

An ‘Exemplary Comrade’: The Socialist Workers Party’s 40-year-long cover-up of Stalinist spy Sylvia Callen: Part two

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In May 1947 the Socialist Workers Party received information that Sylvia Callen, the personal secretary of long-time party leader James P. Cannon, was an agent of the Soviet secret police, the GPU. It quickly became clear that Callen had concealed critical personal information about her Stalinist background when she joined the SWP in 1938. For nearly nine years Callen had high-level and unrestricted access to the party’s most sensitive information. However, rather than exposing Callen’s murderous role as spy within the Trotskyist movement, the Socialist Workers Party launched a cover-up that lasted for nearly 40 years. What follows is a historical account of the cover-up and its exposure by the International Committee of the Fourth International. Part one was published on August 14.

Budenz’s *Men Without Faces* and the House Un-American Activities Committee

In 1950, Louis Budenz published a second book, *Men Without Faces*, which provided an even more detailed description of the agent who had infiltrated the national headquarters of the SWP.

Budenz wrote: “Just before I went out to Chicago in 1937 to become editor of *Midwest Daily Record* I had been instructed by Roberts [Dr. Gregory Rabinowitz, the GPU spy leader] to find a comrade who was engaged in penetrating the Trotskyite organization there.” [30]

Though employing the pseudonym “Helen” in place of the spy’s real first name, Sylvia, Budenz’s biographical sketch left no doubt that he was telling the story of the GPU’s recruitment of Sylvia Callen and her successful infiltration into the SWP’s national headquarters.

“From out of the ranks of the Chicago YCL there came a young couple whom we shall call Helen and Irving.” The two “were assigned to dangerous secret work. Helen, being quiet and inconspicuous, was assigned to penetrate the Trotskyite groups. Irving, who went to Spain as a member of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, was used as a special agent, under Steve Nelson and the forbidding George Mink, to detect and eliminate ‘enemies of the party.’”

“Helen had been instructed to move to New York, in order to penetrate the Trotskyites on a national scale,” Budenz continued. “I was then in Chicago, and it was I who had arranged this transfer, on the orders of the Soviet secret police representative with whom I was working and who was known to me only as ‘Roberts.’” [31]

“Our first conference was at [YCL Chicago leader Jack] Kling’s house out on the West Side of Chicago. With curtains drawn so that no one could see who was there, we arranged the ways and means by which I could get in touch with her. She expressed an eagerness to work on a wider scale for the party among the Trotskyites and, before she knew what the mission involved, gladly volunteered her services.” [32]

Budenz was impressed by Helen-Sylvia’s “soft voice and conservative dress, which suited her position as a social worker, enhanced her skill as an underground agent.” Budenz “arranged to meet her privately at different places in South Chicago, where much of her social work was done.” He convinced her to move to New York “when I had satisfied myself about her loyalty and capability.” [33]

Budenz explained that Rabinowitz provided Callen with “\$300 in cash to cover her first-class fare to New York and her initial expenses there. He then told her how she was to proceed. She would have an apartment in mid-Manhattan; and arrangements had been made for her apparent employment by a woman doctor who was a trusted party member. This would explain her regular income and also her regular hours. She could then volunteer to do stenographic and other clerical work at the Trotskyite national headquarters on University Place and 13th street.” [34]

Certain conditions were set. “It was to be an unspeakable rule that Irving was never, for any reason, to go to her apartment; nor were they ever to be seen together in public.” [35]. The Stalinists were aware of Zalmond Franklin’s public profile and his family’s widely-known role as leaders of the Communist Party in Milwaukee. They knew that if the SWP discovered Callen’s husband’s identity, her role as a GPU spy would be exposed. Callen observed this rule, and concealed her marriage from the SWP.

“The arrangements went through at top speed: Helen departed for New York and Irving soon was located in the Bronx. And Helen so ingratiated herself with the leading Trotskyites that she became a close friend of James Cannon, American Trotskyite chief, and his wife Karsner. She had the full run of the Trotskyite offices, became Cannon’s secretary and made available to the Soviet secret police all the correspondence with Trotsky in Mexico City and with other Trotskyites throughout the world.” [36]

Budenz described his first meeting with Callen.

Callen dictates the SWP’s response to *Men Without Faces*

Budenz’s account of Callen’s activity in *Men Without Faces* was

detailed and irrefutable. Nevertheless, the SWP leaders sought to maintain the public pretense that Callen had been a devoted and hardworking comrade.

But the pressure to come up with a response to Budenz was overwhelming. In August 1950, the Party leaders dispatched Farrell Dobbs to meet Callen at her home in Chicago to ask her how the party should reply.

In an August 21 letter to Cannon, Dobbs reported on his meeting with Callen. He wrote:

Chicago, Ill.

August 21, 1950

Dear Jim,

I have seen S. When I showed her the passage in the Budenz book and told her of the Shachtmanite prattle she reacted with mingled anger against her detractors and anxiety for her family.

She told me the FBI has been hounding her and her family. As a result her father almost lost his job and was told that if there is any more investigating he will be fired. The FBI tried to question her about the party but she refused to give them any information.

Her family now knows the whole score and they have put heavy pressure on her to keep her away from the movement.

She does not want to be involved either directly or indirectly in the matter of a reply to Budenz. I asked if she would be willing to sit down with Mike and me to help us gather some of the facts needed to refute Budenz which would be used without openly or directly involving her. She said she did not want to be drawn into the thing in any manner whatever.

I told her that we considered it absolutely necessary to reply to Budenz charges. She asked if we couldn't just issue a statement announcing that a full investigation of his allegations was made three years ago which proved his story false and denounce him as a character assassin. She asked if the statement couldn't be general, i.e., not refer to any specific person in refuting him, but state that no such person as he describes has ever been in the party office.

She appeared to be in good health, seemed pleased to see me, and asked about everyone. She had not heard about Oscar [Coover, a longtime leader of the SWP who died earlier that year.]

So far as I can see there is no point in attempting to press her any further on this matter. It seems best to go ahead along the lines we agreed on when we discussed the question in the secretariat right after the last plenum.

(signed) Farrell

The SWP sent Dobbs to meet Callen because they wanted to know whether she had spoken to the FBI about the party and its leadership. The bizarre, Dostoevskyan quality of the letter is a product of the fact that the SWP was going along with a story they had created which they knew to be a lie. By preventing any investigation into Callen's ties to the Communist Party and by calling Budenz's revelations and Shachtman and Glotzer's warnings "rumors" and "gossip," they created a false narrative that they felt they had to maintain.

Callen brazenly told the SWP how they should respond to Budenz's revelations. She instructed Dobbs to simply deny the existence of anyone who fit "Helen's" description, and to cite the 1947 Control Commission as proof that the allegations against her were baseless. The SWP leaders, in a decision that was as cowardly as it was duplicitous, acceded to Callen's instructions.

One week after Dobbs' letter, on August 28, 1950, Cannon published an article in the *Militant* acknowledging that the party had received a

report of a possible GPU agent in the national headquarters. Calling Budenz a "well-known professional perjurer," Cannon wrote that the references to "Helen" in *Men Without Faces* were false.

This story, published by Budenz for the first time in the middle of the year 1950, has been known to us for more than three years. In 1947, we received a 'tip' purportedly emanating in the first instance from circles close to the FBI, that one of the secretarial workers in the National Office, who was identified by name and specifically by previous occupation and biographical details, was an agent of the Stalinists." [37]

Mischaracterizing Callen's role as a mere "secretarial worker" and not as his personal secretary, Cannon claimed that "this report was promptly handed over to the party Control Commission for investigation according to the established principles of the revolutionary workers' movement" and that the investigation "established that the 'information' given to identify the accused comrade as to her biography, her previous occupation, and her personal life, was false. It was evident to us then that the accusation was based either on mistaken identity, or was a deliberately planted story designed to create a spy-scare in the organization." [38]

This account was a lie from beginning to end. The Control Commission covered up the fact that the testimony corroborated the report from Shachtman and Glotzer's source and that she lied about being married to a leading Stalinist. It concluded by swearing those present to secrecy and was signed by the accused's close personal friend, Rose Karsner. Far from proving the source's information was false, the Control Commission hearings confirmed she had moved to Chicago in 1939 and uncovered that she had not told the party she had been married to a Stalinist and had been in the Stalinist youth movement. She left the SWP as soon as her cover was blown. Under the circumstances there was no innocent explanation.

Following Callen's instructions, Cannon added that Budenz's allegations "do not apply to this particular person or to anyone else who ever worked in the National Office of the Socialist Workers Party." He said, falsely, that "the Control Commission rejected the accusation and exonerated the accused comrade, who had fully cooperated with the investigation, answered all questions put to her and supplied the Control Commission with all the data relating to her biography and previous occupations, which were subjected to verification." [39]

In fact, none of Callen's claims had been verified nor had there been any real investigation. From the initial visit of Shachtman and Glotzer to the issuing of the Control Commission's findings, little more than two weeks had elapsed. Callen had not cooperated with the SWP.

Budenz was not through with his exposure of Callen. On November 11, 1950, Budenz submitted an affidavit to the House Un-American Activities Committee that included new details of Sylvia Callen-Caldwell's role. This time, Budenz dispensed with the use of the fictional name "Helen."

"Another person whom I introduced to Roberts," Budenz testified, referencing the alias for Dr. Gregory Rabinowitz "was Sylvia Caulwell [sic] and whose maiden name was something like Sylvia Kallen [sic].

"Her husband, Irving Franklin, had been in Spain working in secret work and had been sent to Canada to aid in espionage activities there...Sylvia under the direction of Roberts-Rabinowitz, gradually made herself indispensable to James Cannon, then head of the American Trotskyites. She became his secretary and served in that capacity for some time. Roberts-Rabinowitz advised me that she had proved to be invaluable." [40]

The SWP did not respond to this testimony.

Joseph Hansen and the SWP cover-up

Over the next years, the evidence against Franklin mounted and the SWP continued to defend her along the lines Franklin laid out in her meeting with Dobbs, repeated in Cannon's article of August 28, 1950.

In 1954 and again in 1958, Franklin testified before federal grand juries investigating Soviet espionage in the US. In her first appearance, Franklin relied on her Fifth Amendment right to remain silent. In 1958, however, she admitted that she was, in fact, a GPU agent. This testimony would not be known for another 25 years.

In 1959, however, the journalist Isaac Don Levine published an account of Ramon Mercader and the GPU's assassination of Trotsky, *The Mind of An Assassin*, that substantiated Budenz's testimony.

Levine wrote:

"He [Budenz] made it possible for the NKVD [the GPU] to steam open and pilfer Trotsky's mail to his New York followers. He got a Communist Party girl, a Chicago social worker, to move to New York and volunteer her services to James Cannon, the American Trotskyist leader: 'She had the full run of the mill of the Trotskyite offices, became Cannon's Secretary, and made available to the Soviet secret police all the correspondence with Trotsky in Mexico City and with other Trotskyites throughout the world,' he testified." [41]

SWP leader Joseph Hansen tried to convince Levine to drop the matter. Hansen had joined the SWP in the mid 1930s and served in Coyoacan, where he provided secretarial assistance and security for Trotsky. In fact, he was the second man to reach Trotsky—captain of the guard Harold Robins was the first—after Mercader struck the fatal blow. Hansen wrote to Cannon on October 24, 1958 about a discussion he had with Levine about the latter's book:

"What he wanted from me was information on any spies or evidence of spies in Soviet pay working in or around our movement. Not having any such information, I could not help him; in fact, when he came to Sylvia Caldwell I hope I was able to give him some further considerations to help squelch that rumor." [42]

On March 19, 1960, Hansen responded to an urgent note from Gerry Healy, then National Secretary of the Socialist Labour League, the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International. Healy inquired from Hansen what the latter knew about a report in Levine's book regarding another GPU agent, named "Etienne," the party name of Mark Zborowski, the Paris-based GPU agent who played a central role in providing the Stalinist secret police with information that led to the murders of Trotsky's son Lev Sedov, Trotsky's political secretaries Erwin Wolf and Rudolf Klement, and GPU defector Ignatz Reiss, who left the Soviet Union to join the Fourth International.

Referencing his own review of Levine's book, Hansen attempted to deflect Healy's interest in Etienne, claiming the SWP could not spare anyone to attend Etienne-Zborowski's 1958 perjury trial, where the agent was sentenced to prison for lying under oath about his ties to Jack Soble, a GPU controller responsible for a network of agents in the United States. In reality, Hansen and the SWP had no interest in covering a trial that

could expose details of GPU infiltration of the Fourth International.

Hansen said he "decided not to give much space to the Etienne case" in his review of *The Mind of An Assassin* because, in his words, Levine was an anti-communist. Hansen said he considered referencing "the report about Cannon's personal secretary being a GPU agent" as an example of Levine's false material, adding, "But this would necessitate an article on our investigation years ago of the slander and the review would have been thrown out of balance."

Hansen continued, "One of our primary concerns was not to give the slightest encouragement to the view Levine seeks to implant—that our organizations are loaded with spies. Such a view is deadly poisonous and can do incomparably greater harm than the occasional stool pigeon that turns up in any organization." [43]

Weeks later, in April 1960, Cannon wrote a letter from Los Angeles to his wife, Rose Karsner, which is published here for the first time. In a discouraged tone, Cannon wrote:

"I haven't felt like writing but I am sending this note so that you won't worry about something possibly being wrong. Spiritually I am tired and have no present ambition to do anything. I spend the time reading stuff that is easy to read, thinking a little, but mostly musing and remembering and reflecting. Most of my musing and remembering these days is sad, and that paralyzes the will to work or even to plan to work later on.

"The memories of work I have already done in the past—not speaking and writing, which was the easiest part and probably all that others really noticed, but carrying people on my back—give me a delayed reaction of spiritual weariness. I feel that I have done all of that heavy work I can do or even want to do again for anybody...

"I don't want to do anything for anybody—in fact, I can't—and I don't want anybody to try to do anything for me except for routine technical things. The most I want from people now is to let me alone, not pull at me or try to push me, and above all not expect me [to] pick them up and inspire them and try to solve their problems." [Emphasis in the original]. [44]

That same year Sylvia Callen was named as an unindicted co-conspirator in the indictment of GPU spy Robert Soblen, Jack Soble's brother. At Soblen's trial, further information proving Callen's role emerged. Soble testified, "I went further into the Trotsky field and worked with the secretary of Cannon, Sylvia...also introduced to me by the same Russians who worked for them already before...She gathered material at the secretariat of Cannon and gave it to me...pure Trotsky material." [45]

The SWP again failed to cover the trial and report on this testimony. The absence of any coverage by the *Militant* of the Soblen trial—which was front page news in *The New York Times*—is all the more incriminating given the fact that another prominent ex-member of the SWP, Floyd Cleveland Miller, was also listed as a GPU co-conspirator.

The cover-up of Callen's role as a GPU agent became the official policy of the SWP leadership. In a manner that defies innocent explanation, the SWP went out of its way to uphold her bona fides, perpetuating the myth of Cannon's selfless secretary and denouncing Budenz as a perjurer.

On November 12, 1966, Cannon wrote to Reba Hansen, Joseph Hansen's wife, regarding a proposal by a party member to change the functioning of the SWP's Control Commission. He addressed the matter in a thoroughly dishonest way.

Cannon explained that the party's Control Commission was responsible for the "double purpose" of maintaining party security and "to provide

the maximum assurance that any individual party member, accused or rumored to be unworthy of party membership, could be assured of the fullest investigation.” [46]

To defend his position, Cannon cited the case of Callen-Caldwell without identifying her by name. He said that at the time, “a rumor circulated by the Shachtmanites and others outside the party against the integrity of a National Office secretarial worker was thoroughly investigated by the Control Commission which, after taking stenographic testimony from all available sources, declared the rumors unfounded and cleared the accused party member to continue her work.” [47]

This letter to Reba Hansen had clearly been written for public consumption, with the purpose of suppressing questions about the official story, particularly among older members of the SWP who must have wondered why Sylvia Callen had suddenly left the party.

Cannon’s letter neglected to explain that Callen-Caldwell was not simply “a National Office secretarial worker,” but his personal secretary, assistant and his wife’s close friend. He hid the fact that she quit the party shortly after supposedly being cleared “to continue her work.” The 1947 control commission did not investigate the matter “thoroughly” and it did not take testimony “from all available sources,” as he claimed. Her lies were exposed by Budenz, Levine and Soble, and the SWP control commission covered up her real role.

The SWP defends Hansen and Franklin

In 1975, the International Committee initiated its own investigation into *Security and the Fourth International*. The initial findings included evidence of Hansen’s meetings with the FBI and State Department as well as information of Callen’s role as a GPU agent.

Hansen denounced the revelations as “A Geyser of Mud.” He wrote that “the Healyites in no place indicate the basis of their charge that the agent with whom he had met, Robert McGregor, was in association with an agent of the FBI.” [48]

Hansen rejected the ICFI’s call for a commission of inquiry into Trotsky’s assassination, adding:

“Sylvia Caldwell, (that was her party name) worked very hard in her rather difficult assignment of managing the office of the Socialist Workers Party, which included helping Cannon in a secretarial capacity. In fact all the comrades who shared these often irksome chores with her regarded her as exemplary. They burned as much as she did over the foul slanders spread by Budenz.” [49]

In the December 8, 1975 edition of the SWP magazine *Intercontinental Press*, leading SWP member George Novack attacked Healy’s “reckless and indiscriminate allegations” against “Sylvia Caldwell, Cannon’s secretary,” writing that “anything goes in his frantic endeavors to cast a net of suspicion around Joseph Hansen and his colleagues.” [50]

In early 1976, the SWP published a collection of essays memorializing the life of James P. Cannon, who had died in August 1974. Titled *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him*, the volume consisted of essays written by SWP members, including one by Joseph Hansen’s wife, Reba Hansen, which contained the following extraordinary tribute:

“During those years Sylvia Caldwell served as secretary in the national office, a job that included working with Jim, who held the post of national secretary. She was the second full-time secretary the party had. The first was Lillian Roberts.

“Jim often told us about how it was ‘in the old days’, when it was difficult to get things done because of having no secretarial help. He

said he was grateful for any help he could get and he never failed to show his deep appreciation for the aid that Sylvia gave.

“Jim was fond of telling the story about how Sylvia went to a business school to learn shorthand when it was proposed she work in the national office. This was before the days of the tape recorder, and shorthand was essential to taking adequate minutes at meetings and dictation for letters and articles. Sylvia learned fast and well. Her Gregg characters were like copper-plate engravings, her typing without strike-overs, and no messy erasures.

“When the load in the national office was heavy and Sylvia needed help, I gave her a hand, working very closely with her. Her efficiency impressed me. She knew how to do everything that was necessary to keep a one-person office running smoothly. Her devotion to the movement and her readiness to put in long hours of hard work inspired us all.

“Sylvia and I became close collaborators and good personal friends. She was a warm human being.

“When Sylvia left New York in 1947 because of family obligations, Jim asked me to take her place in the national office. Since this included working closely with Jim, I felt a little nervous, but Sylvia helped me through the transition from business manager of the *Militant* to my new assignment.

“At that time Rose and Jim lived at 126 West Eleventh Street, seventh floor. The apartment building was modern—it had an elevator—and the rooms were large by New York standards. The front room, facing on Eleventh Street, was big enough for two desks, several filing cabinets, and a worktable. Sylvia took me there to work with her and learn the ropes.

“But Jim didn’t shift easily from one secretary to another. And it was only after Sylvia had been gone some time that Jim felt enough at home with me through working together in the national office to ask me to come over to West Eleventh Street.” [51]

There is no innocent explanation for the inclusion of this lying tribute to Sylvia Callen in a book that was supposedly intended to eulogize Cannon. Reba Hansen knew full well that Callen had suddenly disappeared from the SWP national office in 1947 not because of “family obligations,” but because she had been exposed as a GPU agent. Her gratuitous tribute to Cannon’s secretary, who had for nearly a decade managed the national office, did not make any mention whatever of the allegations made by Budenz, the 1947 control commission, Budenz’s more detailed account in 1950 of Callen’s activities, or of her being named by the US government as a co-conspirator in the 1960 trial of Soviet agent Robert Soblen.

To be continued

Notes:

[30] Budenz, Louis, *Men Without Faces* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950), p. 124.

[31] *Ibid.*, pp. 123–24.

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 125.

[33] *Ibid.*

[34] *Ibid.*

[35] *Ibid.*, p. 126.

[36] *Ibid.*

[37] *The Militant*, August 28, 1950, available at <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1950/v14n01-jan-02-1950-mil.pdf>.

[38] *Ibid.*

[39] *The Militant*, August 28, 1950, available at <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1950/v14n01-jan-02-1950-mil.pdf>.

[40] *The Sylvia Franklin Dossier* (New York: Labor Publications Inc.,

1977).

[41] Ibid.

[42] Joseph Hansen to James P. Cannon, October 24, 1958, *Wisconsin Historical Society*.

[43] *The Indictment Stands* (New York: Labor Publications, Inc. 1976).

[44] James P. Cannon to Rose Karsner, April 1960, *Wisconsin Historical Society*.

[45] *The Gelfand Case* vol. 1 (Detroit: Labor Publications, 1985) p. 58.

[46] *Building the Revolutionary Party, an Introduction to James P. Cannon* (Chippendale, Australia: New Course Publications, 1997) p.70.

[47] Ibid.

[48] *Intercontinental Press*, November 24, 1975.

[49] Ibid.

[50] *Intercontinental Press*, December 8, 1975.

[51] *James P. Cannon as We Knew Him* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1976) p. 232–33.

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