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Obituary

# Ross Dowson

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**Ross Dowson, who died on February 17, 2002 was the major personality in the Canadian Trotskyist movement from the early 1940s to 1974, when he left with a few collaborators to set up a group almost entirely devoted to working within the social-democratic New Democratic Party.**

Dowson had played a key role in reassembling a Canadian Trotskyist organization, the Revolutionary Workers Party, near the close of the Second World War. The RWP's main activity was the publication of a bi-weekly 8-page newspaper Labour Challenge, with a readership that for some time numbered in the thousands. The group also contested elections, mainly at the municipal level.

The postwar period was a difficult one for the left in general and no less so for the Trotskyists, who were harassed and driven out of their positions in the trade union movement. The divisions that developed in the Fourth International (FI) forces, and the subsequent international split, have been well documented. The already weakened RWP effectively disintegrated.

Ross Dowson worked strenuously to reconstitute the Canadian section of the FI, first through the Socialist Education League, based largely in Toronto, then through the League for Socialist Action (LSA), which was formally constituted in 1961.

During the 1960s the LSA, like most far-left groups, attracted new members among young people radicalised by the Cuban revolution, the Vietnam war, and the developing women's liberation movement. Until the mid-1960s, the LSA was confined to English Canada. With the formation in 1964 of its Quebec counterpart, the Ligue Socialiste Ouvrière, the united organization (now the LSA/LSO) began attempting to analyse the Quebec national question and nationalist movement from a Marxist perspective. A consistent supporter of Quebec's right to self-determination, in 1970 it began actively supporting Quebec independence from the Canadian state.

Ross Dowson, as the organization's national secretary, was at the heart of all these developments. A skilled lithographer and printer by training, he spent almost his entire working life as a full-time paid staffer (at times the only one) for the organization. For the new generation of recruits in the Sixties and early Seventies, he was our major link to the older generation of class-struggle militants and Marxists who had built the labour and socialist movements in previous decades.

In the late Sixties Canadian Marxist academics, under the influence of the then-predominant dependency theory, tended to view Canada as a peripheral 'de-industrialising' subordinate satellite of the United States, de-emphasizing or even denying its status as a (lesser) imperialist power in its own right. Dowson became enamoured with this approach and, when it became a prominent theme in a broad left opposition current that developed within the NDP in 1969-72, he began to adapt to it politically, developing a theory of a new, progressive Canadian nationalism, in opposition to U.S. 'domination', that should be embraced (albeit critically) by socialists as a radicalising force. In the early 1970s, a bitter debate on these positions broke out in the Canadian Trotskyist movement, and Dowson soon found himself in a minority.

After being decisively defeated at the League's 1973 convention, Dowson and about 20 supporters left the Canadian section of the FI to establish the Forward group, publishing a paper of that name for about ten years, and operated mainly in and around the NDP. The group functioned to some degree as a personal cult around Dowson. In 1988 Ross Dowson suffered a devastating stroke from which he never recovered. He spent his final years in an acute-care

hospital.

Condensed from an article posted on Marxmail: <http://www.marxmail.org/>.