

# Keeping Sight of Social Justice: 80 Years of Building CASW

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## Social Work: A New Profession

Not many of you will know of the formation recently of a new professional association.... It is the professional Association of Canadian Social Workers, and its formation will perhaps be the first indication to many that the problems of inequalities and human relationship which arise from and live to burden our social structure have evolved a profession of social workers to meet them — a professions with a technique all its own, demanding rigorous training, and a code of ethics and standards to be lived up to. (Official announcement of the establishment of the Canadian Association of Social Workers).<sup>1</sup>

As we trace the history of the development of the social work profession in Canada over the past 80 years, several themes emerge. Predominant among them is the unremitting commitment of social workers to the dual roles of alleviating human suffering of the individual and promoting broader social, political, and economic change through social action. Social work, in fact, is the only profession in which human rights, peace, and social and economic justice are integral to its code of ethics and practice. The commitment to social action as a primary objective, however, has fluctuated over the years, with social activism often playing a secondary role to a more individualized approach to helping.

In attempting to understand social work's intermittent acceptance of the primacy of social activism, one must consider a number of factors. First, the profession is rooted in Christian charity work that initially focused mainly on changing the individual, not society. Secondly, while social work in Canada was influenced by both the British and American traditions, those of the United States had a particularly longstanding influence on social work education and practice, inhibiting for many years the development of an indigenous Canadian social work movement. Social workers attended American conferences, read American journals, and were educated in American universities. In fact, the Council of Social Work Education (CSWE) accredited Canadian schools of social work until as recently as 1970. Thirdly, inherent in the process of professionalization is the tendency to become increasingly circumscribed by the demands of the new profession, as opposed to adopting a more outward perspective. At no time was this trend more obvious in the history of the social work profession in Canada than during the severe social dislocation of the Great Depression of the 1930s. Finally, the repression of left-wing social work activists, particularly during the Cold War era, presented formidable challenges to anyone who was interested or involved in social action. All of these factors served as barriers to a cohesive, consistent, comprehensive, and

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<sup>1</sup> As it appeared in the October 1926 edition of *Social Welfare* (journal published by the Social Service Council of Canada) and the *Compass* (journal of the American Association of Social Workers).

enduring orientation toward social action in the history of social work in Canada.

### **Roots in Christian Charity Work**

Influenced by similar organizations in the United Kingdom and the United States, the Charity Organization Societies (COS) and the Settlement movement were initial social responses to the poverty and social dislocation that arose as a result of industrial capitalism in the last half of the nineteenth century. The Charity Organization Society workers stressed efficient administration of charity to the “worthy poor.” Poverty was thought to be largely the result of personal failings; only in cases where it was clear that a person’s circumstance was caused by no fault of his or her own would charity be dispensed. An important contribution made by charity workers to the social work profession was the social casework method. Associated Charities were established in cities to coordinate charitable donations to avoid the duplication of relief.

The settlement workers, influenced by the radical social gospel movement and a social justice orientation, had a somewhat different approach to the provision of charity, and they focused on the social and economic conditions to assist their “neighbours in need.” By 1920 there were 13 settlement houses across Canada, and these settlement workers contributed group work and community organizing strategies to social work. Both the Charity Organization Societies and the Settlement movement were strongly influenced by Christian values and the belief that individuals should take control of their lives, even in adversity, and it was the COS that most influenced the fledging profession.

### **Building a Canadian Social Work Profession**

As social problems continued to grow in both number and complexity, particularly in the more industrialized centres of Canada, the need for social workers increased. Alongside this increased demand was a call for more educated social workers who could deal with the wide range of social issues. The first schools of social work in Canada were established at the University of Toronto (1914) and McGill University (1918). While these schools were influenced strongly by both the United Kingdom and the United States, Canadian social workers relied mainly on American social work associations and conferences for their professional growth. Although Canadian social workers had full membership privileges in the American social work associations and were eligible to serve on committees, they did not feel on equal footing with their counterparts in the US.

Howard Falk, Director of the McGill School of Social Work (1918-1924) and the nephew of social reformer Arnold Toynbee, believed that the development of social work was closely connected to government policies and actions and advocated a Canadian national social work consciousness and orientation. In his view, a Canadian Association of Social Workers and a Canadian National Conference of Social Work were needed. On March 20, 1926, in Montreal, close to 60 social worker representatives from Winnipeg, Toronto, Ottawa, Halifax, and Montreal met and agreed to form a Canadian association for social workers. Later in the year, on September 1, 1926, the constitution for the Canadian Association of Social Workers was approved. CASW became a reality, with 197 charter members from across the entire country. Thus the Canadian Association of Social Workers began with a small membership spread across a broad geographic region with major regional diversities and within a political system characterized by federal-provincial tensions.

To help social workers build their profession, a decision was made to decentralize

through the formation of Branches in communities where at least five members were present. In 1927, the Montreal Branch (Secretary Miss Lyra Taylor) and the Toronto Branch (Secretary Miss Margaret Gould) were formed, followed by the Hamilton Branch (Secretary Miss Mary McLeod) and BC Mainland Branch in 1928 (Secretary Miss Zella Collins) and the Manitoba Branch in 1930.

Along with the professional association, social workers also formed the Canadian Conference of Social Work, which met for the first time on April 24-27, 1928. This was a historic event, as 710 social workers from all the provinces convened for the first time. In October 1932, the association journal *The Social Worker* was released as four-page leaflet under the editorship of Mary Jennison. All four developments — the institution of Canadian schools of social work, the formation of CASW, the establishment of the Canadian Conference of Social Work, and the beginning of a social work journal — were milestones in the history of the young profession and reflected the dedication and leadership of its members, primarily women. But this move toward professionalization presented new issues for social work.

### **The Contradictions of Professionalization**

Human rights and social and economic justice are integral to the code of ethics and practice in social work. However, the emphasis on professionalization presented the profession with a dilemma and conflicted with the social justice mandate that social work espoused. Porter Lee, Director of the New York School of Social Work, in an article in the CASW section of *Social Welfare* in 1928, observed that, with the acquired status, “there seems to be fewer prophetic voices, less evidence of the quickened spirit, greater interest in social work as a career than as a cause.”

Porter Lee’s concern became evident early in the history of CASW. In 1929, Charlotte Whitton, Executive Secretary of the Canadian Council on Child Welfare, encouraged CASW to present a brief to the House of Commons on the issue of family allowances. The executive of the association considered Whitton’s request, but decided that the activities of CASW should be restricted to issues of a purely professional nature — ethics, standards, training, recruiting, and employment. Social work’s narrow focus on profession-building at the expense of social activism was seriously challenged when social workers were confronted with the economic and social fallout of the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Historians have identified the late 1920s and the 1930s as a period of intense class conflict, as well as trade union development and militancy. With the collapse of the stock market in 1929 and the crop failure in the West, Canadian society entered a period of massive unemployment, unprecedented levels of poverty, and economic uncertainty. During the harsh social conditions of the winter of 1931, social workers were overburdened with people in need.

As economic and social conditions deteriorated for many people, social workers began to debate the role of political activism in social work. The Toronto Branch discussed the role of politics in social work and concluded that CASW should not become “a propaganda organization”; because social workers were paid by the capitalist group to assist those less privileged, organized support of issues of a political nature “would be very difficult if not dangerous.” Instead, social workers could interpret social work policy to those in leadership positions and meet the objective of helping people to adjust to their

environment. Although it was recognized that social work also had the objective of adjusting the environment to people's needs, the group perceived a danger in engaging in radical action "since we are paid by the group who would resent such changes most."

In 1933, a few social workers who began to contribute their views in *The Social Worker* were offered anonymity by the editor. One submission under the name "One of Them" wondered why, after 13 years, social workers were so unpopular. The writer asked, "Do we strike out for better employment services — better housing — unemployment insurance — pensions for working mothers during child-bearing period (regardless of whether the mother is married) — for recreational facilities for all ages — for nursery play grounds for the pre-school child — and so many other community needs?"

Social work educator Harry Cassidy argued that social workers had taken the role of the "stretcher bearers of society" who respond to the casualties of the system but do little to strike at the roots of the problem: the deplorable economic conditions. He called on social workers to "wage unremitting war against the social crime of poverty."

### **Repression of Social Workers**

While we know that many political activists in Canada faced repression during the Cold War, we do not know the extent to which this affected radical social workers. Many political activists were driven underground, out of their jobs, and sometimes out of the country, but the histories of most of these people have not been recorded. Unlike their counterparts in the United States, Canadian social workers did not form a "rank and file" movement within their profession, and this presents challenges to uncovering an organized radical history within the profession. However, the historical record in Canada does have some case examples of left-leaning social workers practising and facing serious repression because of their political work.

One social worker who faced political repression because of her political activities was Mary Jennison. Jennison was a founding member of CASW and a long-time advocate for social justice who was fired for her political activities and retained on the RCMP "red list" for most of her adult life. Mary Jennison was employed by the Dale Community Centre in Hamilton, renowned for its progressive programs and its work with children, youth, and the unemployed. She had worked at the Dale Community Centre for four years before rumours began to fly that she and her staff were communists. It is clear from RCMP records that Jennison had been under surveillance since the 1930s when she became a political activist in Quebec.

The firing of Mary Jennison and her staff was a tragic and all-too-common occurrence during the height of the Cold War in Canada. It represented part of a North American witch hunt perpetrated against politically active left-wingers. Members of socialist and social democratic political parties, trade unions, women's organizations, and the peace movement were all targeted for their alleged subversive activities through monitoring, investigation, ostracism, firing, and, for some who were born outside of Canada, deportation.

While the extent of repression of social workers in Canada is not known, there are other examples that indicate that social work activists were targeted. Others who have spoken or written about the repression they faced include Bridget Moran, an activist who fought the BC Social Credit government for her beliefs about child welfare in 1964; Marlene Webber, who was released from a Canadian school of social work for her political beliefs and activities in 1978; Gilbert Levine, who was later to work in a union; Hazel Wigdor, a social

worker who promoted the unionization of social workers and was also a peace activist; and Margaret Gould, a “key figure in assorted left wing activities.” To our knowledge, CASW did not actively support or defend these social workers, many of whom were members in good standing. These histories do not tell the full story, but they are samples of what happened to individual social workers who dared to speak out, and, more seriously, who dared to act on their political convictions.

The repression of political social workers, the sparse numbers of social workers across a huge land, the contradictions of a developing profession, a strong American influence, and social work’s roots in Christian charity are some of the key reasons why the profession has not consistently adhered to a social action mandate over the past 80 years. Perhaps the most important message to take from this brief historical overview, however, is that CASW and social workers across the country have never abandoned social action as a fundamental part of social work. In the current conservative climate we will undoubtedly face new pressures to steer away from this course, but, as our history so clearly shows, such a time is precisely when we need to act.

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