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

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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 a 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.

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Joseph Hansen and the control commission

Joseph Hansen could not be deposed or questioned during the Gelfand Case. To the end, Hansen actively defended Callen, however, having organized an international campaign to slander those who raised questions about what was ultimately proven to be the truth: she was an agent of the GPU.

Why did Hansen and the SWP, after Hansen’s death, go to such lengths to defend Callen? Why did they not simply admit, even before the release of the grand jury transcripts, that James P. Cannon’s secretary had been an agent of the GPU from 1939 to 1947? By the mid-1970s, when the International Committee initiated its investigation into Security and the Fourth International, nearly 30 years had passed since Callen left the SWP.

The obvious question is: Why did Hansen and Barnes cling so desperately to the transparent lie that Callen had been an “exemplary” comrade? Would it not have been easier for Hansen to admit that the SWP had been duped by Callen’s claims of innocence, and that the 1947 control commission’s investigation had been inadequate?

The only answer is that the activities of Callen and Hansen were too closely intertwined. Hansen was compelled to lie about Sylvia Callen because—as a document obtained by Gelfand’s attorneys near the conclusion of the litigation proved—he was shielding his own role as an agent inside the SWP.

Late in the litigation, Judge Pfælzer compelled the SWP to turn over a letter sent to Hansen by his close friend, Vaughn T. “Irish” O’Brien.

In this letter, dated June 8, 1976, O’Brien recalled an encounter in the late 1940s or early 1950s—the general time frame of the control commission and the publication of Budenz’s books—with Pearl Kluger, a former member of A.J. Muste’s American Workers Party who knew Budenz personally. O’Brien wrote, “I had not seen Pearl for a considerable period of time, but she immediately said, ‘Budenz says your friend Joe Hansen worked with the GPU.’” [73]

This extraordinary revelation—that the same man who had originally exposed Sylvia Callen had also identified Joseph Hansen as a GPU agent—was substantiated by the Socialist Workers Party. Just one month after the conclusion of the Gelfand trial, in the April 15, 1983 edition of the Militant, SWP leader Larry Seigle wrote that Budenz “had fingered not just CP members, but also several SWP members, as Soviet agents. Among these were Joseph Hansen, a central leader of the SWP until his death in 1979, and Sylvia Caldwell, who had been a secretary in the SWP national office.” [74]

It is evident that there were, in the immediate aftermath of the Gelfand trial, disagreements within the SWP leadership as to how to handle the evidence that incriminated Hansen as a GPU operative. Seigle’s public acknowledgment of Budenz’s exposure of both Caldwell and Hansen—thus confirming the allegations made by Gelfand—was evidently seen as a major political blunder.

Just one day after Seigle’s article appeared in the Militant, the SWP leadership formulated a plan to reverse the damaging admission. The minutes from the SWP Political Committee meeting of April 16, 1983 show that the Barnes leadership conspired to denounce the grand jury transcripts as forgeries and double down on its defense of Callen-Caldwell:

“We should write an article presenting the party’s position on the accusations against Sylvia Caldwell. The article should present for the party and the international movement our political position on the responsibility of the party to defend itself against COINTELPRO-type ‘snitch-jacket’ operations of the kind that is now being carried out against Sylvia Caldwell and the SWP. It is especially necessary to explain again, for those who have never learned or have forgotten, the responsibility of the leadership of a revolutionary workers party to defend loyally each and every member against such slander campaigns.

“The article will examine the new ‘evidence’ presented by the FBI in Pfælzer’s courtroom and circulated by the WL/WRP, consisting of what is presented as transcripts of testimony given by Sylvia Caldwell before two grand juries investigating Soviet ‘espionage’ in the 1950s. We have no way of knowing how much the transcripts are doctored. Moreover, testimony given under these conditions—before a secret grand jury, without a lawyer, under threat of indictment as a Soviet spy in the shadow of the judicial murder of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg—cannot be taken as true by any serious workers’ leader.” [75]
The minutes also reveal that the publication of the grand jury transcripts, exposing the cover-up of Sylvia Franklin, had produced widespread anxiety within the SWP membership and among its international allies.

“Because of inexperience and some confusion on these points, in the party and in the international movement, an article along these lines would be helpful.” [76]

On August 5, 1983, the Militant published a report that had been given by Jack Barnes in May, weeks after the PC meeting, to the SWP’s national committee. Barnes resumed the defense of Callen-Caldwell:

“Another thing that happened at the trial needs to be emphasized. And that is what the government and the WL-WRP did concerning our comrade Sylvia Caldwell, whom they accuse of having been an agent of the Soviet secret police during the years when she was a member of our party, from the mid-1930s to the late-1940s. As we know, Sylvia was vilified by the FBI disrupter and stool pigeon, Louis Budenz. She was hounded by the FBI throughout the years of the witchhunt. She was hauled before the federal grand juries investigating Soviet ‘espionage’ during the 1950’s, like the one that indicted the Rosenbergs. And she has now had the WL-WRP continuing the effort as a means of furthering their disruption operation against our movement, here and internationally.” [77]

This tirade was a lie from beginning to end. If “our comrade Sylvia Caldwell” had been, as Barnes claimed, the subject of vicious persecution throughout the 1950s, why had the SWP failed to mount a public campaign in her defense? Why was there not a word written in the Militant about “comrade Sylvia” being “hauled before federal grand juries investigating Soviet ‘espionage’ during the 1950’s, like the one that indicted the Rosenbergs”? Why had the SWP and the Militant not denounced publicly the listing of Sylvia Callen as a GPU co-conspirator in the 1960 federal indictment of Robert Soblen?

Barnes went on to imply that the 1958 transcript was a forgery, referring to it as “what the FBI claims is a transcript of her testimony before a grand jury in 1958.” He continued:

“This is supposed to be the perfect frame—an official transcript, in which the woman under oath herself says that she did the things she was accused of doing. (I leave aside the fact that nowhere in the transcript is there any mention of the Soviet secret police, or any activity by Sylvia on their behalf. All it quotes her as saying is that she was gathering information for the Communist Party (CP). It is revealing that, for the WL-WRP as for the FBI, being a member of the CP and being a Soviet espionage agent are the same thing.)” [78]

The intense involvement of the Communist Party in the operations of the GPU—and especially in the penetration of the Fourth International and the SWP and in the organization of Trotsky’s assassination—is an indisputable and massively documented historical fact. Budenz’s own writings and testimony had made very clear that he, and those whom he recruited for anti-Trotskyist espionage activity, had been working for the GPU. Barnes’ claim that “Sylvia’s” admission that “she was gathering information for the Communist Party” does not prove that she was acting on behalf of the GPU testifies as much to his desperation as to his unscrupulous dishonesty. The reasons for Barnes’ desperation are to be found in the evidence uncovered in the course of the Gelfand case and the Security and the Fourth International investigation.

The significance of the O’Brien letter, and Seigle’s and Barnes’ statements about the release of the 1958 transcript was summed up by David North in an article titled “Barnes Still Defends Sylvia Franklin,” which appeared in the Bulletin, the newspaper of the Workers League, on September 9, 1983. North wrote:

“The transcripts showed that the facts presented by Louis F. Budenz, ex-editor of the Stalinist Daily Worker, in his November 1950 affidavit exposing Franklin, were absolutely true. Franklin explicitly admitted in her testimony that she had been a member of the Communist Party and that she had been recruited by Louis Budenz to work as a spy inside the SWP.

“These transcripts shattered the decades-old coverup of the true role of Franklin inside the SWP. The countless lies of Joseph Hansen, Barnes, and their accomplice, George Novack, in her defense (‘an exemplary comrade,’ ‘a warm human being,’ ‘Budenz’ foul slander,’ ‘Healy’s Big Lie,’ etc.) were exposed once and for all.

“Furthermore, other evidence introduced at trial established the full significance of the Franklin coverup. Budenz, it emerged, had also identified Hansen as a GPU agent at about the same time he had identified Franklin. This fact was contained in a letter written on June 8, 1976 to Joseph Hansen by his close friend, Vaughn T. O’Brien. [79]

After quoting Seigle’s April 15, 1983 article noting that Budenz had also fingered “several SWP members,” including Joseph Hansen, as GPU agents, North continued:

“Although he publicly exposed Franklin, Budenz never published what he knew about the GPU activities of Hansen. This was because he was instructed not to do so by the FBI. It was protecting its highly-prized agent inside the SWP, Joseph Hansen—who, as other evidence established, had sought and obtained a covert relationship with the FBI in 1940.” [80]

It was essential, from the standpoint of the SWP’s cover-up, that Budenz, as a source of the claim that both Callen and Hansen were agents, be labeled a “slanderer,” “stoolpigeon,” and “perjurer.” Moreover, if Hansen and the SWP were to admit that Callen was an agent, it would lend legitimacy to Shachtman and Glotzer’s 1947 source. This source not only warned about Callen but also said, in the words of Cannon, that “the FBI has an agent in our party, high in the leadership.” Cannon said Shachtman’s Workers Party had warned the SWP of the FBI agent “for years.”

The Security and the Fourth International investigation uncovered documents revealing that Hansen met secretly with the State Department in the aftermath of Trotsky’s assassination. At these meetings, Hansen admitted to having a relationship with the GPU at the same exact time the Stalinists were infiltrating the SWP with agents like Franklin. He asked for, and received, information for follow-up meetings with the FBI in New York City. None of these facts were known to the National Committee of the SWP until the International Committee published them.

While Hansen’s role as an agent is clear, the full details of his operations with the GPU and US agencies are not yet known. There were multiple sides to his motivation for initiating contact with the State Department and FBI. He feared that if US officials knew he had been in contact with the GPU, he would need an alibi, which he provided to the
agents with whom he met after Trotsky’s assassination. He also hoped to deflect attention from his past connections to the GPU in the investigations into Trotsky’s assassination.

Hansen began working for the FBI, handing over to them information about the SWP’s internal investigation into the assassination, as well as providing the US government a copy of the “W Memorandum,” a list of names of GPU agents the SWP had received from ex-Communist Party member Whitaker Chambers.

In exchange for this and other internal party information, Hansen was able to avoid prosecution when, in 1941, the Justice Department, at the behest of the FBI, prosecuted 29 members of the SWP with sedition and conspiracy to overthrow the government in the Minneapolis Smith Act Trial. As the World Socialist Web Site detailed in its two-part review of Donna Haverty-Stacke’s book Trotskyists on Trial (Part one, Part two), Hansen’s absence from the list of defendants was otherwise inexplicable on account of his role as Trotsky’s secretary in Mexico City from 1939 to 1940.

While the documents published by the ICFI showed Hansen’s relationship with the FBI began in 1940, they do not indicate that this relationship ever came to an end.

The SWP had the opportunity to uncover the truth about Callen and Hansen. If the 1947 SWP control commission had made a real effort to investigate the claims about FBI and GPU infiltration by Shachtman and Glotzer’s source, which followed the Budenz revelations, they would have exposed the agents who did untold damage to the SWP over the course of the next decades, including Hansen himself. In the course of the SWP’s suit against the FBI over COINTELPRO, the government was forced to admit that it had infiltrated the SWP with hundreds of agents, comprising a substantial portion of the party membership. Soviet spy logs and cables, acquired by the US Army Signals Intelligence through the VENONA program, which were published in the mid-1990s, explicitly reference Callen—codename “Satyr”—as a Soviet agent.

Instead, the control commission let the matter pass and swore those present to secrecy. Callen was allowed to leave the movement. The SWP dropped all coverage of Louis Budenz’s revelations at precisely the time the government was acting on the SWP’s prior demand that Budenz be interviewed by a grand jury. When Budenz published his second book in 1950, Men Without Faces, the SWP worked with Callen herself, who dictated to Farrell Dobbs how the SWP should respond to Budenz’s allegations.

Hansen maneuvered to protect Callen, as evidenced by his exchanges with Isaac Don Levine in 1958 and Gerry Healy in 1960. The SWP failed to report on the 1960 Robert Soblen trial and the testimony of Jack Soble, which further identified Callen as an agent. Cannon, in his 1966 letter to Reba Hansen, also gave a false portrayal of the 1947 control commission, indicating that it investigated the matter and allowed Callen to “continue with her work.”

As a result, Hansen remained at his leadership post, with access to information about the world movement’s activities and membership. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Hansen became the dominant political figure in the SWP, engineering its political break with the International Committee in 1963 and its reunification with the pro-Stalinist United Secretariat of Michel Pablo. Hansen also oversaw the recruitment of Jack Barnes and a group of 12 students from Carleton College, a rural private college in Minnesota, and helped orchestrate their elevation into the leadership of the party.

The ICFI’s Security and the Fourth International investigation was an enormous undertaking and a milestone in the history of the Trotskyist movement. The ICFI conducted this struggle under conditions where the Stalinist bureaucracy and Pabloite apparatus wielded considerable influence over the labor movement and sought to blackguard and isolate the ICFI.

Despite these unfavorable circumstances, the ICFI fought to expose the crimes of the Stalinist bureaucracy in orchestrating the murder of Trotsky and the infiltration of the Trotskyist movement.

To the contemporary reader, it might seem difficult to understand the bitterness of the denunciations that were hurled against the ICFI for undertaking this investigation. Opposition to the Security and the Fourth International investigation from the various Pabloite and Stalinist organizations had two central motivations. First, the state agents inside the SWP and the international Pabloite organizations were determined to block their own exposure through the ICFI’s investigation. Second, and most fundamentally, Security and the Fourth International’s exposure of the counterrevolutionary history and role of Stalinism cut across the political agenda of the Pabloites and their Stalinist allies.

But, over the past 40 years, the publication of new evidence has substantiated the ICFI’s allegations as fact. Even today, many who cite the information made public through Security and the Fourth International do so without acknowledging the investigation itself or the ICFI’s role.

The lies to defend Hansen and to slander the Security and the Fourth International investigation continue to the present. The ex-Pabloite, St. Mary’s professor Susan Weissman, for example, called the investigation “a bizarre, sectarian smear campaign against Joseph Hansen.” When challenged to retract her slanders in a November 10, 2015 open letter by David North, Weissman hid behind a veil of dishonest silence.

To honest historians, as well as workers and youth coming into struggle with the capitalist system, the investigation is an invaluable source for understanding the counterrevolutionary nature of the Stalinist bureaucracy and the necessity of protecting the revolutionary movement from agents of the state. The historical significance of Security and the Fourth International endures.

Concluded

Notes:

[75] SWP PC meeting minutes April 16, 1983.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Barnes Still Defends Sylvia Franklin, p. 10.
[78] Ibid., p. 3.
[79] Ibid., p. 2.
[80] Ibid.

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http://www.wsws.org