilization of students and workers, fight for the right to abortion

Shortly after April 25, the LCI developed activities to mobilize students and workers, because "it was important to make the connection between student struggles and the workers' struggle, to build a bridge. "

Feminist struggles, such as the right to voluntary termination of pregnancy, were also a priority. "We also had an autonomous women's organization, the group 'To be a woman', and we participated in the European network of women. I even went abroad to represent the Portuguese organization. Together with the women of the UDP [9] and the MDM [10] we organized various meetings on the issue of women's rights which, at this time, were mainly focused on the recognition of the right to voluntary termination of pregnancy. As the LCI, we participated in all the movements that took place for the recognition of this right. We are part of the Movement for the Decriminalization of Abortion."

[1] The International Police and Defence of the State (PIDE), the Salazarist political police, created in 1933 and renamed General Directorate of Security in 1969 (but still called the PIDE by the population) was dissolved on April 26, 1974, except in the colonies where it survived until independence as the Military Information Police. Its headquarters was located in Lisbon, on António Maria Cardoso Street.

[2] The scandal known as the Pink Ballet seriously destabilized the Salazar dictatorship in 1967. The foreign press (the Portuguese media was subject to censorship) revealed that men of the elite – marquesses, counts, businessmen, the Minister of the Economy and even a bishop – benefited from a network of child prostitution. Daughters of prostitutes, aged 8, 9 or 10 years ... had been delivered to them for years by their mothers in exchange for money.

[3] Manuel Resende, poet and translator, was one of the main leaders of the Portuguese section of the Fourth International.

[4] On April 17, 1969, the authorities prevented students, who were demanding the democratization of higher education and the reinstatement of teachers, from speaking at the inauguration of the university's mathematics college. The students occupied the room where the inauguration took place. Coimbra was occupied by the army and the police, students were arrested and several of them were forcibly conscripted into the army and sent to the colonies.

[5] Bobby Sands (1954-1981), a Provisional IRA volunteer and Member of the United Kingdom House of Commons from 9 April to 5 May 1981, died in Maze Prison after 66 days of a hunger strike whose objective was to obtain the status of political prisoners for imprisoned republicans.

[6] Luã-s Moita, who abandoned the priesthood, became a professor of moral theology at the Olivais seminary in 1971 and was later rector of the Autonomous University of Lisbon. He was active in the progressive Catholic movement, which was opposed to the Salazarist regime and the

colonial wars and collaborated with their opponents on the left. This movement organized from 1972 a clandestine publishing operation in support of the anticolonial struggle, whose texts were selected by LuÃ-s Moita.

[7] The history of the Voz do OperÃrio ("Workers' Voice") Education and Charity Society dates back to the beginnings of the workers movement in Portugal. As a result of a strike, the tobacco workers decided to create a newspaper in 1879. Then, in order to finance this publication, in 1883 a cooperative society was formed, which also started to set up schools and libraries. In 1932 its schools were the main nucleus of primary education in Lisbon, with 4,200 pupils, which enabled the society to subsist under the Salazarist dictatorship, which was unable to replace this school role. In Lisbon, the newspaper and library building on Voz do OperÃrio Street also has a large meeting room. In May 1974 the LCI organized its first big meeting there with Ernest Mandel.

[8] The League of Unity and Revolutionary Action (LUAR) was formed in 1967 in Paris, shortly after its founders had expropriated by an armed hold-up a bank in Figueira da Foz, under the leadership of HermÃnio da Palma InÃcio (1922 -2009), a revolutionary militant who had begun the anti-fascist struggle when he was a soldier during the "military coup" in 1947. In 1961 he hijacked a plane and forced the pilot to fly over Lisbon at a low attitude so that he could scatter 100,000 leaflets. In 1975, the LUAR participated in the Revolutionary Unity Front (FUR), alongside the LCI, the PRP and the MES.

[9] The People's Democratic Union (UDP) was founded in December 1974 by several Marxist-Leninist organizations linked to the Albanian regime and had a member of parliament elected from 1975. After a long debate and an ideological recomposition, in 1998 the UDP made an alliance with the PSR (Portuguese section of the Fourth International) and PolÃtica XXI to form the Left Bloc. Since 2005, the UDP has been operating in the Left Bloc as an association and has published the journal *A Comuna*.

[10] The Democratic Movement of Women (MDM) has its roots in the Women's Election Commissions, created during the 1968 elections on the initiative of women who were opposed to Salazar. After April 25, 1974, the MDM participated in various struggles for women's rights. It is a member of the International Women's Democratic Federation, of which Maria Lamas (1893-1983), who became Honorary President of the MDM and a member of the Portuguese Communist Party in 1975, was a founding member.