

Canadian Trotskyism in the 1960's

1 Introduction

Canada is a remarkably stable country. Its institutions and traditions are derived primarily from England and from pre-revolutionary France. Admittedly there have been revolutions and armed conflict in Canadian history for example in 1837 and in the Riel rebellion, but these have been the exception and not the rule. Usually consensus, compromise, and evolutionary change have been the norm. For one thing, at the time of Confederation the elites well understood that the alternative to compromise was American annexation. So English and French, Protestant and Catholic, broke bread, made agreements, and honoured them, however they may have felt about each other in private.

And yet this is a document about a revolutionary movement in Canada. Revolutions are based on issues. What are the issues in Canadian politics today?

I suggest that they can be presented as questions grouped as follows:

Environment and health.

- will Canada, or even mankind, be able to reply to future environmental challenges or do we face extinction?
- can the medical system be made functional?

Economics.

- can Canada overcome the unfairness in its economic relationship with the United States?

- will Canadians continue to be prosperous in an evolving world? In particular, will our children have something approaching the opportunities that were available to the post-war generation?

Foreign and domestic policy.

- what is one doing in Afghanistan, where is it going and how will it end?

- can the national question in Québec be settled definitively and harmoniously?

- can the aboriginal peoples of Canada find a mode of life that is dignified and replies to their specificity?

Justice and culture.

- how can crime (and the drug problem) be addressed?

- is there still a Canadian identity, and if so, how will it evolve under continued immigration, and the low birthrate?

Trust in government.

- do Canadian governments serve their communities, or rule over them through self-serving bureaucracies?

The above are certainly serious issues and they may have unseen consequences, but it is not evident that they are socialist let alone revolutionary in their implications.

Yet, to understand this document one must realize that in response to the political issues of the 1960's several hundred Canadians, often young, did believe that a revolutionary solution to Canada's problems was possible, preferable, and even imperative. This group was not important and had no long term impact on Canadian history. But its adherents were convinced, enthusiastic, devoted, and in many cases, talented. They saw change in terms of the then-issues in Canadian politics. Where they came from, how they

worked, and what they thought, is the subject of this essay.

This will be a flawed document for a number of reasons. First of all, the title is mistaken because the experiences drawn upon occurred only in Toronto and in Montreal, and not in Canada as a whole. Secondly, I was at most a marginal observer of Canadian Trotskyism and was also a young person with little experience in life. There are surely many blind spots. Yet my hope is that something of the flavour of the movement in the 1960's will come across in this narrative.

Originally I intended to include a chapter called "Why not Trotskyism?". After writing it, I suppressed it and decided to limit myself to the history of the movement.

I would like to thank Ian Angus, John Riddell, and Art Young for their help with this document. John encouraged the project several years ago and Ian set the ground rules. Both of them were very tolerant of the long unavoidable delays. They also corrected a regrettable error on my part in an earlier version, and John did a wonderful job of copy editing the final version.

Notwithstanding the above, both John and Art have transmitted disagreements with some of the content. My feeling is that the facts and incidents in the document are correct and I stand by them. The opinions expressed, however, are mine alone. Some do reflect the fact that my views today differ from those which I held in the 1960's. It would be good if any of the above-named (or anyone else) were to write up their own version of the same events.

2 What is Trotskyism?

It is regrettable that there should even be a term "Trotskyism". Briefly, and at the risk of vast over-simplification, Marx developed an analysis of the capitalist system of production that had replaced feudalism in Europe. He thought that capitalism would face periodic crises and be replaced with a new system of economic and political relations called communism. This did not happen quite as inevitably as expected, and later in Russia at the

end of the nineteenth century the majority of his followers opted for the idea of working through an organized and disciplined political party that would intervene and help the process along. Lenin led this movement, and after the Russian revolution many Marxists adopted the name Marxist-Leninist, or simply Communist. Trotskyism is the direct descendent of this current of thought and the term Trotskyism is used largely because it became necessary to distance oneself from the errors, crimes, and structures that evolved in the Soviet Union after the revolution. If not for this “degeneration”, people would not use the term Trotskyism at all. There are secondary meanings associated with the term Trotskyism. For example, it also included explanations as to why the Soviet Union changed, and about what fascism meant. But one does not want to write an encyclopaedia, so I will not say more.

In Canada there was a tendency to use the term “revolutionary socialists” publically in the Trotskyist movement of the sixties, basically for two reasons. For one thing the word “communism” had become too identified with Stalin, his followers, and their actions; secondly, one did not want to appear like a sect living in a European time-warp by calling the movement Trotskyist.

3 Canadian Trotskyism in the fifties

In retrospect one must give credit to the Trotskyists of the 1950's. I suspect that without their legacy the expansion of the sixties would not have been possible, or it would have been much more difficult. But what was it like? Let's begin with a bit of background.

The second world war ended much differently from the first. There were significant mass movements to the left after the first world war. The war was so destructive that it created disillusionment with the capitalist and imperial powers, and there was also a sense of betrayal with the social democratic parties which had supported the war. The war was a fundamental cause of the February Revolution in Russia and Kerensky's inability to leave the war was crucial to his overthrow in October. After the war social revolution also broke out in Ireland, Germany, and Hungary. Canada experienced a seminal general strike in Winnipeg. Even after these movements had been defeated, dynamic new communist parties emerged in many countries, in-

cluding Canada, and they were led by talented and devoted people. The ball game had changed. The international communist movement, taking its cue from the Soviet model was a new and pretty genuine threat to the established order.

Trotsky anticipated a similar surge towards the Fourth International after the second world war. It did not happen. (See for example: Trotsky: Fate of a revolutionary, Robert Wistrich, Stein and Day, 1982). To understand Canadian Trotskyism in the fifties, one must appreciate the fact that everything that could go wrong, did indeed go wrong, or was about to go wrong. These included: the successful reconstruction of Europe and Japan under capitalist leadership, the extension of the Stalinist system to all of Eastern Europe and parts of Asia, and the onset of McCarthyism in the United States. If the workers of Europe did have class consciousness and seek political action, it was under the banner of the mass Communist Parties, in France and in Italy for example. To the extent that social revolutions occurred they were led by Stalinists, either in Yugoslavia, or in Asia (China, Vietnam, and Korea). Real social change seemed excluded in societies, whether Western or Soviet, that seemed frozen in time, and drugged on contemporary dogma. The followers of Trotsky were isolated and reviled. To make matters even worse the movement split internationally into two groups.

It was at this time that I first encountered the Trotskyists. I would see them selling the Workers Vanguard at concerts of Pete Seeger, for example. They made a strange impression, somewhat akin to that made by the Jehovah's Witnesses. They seemed very sincere, hopeless, and they presented themselves publically with a kind of inspired but pathetic dignity.

An anecdote which I later learned from the then leader Ross Dowson might prove instructive. There was a very popular Communist Party leader member named Joseph B. Salsberg who represented a Jewish riding in Toronto and was clearly proud of his Jewish origins. (My religious grandmother voted for him). He was concerned by reported anti-Jewish attitudes in the Soviet leadership and after visits to the Soviet Union in 1955 and 1956 returned to Toronto in a state of shock. He made his frustrations public ultimately leaving the Communist Party with a group of supporters (my grandmother was perhaps a good judge of character, after all). At one point he met with Ross Dowson and enquired as to the size of the Trotskyist organization in

Toronto. Bluffing, Ross replied with a figure in the hundreds and Salsberg expressed surprise that one could manage so many activities with so few people. Little did Salsberg realize that in reality the number was more likely 8 members. That was the state of Trotskyism in the fifties. The CCF was an established federal social democratic party, the Communist Party probably could count on a thousand members in Toronto, Salsberg had perhaps a hundred supporters, and the Trotskyists in Toronto could be counted on two hands.

The primary activities of the movement in the fifties can be summed up simply: maintain the continuity of the movement, publish its newspaper and run periodically for mayor in Toronto. The idea of having any real impact on society was out of the question. The movement was in survival mode.

The movement operated out of a modest store on Yonge Street and had public meetings in its dismal basement. Ross Dowson was a leading figure who somehow held the movement together basically because he was committed to maintaining a revolutionary organization in tact through this terrible period in order to be achieve something in better times.

The official Communist movement was busy worshipping Stalin as a demigod in the pattern of the recent adoration of Saddam Hussein, or Kim Il Jung. The Americans were on a witch-hunt that had people on the left cowering. Orwell had just written 1984 not just as a novel, but as a real warning to the world. And yet here were people talking about Marx, saying that working people should have rights, were entitled to dignity, could form their own governments, and not be ruled from above either by Western imperial governments or by the Kremlin. No one was listening, but they still managed to preserve their sanity and their ideas.

In retrospect there were a few positive political developments in the world in this period. One saw the independence of India, the victory of the Labour party in England, and the creation of the State of Israel. The Maoist victory in China was very important historically but it seemed to confirm the irrelevance of Trotskyism and the correctness of Stalinism. The CCF victory in Saskatchewan was the only bright light in Canada. It was very significant but its impact on the rest of the country would be delayed for a later date.

4 Canadian Trotskyism into the sixties

Things changed in the sixties. Cracks started to appear in the regimented systems and some genuine mass movements emerged. I will present these individually, but the most important thing is to realize that together they acted as a synergy that suggested that dissent was legitimate, that existing governments were not omnipotent and the social change was possible and necessary. There were several theatres of action.

One was the Campaign Against Nuclear Disarmament. It was primarily British based and it reflected a genuine fear that mankind faced the danger of destruction in a nuclear conflict. Nuclear weapons had been used against Japan, the Soviet Union had now had them, and there were terrifying scenarios. Apart from what it did and did not achieve, it showed that masses of people could intervene in the political process and not simply be moved about like pawns. This movement, it seems to me, cannot be separated from the sentiments that also elected Labour after the war, and indeed it cannot be separated historically from the Chartist movement. Why mention it in this essay? Basically because it was a mass movement, it was spontaneous, and it was not under the control of the Stalinists, or any other bullies. In a sense it was a statement of the need for human decency to prevail. Interestingly (he would have been delighted) it argued against Orwell's apprehensions. One must recall that at that time there were no organized movements of protest of any kind at this time in Canada or the United States let alone in Eastern Europe.

There was a massive movement underway elsewhere, one that signalled the end of colonialism. India came first. Slowly but surely the people's of Africa and Asia rejected colonial status. They wanted the dignity of indigenous regimes. Sometimes this occurred bloodlessly but this was rare. Ultimately Britain, France, Belgium, Portugal and Holland ceded their colonies and these comprised a significant part of humanity, though not of the world economy. I remember the comment "Africa is on fire" proffered by a CCF supporter. Some of the more memorable struggles were in India, Vietnam, Algeria, Angola and Mozambique, memorable because of their impact on the mother countries, its politics, and the development of the left in France and later Portugal. The anti-colonial movement did not have the same signifi-

cance for Canada. But it underlined the social changes that had begun in the world and that the existing order could be confronted successfully.

Most Marxists in the post-war period supported the Communist Party. Is it possible for workers and allied intellectuals to support a regime whose activities included, the organization of the Ukrainian famine, the construction of the White Sea canal by political prisoners, the torture of the Jewish doctors and the execution of the Polish officer caste in the Katynin forest? The answer is yes. Partly out of blindness, but more out of the conviction that the Soviet Union was, despite everything else, the workers' state. However, it slowly but inevitably became clear that the Stalinists could not retain their credibility in the Canadian left. (The Maoist regime did not then have followers in Canada, except through certain Christian missionary sympathizers). The work of the Trotskyists contributed little to this process. It was Nikita Khrushchev who by denouncing Stalin seemed to open the flood gates. All of a sudden it was revealed that there had been purges and frame-ups on a massive scale. The impact in Canada and the United States was dramatic, perhaps because their Communist Parties had been the most slavish supporters of the Soviet regime. The questions and the memories could not be suppressed. What had happened in East Berlin in 1953? Why had the Soviet Union done such a miserable job in resisting the Nazi invasion? Were the Jewish doctors guilty? What about the charges of Salsberg? What about the Slansky trials in Czechoslovakia? Slowly people began to leave the Communist Party in Canada. (The Russians did not care a whit). The process took on a momentum of its own. Khrushchev put down the uprising in Hungary. It caused some consternation. There followed the uprisings by Polish workers and the emergence of independent leaders like Gomulka. Still some held on to their beliefs and illusions. Later for many the Czechoslovak experience, Prague spring in 1968 and its suppression, would be the last straw. I think it is fair to say that this marked the end of the Communist Party in Canada as a pole of attraction for the left. Previously it had been powerful without ever being a mass party. It still had money, a machine, and some union affiliates but it was morally bankrupt. Radicalized forces might go somewhere, but it would certainly not be to the Communist Party.

Another massive social change was in the wings close by, and though overdue, it came as a surprise and was in no way planned. The American blacks had never come close to the equality promised by the Civil war. Indeed their

bondage was astonishing. There had been individual examples of protest like W.E.B. DuBois the historian, and Paul Robeson who thought that the Communist Party could address black inequality. But now there was a mass movement, and though it had leadership, largely religious in origin, what was striking was the mass decision of American blacks, at first in the south, to ask for changes, social equality, and voting rights in the United States. We all know that one spark came without organization from a simple woman who refused to sit in the back of a bus. What has to be grasped is the breadth and depth of the feelings into which it tapped. At first there were simply marches and sit-ins more in the south. And campaigns of voter registration. But later whole communities were set on fire in riots that were substantial. The Army and/or the National Guard were often involved.

There now occurred two international developments which were more significant to the United States than to Canada. But they were major all the same.

The United States maintained powerful interests in Latin America but not via outright colonies. These took the form of independent states, often military dictatorships, which ruled in their own interests and in collaboration with the United States. Costa Rica and Mexico were somewhat exceptional, the former more benign than the latter. There had been many attempts at social change, democratic and otherwise. Significantly, the elected Arbenz government of Guatemala was overthrown with American help. Latin America was electrified when a military uprising against an autocracy succeeded in Cuba in 1959. There followed a sort of sad ballet in which the United States could not accept the reality of a bit of a social revolution even when Castro showed every willingness to talk and to do business. Positions hardened, Castro moved to the left, the Americans tried to overthrow him, and one was launched in the direction of the stand-off which continues to this day. Latin America has changed a great deal in the meantime, but in the sixties it is important to understand that Castro represented the mouse that had the courage to confront the elephant. Castro and his team had enormous personal prestige. This had an echo in Canada where a Fair Play for Cuba Committee emerged, largely saying the obvious, namely that the Cuban revolution was popular, and that the Cuban people had the right to choose their future without American dictate. With time the Cuban regime nationalized the economy and associated itself with the Soviet Union but in the period we

are discussing it is important to understand that it was an inspiring regime in a country that was in celebration. I have no doubt as to the genuineness of the sentiments of liberation in Cuba that filtered back to Canada at this time.

The second development was the evolution of the conflict in Vietnam which gradually evolved into a full-fledged war. It had an enormous impact in the United States because it undermined one's confidence in the leadership of Western governments. It just seemed morally wrong to be fighting such a horrible war against a poor colonial people in alliance with such unsavoury Vietnamese allies. Of course the other side was pretty horrible too, though we often ignored that. People were radicalized by this war, by the unending lies, by the napalm, and they questioned society as a whole. I think that the war in Vietnam, more than anything else, was the factor which prevented part of my generation from identifying with authority in the sixties.

There were to be two Canadian developments as well.

The first was the decision of the CCF to join the with the trade union movement and create the New Democratic Party.

The CCF was the social democratic party in Canada. It was important and it had done very well electorally, but it had some limitations. Its roots lay mainly in the agricultural crisis in Saskatchewan during the Depression, and in Christian socialism, mostly from the United Church of Canada. The problem was that Canada was becoming less agricultural, and more urban. A New Party was proposed, one that would merge the (more western) CCF with the (more eastern) trade union movement. It would be a party for both workers and farmers. It would be financed partly by systematic deductions in the work-place and thus stand a chance at confronting the Liberal and Conservative parties. There was a certain groundswell around this movement, and one thought in terms of achieving genuine power, or opposition status at the federal level. Canadians had voted Liberal pragmatically since the Depression and it seemed that the New Party could change this.

The second Canadian movement to emerge was the Quiet Revolution in Québec. This picked up momentum a bit later, and it did not radicalize the youth in English Canada. Its impact on Québec was enormous, and I

will deal with this more in a description of the workings of the movement in Montreal. There were also other important social movements that came later. The movement for gender equality had already started in the sixties, but its heyday came later. So did the gay liberation movement, and the aboriginal struggle.

5 The make-up of the movement, its personality

I think it is interesting to discuss some of these questions. I do not think that people became Trotskyists without there being some linkage with their backgrounds and experiences. If there is one theme that was usually shared it was the idea of class, ie. that Canadians were not equal. More than this, that Canada is divided along class lines as basically outlined by Marx. And that class distinctions in Canada were the source of great pain and suffering. This was compounded for some by the immigrant experience. It may shock general Canadians to hear that class distinctions could be so fundamental in Canada as to argue for a social revolution. After all Canada does not have India's caste system, and few people starve. Yet I stand by my suggestion that class experiences, humiliation, powerlessness, insecurity, that these were the most common experiences that brought people to the Trotskyist movement.

I have been asked by Ian Angus to dwell on details about the movement and I shall. The movement in Toronto operated out of a bookstore on Queen Street West opposite the then new City Hall. It was called the Vanguard Bookstore. It was not a specialized leftist bookstore, but rather a general serious bookshop that also stocked some liberal and leftist items. One comrade worked in the store maintaining normal business hours. The bookstore was operated because it attracted thinkers who could sometimes be engaged in conversation. In a pretty relaxed way interested people were led to discussions on politics, on social issues, and, if appropriate, were invited to attend weekly talks. Gerry Houle and Cliff Olsen would work in the store. At times so did Ross Dowson. They were good at the job and there were instances of recruitment that resulted simply from the fact that people had wandered into the store. (By the way I remember as well that the CP also ran a bookstore.

At one time Misha Cohen's wife worked there. I don't recall it as being so recruitment oriented however).

Behind the store there was a meeting hall that would seat perhaps 40 people at the most. On the wall facing one as one entered was a modern painting of two workers jointly pouring molten steel from an industrial bucket in a fiery steelmill. The hall was somewhat modern and made for a pleasant meeting place. There was no red flag, no bust of Trotsky, or even his photograph. Behind the hall was a kitchen with a small informal area where people often took their lunch. Below the main floor was a work area, and it was pretty sombre, in fact, it would have made for a terrible firetrap. The newspaper was written there and mailed from there. There were also offices, files, a Gestetner machine (elementary printer) as well as a small meeting room.

The Toronto movement was organized into two groups. There was a Branch for the adults and for the more experienced young people, and there was a young people's organization where the maximum age was about 25. The Branch meet once week in the meeting hall (used by the forum) and I recall that the (smaller) youth group usually met in the basement. I think the Branch meet on Sunday evenings, and the youth group usually on Saturday mornings. There was a public meeting called a Forum each Friday evening in the meeting hall. It was to the Forum that people would be invited from the bookstore contact, if it was considered appropriate. The topic for the forum was determined by the Branch. The topics would be general ones of interest to the public. The speakers were mostly, but not always, Trotskyists. They might be experienced members of the movement in Toronto, they might be people passing through on a tour of Branches; the forums might be routine and laid-back, and they might be more gripping topics related to an important current development. It didn't happen but I don't think that people from other tendencies would have been denied the right to present a forum. Certainly a racist would not be given the forum. But had a social democrat, a Christian pacifist, or a Stalinist wanted to give a forum I suspect it would have happened. Maybe a competing Trotskyist tendency would not have been permitted, but as I say this never happened. The most common topics dealt with developments and challenges for the New Democratic Party, the Cuban Revolution, and the war in Vietnam. I remember one forum that was given by poet Milton Acorn on the role of artists in society. Another was given on the latest developments in the Algerian Revolution by Ross Dowson

after he returned from a visit to see things firsthand. At times there were strikes in the trucking industry, and we would have a forum on this topic.

Forums were open, they were followed by questions and comments from the audience. I recall there being tolerance for differing opinions. I cannot honestly say that the forums were brilliant in any sense, but they were interesting. Occasionally there would be a more prestigious figure visiting the city, and the forum would be held at a larger public hall. (I remember one by a South African speaker).

The forum was the public face of Trotskyism in Toronto, and I think there was a similar one in Vancouver, and certainly later in Montreal. But for the country more was needed, and in those days before web-sites, the answer was a monthly newspaper called the Workers Vanguard. Publishing the Vanguard was an enormous undertaking, and most of it was done by Ross, who acted as its editor. Offhand I would say that the newspaper consumed at least one-half of his time.

Let me mention some of the primary areas of political work by the movement. I am, in a sense, working down the agenda of a typical Branch meeting, as I recall them.

Comrades would report on their work in the New Democratic Party. What they were doing to build the NDP and also, what progress they were making in bringing some of its more left-wing members to Trotskyism.

Comrades would report on their work in the Fair Play for Cuba Committee. Although the latter functioned, it was a less dynamic area, since the Fair Play committee was not a mass movement and the NDP was.

There would be a report on work in industrial unions. This got more intense if there was a strike in the offing in a union where comrade(s) worked.

There was an item called Membership and Contacts. This would involve reporting on people being recommended for Branch membership or indeed, people being dropped from membership. Other issues came up. Person X was sympathetic and becoming more so. Person Y was hostile. I remember a report that one young man who did some volunteer work was reported to have become violent and broken some equipment. Security and reliability

were, on occasion, themes.

Sometimes there would be a financial report in a Branch meeting made by the Treasurer.

Virtually all Branch meetings, to the chagrin of many, included an Educational. This was simply a talk on a pertinent theme. It would be followed by questions or comments. The topic could be historical, it could be a book review, it could, and often was, based on a Discussion Document received from the US. Socialist Workers Party. The reason people were chagrined by the educational was that they were intellectually lazy and unwilling to learn about ideas. (Forgive my bluntness). As well, people were very loathe to take on the task of giving an educational which they would have to prepare on their own. Despite this, the educational were quite interesting, and the documents from the SWP certainly were. I remember all kinds of topics from the SWP. Perhaps they, unlike us, had achieved the critical mass needed for such discussions.

6 The sociology of the movement

The confirmed workers

The Toronto Branch had a significant mature working class component. These people had life patterns that were settled. They were not young workers, not moving from job to job, or moving from jobs to studies. They were confirmed members of the working class and some of them were not to be taken lightly on the intellectual level, believe me. I had many interesting conversations with Fred Callaghan who came from Newfoundland and had worked as a seaman. He knew in detail the history, for example, of post-war Albania.

There was a significant number of teamsters. Don't ask me why there should be a correlation between teamsters and Trotskyism, but this also happened in the States (Minneapolis). There may have been 5 to 10 of these comrades. They tended to be rugged and friendly. They were also more affluent.

Meyer Shapiro was a postal worker, and he played a good role in his union. (See my comments on the religious question later).

One of the little surprises I had was that the movement had British immigrants who had been radicalized by the move to Canada. Alan Harris spoke to me about this. You would think that the class divisions in England would be more of a motivator, but Alan explained to me his shock at the nakedness of Canadian capitalism. It drove him to the left after arriving here.

The second British immigrant that comes to my mind was Pat B. Pat was, I think, genuinely from a disadvantaged background in England. His chest was sunken-one suspected he had been poorly nourished as a child. (This is Toronto in 1960, and not Dickens in the 19th century, I hasten to remark). I doubt that Pat had had much formal education, and maybe it affected the way he spoke which could make him seem a bit strange. That is, until, one listened to what Pat had to say. I remember that Ross at one point returned from Europe and reported that Pablo was opposed to a reunification. There was, at that point, a lone voice from the audience that said "I thought so". It was Pat. Pat understood Trotskyism deeply and was a fine person. Pat worked in the steel finishing industry.

Another mature worker that comes to mind was Hugh Dowson who worked in the aircraft industry. He was experienced and articulate. He played a role in his union. He was also a settled married man with a house and children. His wife Claire was interesting (see religion) and their daughter is today a known quantity both in the broadcasting world, and in the NDP where she has been a candidate in Westmount. (Their daughter mentioned to me last year that Claire is still alive and living in Montreal).

Pat Mitchell was a leading woman member of the Branch. Her roots were immigrant (Holland) and working class (her father was a postman). She herself worked and reflected a life of hard work. Pat was passionately committed to the ideas of the movement, she spoke well, and was in many senses an activist in the movement. We became close friends.

Young workers We had a considerable number of young workers. They tended to be less settled, and more peppy than the older workers. I guess that the Depression and the war weighed less heavily on them, and they lived

in a more affluent society. I will mention a few. Toni F. did fashion columns for a Toronto newspaper. Jim Onyschuk did union work. There were quite a few others.

Students We started to attract students and a lot of young people in the sixties. It coincided with the liberation that the sixties ushered in, and even with a bit of bohemianism. The students were by their very nature not as tied to the working class. That was to be expected. The youth group did a lot of work in the high schools and published a youth oriented paper.

Some of the students who stand out in my memory are Richard Fidler, John Riddell and Art Young (see the section “Seeds of the New Leadership”).

Professionals Later we started to recruit some white collar professionals. One was a psychiatrist who visited Vietnam during the war and spoke out with the authority of a doctor. Vern Olsen was, I think, an engineer, a thoughtful and mature person. Two of our young members went on to become lawyers.

Our poets It was not uncommon to meet poets around the Trotskyist movement. Three come to mind. By far the most committed was Joe Rosenblatt. He worked a day job on the railroad loading and unloading wagons. But Joe was also a poet, quite a sensitive one, and he did publish in the Workers Vanguard periodically. I think he gradually moved away from politics, but certainly at one point was either a genuine, or defacto member of the Toronto Branch. Milton Acorn viewed himself as a working class poet and was known in Canadian poetic circles. Initially he had been a kind of worker-communist in P.E.I. (I know the family). He would periodically speak at Forums. Milton lived in the margins of society more than Joe did.

I don't know if Milton's wife Gwen McEwan was that political. For a while one did see her perhaps more because she was married to Milton. But she was certainly an important figure in Canadian poetry.

7 Religion in the Trotskyist movement

I don't think that religion was ever much of an issue in the Branch. We had people of Protestant background, of Catholic background, and of Jewish background. For most members, religion did not seem to be a factor in their daily lives. I raise the question because I think that it is interesting that we did have two practising, or at least believing, Catholics in the Branch. One was Claire Lagacé, who was married to Hugh Dowson. She was French Canadian from Québec, and believed in an amalgam of Trotskyism and Catholicism. A second was Jimmy Howell, a teamster comrade. I never discussed too much with Jimmy, but had the distinct impression that he was religious. I don't know of others who went to church or to the synagogue. One Toronto comrade from the West was in some sense a refugee from a very religious (and disturbing) upbringing he had experienced.

8 The Jewish question

There are a few memories that I think should be mentioned under this topic.

The first concerns Meyer Shapiro, our postal worker. One usually passed a small basket around after a forum to collect a few dollars for the rent and upkeep of the hall. One evening Meyer was asked to pass the basket and he refused, saying to me, (also Jewish) that people would give less, if a Jew was collecting the money. I reacted badly and transmitted Meyer's comment to Ross, who replied. "Let Meyer pass the basket, and if people have prejudices, let them learn to overcome them." Ross basically forced Meyer to pass the basket. I was very deeply struck by this event.

The second concerns a friend, actually my closest friend, who explained once in public that he had moved someone after renting a truck. He had "Jewed" the owner down to a lower price. I was aghast at this comment and reacted strongly and immediately. Ross was present, was equally offended at the remark, and made it clear that he would have corrected the error as well.

My last comment concerns Ross's attitude toward the Jewish family. Ross

was no stranger to Jews. He was very close to two of my relatives at one point, and he was also related by marriage to a Jewish artist named Rosenthal. I think Ross, a Protestant by origin, was critical of the general family as an institution actually. His comments to me concerned the narrowness and the reactionary nature of the Jewish family. What struck me was how strongly he felt about this.

9 The gay question

Some of the things I am going to mention might surprise young people today. I remember that we had a young member who was homosexual in his orientation. I never spoke with him at length but he seemed to be serious, committed, and kind of troubled. He also came from poverty and this counted as a plus in some people's eyes. Anyway I remember a forum to which he invited a friend. The friend was not visibly gay to me, but was to our leader Ross Dowson who got pretty upset about the two of them being there. I must add that the friend seemed to be there out of interest, and nothing sexual was either said or done by either of them. I well remember Ross' words to me. "We do not want people like that around our movement".

My second comment concerns a comment I received from a leader of the S.W.P. on a visit to New York. "Homosexuality is a reflection of a system which is in decay".

Notwithstanding the above, I am pretty certain that we had some closeted homosexuals in the movement.

10 Drugs in the movement

Although drug usage was part of the youth movement in the 1960's this was not the case in the Trotskyist movement. We admired the Beatles, and they used drugs, but we did not. At most I can recall one marginal person, not a member, who did use something but never did so near the movement. Alcohol was, of course, consumed by members just as it was in the ambient

society. I recall the case of a member who was an alcoholic and discussed this with me.

11 Social Events

Several times a year the movement in Toronto would rent a large hall and hold a substantial social event. These tended to be exhilarating because they contrasted with the very serious atmosphere that usually prevailed in political work. The socials were fun. One decorated the hall, served food, served drinks, and danced. There were sympathizers who would not come out for political events but liked a Saturday evening social. So the numbers were greater and one broke the usual routine of work in the movement. I remember a discussion with Max Armstrong at one of the socials. He was explaining the psychology of the Russian peasantry to me. It was a wonderful experience.

I recall two halls in particular that were used. One was a union hall in the west end of the city. The second was the Borochoy hall named after a Marxist Zionist. Often we had revolutionary banners on display and Nick Olenuk would delivered rousing and enthusiastic remarks. Somehow momentarily one had a glimpse of how things might be if one were one day to become a bit more of a mass movement.

12 The finances of the movement

It makes eminent sense to ask how the Trotskyist movement could pay for its activities. There was a system of tithing called the pledge, and members gave regularly to the Branch. The amounts were often modest, especially for the students, but the workers often paid substantial pledges, especially some of the teamsters.

Two other comments on the finances are in order.

The Stalinists at different points suggested that the Trotskyists were financed

by the capitalists. They had a theory that capitalism would attack the Soviet system from the “left” as well as from the right. Anyway, as treasurer of the Toronto Branch, I did not notice any inflows of cash from the CIA or anyone else on the outside. We were perpetually broke.

My second comment is that one way the movement did pay its bills was by having modest expenses. The salaries paid, especially to Ross, were very modest indeed. Later when Riddell or Young worked for the movement I had a similar impression. They lived very modestly, perhaps too modestly.

13 The leadership of the Toronto Branch

The good news was that we had an established leader, and the bad news I think was that we had only one.

Ross Dowson was interesting for a number of reasons. One was his single-minded devotion to Trotskyism. He was not a blind fanatic, quite the contrary, he had a firm grasp of reality, but his commitment to the movement was total. Secondly, for someone his age, he was exceptional in that he had not been through the experience of the Communist Party. Lastly, unlike many of the leaders of his time, he had had no contact with Trotsky. (It was common for emerging leaders to have visited Trotsky in Mexico or worked with him there.)

Ross knew, as we all did, that he was the de facto leader of the Branch, if not of the entire Canadian movement. I don't think he resented this, or “wanted out” in any sense. He did have the feeling that it was his duty to intervene in the movement and to provide political leadership. This may have been a bit unfair. I don't think that Ross was a creative Trotskyist thinker, nor was he an accomplished writer. Ross forced himself each morning to read the Globe and Mail, and he forced himself to evolve policies in a changing world, and a changing international movement. I think he did this well, and it is not my intention to belittle what Ross did. On the contrary. What I am saying is, that I had the impression that this role was not as natural to him, that it was a role he forced himself to play.

There was a role that did come naturally to Ross, and that was as an organizer. He built and maintained the movement at times out of nothing. Ross would cobble together the resources and the volunteers, determine the priorities he felt were most important, and then act. He also had a very good sense of tactics. I remember that he once led our teamster faction through a strike from a distance. He never attended a single strike meeting. But he got reports on the issues, the factions, and he successfully proposed policies for our teamsters. To my mind this is the Ross one should remember: the organizer, the man who could work with a variety of human material, and build an organization of activists. The price one paid for the organization that Ross built was that it was not really a forum for ideas. Its goal was to build a revolutionary organization. I recall that I felt a bit constrained by some of the attitudes Ross expressed. For example once after he returned from France I commented that it was regrettable that there were several different Trotskyist movements in France. He countered that this was false, that there was only one, that affiliated with the Fourth International (Pierre Frank and others). It is obvious that he was wrong, but he did not want “idle talk” to interfere with our tasks. I also very well recall wistful comments by Pat Mitchell about the Buffalo Branch of the SWP. She had visited it and was very impressed by its organizational discipline. By the time the sixties had arrived one never heard further mention of the Buffalo (Marcy) group. It had been Trotskyist but was weak in its criticisms of Stalinism, if I can put it that way. Would it have been such a crazy idea for the two groups to meet at Niagara Falls and walk towards each other protesting the war in Vietnam? That might have taken a bit more flexibility on the part of Ross, of Marcy, and the S.W.P. than they were up to. I say the above because Toronto and Buffalo are not far apart actually.

14 The seeds of the new leadership

It was a given that Ross would not lead the movement forever, let alone do so single-handedly. In retrospect it is clear that a new collective leadership was in gestation in the Sixties. Without being disparaging to anyone else, I will mention four people who, though young, looked as if they might be up to the task of leading the movement. I will do so in alphabetical order.

Ian Angus is the person about whom I knew the least because he came on the scene a few years later and I was no longer about. What I do remember about him was that he played a big role in the youth movement, that he seemed to be the kind of person who could achieve concrete things, and that he seemed to be very dynamic. I suspect that had I known him more, I would have a good deal more to say (positively) about his abilities.

Dick Fidler was a thinker, writer, and perhaps our most impressive speaker. There was something commanding about the delivery of his talks. (I will comment more on Fidler's role when I discuss the Montreal Branch). When we were all expelled from the NDP for Trotskyism Fidler spoke to an NDP assembly to defend himself. There was a genuine sense of loss in the room. Fidler was potential leadership material for them, and they sensed it. The message, unspoken, was "What a shame to lose such a fine young man".

John Riddell had many bases covered. He spoke well, wrote well, and seemed also to be a builder. He had been raised in a political atmosphere and was accustomed to intellectual challenges. John had independent, and often novel, explanations for Trotskyist positions.

Art Young was, like myself, from a working class suburban family and was interested and serious about political ideas. His maturity made him stand out. (See the Québec movement below.) Art made an interesting trip to Algeria to follow developments there. As I recall he met Pablo at the time.

15 Other ties

Although the Trotskyist movement was very weak and was primarily working class oriented, I think it is interesting to note that there were a few vectors to and from other sociologies as well. This was not a new phenomenon. Engels, an industrialist, made his lot with Marx, and Kropotkin, a prince, rejected a job in the Tsarist court to become an anarchist and a distinguished geographer.

I have spoken of the role of class and immigrant experiences in bringing people to Trotskyism in Canada. Not everyone fit this pattern. We had one

member whose family had had ties to the Liberal government of Mackenzie King. Another was from the family of a prominent figure in the CCF in Ontario. Yet another was the daughter of an administrator in the Saskatchewan CCF. Sometimes we even had sympathizers or members who had some financial resources. (Oddly enough this even happened once in Montreal). And although we did not have strong influence in the union movement, we did have as a member the daughter of a very influential union leader in Toronto. I suspect that by the mid-sixties Trotskyism commanded a certain (passive) respect in the liberal-left in Toronto. The isolation of the fifties had been overcome.

16 Some comments on the history of the Montreal Branch

It seems that at one point there was a bit of Trotskyism in Montreal before the Sixties, but in reality, Trotskyism in Montreal, unlike that in Toronto, was an outside, and at first, artificial construct. It was created primarily by two people from Toronto, Dick Fidler and Mike Mill. Fidler had come to Montreal for his studies. I don't know why Mill moved to Montreal. Both moves may have been influenced by the feeling that something important was happening in Québec. This perception could not have been more accurate. Much much more than English Canada, indeed I would say, in contrast to English Canada, Québec was facing basic challenges both on an individual and on a collective level. These included the inferior social status of the French speakers, the role of religious belief and authority, the role women should play, and what role the state should play in education and health. All of these were at play, the atmosphere was almost electric at times, and there was a new and dynamic generation of singers, poets, writers, and artists.

The comrades lived in a very modest building on Guilbault Street and started to build a Branch. It required leadership and that meant new analyses of Québec. If Québec, and its left, were a swimming pool so to speak, Fidler stood beside it, observed, wrote, and predicted, and did so impressively. Mill, on the other hand, got a bathing suit, and jumped into the pool. He knew the players personally, he knew their views and their backgrounds, he learned

the nuances of their language and of their culture. One should see Fidler and Mill as the most important figures in Québec Trotskyism until the 1970's. I don't think that their views were actually that different. There was always a tendency on Mill's part to want to merge with the Québec left, and downplay one's organisational independence. I think that his writings on Québec and his conclusions are worthy of study.

By the time I had moved to Montreal, Fidler had left. He continued to follow events, to write, and to make suggestions. The Branch was quite different from that in Toronto. To begin with most of the members were young. Secondly most of the recruitment was in the English community. Thirdly the physical conditions of the movement were dumpy to put it simply. Among other things the Branch held forums, and published a newspaper called *La Lutte Ouvrière*. About this time Pat Mitchell moved to Montreal and became the leading person organisationally. She never mastered the language, but was very devoted and could be effective. It may seem hard to believe but I saw some very hard-core nationalist men gallantly switch into English in order to accommodate Pat.

Incidentally although the Branch had no impact on Québec society there were at least two organisations that took it seriously. The first was the terrorist FLQ which would send its announcements to this group of anglophone socialists. The second was the police which at one point decided to raid the Branch headquarters looking for bomb-making equipment. (I am not joking or exaggerating when I say the latter.)

There was sometimes conflict with Mill which can basically be explained as follows. Mill was viewed by many as the person who understood what was happening in the Québec left. He also had written some analyses which were interesting. So people wanted to follow his lead and adopt his ideas. On the other hand his lifestyle was a bit bohemian and one could not really follow him. It was Pat Mitchell who kept things running. So the doers could not cope with the ambient culture, and the acculturated people could not be relied upon. All of this was happening in a young and small group, and it was not healthy.

Ross came down one time to try to patch things up, and somehow the Branch survived. In time things changed in a number of senses. First of all recruit-

ment picked up, including in the French working class. The Quiet Revolution continued to develop. One got better quarters. And Art Young moved to Montreal to help out with the leadership. The activities of the Branch grew. It presented a candidate in an election. The paper continued to appear. Later Mike Mill brought in some francophone student types. These were heady days for Trotskyism in Montreal. I shall not continue my discussion of the history of the Branch but should mention that very big developments were in the offing with the 1970 terrorists events, the War Measures Act, and the arrest of Art Young and his wife Penny.

In summary, Canadian Trotskyism successfully built a new Branch in Montreal and hoped to be a factor in the continuing social evolution of Québec. It was viewed fraternally by the broader left. I will leave its post 1970 history to others.

17 Was the movement a cult?

My answer to this question is that this is a matter of degree. Every organisation and family has some features of a cult. Basically I think the Trotskyist movement was not cult-like in that it did have some differing points of view and tolerated them to some extent. I do think that most members were too involved in the movement to the detriment of their relations with the ambient society. This led them to live in a box that was too small and too defined. There was not enough recognition of the complexities of life. Sometimes relations with one's families of origin got ignored. There was great respect for Trotsky and what he had done. I don't think he was venerated. I do think it would have been useful to have heard some criticism of Trotsky.

18 Afterward

Banker and boss hate the red Soviet star,

Vainly they plot a new throne for the tsar,

But from the steppes to the far distant sea,

Trotsky's Red Army brings victory.

(song I learned from Pat Mitchell)

Sometimes in history new ideas are put forward which change human culture in a fundamental way. Marx, Darwin, Freud, Luther, and Einstein changed the world. Try as one might, one could not ignore their contributions.

The October Revolution had a similar galvanizing effect upon the entire world. The working classes and their allies had taken and held onto political power for the first time in history. Hope spread out into Europe, and into the colonial world. The October Revolution represented such a (potential) quantum leap in human historical development, that its theme was still alive in Canada in the 1960's and animated the Trotskyist movement both in Toronto and in Québec. In retrospect this may have been naive or short-sighted. It certainly did not feel that way at the time.