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Hugh Lukin Robinson
19 June 1916–18 October 2012

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OBITUARY / NÉCROLOGIE

Hugh Lukin Robinson

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Elizabeth Quinlan

Socialism is, for the time being, in eclipse. But sooner or later, after we have assimilated the achievements, the mistakes, and the shortcomings of the past, it will revive and again inspire millions of people as it did in earlier years. Why? Because it grows organically and inevitably out of the struggle against capitalism. And, given the worldwide capitalist offensive, that struggle itself is as necessary and inevitable as it was when the Mine Mill and Smelter Workers was founded 100 years ago.

Lukin Robinson, 1993

LUKIN ROBINSON WAS A PRINCIPLED socialist, trade unionist, peace activist, ski jumper, and accomplished squeezebox player, the last achievement known only to a few since he was too shy to perform in public. He earned his economics degree from the University of Geneva in 1939, but this “didn’t help to shed light on the real world,” as he was fond of saying. His sustained study of Marxism did. So too did his involvement in trade union activities, which spanned six decades. Lukin held an executive position in Canada’s earliest public service association in the late 1940s, was the first Canadian Research Director of the Mine Mill and Smelter Workers (MMSW) in the 1950s and 1960s, and worked as a researcher for the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) in the 1990s.

In Lukin’s case, his early activism on behalf of labour’s cause was ignited by the postwar vision of progress through working-class unity and the dauntless pursuit of broader social goals. Despite the many setbacks and defeats that Lukin experienced in his half-century of involvement with the labour movement, he never lost his faith in the socialist ideal. Among his many accomplishments, he might have considered the most notable to be his firing from the United Nations (UN) in the early 1950s for organizing activities with its Staff Association.



Lukin visiting India, 1964

Books were Lukin's cherished companions. His library was massive and eclectic. At the age of 92, he discovered online bookstores and his collection grew exponentially. He authored two books of his own, both on economics. The first, published in 1978 by James Lorimer, was a pocket-sized book: in *Rising Prices: Why Inflation Hasn't Been Licked and Why it May Never Be* Lukin explains using simple language the mechanics of inflation under capitalism. "The fact that the [capitalist] system apparently cannot be cured of inflation, nor indeed of unemployment, can be taken as no small criticism of it," he wrote in the preface. Lukin's second book, *Canada's Crippled Dollar*, took up the more technical subject of international monetary policies and their effects on the Canadian economy. He also published articles in a number of left-wing journals, including *Marxist Review*, *Canadian Forum*, *Canadian Dimension*, *Studies in Political Economy*, and *Monthly Review*. When he died suddenly at 96 years of age, still vital and intellectually agile, he left a desk piled high with newspaper articles, neatly clipped for reference to one of several writing projects underway. He also left a large family, who all continue to miss profoundly his generosity, indomitable

spirit, and youthful curiosity. Among this extended family are his three children, three stepchildren, and seven grandchildren. Lukin was predeceased by his brothers Christopher and Peter; his sisters Hilary and Wendela, his first wife Ruth, and his second wife Lillian. He is survived by his sister Beverly, his children Michael (Mary Ann), David (Christina, Christopher, Peter), and Elizabeth (Michael, Andrea) and his stepchildren, Peter Rockman (Mary, Michael, Cathy, Jenny), Laurie Rockman (Zach Owen), and Joe Rockman, along with many nieces, nephews and great-nieces and great-nephews.

Family life

LUKIN WAS BORN in the family home in Toronto, and as an infant was afflicted with pyloric stenosis, a condition that obstructs the digestive system and which,

at the time, was considered life-threatening. His attending physician instructed Lukin's parents to leave the city and forget they ever had the baby. Defying the physician's prediction of his imminent death, young Lukin commenced life with an abiding disregard for conformity. Yet for all of the inauspiciousness of these beginnings, privilege seemed to be Lukin's birthright. The Robinson family had a distinguished patrician pedigree. His mother was the granddaughter of Sir Oliver Mowat, Liberal premier of Ontario, 1872–1896, and his father the grandson of Sir Beverley Robinson, a key figure in the Family Compact and chief justice of Upper Canada, 1829–1841. A son of the aristocracy, Lukin nonetheless dedicated his life to challenging the citadels of power.



**Lukin growing up in Switzerland
(~age 7)**

Paying little attention to his family lineage became second nature to Lukin. When his niece was visiting him in Toronto in the late 1990s, she wanted to see a statue of Sir Oliver Mowat that stands in front of the Ontario Legislative Building. Lukin was not at all interested in seeing the monument to his ancestor, but humoured his young relative. Upon arrival at Queen's Park, he spotted a demonstration of striking teachers, and immediately made his way toward their protest, leaving others in the family to admire the statue. Mowat's likeness didn't beget a single glance from him. The Ontario teachers were waging one of the largest teacher strikes in North America, resisting Mike Harris's Conservative Party's fiscal and structural cuts to education. In Lukin's view, joining the demonstration was far more important than acknowledging a commemoration of his powerful family tree.

Lukin was an abiding gentleman, with a preference for resolving disagreements through debate, sometimes heated and protracted, but civil nonetheless. Residual fragments of his solidly Puritan breeding sometimes manifested themselves in comical ways through interactions with family. For example, one evening while absorbed in a project, he was oblivious to his two grandchildren playing a board game on the floor, or so they thought. He might have been calculating international trade figures or making a donation to a left-wing organization, or perhaps fashioning a book cover with recycled wrapping paper – no one can exactly remember. But foiled by some unexpected snag, he was to about cry out “shit” when he suddenly recalled the presence of little people with sensitive ears. The verbal expression of frustration then came out as “ssssshhhhhickms.” This expression became a fixture in the family lexicon.



Lukin in a ski jumping competition in Switzerland.

1936 Olympics

LUKIN SPENT the middle years of his youth in the village of Grindelwald in the Bernese highlands of Switzerland, where he and his brother Peter mastered French and Swiss German and learned to ski. Together they competed in various downhill and ski jumping events. In 1935 they were asked to join the Canadian Olympic ski team and go to Germany for the next year's Olympics. In the face of the rising tide of Fascism, Lukin refused the offer. As he later explained, at age 19, his reasons were moral, not political – the left was unknown to him then. Even so, his refusal became a talking point in years to come. While serving in the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) during the war, for instance, an officer asked him with some surprise, "Why didn't you go, Sergeant?" Lukin looked him

straight in the eye and replied, «Why are we at war, Sir?" The officer responded that he had not thought of it that way, to which Lukin added, "If more people had thought of it that way, perhaps we might not have had to go to war."

Royal Canadian Air Force

ENLISTING IN THE RCAF IN JULY 1942 (registration # 179639), Lukin was promoted to corporal in July 1943 and sergeant in 1944. In April 1945, he was shipped to England to provide basic pilot training for the last three months of the war. He returned to Canada in July 1945 and was discharged that September with a clear conduct sheet. For many returning veterans like Lukin, the defeat of Fascism infused them with the hope that they could actually make the world a better place. Their fight for democracy shifted from the battlegrounds in Europe to the social and economic conditions of Canada.

There was much to do on this score. Universal health care for Canadians was more than twenty years away, and even hospital insurance would have to wait until 1957, when Saskatchewan introduced pioneering legislation. Most other social reforms would require concerted political lobbying. In the workplace,

the gains made during the war were significant – for instance, the number of organized workers in Canada had doubled in that time – but a great deal of political effort and labour mobilization would be needed to solidify the gains.

No sooner had the vets arrived back in Canada and began organizing for the presumed future, when another war began and Lukin, like so many other progressives, paid dearly for it. As the Cold War froze the possibility of change by creating a new climate of repression, people like Lukin were ostracized, hounded out of jobs, and red-baited, all the while being watched by the state's security arm, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). Along with over half a million other Canadians, Lukin was under RCMP surveillance for more than 30 years of his life. His file, in excess of 1,000 redacted pages, reported on his daily activities, places of residence, modes of transportation, family history and relations, overall character, reading material, conversations with employers, and meetings held in his home. Very few people targeted by this witch hunt were actually members of the Communist Party. Some were Co-operative Commonwealth Federation members, while others were merely Canadian nationalists or critics of American imperialism. Plenty were genuinely innocent bystanders. There were many "causalities" of this Canadian Cold War, including the distinguished scholar of Japan and Canadian diplomat Herbert Norman, who committed suicide in Egypt after being hounded by American McCarthyites, his integrity questioned by the Canadian state. Lukin paid far less of a price, but his career prospects with the federal department of Trade and Commerce were truncated, forcing him to make an unusual (for the time period) move to New York, where he found work at the United Nations. But that employment also came to an end when Lukin was eventually fired from his post as a UN demographer.

Civil Servants Association of Ottawa

AFTER RETURNING FROM SERVICE overseas in 1945, Lukin and his first wife, Ruth Cotter, settled in Ottawa and joined the federal civil service. He was a statistician in the Public Health Division of the Dominion Bureau of Statistics (DBS), predecessor of Statistics Canada, while Ruth worked as an analyst with the same employer. Both joined the Civil Servants Association of Ottawa (CSAO), and together faced the worsening climate of red-baiting as Communist sympathizers within the civil service were forced out of their jobs.

As chair of the CSAO's Salaries Committee, Lukin was instrumental in bargaining a salary increase for the membership in 1947. Already elected as the executive's first vice-president in 1948, he ran for president against the long-standing incumbent, Russell Taber. Lukin's campaign issues included a cost-of-living bonus, effective grievance procedures, and a medical benefits plan. To avoid taking a position on these issues, the "Taberites" launched an anti-Communist smear campaign against the progressive slate headed by Lukin, appealing to the 14,000 members of the public sector union. Using

the association's newsletter, *Civil Service News*, as well as the weekly CSAO-funded radio program, Taber accused candidates on the progressive slate of being against the security measures instituted in the government, and pushed through a resolution preventing persons with past or present Communist affiliations from holding executive CSAO positions. In response, Lukin and his confederates circulated a petition advocating protection for members from expulsion from the CSAO executive unless proof of Communist affiliation was provided by the Department of Justice.

As the presidential election drew near, Ottawa's Catholics were warned from the pulpit that Communists were gaining control of the CSAO. Urging his parishioners to vote "with discretion," a local priest proclaimed "all members of this association who have faith in democracy must unite against Communist infiltration." Four thousand members showed up to vote at the Annual General Meeting in December 1948, the biggest turnout in the organization's 40-year history. Filling the Coliseum in Lansdowne Park, the crowd was lined up along Bank Street. The highly explosive meeting stretched into the night with all manner of booing and jeering. At 5 a.m. the telephone at the *Ottawa Journal* was still busy with people calling wanting election results. The returns placed Taber ahead by a 2:1 margin; not one of the six candidates for VP from the progressive slate broke the solid grip of the Taber group. The Cold War was in full swing in Ottawa!

Defiance at the United Nations

FROM OTTAWA, LUKIN MOVED and his family moved to New York so he could take a position in the Population Division of the United Nation's Department of Social Affairs in January 1950. Within six months, he was elected as vice-chairman of the UN's Staff Committee's Executive. There he worked on cost-of-living allowances, pay scales and leave systems, job security, and the defence of those UN employees fired for their Staff Association involvement. By July 1952, Lukin faced the same international court of appeal, the UN Administrative Tribunal, to challenge his own dismissal.

Lukin's file in the UN Personnel Department hardly conveys the sense of a staff member negligent in his duties: "Does work of uniformly high quality; shows excellent comprehension of the broader implications of the material; has outstanding ability to write clear, concise, readable reports on difficult technical subjects; has performed very well on assignments of heavy responsibility, e.g. as secretary to committees of the Population Commission." The Administrative Tribunal was less enamored with Lukin's organizing activities, and he was terminated in January 1952, despite the well-recognized shortage of qualified demographers at the UN. In his final address to fellow Staff Association members, he talked about the importance of the struggles unfolding at the UN. He reminded the audience that his case was not an isolated one, and shored up their resolve to continue the fight:

There is widespread feeling throughout the staff that to play an active part in the Staff Association and to take positions on staff matters which are different from those of the Administration, is to gamble with one's employment at the United Nations. I did so gamble, and it seems that, for the time being at least, I lost. To lose is, of course, always regrettable, but the important question is whether the gamble was justified and worthwhile. I think it was. Nevertheless, the proportion of losses in the past year has been too high, and the danger of losing must be made less in the future.

In time, it became clear that Lukin did not lose. The tribunal's judgement in the "Robinson vs. The United Nations" case included an award of \$6,990 in compensation, but more importantly, it was a political victory. The tribunal acknowledged a key element of Lukin's defence – by firing him, the United Nations was guilty of violating the Declaration of Human Rights, which the UN itself was solemnly and fundamentally pledged to uphold.

Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers

FROM THE UNITED NATIONS, Lukin made his way back to Canada to a hotbed of trade-union militancy and radicalism. His job application for the position of Canadian Research Director at the International Union of Mine Mill and Smelter Workers (IUMMSW) references his firing from the UN: "During most of the two years of my employment with the United Nations, I was active in the employees' Staff Association, as a member of its Executive Committee, and it was for this reason that I was dismissed. The enclosed clippings from the New York newspapers will give you the facts as well as the background to the case."

For what position other than one with a radical trade union such as IUMMSW would a firing such as this be viewed as a desirable qualification? The organizing campaigns of MMSW in Kirkland Lake, Ontario in the late 1930s led to the 1941 strike that was famous for ushering in PC1003, the federal legislation recognizing unions as the legal means of negotiating work terms and conditions with employers. Along with other left-led unions, MMSW affirmed the role of trade unions in the larger class struggle with a constitution that reiterated the Industrial Workers of the World maxim: "An injury to one is an injury to all."

Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers was the first international union to grant autonomy to its Canadian members in 1955 with provision for their own national officers and constitution. Coincident with Lukin's hiring in 1952, the union established the Canadian Council. In his capacity as research director, Lukin referred to himself as the "physical embodiment of the Canadian identity of Mine Mill." Local 598's office in Sudbury was home for Lukin's first year as MMSW research director. With close to 18,000 members, Local 598 was the largest local in the Canadian labour movement at the time. In November 1953, he and the family moved to Toronto so he could continue his work at the newly established national office at 1219 Queen Street West.

In the middle of Lukin's tenure with MMSW, the union engaged in a bitter thirteen-week strike that was pivotal in the union's trajectory. The strike



Lukin at Britannia Beach, BC, Local 663 of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers, 1955.

captured the attention of many other unions: financial contributions exceeding \$1 million, along with statements of moral support, came from all around the world. But the company was counting on the strike to reduce their nickel stockpile and did not budge from its original negotiating position. After weeks on the picket line, the members settled for exactly what the pre-strike conciliator recommended: annual wage increases over the next three years of 1, 2, and 3 per cent. Compared to the union's proposed 10 per cent raise over one year, this was a poor settlement indeed. In the fullness of time, Lukin and others on the strike's negotiating team came to recognize that the more significant result of the strike was the anti-Communist zealots' capitalization on the poor wage settlement and their takeover of the executive during the next round of union elections, setting the stage for the eventual demise of Mine Mill.

In 1949, as Cold War hysteria was cresting, left-led unions like MMSW were expelled from labour congresses in Canada and the United States. The

anti-Communist tide opened the door for other unions to force their way in and vie for the jurisdiction of unions tarred by allegations of being “red.” The affluent United Steelworkers of America (USWA) was one such union that set its sights on MMSW locals in Northern Ontario and BC. Despite this, MMSW locals warded off the majority of the subsequent USWA raids throughout the 1950s. But in 1962, the USWA won the right to represent the 14,000 members of Local 598 by a mere fifteen votes. In 1967, all Canadian MMSW locals merged with the USWA except for the 2,000 Falconbridge miners. By that time, Lukin had already left the beleaguered union for a job with a small urban planning firm. Over the years to come, when he reflected on his time with Mine Mill, he took heart from the fact that the union survived for eighteen years (1949–1967) in the face of overt hostility from the Roman Catholic Church, state bodies like the Labour Relations Board, and the Canadian labour establishment.

Political Campaigns

ENCOURAGED BY FRIENDS AND COLLEAGUES in the Waffle¹ in the early 1970s, Lukin became the New Democratic Party (NDP) candidate in the bellwether riding of St. Paul’s, Toronto, in the federal election of 1974. Subsequently, he ran in both the 1975 and 1977 Ontario provincial campaigns in the St. George riding. While he lost all three elections, he did respectably well in the face of the NDP’s devastating 50 per cent loss of seats in the federal election, and won close to 25 per cent of the votes in the two provincial elections.

If elections were won or lost based on the outcome of public debates, Lukin Robinson would have been a long-standing member of the federal or Ontario government. His piercing intellect, prodigious knowledge, and practised oratory skills (he made a concerted study of Roosevelt’s speeches) were brought to the fore during all-candidates meetings. He held his own even when pitted against the most seasoned, acrimonious opponents. In Lukin’s very first campaign, he sparred with Ron Atkey, later a member of Joe Clark’s Cabinet as Minister of Employment and Immigration, and John Roberts, who was appointed Secretary of State for Canada and held several cabinet posts under Trudeau in the late 1970s. In both provincial elections, he ran against the formidable Margaret Campbell, a provincial court judge and Toronto City Councilor who became the first woman elected to the Ontario Liberal Party with her 1975 victory, upsetting the decades-long Tory stronghold in St. George. Such “heavy-weights were made to look like college sophomores beside Lukin in the all-candidates debates,” reported the St. Paul’s riding president. His debating skills had been forged early in his life, in a household proud of a long lineage of eminent lawyers. For Lukin, even more fun than solving the *Globe’s* weekly chess puzzle was the enjoyment of finding the faulty logic and muddled premises in his campaign rivals’ speeches, and later in management’s

1. A left-leaning faction of the New Democratic Party in the late 1960s and early 1970s.



Lukin as Ontario NDP candidate for St. George riding, mid-1970s.

submissions to OPSEU arbitration hearings. Handily checkmating his adversaries, Lukin relished every occasion to clarify the mechanisms of the capitalist system so often obscured in election politics. Inflation and foreign ownership of the Canadian economy, two key election issues in 1974, gave him the necessary scope for making the links to the underlying problem of corporate price-setting.

Lukin's gift for oratory was no reason for him to keep talking just because he could: a favourite censure of pedantic speech was "a diarrhea of words and a constipation of thought." Sometimes he could be very loquacious, but he did not like unnecessary verbiage. During one of the provincial campaigns in the St. George riding, a question from the floor for all candidates

brought a first response from Margaret Campbell. After her answer, which Lukin must have thought covered the issue well, he rose to simply say, "me too," and promptly sat down.

While holding down full-time employment in an urban planning firm, he tackled his political campaigning with seemingly unbounded energy. He often delayed his supper and canvassed late into the evenings, stopping only when his team reminded him, "Lukin, you have to let people sleep – you can't keep knocking on their doors at this hour." The key NDP planks in the provincial elections were more jobs for Ontario, rent control and tenants' rights, better day care services, and environmentally friendly resource development (a visionary idea in the late 1970s). Gay rights emerged as an especially heady issue in Lukin's campaigns. St. George included the Church and Wellesley

area, home to a large gay population, some of whom worked on Lukin's campaign. The NDP eventually became the first party to publicly defend gay rights, but during the late 1970s the issue was so new to the public sphere that many people, including those on the left, had not yet thought it through. Lukin's instinctive response to the fundamental injustice of discriminatory housing and employment practices against homosexuals (gay marriage was not yet on the radar) drew criticism from some fellow NDP members, and led many to assume that he was gay himself.

Politically he was a fire-eater, but when it came to Lukin's food tastes, morning glory muffins were too spicy for him. One night after canvassing, he and his campaign fundraiser went for dinner at a nearby Italian restaurant. Lukin ordered spaghetti. When the food arrived he was deep in conversation and, without thinking, he shook a generous amount of chili pepper flakes over his plate. Before finishing his first mouthful he exclaimed, "My god, this is awful – it's so spicy! Why do they make it like this?" When his companion observed it might have something to do with all those chili flakes he dumped on it, Lukin immediately fired back, "Well, why didn't you stop me?" His companion chortled as he recounted the story: "I would never try! I could follow him, disagree with him, agree with him, fight with him, but I could never stop him and I wouldn't try."

Other Campaigns

LUKIN WAS ACTIVE in the peace movement from 1953 onward, sitting on the executive of the Canadian Peace Congress and the Toronto Association for Peace, and serving as the chair of the Toronto Coordinating Committee to End the War in Vietnam. Another of his campaigns was to protect the Queen's English. An ever-vigilant champion, Lukin took time to regularly write letters to the editor of the *Globe and Mail* to point out the latest transgression committed by one of its journalists. After chastising the editor himself for his use of "like" as a subordinating conjunction, Lukin concluded:

Since in spite of the *Globe's* Manual of Style all your writers freely make the same mistake – as well as goodness knows how many others who, to their shame, ought to know better – Mr. Thorsell has evidently decided that there is no point in continuing to hew the path of virtue. Too bad, another bastion of rectitude has fallen to the enemy.

Well past the usual retirement age, Lukin worked as a researcher for OPSEU, imbuing his arbitration briefs and presentations with a working-class analysis. He was responsible for winning reclassification cases with substantial wage settlements for many groups of public sector workers. Even when the grieving group was made up of prison guards and police – defenders of the state – Lukin saw them as workers who needed assistance in the fight with their employers, as did all workers.

In 2010, at the age of 94 and some 40 years after the pivotal MMSW strike, Lukin walked in support of USWA Local 6500 workers striking against the same mining giant. Unlike the 1958 strike, the 2010 conflict was almost four times longer and achieved a monetary settlement far worse in relative terms. A simple comparison between two strikes bookending a 40-year period reminds us of how few the gains and too great the losses have been for working people in the intervening period. In the face of declining real wages and job security, worsening economic inequality, and the “bad jobs” recessionary recoveries, the question arises of how to maintain an enduring commitment to working-class struggles. Lukin did so by taking the long view, as expressed in his centenary MMSW speech:

Capitalism is as bad as it always was and, boasting that it has won the Cold War and freed itself of the enemy, it is now on the rampage. If left to its own devices, it cannot and will not serve the interests of the working people. So the job of the trade union movement, and above all the Left, is the same as it has always been – to tell the workers the truth about the system they are up against, to help them organize, build alliances and fight back, to curb the power of capital; to help them understand and draw the necessary lessons from their experience, and to give them confidence in their own strength and ability, in the long run if not tomorrow, to build a better society than the one we have now.



Lukin, retired but still working (~age 90).