

The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party—Part 8

7 October 2008

The Socialist Equality Party (US) today continues publication of The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party. The document was discussed extensively and adopted unanimously at the Founding Congress of the SEP, held August 3-9, 2008. (See "Socialist Equality Party holds founding Congress") The WWS will serialize the publication over two weeks. (Click here for parts 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10 and 11)

The WWS has published the Socialist Equality Party Statement of Principles, which was also adopted at the Founding Congress. Click here to download a PDF version of the Statement of Principles.

To find out more about how to join the SEP, contact us here.

Wohlforth's Break with the Workers League

157. The world capitalist crisis and the escalation of class conflict brought to the surface political problems in the Workers League. The growth of the League in the late 1960s and early 1970s had been based to a great extent on the radicalization of student and minority youth. But the political climate on university campuses substantially changed as the withdrawal of US troops from Vietnam began and the draft was ended. The Workers League was confronted with the challenge of turning to the working class. This required not only expanded practical activities, but also a comprehensive Marxist analysis of the objective situation and the assimilation, by a relatively inexperienced party cadre, of the lessons of the ICFI's struggle against Pabloite revisionism. Instead, the work of the party assumed, under Wohlforth's direction, a largely activist character, without a clear political perspective. Wohlforth's political and personal behavior exhibited disturbing signs of disorientation. Egged on by a new personal companion, Nancy Fields, Wohlforth's interventions in the party assumed a frenzied, unprincipled and destructive character. Within the space of one year, 1973-74, the Workers League lost more than one-half of its membership.

158. The crisis in the Workers League came to a head in late August 1974. The International Committee learned that Nancy Fields — who, without any experience or qualifications, had been elevated into the leadership by Wohlforth and had become his inseparable companion — had close family connections with high-ranking personnel in the Central Intelligence Agency. It then emerged that Wohlforth, though aware of these family relations, had concealed this information from all other members of the Workers League Central Committee. Nor had Wohlforth informed the International Committee of Nancy Field's background, even though he personally selected her to accompany him to an ICFI conference in May 1974. Several delegates attending that conference came from countries with repressive regimes, which required that political work be carried out in conditions of illegality. The Workers League Central Committee voted to remove Wohlforth as national secretary and,

pending an investigation into her background, suspend Fields from membership.[95] One month later, Wohlforth resigned from the Workers League. Soon thereafter, he publicly denounced the International Committee and — repudiating all that he had written over the previous 14 years — rejoined the Socialist Workers Party. Eventually, Wohlforth would abandon socialist politics entirely, denounce the Trotskyist movement as a "cult," and, in the late 1990s, call for American military action in the Balkans (in an article entitled "Give War a Chance").

The Workers League After Wohlforth

159. The political desertion of Wohlforth marked a decisive turning point in the development of the Workers League as a Trotskyist organization. Wohlforth's resignation and subsequent repudiation of his own political history expressed not only personal weaknesses. It epitomized specific traits of American petty-bourgeois radicalism — in particular, its contempt for theoretical consistency and a pragmatic disdain for history. The Workers League recognized that the crisis through which it had passed in 1973-74 required more than a criticism of Wohlforth's errors. Thus, in response to Wohlforth's resignation and his denunciation of the ICFI, the Workers League initiated an extensive review of the history of the Fourth International. It was precisely the emphasis on the historical experience of the Trotskyist movement, within the context of the objective development of world capitalism and the international class struggle, that emerged as the essential and distinctive characteristic of the Workers League. The development of Marxist perspective and the strategic orientation to the working class, it repeatedly stressed, was only possible to the extent that the full weight of the historical experience of the Marxist movement was brought to bear in the analysis of contemporary socio-economic processes. In its perspective resolution of November 1978, the Workers League stated:

The foundation for revolutionary practice, the indispensable basis for any real orientation to the working class from the standpoint of the struggle for power, is the thorough assimilation of the entire body of historical experiences through which the International Committee has passed since 1953. The training of Trotskyist cadre is only possible in the struggle to base every aspect and detail of the party's political work on the historical conquests of the International Committee, derived from the battle against revisionism.[96]

160. The document explained the relationship between this conscious and continuous reworking of the historical experience of the Trotskyist

movement and both the theoretical struggle against pragmatism and the practical orientation of the party to the working class:

There can be no real turn to the working class outside of the conscious struggle to preserve the lines of historical continuity between the present struggles of the working class and the revolutionary party as a unity of opposites and the whole content of the objective historical experiences of the class and the development of Bolshevism. It is only from the standpoint of the struggle to base the whole work of the Party on the historical gains of the struggle against revisionism, and the immense political and theoretical capital that is the heritage left behind by Trotsky to the Fourth International, that the fight against pragmatism within the ranks of the Party and, therefore, in the working class itself, can be seriously mounted. As soon as the struggle against pragmatism is detached from the fight to maintain the direct historical connections between the daily practice of the cadres and the whole body of historical experiences through which the Trotskyist movement has passed, it degenerates into the most impotent forms of verbal jousting. Or, to put it more accurately, it becomes simply another variety of pragmatism itself.[97]

The Origins of the "Security and the Fourth International" Investigation

161. The intersection of history and politics found expression in the circumstances surrounding Wohlforth's desertion from the Workers League. Although he had initially acknowledged that his failure to inform either the leadership of the Workers League or the International Committee of Fields's family connections was a serious breach of the movement's security, Wohlforth — once he had left the Workers League — declared that the concerns raised by the party were without the slightest justification. Gerry Healy's preoccupation with the issue of security, declared Wohlforth, was evidence of "madness." Joseph Hansen, the principal political leader of the Socialist Workers Party and editor of the Pabloite journal, *Intercontinental Press*, came to Wohlforth's aid with a vitriolic denunciation of Healy. "Wohlforth describes Healy's performance as 'madness,'" Hansen wrote. "Would it not be preferable and more precise, to use a modern term like 'paranoia'?"[98]

162. Hansen's intervention in support of Wohlforth, aimed at belittling the need for security in the revolutionary socialist movement and discrediting those who took this matter seriously, raised questions of the greatest political and historical significance:

i. Hansen's defense of Wohlforth's negligent attitude toward the security of his own organization came at a time when, in the aftermath of Nixon's resignation, an enormous amount of evidence was emerging about massive government spying on radical and socialist organizations. Hansen's own organization had been the target of a spying operation that spanned nearly 15 years. Documents relating to the so-called COINTELPRO operation, set up by the Federal Bureau of Investigation under the aegis of J. Edgar Hoover, revealed that between 1961 and 1975 the SWP had been flooded with police agents and informants.

ii. The Trotskyist movement had been dealt devastating blows through the infiltration of the Fourth International by agents of the Soviet Union and the United States. The assassination of a

significant section of the leadership of the Fourth International between 1937 and 1940 was prepared and executed by Stalinist agents who had penetrated the movement.

iii. Hansen, who libeled Healy's concern for the security of the international Trotskyist movement as "paranoia," had witnessed the assassination of Leon Trotsky by Mercader. It was none other than Hansen who authorized the admission of the GPU agent into Trotsky's villa in Coyoacan on the day of the murder. Hansen also knew that Mercader had developed a personal relationship with a young member of the SWP as a ploy to gain access to Trotsky. James P. Cannon, after Trotsky's assassination, indicted the "carelessness" that had compromised Trotsky's personal security. "We haven't probed deeply enough into the past of people even in leading positions — where they came from, how they live, whom they are married to, etc. Whenever in the past such questions — elementary for a revolutionary organization — were raised, the petty-bourgeois opposition would cry, 'My God, you are invading the private lives of comrades!' Yes, that is precisely what we were doing, or more correctly, threatening to do — nothing ever came of it in the past. If we had checked up on such matters a little more carefully we might have prevented some bad things in the days gone by."[99]

163. Given this context, Hansen's attack on Healy was not only scurrilous. It was nothing less than an attempt to disarm the cadre of the Trotskyist movement in the face of real threats from the capitalist state and its agencies. The International Committee decided that the most appropriate answer to Hansen and Wohlforth would be to review the historical experience of the Fourth International in relation to problems of security. Specifically, this entailed an investigation into the events leading up to the assassination of Trotsky. At its Sixth Congress in May 1975, the ICFI voted to initiate this investigation, whose results were to be published under the title, "Security and the Fourth International."

The Role of Joseph Hansen

164. The initial stages of the investigation uncovered recently declassified documents, which revealed the conspiracy that prepared Trotsky's assassination and the fatal role played by agents who had managed to infiltrate all the major political centers of the Fourth International. The ICFI uncovered documents relating to the activities of agents such as Mark Zborowski, who became the principal assistant of Trotsky's son, Leon Sedov. Zborowski played a key role in the murder of Sedov and other leading members of the Fourth International in Europe. Another important Stalinist agent, who supplied the Kremlin with valuable information on Trotsky's activities was Sylvia Caldwell (née Callen), the personal secretary of James P. Cannon. But the most significant information uncovered by the ICFI related to the activities of Joseph Hansen. Documents discovered in the US National Archives, and others obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, revealed that Hansen, immediately after the assassination of Trotsky, sought out and established a covert relationship with high-level US government agents. One such document, a letter from the American Consul in Mexico City to an official in the State Department, dated September 25, 1940, reported that Hansen "wishes to be put in touch with someone in your confidence located in New York to whom confidential information could be imparted with impunity."[100]

165. The ICFI discovered conclusive evidence that Joseph Hansen had

functioned as an agent inside the Trotskyist movement. A lawsuit brought by Alan Gelfand against the US government, alleging state control of the Socialist Workers Party, forced the release of official documents that substantiated the findings of the Security and the Fourth International investigation. Among the most significant facts uncovered as a result of the lawsuit was that the FBI had known, from at least the mid-1940s, that Joseph Hansen had worked for the GPU inside the SWP. He had been identified as a Stalinist agent by former Communist Party leader Louis Budenz, the same man who had publicly exposed Sylvia Caldwell. This revelation made clear why Hansen and the SWP leadership vehemently denounced Budenz and defended Caldwell. To admit the truth of Budenz's allegations against Caldwell would lend substantial credibility to his identification of Hansen as an agent. Thus, up until the court-ordered release of Sylvia Caldwell's grand jury testimony, in which she admitted to having worked inside the SWP as a GPU spy, the SWP defended her as an "exemplary" comrade. Reba Hansen, the wife of Joseph Hansen, lied publicly about the reasons for Caldwell's sudden departure from the party in 1947 (the year Budenz's revelations were made public). Describing Caldwell as "a warm human being," Reba Hansen claimed that "Sylvia left New York in 1947 because of family obligations." [101] SWP national secretary Jack Barnes, in testimony given during the trial of Gelfand's lawsuit, declared that Caldwell "is one of my heroes after the harassment and what she's been through in the last couple of years." [102]

A Phony "Verdict": The Pabloites Endorse the Cover-up of Stalinist Crimes

166. Despite the evidence uncovered by the ICFI, all the opportunist and Pabloite organizations opposed the Security and the Fourth International investigation. In September 1976, virtually every leading figure in the Pabloite movement issued a so-called "Verdict" denouncing Security and the Fourth International as a "Shameless Frame-up." Depositions taken by Gelfand of SWP officials responsible for the publication of the "Verdict" established that none of its signatories had reviewed any of the evidence gathered by the ICFI before affixing their names to the denunciation of "Security and the Fourth International." Repeated calls by the International Committee for the establishment of a commission of inquiry to examine the evidence went unanswered. Political interests played a decisive role in the Pabloites' response. They had no interest in revisiting the issue of Trotsky's assassination and bringing to the attention of a new generation of workers the history of Stalinist crimes. Nor did they object when the SWP went into court in 1982 in support of GPU murderer Mark Zborowski's efforts to quash a subpoena obtained by Gelfand, compelling Zborowski to answer questions relating to the infiltration of the Socialist Workers Party. Zborowski, who was living in comfortable retirement in San Francisco, challenged the subpoena on the grounds that testimony contributing to the exposure of agents inside the SWP would constitute a violation of the recently passed Intelligence Identities Protection Act. The court upheld Zborowski's appeal.

167. In the quarter century that has passed since the completion of the Security and the Fourth International investigation, many of its findings have been substantiated by the release of official Soviet documents. The so-called "Venona Papers" — decrypted files from Soviet intelligence sources — have definitively identified not only Caldwell, but also Robert Sheldon Harte — an SWP member sent down to Mexico to serve as a guard — as a Stalinist agent. When the ICFI initially published information incriminating Harte, this, too, was denounced by the SWP and the Pabloites as a slander. The validation of the charges made by the ICFI has produced no retraction by any of the Pabloite organizations of their

denunciations of Security and the Fourth International.

168. Another peculiar set of facts emerged as a byproduct of the Security investigation. Virtually the entire central leadership of the Socialist Workers Party — including a majority of its political committee — had attended Carleton College, a small liberal arts school in the Midwest. There was no record that the SWP had conducted any systematic work on the Carleton campus during the period between 1960 and 1964, when so many of its students, including Jack Barnes, entered the party and were rapidly promoted into its leadership. The medium of their transformation from conservative Midwestern students (Jack Barnes had been a Republican) into leaders of an ostensibly revolutionary organization was the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, which was manipulated by, and riddled with, FBI agents. No credible explanation has been provided by the SWP leadership for the Carleton College phenomenon.

169. As the International Committee's investigation uncovered evermore incriminating evidence implicating Hansen as an agent, the counter-campaign of the SWP and the Pabloites assumed an increasingly provocative character. On January 14, 1977, the Pabloites held in London a public meeting of their supporters to denounce Security and the Fourth International and, in particular, Gerry Healy. Among those addressing the assembly were Ernest Mandel, Tariq Ali (leader of the British Pabloite organization), Pierre Lambert (leader of the OCI), and Tim Wohlforth. Prior to the meeting, the Workers Revolutionary Party sent a letter addressed to the leaders of the Pabloite organizations, calling for the establishment of a parity commission, consisting of an equal number of members from the ICFI and United Secretariat, to examine the evidence that had been uncovered by the investigation. The letter was not answered, nor was it acknowledged at the January 14 meeting. Instead, the meeting was given over entirely to vituperative denunciations of Healy. When Healy rose from the audience to request that he be given an opportunity to respond to the attacks, he was refused.

170. Despite the Pabloite stonewalling, the investigation continued. In May 1977, the ICFI located Sylvia Caldwell in a suburb outside Chicago, living without a fixed address in a trailer park. She had, since leaving the SWP, remarried (her first husband, Stalinist agent Zalmond Franklin, had died in 1958), and was now Sylvia Doxsee. She claimed to have no recollection of having been a member of the SWP, while at the same time declaring that James P. Cannon was a man of no particular importance. The ICFI published photos of Doxsee and portions of the transcript of its interview with her in June 1977. The SWP responded to this with a public campaign that sought to label the Workers League as a "violent" organization. This campaign was spearheaded by Hansen himself who, while warning that the investigation would have "deadly consequences" for the International Committee, wrote that "the Healyites are quite capable of initiating physical violence against other sectors of the labor movement..." [103] It had long been the *modus operandi* of the Stalinists to denounce the Trotskyist movement as "violent" even as they prepared physical attacks against it. Four months later, on October 16, 1977, Tom Henahan, a leading member of the Workers League, was shot in New York City while supervising a public function of its youth organization, the Young Socialists. He died of his wounds in hospital, just a few hours later. Henahan's murder had all the characteristics of a professional assassination, carried out by skilled gunmen, who entered the premises where the function was being held and, without any cause, fired on Henahan. The New York City press immediately labeled the assault a "senseless killing," and the police refused to conduct any investigation. Though the two killers had been identified by eyewitnesses, no attempt was made by the police to apprehend them. The police inaction was abetted by the Pabloites, who refused to either report or denounce the murder of Tom Henahan. The Workers League conducted an independent political campaign to mobilize public support behind the demand for the apprehension of the assassins. In the course of this campaign tens of

thousands of workers, and the representatives of trade union organizations representing several million workers, signed petitions endorsing the Workers League's demand. Finally, in October 1980, the police acceded to this public pressure and arrested the killers, Angelo Torres and Edwin Sequinot. Their trial was held in July 1981. They were found guilty and sentenced to lengthy prison terms. However, the defendants did not testify and they provided no explanation for their actions.

To be continued

Notes:

95. The report issued by the ICFI stated that "from the age of 12 until the completion of her university education, Nancy Fields was brought up, educated and financially supported by her aunt and uncle, Albert and Gigs Morris. Albert Morris is head of the CIA's computer operation in Washington as well as being a large stockholder in IBM. He was a member of the OSS, forerunner of the CIA, and worked in Poland as an agent of imperialism. During the 1960s, a frequent house guest at their home in Maine was Richard Helms, ex-director of the CIA and now US Ambassador in Iran." [*Documents of Security and the Fourth International* (New York: Labor Publications, 1985), p. 15.]

96. *The World Economic-Political Crisis of Capitalism and the Death Agony of US Imperialism* (New York: Labor Publications, 1979), p. 30.

97. Ibid., p. 36.

98. "The Secret of Healy's Dialectics," *Intercontinental Press*, March 31, 1975.

99. James P. Cannon, *The Socialist Workers Party in World War II: Writings and Speeches, 1940-43* [New York: Pathfinder Press, 1975], pp. 81-82.

100. *Documents of Security and the Fourth International*, p. 115.

101. *James P. Cannon As We Knew Him* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1976), p. 233.

102. *The Gelfand Case*, Volume II (New York: Labor Publications, 1985) p. 635.

103. *Intercontinental Press*, June 20, 1977.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact