

Radical women in social work: A historical perspective from North America

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: Many challenges that confront social workers today are similar to problems they have faced over the past century – inequality, poverty, unemployment, militarisation and armed conflict, and the challenges of refugee resettlement, to name a few. It is instructive for contemporary social workers to revisit this history and to determine if there are lessons to inform our current struggles.

METHOD: This paper explores the issues faced and strategies employed by radical, politically active social workers, most of them women. These social workers had visions of social justice and were not afraid to challenge the status quo, often at very high personal costs. The radical social workers were expressly interested in social change that centred on social justice, women's rights, anti-racism, international peace, and they worked in close alliance and solidarity with other progressive groups.

CONCLUSIONS: This article highlights the work of five radical female social workers. Radical social workers were in the minority but they were extraordinarily active and made important contributions in the face of formidable challenges.

KEYWORDS: history; radical social workers; women; social justice; peace

That the study of history is losing ground at schools of social work in North America is not a new issue. Over 40 years ago, American social work educators Leslie Leighninger and Robert Knickmeyer lamented that: "Social work, like many fields, has sometimes suffered from an inadequate and distorted understanding of its own history. A profession's inattention to its past is an unfortunate thing" (1976, p. 166). This sentiment rings true today; few social work programmes have compulsory courses in social work history, and accreditation guidelines do not require it. This is troubling for a couple of reasons. Social workers are missing out on important lessons from their history. And, if history is deemed unimportant, it is unlikely that new scholars will engage in

historical research in the current competitive job market. This is problematic because much of social work history has yet to be written. As recently as 2011 the authors of this paper wrote the first comprehensive history of the social work profession in English Canada.

We hope that our article will contribute to a reawakening of interest in social work history and a recognition of its importance to the profession. We begin with a brief review of the development of the social work profession, setting the stage for understanding the role of women in it, and particularly the role of left wing, radical women.

In North America, at the turn of the last century industrial expansion was

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accompanied by urbanisation, increases in immigration, harsh working environments, and deplorable living conditions. Social work emerged as organised responses to those who were poor and unable to care for themselves. Initially it was in the form of the Charity Organization Societies (COS) which regulated, administered and distributed charity to those who were deemed worthy. The Settlement House Movement followed the COS and was based on a different philosophy that was influenced by the social gospel (that is, the application of Christian values to understanding and addressing social problems). Settlement workers moved into and lived in impoverished areas of inner cities and worked to improve social and economic conditions, provide language training and child care. The settlement movement often was aligned with labour and other progressive forces.

Professionalisation was a watershed moment for social work in both the USA and Canada. Social workers would take their place alongside nurses, lawyers and doctors. Professionalisation meant having a discrete, defined and recognised area of expertise that would adhere to specific ethical and work standards, and university programmes providing accredited degrees. In these early years, social workers in Canada and the USA attended the same conferences, read the same journals, and often graduated from the same universities.

From the beginning there were tensions over the nature and purpose of the profession. The emphasis on professionalisation presented a dilemma. Some viewed social work's function as primarily assisting the individual to cope in a complex world and, underlying this, the notion that individuals were to blame for their own circumstances. An alternative view centred on social work as a terrain of struggle for social change through social and political action. Here the focus was on examining the socio-economic-political structures in society rather than on perceived failings of the individual. Elements of this division were manifested early

on, before the era of professionalisation, notably in the differing orientations of the organised charities and the settlement house movement. However, it was primarily the changing material conditions, the scope and magnitude of the devastating problems resulting from the Great Depression and social workers' exposure to these issues that created an environment for developing a more critical analysis of capitalist society and social work's role within it. Leighninger and Knickmeyer summarise that "[t]he depths of the crisis reawakened old debates and introduced new strains of professional thinking" (1976, p. 167).

Our paper examines the work and struggles of five eminent women in the profession's history in Canada and the USA. From the USA we include: Jane Addams, Mary Abby van Kleeck, and Bertha Reynolds; and from Canada: Mary Jennison and Bessie Touzel. There are many more pioneers in our profession who have made significant contributions but we have selected these women because of what they represented, the issues they focused on, and the convictions of their work in the face of extreme challenges imposed by conservative forces and a paranoid state particularly during the Cold War era. Not only were they activists and leaders but also they were leading intellectuals and visionaries in social work.

For ease of discussion we refer to them as "radical social workers"; that is, social workers who held left wing views with class-based critiques of capitalism. The women in our sample, all educated in social work, were committed feminists, socialists and communists or sympathetic to these causes; their contributions to the profession were informed by Marxist ideas. They were politically active, and were opposed to class, race, and gender inequality. They understood the importance of waged labour, unions, political parties and how these structures related to working people. They were intellectuals and prolific in writings, presentations and conference participation;

they were internationalists committed to peace. Finally, they were extremely courageous refusing to shy away from their political convictions in spite of red-baiting, firings, and persecution by the state and conservative forces in society. They all were educated women and worked in central Canada and the north-eastern United States where the first social work programmes were established.

There are two major themes in our paper—radicalism and solidarity. The theme of radicalism highlights the important roles played by radical and highly politicised women in social work history. These women were remarkably in touch with the material conditions of life of the people they worked with and offered clear perspectives for social, economic and political change in society. A second theme in this paper is the strong expression and efforts of both the radical American (USA) and Canadian social workers for working in solidarity with social workers across agencies, common causes, jobs, and nations. These two themes—radicalism and solidarity—form the analytic base of our paper.

Radical Social Workers in the USA and Canada, 1890s–1960s

(Laura) Jane Addams (1860–1935)

Jane Addams was born in a small town of Cedarville, Illinois. Although accepted at Smith College, in 1877 she attended Rockford College in Rockford, Illinois, according to her father's wishes that she be closer to home. While travelling to England in 1888 Addams visited and became inspired by the settlement houses such as Toynbee Hall. In 1889, with friend Ellen Gates Starr, she founded Hull House, a settlement house in Chicago for immigrants.

Inspired by the social gospel, activities were introduced to improve "the quality of life of immigrants by offering them art, drama, and music as well as public baths, baby care, job training and classes in English

and citizenship" (Elshtain, 2002, p. xxvii). Hull House grew to include 26 apartments and 27 rooms and covered two city blocks (Trolander, 1975). Addams quickly became a prominent social worker and a leader in the settlement movement. Hull House was her home for 46 years until her death.

As early as 1910, Addams identified the two groups of social workers which came to represent distinct approaches to the profession.

One group who have traditionally been moved to action by "pity for the poor" we call the Charitable; the other, larger or smaller in each generation, but always fired by the "hatred of injustice" we designate as the Radicals. (Addams, 1910, p. 1)

While both approaches focused on alleviating the hopelessness and suffering of people, they engaged different strategies. The former spearheaded casework and the latter was more centred on group and community work. Settlement workers referred to those accessing services as "neighbours in need" rather than clients (Lundblad, 1995). Addams connected with other progressive leaders who shared her commitment to social equality and social justice and she supported the work of W. E. B. Dubois, a noted Marxist and a renowned African-American scholar and a civil rights activist. In 1910, along with Dubois, Addams became a founding member of the American Civil Liberties Union, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), an organisation that still exists today (Dubois 1968, pp. 218, 260).

The success of Hull House was noted internationally. William Lyon Mackenzie King, Canada's longest-serving Prime Minister (1921–1926, 1926–1930, 1935–1948), worked alongside Addams at Hull House while completing his graduate studies in Chicago between 1896 and 1897. As Prime Minister, he introduced unemployment insurance and family allowance to

Canada; he attributed his understanding of unemployment and poverty partly to his experiences at Hull House. As head of the settlement house movement, Jane Addams opposed WWI and was a founding member of the Woman's Peace Party that would later re-form as the USA section of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). Addams became its president and continued to promote the perspective that peace and social work were inextricable from each other. While her involvement in advocacy for the poor was acceptable, entering the realm of peace advocacy—the political domain of men—was not (Klosterman & Stratton, 2006). She was vilified in the press and alienated from the profession. Addams stated that she wrote the 1922 book, *Peace and Bread in Times of War*, because, for her, peace and bread were inseparable. While politically she tried to be “middle of the road,” she “pushed far toward the left on the subject of war” (1983, p. 133).

During the decade that followed the end of WWI and the Russian Revolution, “anti-Red hysteria” was prevalent and Jane Addams found her name regularly on a list of subversive citizens (Elshtain, 2002, p. xxvii). But she never wavered from her commitment to peace and justice. In 1931 she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace. Addams was a prolific writer—11 books, more than 500 published essays, speeches and editorials. Jane Addams died at age of 74.

Mary Abby van Kleeck (1883–1972)

Mary van Kleeck was a prominent social worker, feminist, labour activist and researcher. As a student at Smith College in 1904 she joined the College Settlement Association. Her early research focused on the conditions of women and children in factories and through the course of her working life at the Russell Sage Foundation, she became a leading expert on employment and working conditions.

Van Kleeck was employed at the Russell Sage Foundation for 40 years (1908–1948)

where she was the Director of Industrial Studies. The Russell Sage Foundation was a privately endowed research institute established in 1907 and several of its studies dealt with the labour market, employment conditions, immigration, and social equality. Van Kleeck centred her research on exploring the relationship between workers and employers, democratising the workplace, and the relationship between labour and capital.

She drafted the War Labour Policies Board standards for women's employment in the war industry during WWI. She was appointed head of Women in Industry Service (later called the Women's Bureau) within the USA Department of Labour. With the Depression of the 1930s, van Kleeck's attention turned to causes of unemployment and the labour unrest that was spreading across the USA and Canada. In 1933 she joined the Federal Advisory Council of the USA Employment Services but resigned after only one day because of her disillusionment over the New Deal policies. Instead she put her energies into critiques of capitalism and its effects on workers, became a prominent public speaker on these subjects and made frequent trips to Canada. She was described as possessing “a sharp wit, a powerful speaking voice, strong leadership skills, and a tenacious reform spirit” (Selmi, 2005, p. 413).

Her awareness of the widespread devastation of economic collapse of the 1930s and its impact on working people led her to be openly critical of capitalism. She became a committed socialist drawing on Marxist analysis for explaining the causes of the Great Depression and the weaknesses of a private market economy. Capitalism, she argued, created “intolerable social conditions, condemning millions to poverty, [and] have led oppressed people to revolt” (1961, p. 4). She was dedicated to the rights of workers, encouraging them to engage social and political critiques in their work (Selmi, 2005, p. 414).

In 1935 van Kleeck gave an address in Toronto, Canada, titled “Social Security

or What" and spoke of the importance of class struggle in acquiring social security. She described it as a process between the "conflict of the interests between workers who are striving for a higher wage scale and employers who are striving to keep the cost of production down and keep up the profit...." (van Kleeck, 1935a, p. 27). She emphasised that social work fails if it does not grapple with these underlying economic problems. She received applause for denouncing the "red scare" and her comments that its purpose was to suppress radicalism, the struggle of workers, and the trade union movement.

Later she addressed the National Coordinating Committee of Rank and File Groups of Social Workers in Montreal, Canada, noting similarities between the two countries, and the great inadequacy of the relief programme.

We seem year to year to be meeting here in this National Conference of Social Work and facing each year the same questions on the way in which an economic crisis, an industrial depression, undermines the achievements of social workers and their efforts. (van Kleeck, 1935b, p. 29)

She urged social workers to be involved in the labour movement and advocate for complete racial equality. Responding to a question about Fascism in the USA, she commented:

Now what is Fascism? It arises as a withdrawal of democracy in the interests of the *status quo*. It is the recoil from democracy ... and limiting, to such an extent, civil liberties, taking away rights of free speech, disciplining teachers and university professors and writers and social workers and all who may to-day take part in the struggle ... these are all Fascist tendencies. (van Kleeck, 1935b, p. 29)

The following day she delivered another speech to the Social Action group of the

National Conference of Social Work on "Governmental Intervention in the Labor Movement." She addressed class conflict and the importance of workers' right to strike and safeguard their interests when employers oppose them; she stated that, "Unless Labor, in its organization, has civil liberties, none of us will have civil liberties" (van Kleeck, 1935c, p. 27).

Van Kleeck was opposed to the USA entry into WWII. As a peace advocate she argued that "...war creates not wealth but destruction. War, moreover, distorts a nation's economy, over developing and over-capitalizing some branches of industry beyond normal, peace-time needs" (van Kleeck, 1961, p. 7). By 1941, van Kleeck had witnessed the growth of the social work profession and although she faced many challenges in her career, she remained optimistic about the future of the profession; social work, she argued, has started to "question its traditional role as ambulance division of a permanently disordered social structure" (1941, p. 3). She died at the age of 88.

Bertha Reynolds (1887–1978)

Similar to Mary van Kleeck, Reynolds attended Smith College, graduating in 1908 with a Bachelor of Social Work degree. She obtained a second social work degree from Simmons College in 1914. From 1913–1918, Reynolds worked for the Children's Aid Society in Boston. Between 1917 and 1918 she studied in the first class of a psychiatric social work programme offered at Smith College in order to assist "shell shocked" soldiers returning from WWI (Bertha Reynold Papers). For the next five years she was Director of Social Services at a state hospital in Massachusetts followed by three years at the Division of Mental Hygiene in Boston where she worked in a clinic for behavioural training of pre-school children.

In 1925 Reynolds became Associate Director of Social Work at Smith College. She taught summer courses and supervised students in

their placements and continued to conduct research on a range of social issues (National Association of Social Work (NASW), 2004). Over the years, Reynolds became a distinguished practitioner and educator and seemed to be able to reconcile her interests in Freudian psychology and Marxism with relative ease. She continued to work at Smith College until the late 1930s when her principles came into conflict with those in power.

Reynolds identified the choices for social work in the 1930s:

Social work today is standing at the crossroads. It may go on with its face toward the past, bolstering up the decaying profit system, having to defend what is indefensible for the sake of money which pays for its services. On the other hand it may envision a future in which professional social services as well as education, medical services and the like shall be the unquestioned right of all conferred not as a benefit but as society's only way of maintaining itself. (Reynolds, 1963, p. 143)

Reynolds was a frequent speaker in Canada and the USA and her work was published regularly in Canadian journals. In 1936, in *Child and Family Welfare*, she encouraged social workers to join in solidarity with all workers:

The future of social casework is the future of the right of common men and women to economic justice and civil liberties, including the right to think and to participate in the making of their own life condition. If common men and women fail to achieve those rights, no one will have them. Professional people are learning that their fate is bound up with that of all workers. If they do not stand courageously for all human rights, they will lose their own, including the right to practice their profession as a high and honourable calling. (Reynolds, 1936, p. 12)

Reynolds worked as Associate Director of Social Work at Smith College for 10 years until she became a victim of anti-communism. Her affiliation with the Communist Party, her efforts to unionise college employees and her expressly Marxist analysis in courses at the college came into conflict with the upper levels of management and she was forced to resign in 1938 (Andrews & Reisch, 1997; NASW, 2004; Reisch and Andrews 2002). Shortly thereafter she worked briefly for the Maritime Union after which she devoted most of her time to writing and public speaking.

Bertha Reynolds, alongside her colleague Mary van Kleeck, was active in the Rank and File Movement, a coalition of groups, including radicals and progressives interested in broad structural changes to their own conditions as social workers and changes to the practices of social work. The movement grew to a membership of 15,000 and created its own journal, *Social Work Today*. When the journal went out of existence in 1942, Reynolds described the impact of this on her personally:

In the early winter of [1943] came the death of *Social Work Today* about which I felt as if it were the loss of a family member. When it was gone a light went out of social work which has never been rekindled. (Reynolds, 1963, p. 240)

Reynolds was committed to peace. And while cynics regarded "peace work" as impossible and naïve, the fear of a nuclear war following WWII was a reality. The intensification of the Cold War and the McCarthy witch hunts of the 1950s had a chilling effect on left-wing activists. Peace activists were of particular concern because to speak of peace was regarded as supporting the USSR. We cannot ignore the role that opposition to peace efforts and advocacy to social justice played in targeting social workers and suppressing their social work activities and contributions. There were two waves of

opposition that social workers faced. First, the success of the Russian revolution in 1917 viewed peace and any opposition to WWI as being subversive and possibly aligned with communist forces. These sentiments were magnified during the 1940s and 1950s during the depth of the Cold War when anti-communism seemed to be at its peak. It was a repressive climate fostering fear where anyone who was advocating social justice was suspect.

In 1953, in the context of American involvement in the Korean War, an escalating atomic reality and the Cold War, Bertha Reynolds posed the question, "How does the world conflict touch us, as social workers, and what do we propose to do about it?" (Reynolds, 1986, p. 90). Although mainstream social workers likely were reluctant to see a relationship between social work and conflict in Korea, Reynolds' questions may have caused them to examine this connection. Cold War ideology did influence the education and practice of social work in both the USA and Canada (Andrews & Reisch, 1997; Reisch & Andrews, 2002); Jennissen & Lundy, 2011). Rachel Levine, Literary Executor of the Bertha Reynolds papers states that:

[Reynolds] believed that catastrophes like war, cyclic economic depression, chronic poverty, hunger, and a host of others, and their effects upon the human conditions, and on a global scale, are but the symptoms of underlying causes which are rooted in societal values and systems; therefore, the searchlight should be beamed on, and work directed to, the elimination of the causes ... But what 'cooked [Reynolds'] goose,' to quote a phrase, was that she used Marxist ideology as a frame of reference for her beliefs and its science of society as the key to the solution of such widespread socio-economic-political disasters. And she dared to present her views in public! (Levine, cited in West, 2012)

Reynolds died at the age of 90.

Mary Irick Jennison (1892–1970)

Mary Jennison was born in 1892 in Acadia Mines, Nova Scotia. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries this was a bustling iron ore mining town and one of the first steel-producing centres in eastern Canada. Establishing her first career as a teacher, Jennison lived in Toronto where she taught at a girls' school. Here she was a teacher of Dorothy Livesay, one of Canada's leading poets. Livesay describes her as an impressive teacher:

... she was taking courses in economics and political science with a view to becoming a social worker. Her approach to literature was intensely stimulating, for she related the novels and poetry to the world they sprang from. She challenged us with questions about atheism and socialism. (Livesay, 1977, p. 20)

In 1927 Jennison entered the Department of Social Sciences at the University of Toronto. She soon distinguished herself as an academic and student leader. She received an alumnae scholarship and became class president in 1927. As a student Jennison studied with E. J. Urwick, acting Director of the Department of Social Science. Urwick came to Canada from the UK with a wealth of experience. He had worked as a poor law guardian, a sub-warden of Toynbee Hall, and Director of Social Sciences and Administration at the London School of Economics (Canadian Economics Association, 1945). This combination of work experience and his education in social theory and philosophy made Urwick a good candidate for teaching social work students and he appears to have influenced them. In 1928 Jennison graduated from the diploma programme alongside her colleague Bessie Touzel; their paths would continue to cross through their work and political activism throughout their lives.

Following graduation Jennison worked for the Social Service Council of Canada as assistant secretary. The Moral and Social Reform Council of Canada, as it

was formerly known, was founded in 1907 and changed its name in 1914 whereby it ...“forged an alliance between churches, labour and social reform groups, and began to lobby government and others for its agenda of social change” (Wills, 1995, p. 18). As soon as she received her social work credentials, Jennison became active in the newly developed Canadian Association of Social Workers (1926) where she was the convener of publicity in the late 1920s and then became the first editor of the CASW’s journal, *The Social Worker*. *The Social Worker* began as a four-page leaflet but soon became an established journal and an important medium for connecting social workers across the country. Jennison regularly contributed to the journal.

After working at the Social Service Council of Canada (SSCC), Jennison worked for the Federation for Community Services (1929–1937). It was established in 1919 to coordinate the funding of the various social service organisations. Maurutto describes the federation as a secular organisation designed to streamline the funding efforts of charities using techniques of budgeting, accounting and audits in its work. The federation was the predecessor of the United Way of Greater Toronto. The “amount of funding given to charities would no longer be determined by benefactors who gave money to their favorite charities; rather, the Federation would base its funding on decisions on an in-depth assessment of anticipated needs” (Maurutto, 2004, p. 2).

Jennison moved to Montreal, Quebec, in 1943 heading the Central Volunteer Bureau of Montreal, the first one in Canada. The bureau promoted volunteerism within the city’s non-profit community. She continued to be very active in the CASW and became vice-president of the Montreal branch; she continued to write in *The Social Worker*. It was during these years in Montreal that Jennison became very involved in left-wing political activities. For example, she was active in the resettlement of the MacKenzie-Papineau veterans who fought in the Spanish

Civil War in 1937–1938; she supported the Committee of Allied Victories in Quebec and several other activities that were under scrutiny by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). These activities placed Jennison on the RCMP’s list of subversive people. The RCMP monitored her activities, intercepted her mail, followed her and intruded in her private life from 1939 to 1970; during this time they amassed 3,171 pages of secret files on her (RCMP files).

After working in Montreal, Jennison moved to Hamilton, Ontario, in 1943. Hamilton was a major industrial centre in Ontario and played a key role in the construction of war materials for both world wars. The city had two major steel plants, Dofasco and Stelco. With a large population of industrial workers, Hamilton was a site of major labour conflict. In 1946 Stelco workers went on strike for union recognition, a 40-hour work week, and increased wages. This was the context within which Mary Jennison was operating the Dale Community Centre.

“The Dale” served a working class population and was known for its support of unemployed workers and their families. Jennison sided with the striking workers and she provided them and their families with a great deal of support. It was not long after the Stelco strike that rumours began about Jennison’s left-wing political leanings and concerns that she was using the Dale for political causes. In 1947, the community chest stopped funding the Dale. The board of the Dale fired Jennison although they denied that it was based on her politics. Parents of children who used the Dale, and the community at large, strongly supported Jennison and the Dale. A petition calling for her reinstatement as Director of the Dale was signed by 400 people. This was to no avail.

Jennison’s firing in 1947 was well publicised in the Hamilton and Toronto media and several organisations, including the Civil Liberties Union and the Congress of Canadian Women, supported her. *The Toronto Star* reported that: “We understand

that there are no complaints against Miss Jennison's competence or loyalty to the Dale, but that, on the contrary, she has gained Canada-wide distinction as a very competent professional worker in the field of social service and has won a sincere appreciation for her services from the people in her community." (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011, p. 122). At the age of 55, Jennison's social work career ended.

The Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW), to which Jennison had made major contributions, did not intervene in her case except to carry coverage of her story in *The Social Worker*. The CASW simply stated that social workers need to be careful when they drifted into political work; it was their personal responsibility. Although she applied for several jobs, Jennison would never work as a social worker again.

From 1947–1953 she worked as the executive secretary of the Canadian Peace Congress. Her commitment to the peace movement kept her RCMP file active. After suffering a cerebral hemorrhage in 1953 Jennison returned to Nova Scotia where she continued to write. In 1959, with Freda Held and Lillian Henderson she wrote, *A Brief History of the Ontario Welfare Council*, and in 1970, *The Canadian Settlement Movement* was made public. In 1970 Mary Jennison passed away at the age of 77.

Bessie Touzel, 1904–1997

Bessie Touzel was a class-mate of Jennison; she graduated in 1928. She was a prominent socialist, feminist social worker with a 40-year career in social work. At 22 she enrolled in the Social Service Diploma Program at the University of Toronto, one of only two that existed in Canada.

Touzel was in the early stages of her career when the Great Depression occurred and this event was a catalyst in her political development. The social workers of the 1930s were faced with the effects of massive unemployment and impoverishment in an

environment that provided few services for these people. Touzel was part of a group of social workers who believed that the profession should be more political and that social workers had a responsibility not only in helping the individual to better cope but also to work toward effecting political change (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011).

During the Depression, there was a dramatic increase in the number of people requiring relief and several municipalities could no longer carry the economic burden. In 1932, Harry Cassidy, head of the social work programme at the University of Toronto, made headlines with his severe critique of the welfare system in Ontario (Cassidy, 1932). Eventually municipal governments in the larger centres were provided with government funding and the authority to provide some relief programmes. The City of Ottawa established the Ottawa Welfare Board in 1933 and Bessie Touzel headed it.

As supervisor, Touzel hired 40 female social workers to assess and dispense relief—both in cash and in kind. Touzel was compassionate and generous in the delivery of welfare service and over the next three years welfare provisions increased. Ottawa became known for its relatively generous levels of relief and a well-developed programme for the poor. Touzel was praised for her work and in 1935 she received a Jubilee medal for her outstanding work as a public servant. (Johnstone, 2015, p. 399). But this triumph was short-lived. The city gave in to public pressure over the costs of welfare and increased taxes and in a dramatic move it fired all 40 female social workers from the Ottawa Welfare Board replacing them with 11 male special police officers. Touzel was outraged and resigned in protest (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011). Subsequently she became the Assistant Director of the Canadian Welfare Council where she worked until 1940.

In the early 1940s, Bessie Touzel left Ottawa for Toronto where she became executive secretary of the Welfare Council of Toronto.

Touzel again became involved in the issue of relief rates. In 1941 the City of Toronto wanted to assess its relief rates and involved the Welfare Council of Toronto in this request. Bessie Touzel led the response to the city. She conducted a study which identified that the requirements for a healthy diet could not be maintained on the existing rates of relief. The city of Toronto accepted the report from Touzel and increased relief rates by 20%. However, the province of Ontario refused to accept the study and the Premier commissioned his own research. Touzel continued to lobby through the local media for increased rates of social assistance and her efforts culminated in a short publication, *The Cost of Living*, which was widely disseminated and used throughout the province; it was also used by unions to support increases in salaries. This publication became known as the *Red Book*.

WWII pulled the Canadian economy out of the depression and brought new challenges as Canadians became involved in the war effort. The war was barely under way when the federal government began to focus on the process of postwar social reconstruction, an ambitious undertaking that centred on developing a social infrastructure that would provide a “cradle to the grave” protection for Canadians, similar to that proposed in the UK. The federal government established several advisory committees, commissions and studies to review various aspects of social welfare and to provide direction and recommendations to government (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011). One such committee was a federally appointed Advisory Committee on Postwar Reconstruction (1941–1944) and Bessie Touzel assisted Leonard Marsh of McGill University in preparing the *Report on Social Security for Canada* in 1943, (reprinted in 1975 and again in 2017) that recommended a broad range of programmes and services.

In 1947 the board of directors of the Toronto Welfare Council lobbied against Touzel’s *Red Book* arguing that it had no mandate to conduct research and set standards. Touzel contested this but the board overruled her

and, similar to the situation in Ottawa 10 years earlier, Touzel found herself at odds with her board of directors over rates of relief, and for a second time in a decade, she resigned in protest.

Touzel returned to Ottawa once again where she accepted a position at the Canadian Welfare Council from 1937–1940. Here she was in the forefront of social change providing leadership on social issues that addressed: the cost of living; minimum wage; labour reform for women; child care; and housing. She also chaired the Committee on Public Welfare wherein she conducted research, designed programmes and presented policy briefs to government.

Her activist work at the Canadian Welfare Council drew attention from the RCMP. Similar to her classmate, Mary Jennison, Touzel was suspected of being “communistic.” The RCMP records indicate that her mail was regularly intercepted, telephone conversations were monitored, neighbours were consulted about her political leanings, and her personal activities were regularly censored. RCMP agents noted that she was in the company of leftists including communists, that she attended meetings of the Ottawa Peace Council, and that she was in touch with Mary Jennison. The RCMP files confirm that the Canadian Welfare Council was itself regarded as a hotbed of left-wing activity and, while concerted efforts were made to place an RCMP agent inside the Canadian Welfare Council, this proved difficult to do. In one entry an agent laments the challenges of collecting intelligence on Touzel: “Although persistent efforts are being made to obtain good information on Bessie Touzel’s activities, little information has been forthcoming” (RCMP Ottawa Special Section, 14/11/51). In another entry: “...trying to place a contact in the Canadian Welfare Council” (10/10/51). And in an entry on October 2, 1951: “We have been interested for some time in the activities of Miss Bessie Touzel, a social worker, who has been connected with communist suspects

in Ottawa for a number of years. She is presently in the employ of the National Welfare Council in Ottawa" (10/2/51). Although information of any import to the RCMP was not found, it is clear that the civil liberties of both Jennison and Touzel were regularly violated.

Touzel worked at the Canadian Welfare Council for six years before returning to Toronto in 1953 to become the executive director of the Ontario Welfare Council where she promoted the development of social programmes and improving services to the underprivileged. Touzel eventually resigned from the Ontario Welfare Council in 1964. She worked as a UN advisor in Tanzania for two years and in 1966 she began teaching at the University of Toronto in the social work department. Towards the end of her career she received several honours: a Coronation Medal, a Confederation Medal; an Order of Ontario; City of Toronto Award of Merit and two social work awards. She passed away in 1997 at the age of 93.

Looking backwards to move forward

This article has examined the contributions made by left-leaning, radical social work women in Canada and the USA. All five women made important contributions to the profession often injecting a class-based and an international perspective into social work debates, writings and practices. Unfortunately, their contributions to making social work a more radical, politicised profession with a direct focus on changing not the individual, but societal structures, have all but been forgotten by contemporary social workers and social work educators. But their contributions have particular relevance as we see a resurgence in Marxist social work and radical approaches to social work (Lavalette, 2011; Lundy, 2011) and the launch of the *Critical and Radical Social Work Journal* (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2013). We believe that their pioneering work had and continues to have important value now and that a revisiting of this history can be very instructive in these beleaguered times.

By tracing the work of these women and the ideologies upon which their work was based, we hope to remind social workers of the importance of being visionary; of working in solidarity with those who seek our services and with other groups (unions, peace groups, social justice groups, anti-poverty organisations, racial minority groups); of keeping an international perspective in sight; and fulfilling social work's social justice mandate that we still proudly claim. Paulo Freire addressed social workers at an international conference and reminded us that we are the agents in making our history: "History is made by us, and as we make it, we are made and remade by it" (1990, p. 7). But as Karl Marx proclaimed in the *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* in 1852, we do not make our history under conditions of our choosing.

These early women strived for a social work that focused on social justice and social change during two world wars, a devastating economic depression and a Cold War. Their legacy reflects the possibilities and potential for positive social change when we come together in solidarity to challenge the policies and practices that disadvantage a significant segment of the population. Our ability to fulfil our social justice mandate is strengthened by learning from our history.

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