

“Society for Socialist Studies: The Early Years, 1967 – 1978”

Reported by Frank Cunningham

Founding

On the occasion of the 2009 meetings of the Society for Socialist Studies at Carleton University, a session was held on the history of the Society, which had been founded at Carleton 42 years earlier – that is in 1967. The session was intended to contribute to the recognition and examination of the Society’s history. The Society has been trying to interest some historians of the left in writing a full history, as Socialist Studies is unique among Canadian organizations promoting socialist research and exchanges of ideas, both in its longevity and the breadth of its disciplinary reach and the political orientations of its members. Any historian interested in pursuing this project is encouraged to contact an officer of the Society or myself (frankcunningham55@gmail.com) to discuss the prospect. Meanwhile, as Secretary of Socialist Studies in its earlier years, I prepared (in 2010) this synopsis of that period.

At the Carleton Congress of the Learned Societies Meetings in 1967 (now called the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences) some 40 people responded to a call by Abe Rotstein, Ed Broadbent and Ian Lumsden, distributed before the sessions and posted on bulletin boards at Carleton to found a “Committee on Socialist Studies.” Abe, co-author with Mel Watkins of the report named for them documenting the increasing loss of Canadian economic independence, was in the (then) Department of Political Economy at the University of Toronto. Ed was in the Department of Political Science at York University, which he was to leave the next year to sit as an MP for the NDP. Ian, in Political Science at York University’s Atkinson College, had just published his provocative book, *Close the 49th Parallel Etc.*

Under the heading, “The Committee on Socialist Studies: A Proposed Statement of Purposes,” the call read:

The objective of the Committee on Socialist Studies is to encourage the development of socialist research in Canada. In particular the following areas of study would be approached from a socialist perspective: (1) political and economic theories; (2) social and political movements; (3) contemporary social problems; and (4) literature and the arts.

Membership is open to all who are interested in scholarly research and analysis from a socialist point of view. We hope to include teachers, students, writers, editors, artists and scientists.

The Committee on Socialist Studies is not a political organization; the purpose of its meetings is to foster serious scholarly discussion, not to promote partisan activity.

A Conference Committee elected annually by the membership will be responsible for soliciting papers and discussants on the basis of known competence in the field of study and not according to any political criteria.

At the meeting, it was decided to hold sessions regularly at the Learned Societies, and Ed Broadbent was designated first President of the Committee. He undertook to secure a place at the next such meetings to be held in Calgary in 1968 under the umbrella of the Canadian Political Science Association. He also initiated a membership drive in a letter to participants at the Carleton gathering and a call published in *Canadian Dimensions* and in *Horizons Research* (a Marxist journal edited by Stanley Ryerson). The result was an initial membership of 57 people, a list of whom was distributed in early 1968 by Margaret Rowntree (University of Toronto, Political Economy) who was the Committee's secretary until 1970.

The association retained the name Committee on Socialist Studies until 1980, when, at its annual meetings at the Université du Québec à Montréal, the decision was made to adopt its current name. At that meeting, feminism and anti-racism were explicitly added to socialism as main focuses of the Society.

Growth

While now the Society mounts an annual program of dozens of concurrent papers as well as a keynote address, conferences in the early years of the society were of from four to six sessions. The positive side of this was that everyone who wished could attend all sessions. For example, the 1969 meetings at York University mounted four sessions: Jean-Guy Loranger, "Imperialism and Quebec"; Kari Levitt, "Canadian Dependence"; Peter Warrian, "The Americanization of Canadian Academies," and Gerald Spalding, "Radical Faculty and the SFU Student Movement." Membership increased in this year to 150.

The titles of sessions in these early years are representative of themes and problems concerning those socialists who affiliated with the Committee. They were echoed in a questionnaire distributed in 1969 by Margaret Rowntree asking what members thought the core task of the association should be. A response typical of several represented the left-wing optimism of the times, namely to "maintain an academic holding action preparing for the day socialist studies will be the prevailing mode of study in the country." Variations of two other recurring to other themes were to "develop new programs and strategies toward a socialist state" and to "study economics and politics as prerequisites for Canadian independence."

As in previous years there were few sessions at the 1970 meetings at the University of Manitoba: Cy Gonick and Mel Watkins on socialist political strategies in the face of the multinational corporation, Alfred Dubuc and Stanley Ryerson on Canadian historiography, Peggy Morton on economic theory and women's liberation, and Patricia Wheeldon, Nathan Popkin and Tony Williams reporting on the purges of left-wing faculty at Simon Fraser University and the resulting protests.

Three additional significant initiatives came from the Winnipeg meeting. One was a decision to apply to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for Learned Society status. Subsequent success in this venture raised the profile of Socialist Studies and greatly facilitated organizing the annual meetings. Another advance was to begin publishing a Newsletter, the first number of which appeared in October of 1970. Edited by Graeme

Nicholson (then in the Philosophy Department, University of Toronto and a member of the anarchist *Our Generation* collective), it ran to 11 foolscap pages. (I recall cranking out these copies with Graeme on – get ready – our departmental Gestetner machine.) In addition to a report on the Winnipeg meeting, it included announcements of forthcoming conferences organized by local committees of Socialist Studies, and it published a full list of the Committee's members with their addresses and main areas of current research. This practice continued for many years and offered an invaluable resource for socialist scholars.

The third initiative was to formalize administration of the Committee with a central executive, based until 1974 in Toronto. It was composed of Frank Cunningham, who served as Secretary, Chandler Davis, Ian Lumsden, Graeme Nicholson and Stanley Ryerson. In addition, local executives were established in Calgary, Northern Ontario, Kingston, Ottawa and Montreal. These grew in 1972 to include a local executive in Edmonton, chaired by Tony Mardiros, and in 1975 an executive in Vancouver comprised of Mordecai Briemberg, Mike Lebowitz, Phil Resnick and Dorothy Smith.

Membership in 1970 grew to 192. Among those who joined the Committee in this year, to name a few, of several, well-known personages, were Alan Cairns, Christian Bay, Harold Chorney, Louis Greenspan, C.B. Macpherson, John O'Neil, Dimitri Roussopoulos, Gerry Sperling, James Steele and Dennis Lee. In subsequent years there were yet more increases in membership: 215 after the 1971 meetings in St. John's and 242 after the meeting at McGill, where the Montreal local committee was expanded to include Gilles Bourque, Sidney Ingerman, Dimitri Roussopoulos and Céline St. Pierre.

In 1974 the central executive moved to Ottawa, remaining there for four years. Marvin Glass (Philosophy at Carleton) served as Secretary and was joined on this executive by Fred Caloren, Kai Nielsen, Leo Panitch and by Reg Whitaker, who began editing the newsletter. At the 1975 sessions at the University of Alberta the Committee approved by mail ballot the project of publishing a journal. In 1976 its application for Canada Council funding was turned down, as were all subsequent such applications. Nonetheless in 1978 a journal was produced under the editorship of Stanley Ryerson, and in 1983 an enhanced journal was produced. The first number included four themes – Marxism and the Eighties (which featured interviews on the 100th anniversary of Marx's death with Macpherson and Ryerson), Socialism and Feminism, The State, and Energy and Independence. Subsequent annuals were devoted to focused themes:

- Critical Perspectives on the Constitution
- Work and New Technologies
- Social Movements / Social Change
- Race, Class, Gender
- Regulating Labour
- Socialism in Crisis?
- 1492-1992 – Five Centuries of Imperialism and Resistance
- Green on Red: Evolving Ecological Socialism
- Labour Gains, Labour Pains: Fifty Years of PC 1003
- The Training Trap: Ideology, Training and the Labour Market
- Global Justice, Global Democracy

Membership by 1978 had increased to 415. On the occasion of the annual meetings, held that year at UWO, it was decided to move the executive from Ottawa to Winnipeg. The new executive was comprised of Michael Feld, Cy Gonick, Paul Phillips, Arthur Schafer, Paul Stevenson and, as Secretary, Jesse Vorst (Economics at the University of Manitoba). In these years the two themes prominent in the founding years – pursuing research with socialist transformation in mind and Canadian independence (that is, from US economic and cultural domination) – continued to command attention as did: workers and trade unions, women’s liberation, the universities and radical pedagogy, Marxism, Quebec, radical philosophy, the state, democracy, the environment, Aboriginal peoples, racism, and some current international events, especially the right-wing coup in Chile.

Regional Conferences

During the five years beginning after the 1970 Winnipeg meetings, where regional executives were struck, there were several regional conferences, most in Toronto.

- 1970 Socialism and the Cities (Toronto)
Marxism and the Philosophy of Science (Toronto)
- 1971 Socialism and the Liberation of Women (Toronto)
- 1972 Sessions on: Revolution, the Division of Labour, and Freedom (Calgary)
Class and State in Canada (Toronto)
Social-Scientific Theory and Practice (Toronto)
- 1973 Socialist Analyses of British Columbia (Vancouver)
Sessions: Western Socialism, Unions, the Women’s Movement (Calgary)
Socialism and *The Limits to Growth* (Toronto)
- 1975 Capitalism, Socialism and Sports (Toronto)

All these conferences were well attended, and all brought new members into the Society.

Academic Affiliations

Almost all members of Socialist Studies from its founding to the present have held university appointments in a variety of fields. Of the 150 members in 1968 whose academic affiliations were announced or known the distribution was:

Political Science	43%
Economics	22%
History	14%
Sociology	14%
Philosophy	5%

Religion, Law, Library Science, Literature and Natural Science accounted for 2% or less each.

(Note: These are only approximate numbers, since many members did not identify their fields or affiliations. The estimations are, therefore, reliable only to the extent that distribution among unidentified fields more or less maps that among the identified ones.)

After the 1970 meetings total membership was 192 and the distribution approximately:

Economics	17%
Sociology	17%
Political Science	16%
Philosophy	16%
History	9%
Literature/Language	8%
Science/Math	4%

Anthropology, Education, Law and Social Work accounted for 2% or less each,

The distribution in 1978 (415 members in total) was:

Political Science	23%
Sociology	20%
Philosophy	19%
History	9%
Literature/Language	8%
Economics	7%
Education	3%
Social Work	3%
Religious Studies	1%

Math, Physics, Classics, Physical Education, Public Administration, Business less than 1% each.

For comparison, approximate distribution in 2009, when total membership was 301, is below. A look at the 2010 membership distribution, recently made available to me, suggests that it is similar; though total membership had dropped to 249.

Sociology	28%
Political Science	20%
Philosophy	9%
Literature/Language	9%
Economics	6%
History	6%
Social Work	5%
Anthropology	3%
Communications	4%
Criminology	2%
Education	2%
Law	2%

Film 2%
 Business, Science/Math, Religious Studies, 1% or less.

Generalizations

The first ten years of the Society lived up to most of the aspirations of Broadbent, Lumsden and Rotstein. Socialist Studies did pursue the sorts of questions they had in mind, and it maintained a socially and politically engaged but still scholarly focus. It was cross and interdisciplinary from the beginning – a rare accomplishment in the Canadian academy – and it provided forums for interchange of ideas and contributions to shared research agendas on the part of people from a variety of political orientations and commitments.

This point merits emphasis, since the Society largely escaped the sectarian infighting that characterized most of the Canadian left. This was an association that included as leading figures in its formative years both Ed Broadbent, who became an NDP Member of Parliament just one year after putting out the call for formation of the Society, and Stanley Ryerson, who in 1968 was still a prominent member of the Communist Party of Canada. It should be allowed that Ed was one of the more explicitly socialistic members of the NDP and Stanley a leader of the CP's Eurocommunist-like democratic wing, who left this party shortly after 1968. (Stanley remained an active member of the Society until his death in 1998; Ed's membership lapsed sometime around 1978.) The nonsectarian nature of the Society also extended to its relation to kindred Societies, and in particular Studies in Political Economy, with much overlapping membership and regular joint sessions. And it has retained feminist and anti-racist focuses.

Two of the founding members' aspirations were not fully realized. While they envisaged an organization encompassing all of "teachers, students, writers, editors, artists and scientists," Socialist Studies has been from the beginning primarily an academic society. Similarly, its membership and the themes of its conferences are, with the exceptions of history and philosophy, mainly from the social sciences; so the fourth area of study specified in the 1967 call, "literature and the arts," receives little attention, and few natural scientists have been members of the Society.

This concludes my historical sketch, which does not aim to be more than an outline factual account. It is worth noting that the Society has exhibited staying power from the early days right up to the present. Younger scholars have continued to join the Society and to present papers at its Congress sessions. These sessions, moreover, are very well attended and it is often remarked by Congress delegates that they are more "alive" and "engaged" than most of the sessions of the traditional discipline-based societies. Contributions to the Journal are on the leading edge of progressive thought across a wide range of vital issues and problems of the day. This suggests to me that, though the march will evidently be longer than many thought in 1969, the aim articulated by one of the respondents to Margaret Rowntree's questionnaire then, namely "to maintain an academic holding action preparing for the day socialist studies will be the prevailing mode of study in the country," is not entirely a utopian dream.