
**Letter to the Central Executive Committee of
the Workers Party of America in Chicago
from Peter Hansen and Cornelia Davis in Buffalo, NY,
May 6, 1924.**

A document in the Comintern Archive, f. 515, op. 1, d. 318, ll. 102-105.

76 East Tupper St.,
Buffalo, NY
May 6, 1924.

To the Central Executive Committee Workers
Party.

Dear Comrades,

John Ballam wrote you not to “kid yourselves that you had a District here.” After two months of his activity (?) in Buffalo, it would be pertinent to ask: what have you got now? †

As a member of the District Executive Committee of District 4 [Buffalo], I would like to know whether the District is to continue its existence

or whether it is to be dissolved? No full meeting of the DEC has been held since Ballam took charge [March 10, 1924]. No books were kept by him. No reports of any kind, financial or secretarial, were issued by him to the District, so far as I know. He has quit Buffalo presumably for good, leaving the office looking as if a cyclone had struck it. It is to be closed this week and the junk heap removed to Finnish Hall, on the outskirts of the city. (Incidentally, this move means the collapse of the Local.)

I have been in the Socialist movement many years, and I have yet to see anything like the kind of tactics Ballam carried on here. The sum total of his work can be put down on the debit side of the ledger for the Party. It is my personal opinion

†- In the fall of 1921, the underground Communist Party of America split three of its four largest districts, carving off part of New York District 2 to create District 10, based in Buffalo and including much of upstate New York and Erie County, PA. This district was carried over in the legal Workers Party of America as District 4. The first District Organizer of WPA D4 was Edward Lindgren. By 1923, P. Hansen of Buffalo was serving as “District Organizer Pro Tem.” On March 10, 1924, Latvian Federationist John J. Ballam arrived in Buffalo to take over as WPA DO4. Ballam’s tenure there seems to have been unhappy; on May 5, 1924 he sent a lengthy letter to WPA Executive Secretary C.E. Ruthenberg and the Organizational Committee stating that while there were branches in 15 cities and towns in the district, only three locals could be “depended upon to carry out party tasks,” namely Buffalo, Rochester, and Schenectady. He advocated merging District 4 with New York District 2, as long as an Assistant DO could be appointed to do field work in the larger industrial centers of upstate New York, Connecticut, and New Jersey. “I found that there is not sufficient development of comrades and a lack of political experience necessary to give the comrades political direction,” Ballam wrote. The District Executive Committee structure would thus be dissolved in area currently functioning as District 4. This directly impacted former District Organizer Hansen and former DEC Secretary Davis, prompting them to write this letter to the CEC of the WPA complaining about Ballam. As might be expected, District Organizer Ballam and his new DEC struck back, adopting a resolution calling the charges leveled by Hansen and Davis to be “false and malicious” at its meeting of May 27, 1924 [f. 515, op. 1, d. 318, l. 126]. In a May 29 letter to Ruthenberg, Ballam noted that the Buffalo City Central Committee was about to take action against Hansen for failing to submit a financial report as literature agent. “Since I came here Hansen has been sabotaging the work of the party,” Ballam stated, charging that he was arbitrarily excluding a list of individuals on the grounds that they were “not good communists” and causing disorganization in the District. Ballam soon moved along, replaced on June 6 by “Acting DO” Joseph Siminoff, whom Ballam personally recommended for the job. Siminoff continued to seek a financial accounting from Peter Hansen, finally notifying him that he was bringing him up on party charges for failing to provide an accounting and violating party instructions to appear at meetings

he has not and never had a grain of interest in this District. As far as organization is concerned, the results are nil; (whatever his reports to you to the contrary may be, notwithstanding) and as far as office routine is concerned, ditto.

He came here with a grouch on against the CEC, and he took it out on those nearest to his hand. He looks upon District 4 [Buffalo] as a hole in the corner where his transcendent abilities are being wasted. After forcing the CEC to appropriate \$150 a month toward his salary — he declared he would not do a stroke of work until the CEC “came across” (and he didn’t) he used the District office as a base for carrying on his operations as a machine politician, and to further his personal ends.

This man Ballam should not be permitted to come into continuous contact with the rank and file membership of the Party as an organizer. He lacks judgment and common sense. Whatever his abilities in other directions may be, his character is such as to constitute him a menace to the organization in his present capacity. Those who have seen him at work (?) and have not been deceived by his preposterous airs of self-importance, are disillusioned in regard to the leadership of the Party. He is capable of wrecking the organization itself for his own ends: he admits it, and even boasts about it. His unspeakable pettiness, his

malicious, relentless, and cowardly persecution of those who have incurred his dislike, his shameless lying and slandering and falsifying of facts have earned him the contempt of comrades here who asked nothing better than to serve the Party and to be let alone.

Specifically, I mean Miss Davis and myself. By his tactics he drove us both out of active participation, and then attacked us for being out. Having accomplished this, he proceeded to turn the Local over to a clique which he had privately characterized individually and collectively as being un-Communist and tending toward labor-fakerism. What larger end he was serving by this move, other than the satisfaction of a grudge and the creation of a machine which he can control, I leave to you to determine. But whatever he had in mind, his actions by and large have been inconsistent and irrational to the point of absurdity. They have been dictated by private passions almost entirely, with no eye to the good of the organization. He does not seem to have learned the ABC of cooperation, and his conception of centralized authority seems to be to sit in a swivel chair and issue instructions like a little czar, which his willing subjects carry out to the letter. “Theirs not to reason why.” He has clearly shown that he does not understand the make-up of Communist men and women, and that he is totally unfit to

[letter of July 14, 1924: d. 318, l. 142]. Hansen replied on July 15, 1924, that he considered “the clique which today, thanks to J. Ballam’s underhand methods is in control of Local Buffalo, neither mentally nor morally fit to sit in judgment on me on any matter whatsoever.” [d. 318, l. 142] Hansen and Davis resigned from the WPA on that same day with a terse one line note to the Secretary of the English Branch of Local Buffalo. [d. 318, l. 142]. That same day, DO Siminoff noted that the WPA’s central literature financial secretary, Nicholas Dozenberg, had on his books an account of \$40.56 due from Peter Hansen. He sought an itemized bill for this account, noting “we are having a little difficulty collecting the account of Comrade Hansen. [d. 318, l. 144].

Siminoff was notified that he was being replaced by the CEC as DO4 by T.R. Sullivan with a July 18, 1924 letter from Ruthenberg. Sullivan, who moved in from St. Louis and thus was not a party to the squabble between Hansen and Ballam, wrote a letter to Ruthenberg on July 31 noting “very poor connections” between the DO and lower units and stating “the records of the DO are just a mess. The DEC has not met for months. It is not a working committee. There is no organized industrial activity.... There are some capable comrades here but they have not been working together.” [d. 318, l. 154]. Sullivan sought to keep Joseph Siminoff on as “Local Organizer,” which he seems to have accomplished.

In September 1924, there was a rapprochement between Hansen and the WPA. Hansen met Ruthenberg in New York City, where he had been to see his brother off to Europe, and expressed an interest to remain in the WPA. In a Sept. 13 note to T.R. Sullivan, Ruthenberg noted “in view of his past activities, it seems rather a shame that we should lose his services for the Party.” [d. 318, l. 197]. Hansen met with Sullivan shortly thereafter. Sullivan noted to Ruthenberg that “I have Hansen’s promise that he will give an accounting and when he has done that we will take up the matter of re-instating him.” [d. 318, l. 200]

handle them.

I understand he was planning to write the secretary of the CI that “the best elements are leaving the Party,” and whether there was any connection between his amazing antics here and his message to Zinoviev is a matter for wonderment. His “frankness” naturally does not include revealing his deep-laid schemes to the Communist hoi polloi.

Now, Comrades, you may discount as much of this letter as you like to personal enmity. The fact remains that Ballam has made a mess of things here. If they were in a mess when he came, they are doubly in a mess now that he has left. He has managed to wrest a living out of you, but facts warrant me in saying that he has used the opportunity as much to undermine as to build up a structure in which his chief interest is as to what niche he himself is to occupy. His value to the Party is somewhat conditioned by the fact that he emphatically needs a Commissar at his elbow to keep him straight.

Fraternally yours,

P. Hansen
Former Dist. Org. pro tem.

Cornelia Davis,
Former Sec. DEC.

Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport.

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