



Hansen with Leon Trotsky in Mexico



January 1 1959: Cuban newspaper

# Hansen: his life reflected crisis of the Fourth International

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By John Lister

After 45 years of struggle in the midst of the heated controversy—its leader of the American Socialist Workers Party Joseph Hansen died January 18 1979.

Hansen had up to his final days played a key role in the political and theoretical work of the SWP and had been the driving force that established *Revolutionary Press* as a weekly internationalist magazine reflecting the politics of the SWP and the "United" program of the Fourth International.

His lifetime of activity in the SWP spans a whole range of political upheavals and developments.

It began with him deciding to study in 1934 to join the struggling US Trotskyist movement, the Communist Party of America; but its turn-points have reflected not some of the strengths but many of the weaknesses of the Fourth International, particularly in the post war period.

His journalistic skills quickly brought Hansen to the front of the US Trotskyists, at that time were engaged in important work in the workers' movement.

In 1936 he had established himself as an active militant in the maritime union, and was going to edit the union journal

*Voice of the Federation.*

He went on to succeed James P. Cannon as editor of *Labour Action*, the paper produced in California by the Trotskyist faction within the Socialist Party.

Throwing off an initial unhealthy attachment to the petty bourgeois opposition clique around Martin Abern, Hansen was sufficiently trusted in 1937 to be selected to act as secretary to the exiled Leon Trotsky, then in Mexico.

## Assassin

As such, Hansen was on guard duty when Stalinist assassin Ramon Mercader—having won the confidence of the household in preceding weeks—gained access to the building and dealt the death blow to Trotsky with a concealed ice-pick.

This major setback inflicted by Stalinism on the newly-formed and still small Fourth International took shape at the same time as within the US party a group of petty bourgeois forces were launching a very different form of attack on revolutionary Marxism.

University professor James Burnham and journalist Max Schachtman—a founder member of the US Trotskyist movement—had begun to formulate views which challenged not only the Marxist analysis of the Soviet Union and the necessity to

defend it against imperialism, but also rejected the organisational norms of democratic centralism, and the very method of Marxism itself.

A hard-fought factional fight ensued, leading to a major split in the SWP on the eve of US involvement in World War 2. Hansen, emerging as a trusted ally of James P. Cannon, sided firmly with the majority in the struggle for defence of the programmatic and theoretical foundations of the party.

Following the split Hansen was drawn more centrally into the leadership of the SWP, serving both as journalist and as a member of the National Committee.

In the confused period following the end of the war he was to play an important role in the discussion on the changes taking place in the Eastern European "buffer zone" controlled by the Red Army.

## Downfall of Stalinism

The political problem was a real one for the Fourth International. Trotsky and every other leader of the International had anticipated that the War would bring the downfall of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Kremlin—either (hopefully) through the upsurge of political revolution unleashing the nationalised property relations established in the 1917 overturn; or, conceivably, through a

historic defeat if imperialism were able to intervene and reverse these gains, restoring capitalism.

Neither of these eventualities had proven to be the case. Rather Stalinism appeared, if anything, to be stronger than ever—its power now extended into new areas of Eastern Europe, with crisis-ridden imperialism impotent to resist.

## Plundered

Yet Stalin at first had no intention of consolidating Soviet control over the 'Buffer Zone'. Instead these countries were used as a source of plundered industrial plant and materials, and as a bargaining counter in negotiating a new counter-revolutionary deal for 'peaceful coexistence' with imperialism.

Thus in 1946 the Fourth International was quite correct to characterise the Buffer Zone as still being *capitalist* countries—ruled in each case by bourgeois coalition governments.

But with the onset of the Cold War in 1947 this state of affairs changed rapidly.

Stalin, seeking to protect the borders of the USSR, launched a drive throughout the Buffer Zone for the elimination of the remnants of private industry, the suppression of bourgeois and peasant parties, and the

takeover of the state machinery by monolithic Stalinist parties under the watchful eye in most places of the Red Army and the Stalinist secret police.

By 1949 therefore—though development was uneven—it was no longer in general correct to regard these countries as capitalist. They had become deformed workers' states—states in which the working class had never in any way actually held power in its own hands, but in which a bureaucracy parasitic on the workers' movement had driven out the old capitalist class and installed itself at the head of a bureaucratized state machine.

Hansen in December 1949 argued strongly for such an analysis of the Buffer countries and against those who, in fear of peddling illusions in Stalinism clung rigidly to the view that they remained capitalist states.

There were strengths in Hansen's approach—which in no way attributed any "revolutionary" or progressive role to the Stalinist bureaucracy, and which looked back to Trotsky's analysis of pre-war events in Finland and Poland.

But there was also one basic weakness, which was to have profound repercussions.

That is, Hansen focussed simply on the 'fact' that these states had become deformed workers' states—paying insufficient attention to the details of the process whereby that 'fact' had come about.

How was it that a counter-revolutionary national bureaucracy carried through the historically progressive step of the expropriation of the capitalists and landlords of Eastern Europe?

In what way if at all, were the masses mobilised to accomplish such a change? Did they at any point reach the level of independent action—or was everything orchestrated and controlled from above?

Hansen, concerned rather with the change itself than the mechanism that produced it, leaves this question only partially answered.

In any event, with the possible exception of Yugoslavia, there was little that even the most empirical observer could seize upon as "revolutionary" about the leaderships of the Eastern European Stalinist parties—so the issue must have seemed of little importance.

## Independence

But the way that FI leader Pablo analysed Yugoslavia should have provided a clear warning that it is essential in such struggles to call at all times for the mobilisation of the working masses *independently* of the Stalinist bureaucracy, and to fight for the building of Trotskyist parties.

Carried away with the superficially 'left' rhetoric and populist gestures of the Tito bureaucracy in the wake of the 1948 Stalin-Tito split, Pablo declared that the Yugoslav CP had ceased to be a Stalinist party—and had evolved into a centrist party under "mass pressure".

He devised dreams and schemas of the YCP as a whole being won to Trotskyism: of a whole pattern of similar developments within mass CPs in East and Western Europe; and of a reforming wing of the bureaucracy emerging within the Soviet CP itself.

Such a position offered only a complete confusion to the cadres of the FI. But its starting point was a failure to see the necessity for a complete *break* by the masses from the Stalinist bureaucracy, and an independent programme of class action to establish genuine workers' power.

Yet Pablo's positions were not challenged within the FI. Rather, they were endorsed at the Third World Congress in 1951.

Only in 1953, when his policies had developed to threaten the very political independence of established Trotskyist cadres, were they eventually resisted by the leadership of the SWP.

## Open Letter defended

Hansen, correctly siding with the SWP majority, defended their unilateral action of publishing an Open Letter in November 1953:

"The open letter, which [Pablo] flatly refers to as a 'split appeal'—although it was nothing of the kind—did three things:

(i) On the political level it called the attention of Trotskyists everywhere to the fact that in flagrant violation of the programme of the Fourth International the Pablo faction had covered up and apologised for the Stalinist betrayal of the French general strike in August; had failed to call for the withdrawal of Soviet troops from East Germany when they were used to crush the June 17 workers' uprising against the Stalinist gauleiters; had painted up the treacherous temporary concessions granted by these besieged rulers; had similarly painted up the concessions deceptively promised by the Malenkov regime to ally mass unrest in the Soviet Union; and had projected the possibility of the Stalinist bureaucracy and even the Soviet workers sharing power with it . . ."

(*Trotskyism v. Revisionism*, Vol. 2, p.116)

Hansen went on to point out correctly that Pablo's political line:

"is to liquidate the Fourth International as an independent organisation. To dissolve the FI





Report Batista's flight to exile

politically it is necessary first to break up its cadres by expelling them, or reducing them to silence if not acquiescence".

(p.121)

But, in keeping with the remainder of the SWP leadership, Hansen made no serious effort to work back through the essential political, programmatic and theoretical differences and problems that the split with Pablo uncovered.



Hansen

Instead, as a sympathising section—prevented by reactionary US legislation from affiliation to the new-formed International Committee—the SWP began from 1956 onwards to drift towards a similar political method to that of the Pabloites.

As a result, the issue of the political independence of the working class, which had at first appeared of comparatively little significance in 1949, and then emerged as a major question in the 1953 struggle against Pablo, emerged once again in the limelight with the Cuban revolution of 1959.

The petty bourgeois nationalist July 26 Movement headed by Castro successfully overthrew the tottering Batista dictatorship—only to seek out a coalition deal with remaining elements of the bourgeoisie.

But as the Castroites carried through a programme of land reform and expropriation of American capital the regime encountered mounting economic pressure from US imperialism—culminating in the breaking off of the US agreement to buy Cuban sugar, the

bedrock of the economy.

These exports were swiftly taken over by the USSR and China. The Soviet bureaucracy had reasons of its own for furthering an alliance with Castro. And when Kennedy attempted the abortive 'Bay of Pigs' invasion he was easily routed by massive popular resistance.

A few days later Castro declared that the revolution had a 'socialist' character. And, resting on the appearances of events—the 'facts'—the SWP leadership, with Hansen at the forefront, believed him.

Losing track of the 'facts' of the origins of the Castro leadership, and conveniently forgetting the crucial economic and military support given to his regime by the Soviet Union, the SWP increasingly developed the theory that a 'natural' evolution towards Marxism independent of Stalinism was taking place in the Castro leadership—one that had produced not a deformed, but a healthy workers' state.

The 'fact' that there were no organs of working class power in this "healthy" workers' state, and the 'fact' that the counter-revolutionary Communist Party, true to the requirements of Moscow, was seeking close links with Castro, were brushed aside with a schema echoing Pablo at his worst:

Mass pressure

"The Cuban Communist Party is not exempt from this ferment... The fact is that the Cuban Communist Party supports the revolution. If a rift were to occur between Cuba and the Soviet Union, it can be taken for certain that the loyalities of a decisive section of the Communist party, if not the party as a whole, would remain with the Cuban revolution. The experience in Yugoslavia speaks eloquently for such an outcome."

(Draft Theses on the Cuban Revolution, December 1960).

Accordingly, since they envisaged both the Castroites and the Stalinists transformed under "mass pressure" into revolutionary forces, the SWP,

led by Hansen, dropped any call for the building of a Trotskyist party in Cuba.

Introducing the *Theses*, and demonstrating that illusions in Castro were the starting point of the SWP's view of the 'facts', Hansen pointed out that the reason why they had held back before describing Cuba as a workers' state was:

"the absence of a manifest socialist consciousness on the part of the leadership of that revolution. We simply could not give them a blank political cheque when they came to power and say 'Well, obviously because of the mentality you have, your programme, your consciousness, you're going to make Cuba into a workers' state (...)' It remained to be seen in the struggle itself what the final course would be in Cuba."

But Hansen waited only until late 1960 before extending to Castro the blank political cheque that the Havana regime is still cashing in on to this day.

Explaining his method, Hansen proclaimed that: "Our characterisations

simply reflect the facts, just the facts. The fact that the capitalists have been expropriated in Cuba. The fact that a planned economy has been started there. The fact that a qualitatively different kind of state exists there..."

Starting from such 'facts' rather than the necessity to develop the political independence of the working class through the fight to construct Trotskyist parties is the hallmark of the Pabloite method.

Pablo himself drew from these same "facts" the conclusion that the Cuban events were the pattern for the future of the colonial revolution:

"What is new for Revolutionary Marxism in relation to this experience is this: that we pass from the appreciation of the revolutionary role of the peasantry (!) and the necessity of the workers' and peasants' alliance to the understanding of the possibility of beginning and carrying through for a whole period the Revolution in a number of colonial and semi-colonial countries by the armed struggle of the revolutionary peasantry."

Pablo was not alone in this view. He was joined by the formerly "anti-Pabloite" SWP, and especially by Joseph Hansen who, like Pablo, cherished illusions that the Algerian revolution would also follow the "Cuban Way".

Peddling illusions

1962 saw Hansen in Paris writing a string of articles for the SWP *Militant* which peddled the greatest illusions in the "socialist" character of the petty bourgeois nationalist Ben



1959 rally hits Mass mobilisation called by Castroites in struggle against imperialist pressure

Bella regime in Algeria—a position maintained even while that regime moved in to crush the independent trade union confederation UGTA and consolidate deals with French and US imperialism.

How was this false approach fought by the remaining sections of the International Committee?

British SLL leader Gerry Healy, certainly started off on a more correct footing—insisting on the necessity to struggle within the Cuban events for a conscious revolutionary leadership, a Trotskyist party.

But in arguing the case for this view Healy based his approach not on showing how the need for such a party flowed from the actual process of development in Cuba, but on descending to a futile argument centred on disputing Hansen's 'facts', and denying that Cuba was now a workers' state.

From the wrongheaded debate sprang the political split between the SWP and the SLL, based on the documents "Trotskyism Betrayed" (SLL) and "Cuba: The Acid Test" (SWP).

Yet the judgement of whether or not Cuba was a workers' state was not in any way the "acid test". Nor was there any disagreement about the need to defend the Cuban regime—whatever its precise character—against imperialist attack.

Process

The acid test was really whether the Trotskyist movement was capable of grasping the process of the development whereby a petty bourgeois regime in alliance with the Soviet bureaucracy had carried through the expropriation of capitalism without permitting the emergence of independent organisations of the working class.

Only if this process were understood would it be possible to combine on the one hand principled defence of the historically progressive nationalised property relations and on the other to put forward a clear programme for independent working class action for the overthrow of the Castro bureaucracy and establishment of genuine workers' power.

Both tendencies failed this "acid test".

Marxism as a science must begin not from Hansen's notion of the 'facts'—regarded as fixed, wooden entities—but from the material process of the conflict of opposing social classes which actually produces the 'facts' that we empirically observe.

Only this can furnish the key to intervention to change the world.

Thus while Hansen and the Pabloites were able to rest for a period during the 1960s on the apparently left wing, internationalist rhetoric of the Castro bureaucracy as "proof" of their analysis, the processes of the world class struggle served increasingly to highlight the real subordination of the Castro bureaucracy to the reactionary foreign policy of the Kremlin.

In 1965 the Cuban Communist Party was formed—through the merger of the Castroites with the Stalinists—as a totally bureaucratic formation, which held no congress for 10 years.

And 1968 saw Castro defending the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, and the Cuban press abstain from criticism of the Stalinist sabotage of the French general strike.

Today, even empirical evidence reveals Cuban forces as the tool of Kremlin diplomacy

though attempting to preserve the USFI's basically false position on the Castroite forces.

The struggle in the USFI was to sharpen and broaden to the point of the declaration of public factions.

In a number of countries these factions ran competing newspapers, argued opposed policies, recruited independently and, in Portugal in 1975-6 came near to hand-to-hand combat as the Mandelites sided with the Stalinists and the Armed Forces Movement regime while the Hansenites tailed behind the anti-communist demonstrations run by the witch-hunting Socialist Party leadership.

The belated "self-criticism" of their guerrillaist policies by the Mandelite International Majority Tendency however offered an opening in late 1978 for the SWP-backed Leninist-Trotskyist Faction to heal the breach.

This took place with added urgency because there were growing signs of opposition to the SWP's positions among Latin American USFI supporters around Nahuel Moreno that had formed the bulk of the LTF.

Nothing resolved

Thus in 1977, though none of the contentious issues that had divided the SWP leadership from the Mandelite majority had been resolved, the SWP's 29th Annual Convention voted unanimously for a resolution calling for the dissolution of the two tendencies—effectively a new, no-discussion "reunification", with even more guilty secrets to hide than the original reunification in 1963.

and military strategy in Africa, propping up the petty bourgeois Neto regime against working class resistance in Angola; holding back the Zimbabwe liberation struggle; and manning artillery and giving advice for reactionary Ethiopian efforts militarily to crush the Eritrean liberation struggle.

Yet still Hansen maintained to the very end and the SWP continues to argue that Castro's Cuba remained a "revolutionary" "internationalist" regime.

Hansen bolstered this by carrying selective 'left' quotes in *Intercontinental Press* from the Cuban press—while conveniently omitting recent witch-hunting anti-Trotskyist tracts that have appeared.

The confusion on Cuba served to split the International Committee, and also paved the way for the SWP's "reunification" with the Pabloites in 1963.

Diplomatic

Hansen helped to draft the diplomatically-worded reunification documents which carefully avoided any examination of the unresolved problems that had produced the 1953 split, and conceded entirely to the political positions of the Pabloite International Secretariat.

But, not unexpectedly, the confusion lingered on. By 1969 the majority of the new 'United' Secretariat had drawn the most opportunist lessons from their impressions of the Cuban Revolution, and taken up a strategic perspective of guerrilla warfare throughout Latin America.

This went too far even for Hansen and the SWP leadership to swallow. A factional fight erupted, and Hansen emerged as the main spokesman for the comparatively "orthodox" line of building independent revolutionary parties in Latin America—

Hansen was forced for the final four years of his life to contend with a particularly vicious slander campaign against him in the press of the British Workers Revolutionary Party and the remnants of the International Committee.

Various charging Hansen with being a "proven agent of the FBI" and an "accomplice of the GPU", the slanders began in response to a particularly stinging polemic by Hansen against the political positions and internal party regime of the WRP and IC in the wake of the removal of Tim Wohlforth, formerly General Secretary of the Workers League, the US sympathising section of the IC.

They developed into a full-scale vendetta in which Hansen was charged with aiding and abetting Mercader in the murder of Trotsky, and with subsequent illicit collaboration with the FBI.

Yet Hansen was of course one of the twelve plaintiffs in the SWP's marathon \$40 million lawsuit against the FBI, which has so far uncovered reams of hitherto secret files detailing state infiltration and disruption of the US workers' movement.

That lawsuit remains now blocked by the categorical refusal of US Attorney General Griffin Bell to comply with a court order to make available files detailing FBI agents currently active within the SWP.

Healy's cover-up

Yet, if WRP leader Healy is to be believed, it is not the US capitalist state that is the obstacle—but "FBI agent" Joe Hansen!

It is hard to imagine a more convenient political cover-up for the US state machine.

Meanwhile, though attacking Hansen's political integrity and using this as a means of attacking the SWP and the USFI, Healy has in fact himself

adopted political positions as bad, if not worse than those of Pablo by sucking up to the reactionary Middle East despots of Libya and Iraq, uncritically defending the petty bourgeois leadership of the PLO, and even producing eulogies in praise of the late Algerian dictator Boumediene.

It is hard to imagine a more squalid political device than cynically branding your opponents as police agents while yourself adopting policies more opportunist than anything they have proposed.

It is clear that we in the Workers Socialist League have considerable political disagreements with Joseph Hansen, which must colour the way in which we view his achievements over the past 45 years.

Strengths

For there are real strengths from which we can learn.

In my view, whatever his political weaknesses, Hansen's dedication to the building of a revolutionary movement was and remains an example to all those turning to revolutionary politics.

All too few of the "old Trotskyists" have repelled the pressures of careerism and self-gratification for as long as Joseph Hansen. For many the lure of seeking well paid jobs or even starting small businesses was too great.

There is no wealth to be made as a Trotskyist leader: but Hansen lived all his life in a modest style and devoted himself to the political struggle. We must respect such a quality.

Secondly there is Hansen's consistent attention to international questions—his

insistence upon seeing the struggle within the USA in the context of the international developments of the class struggle.

This strength, flowing over into the production of *Intercontinental Press* is an essential quality to be fought for within the Trotskyist movement.

Thirdly we must look at the type of leadership established in the SWP—a collective leadership in which a whole number of leading members are capable and called upon to take key responsibilities.

The opposition to any kind of "star" system by both James P. Cannon and by Hansen—each of whom had the historical standing to dominate the movement had they chosen to do so—stands in marked contrast to the concept of leadership as a tight-knit exclusive clique as seen in Gerry Healy's WRP.

However, this said, there is still no substitute for a struggle for a correct programme and perspective, and such a struggle is necessary not only against Healyite revisionism but also against the revisionism of Joe Hansen and the SWP.

Joe Hansen's life's work in short reflects all of the initial strengths and the subsequent problems and disorientation of the Fourth International.

His undoubted journalistic and theoretical talents could only have reached their full potential in a fight to return to the principles and the method of the Trotskyist programme.

Rejecting that course in 1963, Hansen himself became willy nilly a component in the continuing crisis facing the Trotskyist movement.

That is one fact that neither he nor the USFI leaders or Healy have ever properly understood.