



LIBRARY – ARCHIVES DIVISION

SOCIAL ACTION ARCHIVES

For over a century the Social Action Archives at the Wisconsin Historical Society has documented major sociopolitical issues and movements in the United States and the state of Wisconsin. It has often been the first archives to recognize the value of documenting these movements. From our beginnings as the first institution to collect labor and working-class history, we have continued to identify and document major issues of the day throughout the 20th-century: from socialism to the New Left, from civil rights to civil liberties, from the anti-Vietnam War movement to contemporary peace and justice activities, from welfare rights to community organizing. The collection has grown steadily from the early 20th-century to the present, although the collecting focus has changed as American society and its social movements and major issues have changed. The Social Action Archives is now one of the largest of its kind in the United States.

Economic Justice

From the early 20th-century through the 1950s, the Social Action Archives emphasized documenting labor and working-class movements. This effort resulted in excellent collections on organized and individual efforts for economic justice, including labor, socialism, communism, and anarchism. The strengths in this area include 19th-century sources; collections that trace the development of socialism from the International Workingmen's Association to the Socialist Workers Party and Socialist Labor Party; and the papers of prominent reformers such as Henry Demarest Lloyd. The Social Action Archives also includes the collections of such mainstream labor organizations as the American Federation of Labor, the Textile Workers Union of America, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, and the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union and its predecessor unions, and the papers of well-known socialists, among them Morris Hillquit and Victor Berger.

Social Security and Entitlements Movement

Core collections documenting the Social Security and entitlements movement that originated in the 1930s have also been collected. Beginning in the 1950s, the Society acquired the papers of central figures such as Wilbur Cohen, Elizabeth Wickenden, Nelson Cruikshank, Edwin Witte, Arthur Altmeyer, and Robert Ball. The collections date from 1904 to the late 1990s and are especially useful for the study of the origins, formulation, administration, expansion, reform, and defense of benefits. Significant holdings on the earliest years of the program and the establishment of Medicare form an especially strong part of the collection.

Collecting, Preserving and Sharing Stories Since 1846

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Civil Rights, Civil Liberties, and Free Speech

In the early 1960s the Society began to shift to civil rights, civil liberties, and free speech. The civil rights collections primarily date from the 1950s through the 1980s and are particularly strong in the areas of the southern movement, principally Mississippi; national organizations; and Wisconsin. Highlights include extensive materials on the Congress of Racial Equality, civil rights advocates Daisy Bates and Amzie Moore, the Highlander Center, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, 75 Freedom Summer volunteers, the Southern Conference Educational Fund, Carl and Anne Braden, James Dombrowski, and many other lesser-known organizations and activists. The civil liberties and free speech holdings are especially useful for the study of organized efforts to preserve and defend civil rights. They include collections from Alexander Meiklejohn, the Defending Dissent Foundation and its predecessors the National Committee Against Repressive Legislation and the National Committee to Abolish the House Un-American Activities Committee, the Free Speech Movement, and various defense committees. Also available at the Society are a number of collections documenting 1950s and 1960s film industry blacklisting and the Hollywood Ten, which are held by the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research.

The Vietnam War, Student Activism, the New Left, and Post-1960s Activism

As student activism and resistance to the Vietnam War grew, the collection expanded into a wide array of interests and efforts known collectively as “the movement”. The anti-Vietnam War movement, student activism, and the New Left are documented in collections such as those of Students for a Democratic Society, the Young Socialist Alliance, the United States Student Association, Fred Halstead, Staughton Lynd, Todd Gitlin and Nanci Hollander, Sidney Peck, various mobilization committees, and many smaller, ad hoc grassroots organizations. As the war ended social action collecting broadened into a variety of other concerns including abortion rights, GI rights and resistance, welfare rights, and community organizing. Highlights in these areas include the collections of George A. Wiley, the founder and executive director of the National Welfare Rights Organization; ACORN; the National Urban Coalition; the GI Civil Liberties Defense Committee; AMEX/Canada; Vietnam Veterans Against the War; and the Women’s National Abortion Action Coalition.

Peace and Justice Activism

More recent collecting has focused on peace and justice activism around the issues of United States policy in Central America in the 1980s, nuclear weapons, and apartheid. Acquisitions include collections from peace activist Brian Willson, Nicaragua Exchange, Tecnica, Nukewatch and anti-nuclear weapons activist Samuel Day, Plowshares Eight activist John Schuchardt, the Alexander Defense Committee, anti-apartheid advocate Prexy Nesbitt, along with many other grassroots efforts, particularly those from Wisconsin.

Social Action Collecting Today

The Wisconsin Historical Society's Archives continues to accept collections that augment our existing holdings in aspects of social action including organized labor and social reform movements seeking to promote economic justice, Social Security and entitlements, civil rights, civil liberties, free speech, anti-Vietnam War protest and the New Left, community organizing, and peace and justice activism. The Archives also seeks collections that document the organic and sustainable foods movement in the United States.

Information for Donors and Researchers

The Wisconsin Historical Society seeks selected archival materials on social action activities, including but not limited to correspondence, meeting minutes, notes, photographs, speeches, brochures, newsletters, memoranda, scrapbooks, audio and visual materials, press releases, and financial and budget files. Potential donors should confer with collection development archivist Jonathan Nelson, 608-264-6447, jonathanr.nelson@wisconsinhistory.org prior to sending any materials.

The Archives Research Room provides research access to the social action collections. Hours are 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM, Monday to Friday and 9:00 AM to 4:00 PM on Saturday. The Archives Research Room is closed on Sunday and holidays. Information about individual collections is available from the Society's Archives online public access catalog ArCat at <http://arcatalog.library.wisc.edu/>, registers and inventories available online and in the Archives Research Room, and the WorldCat online catalog.