

The case of Nancy Wohlforth, a.k.a. Fields, and the origins of Security and the Fourth International

David North
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On Tuesday, May 20, a memorial meeting was held across the street from the White House, in the main lobby of the national headquarters of the AFL-CIO in Washington D.C., to honor the life of Nancy Wohlforth, who had died on December 31, 2024 at the age of 79.

The speakers paid tribute to Wohlforth's role as secretary-treasurer of the Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU) and member of the National Executive Board of the AFL-CIO.

The meeting was chaired by Larry Cohen, the former president of the Communications Workers of America (CWA). The main eulogy was delivered by Liz Shuler, the president of the AFL-CIO, who had known and worked closely with Wohlforth for 20 years. Mary Kay Henry, who retired last year from the presidency of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), also paid tribute. Ms. Henry was described in *Washingtonian* in 2022 as "the most influential union voice in the White House..."

There were approximately 75 people in attendance, consisting almost entirely of union bureaucrats and friends of Nancy Wohlforth. Not a single rank-and-file member of the OPEIU or any other union was either present or spoke at the event.

In the course of the two-hour memorial, the speakers focused on Wohlforth's work in the OPEIU and AFL-CIO bureaucracy and her commitment as a prominent lesbian to the fight for gay rights. In 2005, she became the first member of the LGBTQ community to be elected to the AFL-CIO's national leadership.

Notably absent from any of the speeches was a reference to that part of her life for which she will be remembered and forever held in contempt by the socialist movement: that is, her central role in an attempt to destroy the Workers League, forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party, in 1973-74.

The name "Nancy Fields" was never referenced by the speakers. But it was under that name that Nancy Wohlforth carried out a wrecking operation within the Workers League that resulted within the space of one year in the loss of approximately half the membership of the organization.

Initially known as Nancy Freuden, the last name being that of her first husband, she joined the Workers League in 1971 and volunteered to work full-time as a proofreader in the party's national office. She claimed to have acquired experience in that capacity as a former employee of *Time* magazine. Her other responsibilities included serving as the office receptionist and monitoring the literature inventory. She adopted the byline "Fields" for articles she occasionally contributed to the *Bulletin*, the newspaper of the Workers League.

Fields played no significant role in the leadership of the Workers League until the late spring of 1973, when she, having left her husband, began a personal relationship with the national secretary of the Workers League, Tim Wohlforth.

Solely on the basis of this relationship, Wohlforth elevated Fields into

the party leadership. She became Wohlforth's inseparable companion. With his unquestioning approval, Fields was given control over the activities of the national organization.

The eulogists at the memorial event spoke effusively about Nancy Wohlforth's warmth and humor. But these were not characteristics observed by party members in 1973-74. Her interactions with cadre consisted almost exclusively of unrestrained verbal abuse, delivered with shouts and a shaking fist. Her conduct, to which Wohlforth blindly acquiesced, had a devastating impact on the Workers League, which at that time consisted largely of a relatively inexperienced cadre.

Fields' *modus operandi* was later described in *The Fourth International and the Renegade Wohlforth*, written in 1976:

Wherever she went, Fields left behind a trail of political destruction. She became Wohlforth's inseparable travelling companion and hatchet woman. They jetted around the country to the tune of thousands of dollars in a wrecking operation the likes of which had never been seen in the Workers League. They closed down branches, threatened members with expulsion, and employed the crudest factional intrigues to drive comrades out of the Workers League.

The so-called "national tours" of Wohlforth and Fields had more the character of a honeymoon than a political intervention.

In April 1974 Wohlforth selected Nancy Fields to accompany him as a Workers League delegate to a congress of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) in London, even though she had absolutely no qualifications for this assignment. Present at this meeting were delegates from Greece, Spain and Peru who were conducting their political work under conditions of illegality.

In the course of the discussion, the Sri Lankan delegate, Keerthi Balasuriya, general secretary of the Revolutionary Communist League, expressed concern that the Workers League's delegate to the previous meeting of the ICFI had left the organization. Wohlforth evaded Balasuriya's questions by dismissing the resignation as merely a personal desertion and boasting of other organizational successes.

However, in mid-August 1974, one of the longtime members who had left the Workers League traveled to Britain and brought to the attention of Gerry Healy, the leader of the Workers Revolutionary Party, the enormous scale of the losses suffered by the Workers League. Healy, possessed of a vast experience in revolutionary politics, had been troubled by the attendance of the previously unknown Nancy Fields at the recent international conference. Moreover, he noted the coincidence of the

initiation of Wohlforth's relationship with Fields, her rapid elevation into the party's leadership and the eruption of a devastating organizational crisis in the Workers League.

The Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP), the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, contacted Wohlforth and asked that he travel to Britain to discuss the state of the Workers League. During the subsequent discussions in London, Wohlforth was directly asked whether he had any information that might indicate that his companion, Nancy Fields, was in any way connected to police or intelligence agencies in the United States. Wohlforth insisted that there was no reason to suspect that this was the case.

There was nothing outlandish about Healy's inquiry. In 1971, information had emerged that exposed the massive scale of police agent infiltration and surveillance of the socialist movement in the United States by the Central Intelligence Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. COINTELPRO (Counterintelligence Program) had been initiated in 1956 to "expose, disrupt, misdirect, or otherwise neutralize" groups held by the government to be subversive. Among its major targets was the Socialist Workers Party, which was flooded with agents and informants.

Moreover, at its summer camp in 1973 held in Canada, the Workers League had discovered surveillance devices that had been planted in the main lecture hall.

Despite Wohlforth's assurances that Fields' political credentials were above all suspicion, Healy initiated an inquiry into her background. Information emerged that directly contradicted the assurances given by Wohlforth. He had failed to disclose to Healy, the International Committee and the Workers League that Nancy Fields had the closest family connections with high-level personnel in the Central Intelligence Agency.

When asked at a meeting of the Workers League National Committee during its summer school in late August 1974 why he had concealed information about Fields' background, Wohlforth replied that he did not consider it important. Her family relations were a purely personal matter.

The national committee of the Workers League rejected Wohlforth's irresponsible justification of his failure to disclose what he knew about Fields' family background. It voted to temporarily remove Wohlforth from the position of national secretary and suspend Nancy Fields from membership pending an ICFI investigation into her personal background. It was not alleged that Nancy Fields was an agent. However, the failure of Wohlforth and Fields to disclose her family connection to CIA personnel was a grave violation of the security of the Workers League and the International Committee.

Wohlforth and Fields initially voted for the resolutions passed by the national committee. But one month later, just as the international commission was beginning its work, Wohlforth and Fields resigned from the Workers League.

On November 9, 1974, the commission issued its report, which stated:

The inquiry established 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 IBM 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.

The commission, working with limited resources and decades before the development of the Internet, found no information that Nancy Fields was an agent. However, this did not change the fact that Wohlforth and Fields were obligated, in accordance with longstanding traditions of the workers and socialist movement, to make known to the party leadership Fields' relationship to Albert Morris. The party had the right to investigate this relationship in order to make sure that its security was not being compromised.

After resigning from the Workers League and refusing to cooperate with the commission of inquiry, Wohlforth, with Fields still by his side, made his way back to the Socialist Workers Party. Fields' sojourn in the SWP, as well as her relationship with Wohlforth, did not last long.

Her brief marriage to Wohlforth was effectively over by early 1978. Though retaining Wohlforth's name, she came out as a lesbian and in 1981 entered into a long-term relationship with the woman who became her wife. The nature of her sexual preferences would not merit comment were it not for the questions they raise about her motivations for pursuing, and with such cold-blooded determination, a relationship with the national secretary of the Workers League only a few years earlier.

In 1978 Nancy Wohlforth embarked upon a career in the bureaucracy of the OPEIU and enjoyed a meteoric rise. Certainly, her activities in the Trotskyist movement proved no obstacle in the development of her career.

She became a full-time paid official in her local in 1983 and eventually rose to the position of the national union's secretary-treasurer. At the height of her career as an OPEIU bureaucrat, she enjoyed an annual income of a quarter million dollars.

As for Tim Wohlforth, his 14 years of struggle from 1960 to 1974 against the SWP's betrayal of Trotskyism and the duplicitous role of its principal leader, Joseph Hansen, were forgotten overnight.

In June 1974 Wohlforth had written a lengthy exposure of the anti-Trotskyist politics of Joseph Hansen, which appeared in the *Bulletin* under the title, "An Aging Liar Peddles His Wares." But in February-March 1975, he published a long denunciation of Gerry Healy and the International Committee in the *Intercontinental Press*, the Pabloite journal edited by Hansen. He characterized Healy's concern with the breach of party security as "madness."

Following Wohlforth's attack on the International Committee, Hansen wrote and published in the March 24, 1975 issue of *Intercontinental Press* a vicious diatribe titled, "The Secret of Healy's Dialectics." Cynically mocking the International Committee's response to the violation of its security, Hansen wrote:

Wohlforth describes Healy's performance as "madness." Would it not be preferable, and perhaps more precise, to use a modern term like "paranoia"?

If the term fits, then the true explanation for Healy's obsessions about CIA agents, police agents and plots against his life, as well as his rages, "extreme reactions," and strange version of dialectics is to be sought not in his politics, philosophical methodology, or models like Cannon or Pablo, but in the workings of a mind best understood by psychiatrists.

Hansen's defense of Wohlforth's reckless conduct could not be simply dismissed as an example of unprincipled factionalism. Hansen was justifying Wohlforth's concealment of Fields' connection to CIA agent Albert Morris at a time when the massive state penetration of Hansen's own organization, the Socialist Workers Party, was front-page news. Even more serious, Hansen's own political experience had exposed him, in the most tragic manner, to the consequences of the penetration of the Trotskyist movement by an agent.

From 1937 until 1940, Hansen had served as one of Trotsky's secretaries in Coyoacan, Mexico. He was the guard who admitted Ramon Mercader, the agent of the Stalinist secret police, the GPU, into Trotsky's villa on August 20, 1940. Hansen witnessed Trotsky's assassination in the late afternoon of that terrible day. He was, moreover, entirely familiar with the series of assassinations of leading Trotskyists in 1937-38 by the GPU, which used information provided by Mark Zborowski, the Stalinist agent planted in the leadership of the Fourth International.

In its initial response to Hansen, published in April 1975, the Political Committee of the Workers Revolutionary Party stated that attention to security issues "is to be seen as a central political question in the training of a revolutionary cadre in the working class." This does not call for panic, because the party "cannot organize its ranks properly to repel police penetration under panic." Rather, it is essential for the party membership to understand the political significance of security issues. Toward this end, the WRP leadership wrote:

Hansen's article enables us to reopen vital pages in the history of Trotskyism. We are obliged to present this history, warts and all, since our movement has, in the past, paid a terrible price when it has ignored and derided security training in its ranks. These are the pages that Hansen wants to suppress.

The International Committee of the Fourth International is not going to be intimidated by the shouts and screams of the revisionists. They can call us "sectarians" and "paranoids" until they are blue in the face. In using these labels, they are in fact attacking the IC's fight for principles and its attention to discipline and security vigilance in our ranks. We are not building a bucket-shop for middle-class free-booters and adventurers, which is the hallmark of Hansen's international groupings. That road is an open invitation to the CIA and penetration by the police, because it is precisely among such elements that the police agencies operate so breezily.

Hansen wants to hide the security question: We want to elevate it in the training and building of our movement. That is why we feel it necessary to reopen the pages of the history of Trotskyism to explain the background of why action was taken against Wohlforth and why similar steps will be taken again in the future if the necessity arises.

The statement concluded with the following notice:

The International Committee is recommending to the Sixth World Congress that a special fund be started to provide resources for a thoroughgoing investigation into security and the Fourth International and the role of individuals such as Hansen.

One month later, the Sixth Congress of the International Committee met from May 19 to May 25 and formally accepted a motion introduced by Gerry Healy to initiate an investigation into the penetration of the Fourth International by agents of the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy and the imperialist states and into the conspiracy against the Fourth International that culminated in the assassination of its founder in August 1940.

When that motion was passed, little more was known in the Fourth International about the assassination of Trotsky than what had been widely reported in the days that followed his murder. This was the official narrative: A GPU assassin had established a relationship with a young and unsuspecting Trotskyist by the name of Sylvia Ageloff to gain access to

the villa in Coyoacan.

The new information that emerged in the years that followed—such as the real name of the assassin, Ramon Mercader, and about the network of Stalinist agents operating inside the Fourth International—was uncovered by investigations unconnected to any efforts made by the Socialist Workers Party, which had been principally responsible for Trotsky's security in Mexico. For all intents and purposes, the SWP not only abandoned any independent investigation into the circumstances of Trotsky's assassination. It ignored and sought to suppress information that became public in the 1950s and early 1960s.

There were two reasons for the SWP's suppression of information relating to the conspiracy against Trotsky. The first was that the evidence pointed to and threatened to expose the infiltration of agents into the central leadership of the Socialist Workers Party. Second, and even more significantly from a political standpoint, the exposure of the counter-revolutionary role of Stalinism cut across the efforts of the Pabloite organizations to effect a reconciliation with the Stalinist organizations.

The Security and the Fourth International investigation, which obtained access to declassified files deposited in the US National Archives, implicated Hansen as an agent of the GPU and informer for the FBI. Other documents, including long-sealed grand jury transcripts, decisively proved that Sylvia Caldwell, the personal secretary of James P. Cannon from 1938 to 1947, was a Stalinist agent who provided the GPU with vast troves of information from the SWP's national office.

The investigation conducted by the International Committee was met with hysterical denunciations by the SWP and its collaborators in the international Pabloite movement. The more damning the documents uncovered by the ICFI, the more unrestrained became the denunciations by the Pabloites.

The investigation into Security and the Fourth International vastly expanded knowledge of both Stalinist and imperialist state conspiracies against the Trotskyist movement. Its work has continued over decades, with its most recent research uncovering information that establishes beyond all reasonable doubt that Sylvia Ageloff, the woman who enabled Mercader to penetrate Trotsky's household, was a GPU agent.

Fifty years after the initiation of the investigation, Security and the Fourth International retains intense contemporary relevance. In the midst of accelerating imperialist counterrevolution, the capitalist state and its agencies will apply against the working class and its most politically conscious vanguard in the socialist movement measures that will exceed in ruthlessness and violence those that were employed in the 1930s. The genocide that is being conducted by the Israeli state, with the full support of all the imperialist powers, demonstrates that there is no crime from which the ruling elites will shrink.

August 20, 2025 will mark the 85th anniversary of the assassination of Leon Trotsky. The International Committee of the Fourth International will commemorate this anniversary with international meetings that will review the findings and contemporary political significance of the International Committee's historic investigation into Security and the Fourth International.

For more information, access the World Socialist Web Site's feature page, "Security and the Fourth International."



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