The Good Communists and the Chicago Health Movement of the 1970s: A Speculative Retrospective

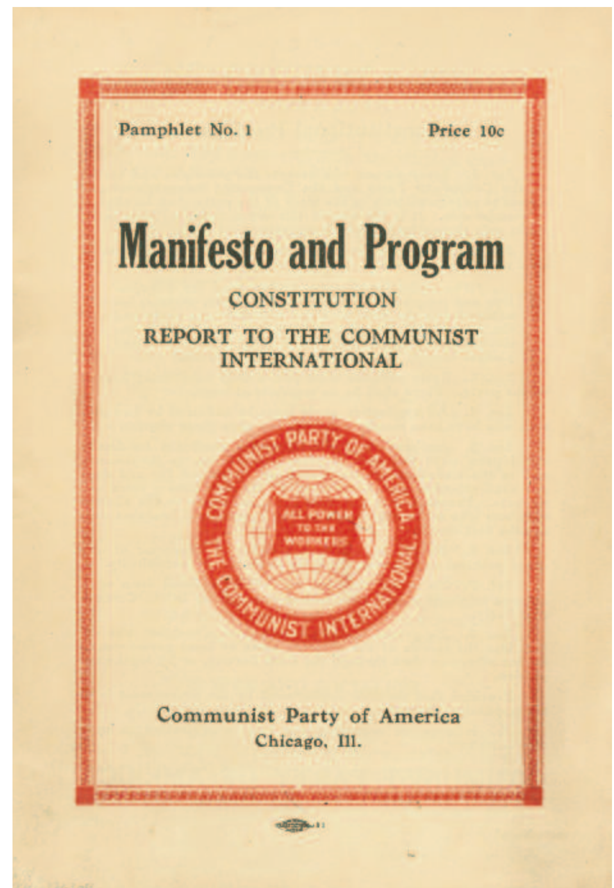
JUDITH KEGAN GARDINER

Cook County Hospital was a site of health activism in the 1970s. In October 1975, the House Staff Association called a strike in response to months of stalemated contract negotiations. One of the key demands by the striking residents and interns was for improved patient care. The strike lasted 18 days, which at the time was the longest doctors' strike in US history.

When I've mentioned that I was doing some research on the role of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) in the progressive Chicago health movement of the 1970s, I've been greeted by two repeated responses. First, from people in general, I've been reminded that Stalin was a disastrous tyrant, a verdict with which I have no argument, but which also had very little relevance to the people and period I'm discussing here. Second, I've heard from many people, including political leftists and progressives, that although the CPUSA was active and influential in the early twentieth century and through World War II, all its members had left the Party after the McCarthy hearings of the 1950s and certainly by the 1960s. In contrast, I have found and describe here the important, progressive, and largely still unacknowledged influence of CP members and former members lasting into the 1970s and beyond, particularly in shaping public health campaigns and institutions in Chicago and building toward a national movement for socialized medicine that is only now seeming more likely to attain popular favor. My second goal in this investigation is to deepen understanding of the period and its politics, in which many parallel movements like the women's movement, gay liberation, and movements for civil rights, competed for the loyalty of those Americans interested in social change.

In her recently reissued book, *The Romance of American Communism*, originally published in 1977, Vivian Gornick vividly details the aspirations and conflicts of American members of the CPUSA as a historical curve rising in the 1930s and ’40s and being extinguished with Kruschev’s revelations of Stalin’s crimes after his death in 1953. The true believers, as she describes them, were largely idealists who came to understand that they were duped and lied to by international Communism. Yet, their disillusionment was part of a necessary and repeating cycle: “. . . if the Communists had not embodied what is darkest and most terrifying in organized politics, would the current generation of Marxists know as much as it does know both of vision and of dogma?” she asks.[1]

In this retrospective, I argue for a less dramatic and more limited—but more optimistic—trajectory, claiming that the CPUSA had a significant and positive influence on progressive health activism in Chicago, and to some extent in the nation, in the 1970s and even later. Based on my investigation and interviews, I claim that racial integration and better public health for the poor and people of color were significantly advanced by the infrastructure and networks of the CPUSA. That is, the still hidden organizational accomplishments of the CP



The Communist Party of the United States of America was established in 1919, the year this Manifesto and Program was published.

Communist Party membership increased during the Great Depression. In 1932, CP members led this protest march on Monroe Street in Chicago. They carry signs demanding a stop to evictions and a $7.50 weekly wage for a family of two.

A proponent of single-payer health care, Dr. Quentin Young is seen here attending a Medicare for Fall march and rally in Sacramento, CA. In 1981, Mount Sinai director Ruth Rothstein discusses her role in saving the once-ailing hospital.

deserve more credit than they have received, because CP activists labored to keep their memberships and networks secret in an era when such membership could lead to considerable negative consequences: loss of reputation for individuals and groups, firing from jobs, even internment. Without acknowledgement of this important organizational link, the public history of the Chicago health movement remains in the traditional American narrative of talented individuals acting alone on their individual initiative to achieve major accomplishments or individually founding progressive but isolated groups.

I focus first on three figures active in the 1970s, Quentin Young, Ruth Rothstein, and Irene Turner, all now deceased and all quiet members of the CP. My information about them combines public records and personal knowledge plus inferences I acknowledge. Then, I share interviews with a few still-living former Communists not in the health field and younger colleagues of these three figures, who had a range of affiliations with leftist individuals and organizations in the hope of illuminating the rich contexts of health activism in the 1970s in Chicago.

The three figures highlighted here had been active for decades previously, but I came to know them after coming to Chicago in 1969. In 2016, I attended the funeral of Chicago health activist Quentin Young, MD, a central figure in health activism for decades. I met Quentin when he was working at Rush Presbyterian St. Luke's Hospital. Also at Rush was Irene Turner, a health activist and former union worker, who had risen from being a lab technician to becoming a vice president at the hospital with only a high school diploma. Quentin and Irene were informally known among the activist medical students and health officers as the "mother" and "father" of the Chicago health activist movement. The other towering figure of Chicago health activism was Ruth Rothstein, like Irene Turner a former union worker without a college or advanced degree, who was a close friend of Irene's for decades.

At Quentin's funeral, colleagues described his many accomplishments and spoke about his brilliant and equivocal testimony to the House Un-American Activities Committee, which had been frightening leftists throughout the country since 1938 by accusing them of their Communist affiliations. One speaker at the funeral mentioned that Quentin had been a member of the Young Communist League early in his school days, but he implied that the CP was a youthful and tangential part of Quentin's life, not that it remained a central allegiance throughout his professional and activist career.

The public accomplishments of these three impressive figures are all openly recorded, from newspaper articles on their activities to laudatory obituaries and autobiographical narratives of their own. After a brief overview of these accomplishments, I focus on the underlying connections that make their story more than one of exceptional individuals but rather of a hidden but influential organizational effort.

Quentin Young

Quentin died at age 92 in 2016. "It's true that over the years, I've aligned myself with unpopular causes," he told the *Chicago Tribune* in 2001. "But over time, they've become the majority opinions." He was a life-long campaigner for a single-payer health care system, as chronicled in his autobiography, written with Steve Fiffer, *Everybody In, Nobody Out: Memoirs of a Rebel Without a Pause* (Copernicus Health Care, 2013). The son of an immigrant pharmacist who had wanted to become a physician, Quentin served in the US Army, though not abroad, during World War II. Twice married and the father of five children, he became a major leftist MD in Chicago, having once treated Martin Luther King Jr., when the civil rights leader was hit by a protester's rock

Dr. Quentin Young with two police officers from the 1996 Democratic National Convention in Chicago.

in 1966. Later, he was the doctor for a young Barack Obama, but the program of “Obamacare” put forward during Obama’s presidency seemed to Quentin far short of a proper single-payer health system. Among Quentin’s main campaigns as a progressive physician from the 1960s on were desegregating Chicago’s racially divided hospitals and improving health care for the city’s poor by cofounding the Committee to End Discrimination in Chicago Medical Institutions. He also treated women who had suffered from botched abortions when these were illegal prior to 1973. He was a cofounder of the

This courtroom illustration by Franklin McMahon captures Dr. Quentin Young testifying for the defense at the Chicago Seven Trial in 1969.

Medical Committee for Human Rights, which treated Civil Rights workers in the South in the 1960s and Democratic protesters and others attacked by police in 1968. He was investigated by the House Committee on Un-American Activities and triumphantly equivocated, not admitting or denying CP membership. In addition to his continuing private medical practice and political activism, starting in the 1970s, he assumed important administrative posts in the Chicago health care scene. In the 1970s, he was appointed the chair of medicine at the impoverished Cook County Hospital, which chiefly answered the health care needs of Chicago’s huge poor population of color, a position from which he was fired

The exterior view of Cook County Hospital and grounds, located at West Harrison and South Wood Streets, c. 1900.

and reinstated in continuing political struggles over funding and governance. In 1983 he was named president of the Chicago Board of Health by progressive Democratic African American mayor Harold Washington. Quentin also coordinated Physicians for a National Health Program and served as president of the American Public Health Association in 1988. He hosted a long-running program on Chicago public radio about public health. At his 60th birthday celebration, speaker after speaker spoke of the many progressive organizations that Quentin had founded that were still active in the hands of others years later. His long-term associate Margie Schaps, who became head of the Health and Medicine Policy Group he founded, praised his ability to build coalitions between “regular folk” and the elite, as well as his success in getting access to the respect of powerbrokers. She quoted Quentin, by no means a retiring figure, as saying, “it’s amazing what you can get done if you don’t need to take the credit.”

Ruth M. Rothstein, president and chief executive officer of Mount Sinai Hospital Medical Center and Schwab Rehabilitation Center, received a Wonder Woman award from Warner Communications, November 15, 1984.

Ruth Rothstein

Ruth Rothstein (1923–2013), like Quentin, the child of Jewish immigrants, is another legendary figure in the Chicago health scene and was another nonagenarian who had been active for decades. Starting as a union organizer with a high school education, she worked as a laboratory technician and health administrator to improbably become the chief executive officer in huge and complex Chicago health care institutions. She served as president and CEO of Mount Sinai Medical Center, a Jewish-founded institution, which changed to a predominantly poor patient base of people of color; she held high administrative posts in Chicago, including Chief of the Cook County Department of Public Health. From 2003 until her death ten years later, she helped guide Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science in North Chicago, Illinois, as chairman of the Board of Trustees. Her Brooklyn family was poor, her father a socialist and union organizer. She tells how he bought her a ticket to the opera and waited outside while she enjoyed the performance when he couldn't afford his own ticket. Like her father, she became a union organizer, working in Cleveland with United Electrical Workers. After a short and childless first marriage, she moved to Chicago and lived with Irene Turner, who became a lifelong friend. Then she married a progressive labor lawyer and had two children. In 1952, she returned to the workforce, according to one account, at the urging of a friend who needed help in the laboratory at Jackson Park Hospital in Chicago. That friend, Irene, encouraged Ruth to work in the field of health care. Ruth trained on the job as a lab technician and advanced to director of personnel and other administrative jobs until promoted to CEO in 1970, where she worked on integrating the hospital into the racially changing community, making hospital jobs accessible to community members. She was almost 70 years old when she moved to reorganize the Cook County Bureau of Health and successfully championed a controversial plan to construct a new county hospital—the John H. Stroger, Jr. Hospital of Cook County. She also oversaw the addition of nearly thirty neighborhood health clinics in underserved areas. Later she helmed Rosalind Franklin University. The Ruth Rothstein Core Center, a facility within the Cook County Health and Hospitals System devoted to the care of persons affected by HIV and infectious diseases, is named in her honor. An elegant and self-assured woman, Ruth reminded some of her colleagues of the Mexican activist quip, "the well-dressed Left will never be defeated." Gail Warden, who had been chairman of the board of trustees at Rosalind Franklin University of

Health and Science, had worked closely with Ruth for years. In 2016 he said he "thinks about her every day," and when making every decision, asks himself, "What would Ruth do? Everyone respected her for what she did." They would meet daily to discuss social justice objectives and figure out how to implement them. She was, he said, "a great influence on others by her knowledge and her personality. She was 'a force of nature.'" In this conversation, he did not mention the Communist Party as a shaping factor in Ruth's life, and other associates of hers also downplayed this aspect of her life and said that she had officially left the Party by the late 1950s.

Irene Turner

Less well known than Quentin and Ruth, Irene Turner (1921–1997) was a friend of both and an accomplished health activist in Chicago. Ron Grossman writes in her obituary in the *Chicago Tribune* in 1997, "during a 50-year career in medicine, Irene Turner went from a lab technician to a faculty member at Rush Medical College and an expert in health demographics. A longtime social activist, she helped found the Committee to End Discrimination in Chicago." "She was a courageous woman and at the vanguard of the civil rights movement," Grossman quotes Ruth Rothstein, then chief of Cook County's Bureau of Health Services, as saying. Born in Lithuania, Irene came to Boston with her parents at the age of two and became a social activist as a teenager. In a factory job, she was chosen by her coworkers to tell their grievances to the bosses, and she then became an organizer for the United Electrical Workers union. After moving to Chicago, she worked as a lab technician for Quentin Young. "Irene had a powerful drive for social justice that always kept her on the front lines," said Young when he was president-elect of the American Public Health Association: "She didn't tire when she grew older." Joining the staff of Rush-Presbyterian-St Luke's Medical Center, now Rush University Medical Center, she authored a report on medical educational facilities in Illinois that persuaded the state legislature to provide the financial aid that enabled Rush Medical College to reopen in 1971. At Rush, reported Grossman, "Mrs. Turner campaigned for increasing the number of women and minority students, and she was also involved in the establishment of the Mile Square Health Center."[2]

One of the first medical colleges in Illinois, Rush Medical College, shown here in 1906, was chartered in 1837.

So far, I have repeated the public accomplishments of the three charismatic individuals I've profiled. In the 1970s when I was active in these circles, Communist affiliations were widely assumed, though only one MCHR member I knew openly claimed his current membership in the Party. He used to say that Stalin was 70% right and 30% wrong. A significant 30%, one would think, but events in the Soviet Union did not much affect decisions in the 1970s about the Chicago health care scene. What I have lately come to find is that membership in the Communist Party provided an important organizational connection for many of Chicago's health activists and organizations.

Like other participants in the New Left, I tended then to think of the CPUSA as old fashioned, even passé. When Quentin Young invited me and a few others to be members of the CPUSA in the early 1970s, I was not interested: I thought of the Old Left as tarnished by its secrecy, deceptiveness, loyalty to the Soviet Union, and heavy handedness. We New Leftists considered ourselves more democratic, open, and responsive to current political conditions and not eager to submit to the centralized doctrine and discipline, which Gornick had chronicled for the Old Left. When one of Quentin's coworkers tried to dissuade him from taking on a particular task because she didn't think it would add to his reputation, she reported that Quentin said to her, "I can tell you were never in the Party because if you were, you'd follow Party discipline," as apparently Quentin continued to do. One physician remembered being told that it only cost 50 cents or a dollar to sign a card as a CP member, but he said he turned down the offer. In hindsight, I think some of the dismissive attitudes, even prejudices about Communists, that I and others had in this period contributed to overlooking and underestimating the accomplishments of the Party in the 1970s, as I am trying to show in this revisionist essay.

The three major figures described here were experienced organizers who had practiced their skills in the CP.

Members of the Illinois Nurses Association carry picket signs and march in front of Cook County Hospital, calling for improved sick benefits, on October 12, 1976. The strike lasted 38 days, at the time a state record.

Among the lessons I learned from them were to always have a desired outcome determined in advance for any meeting or discussion with a group. This could be facilitated by the Party members having met in advance of the general meeting and having them assigned to speaking on behalf of certain positions. Obviously, this technique could be seen as undemocratic and manipulative, but it was often effective in accomplishing goals. At any meeting, the Party members counted who was there, wrote down the attendees, counted numbers of men and women, of white and Black people, and of younger and older people. They kept track of other demographics, and their steady goal was to be inclusive and antiracist.

Ruth and Irene, the two senior women active in Chicago health politics featured in this essay, were longstanding friends. Remarkably, neither had a college education, much less professional credentials, yet Ruth became the president of a hospital and Irene the vice president of one. I first deduced that Ruth had probably been a member of the CP from reading an official biographical essay in her honor that said she had moved to Chicago and stayed with a friend of a friend, who turned out to be Irene. It looked as though some coordinated thought had gone into persuading leftist union activists to move to Chicago and find jobs in health care fields, although some of Ruth's friends attributed such connec-

tions to mere chance. Paradoxically, however, one could see the CP, champion of the working class, as being an avenue for upward social mobility for these women—two working class women, one an immigrant and one the daughter of immigrants—by their own talents and perhaps with the advice and support of various comrades in struggle, who rose to executive positions with high responsibility and good salaries in Chicago's health care scene.

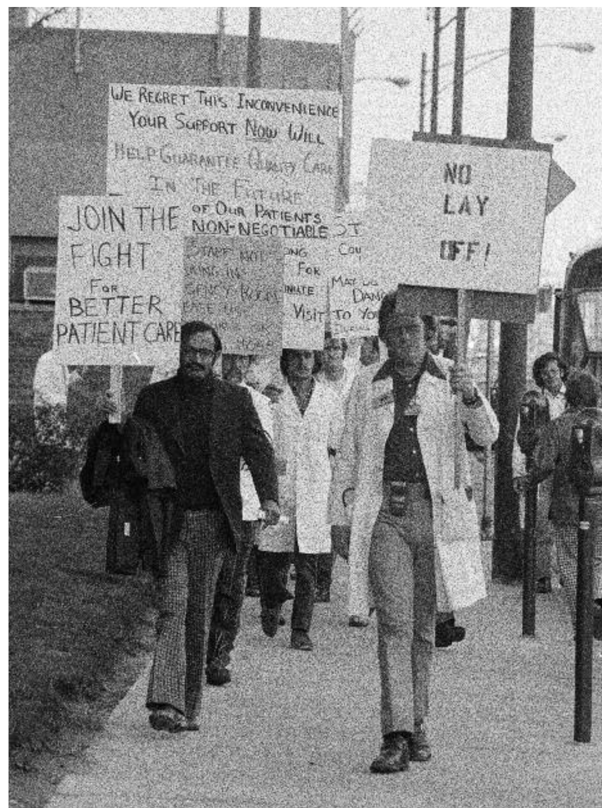
All three of the figures featured here were highly intelligent, energetic, and forceful personalities. People I interviewed for this essay reminisced about the personal advantages that they felt came with being in a Communist organization with a close group of people who depended on one another.

Peter Orris

Among the activists of the next generation, Peter Orris, who was born in 1945 in Los Angeles, was a "red diaper baby" whose mother was a Communist when he was growing up. As a student, he had participated in the frightening and empowering Freedom Summer in 1964 to register Black voters in the South. Throughout his medical school training in Chicago and subsequently as a prominent physician in occupational health, he remained an open member of the CP. For a while, he had been encouraged by Party leaders to become a member of a predominantly African American health club in Chicago. He traced the Party's vision of the future of healthcare to 1972. "In the 1970s we put together a pretty big club," he said, but "no one is still in the Party. They all quit in 1992–93." "I've never seen an organization that got democratic tendencies versus centralism in a good balance. Being a Communist makes you see things, understanding the structure that helped get to the larger vision," he said; further, he "would see how Marxist concepts fit the health case." In the 1970s and '80s, he saw changed, more positive attitudes to socialized medicine as an accomplishment that he and his comrades had helped bring about, although he thought that methods of analysis hadn't changed as much as these attitudes over the decades.

Linda Rae Murray

In the 1970s in Chicago, Orris had discussed feminism and Marxism with Linda Rae Murray, MD and MPH, born in 1948, who became a prominent physician and health activist. In a 2021 interview, she cautioned me against giving undue prominence to the CP based on her experiences working at Cook County Hospital. She said there were members of many leftist groups with differing ideologies working together at the hospital and with parallel goals in improving health care for minorities, which, as an African American doctor, was one of her primary



Doctors on strike carry signs outside of Cook County Hospital on October 27, 1975. Picket signs call for better patient care.

goals. She does credit the Party with teaching her "basic organizing skills" and helping to keep County Hospital open after it was attacked. "I represent the Black people of my generation," she said, "many not in the Party—but efforts of nurses and doctors and feminists and civil rights activists in the 70s—all coming together in common struggles." The Party members made coalitions and determined possible issues important to Black doctors and nurses. However, there were generational differences and tensions among members, and she was "always impatient with white leadership." She wouldn't "let some white men tell me what to do." "In our club, nobody was secret," she said, although the Party didn't have open meetings, and the various clubs within it did not meet very often. Furthermore, at Cook County Hospital, where she worked, nurses would resist "a bunch of doctors telling the nurses how to organize." Looking back, she claimed, "we were young and used to different ways" from the older generation of Party members. She admired the "towering figures" active in the prior generation but said the younger members "didn't have tight discipline." Many leftist groups, not just the CP, were active at County Hospital. Within County, people "might have trouble telling who was in the Party and who was in other left groups. People thought all leftists

were the same and lumped us all together." In any case, "organizing MDs is like herding cats, and people cared about more important issues than which people were CP and which not." Yet, in her view, the CP "was trying to hold on to save the public sector" in medicine, and its "history is one to be proud of." Then at a convention in Cleveland, "we didn't leave, we were voted out, expelled," as national leaders disapproved of their approach and thought they "misunderstood the standard bourgeois politics. . . ." "I didn't cry," she explained, "I'm still close friends with people from that time. I don't regret the years I spent in the Party." "Now young people don't have that institutional infrastructure. Young people now can't even define capitalism," she claimed, but "it's our fault." Murray believes that her grandchildren's generation, the generation of Black Lives Matter, who are political activists now, "will do better."

Dr. Quentin Young speaks outside of the Field Museum in Chicago on October 18, 1984.

Bernice Weissbourd

Other past members of the CPUSA emphasized the common culture they shared. Born in 1923, Bernice Weissbourd, whom I interviewed when she was over 90 years old, had a career as an elementary school teacher, social worker, and activist. She knew Quentin from the American–Soviet Friendship[3] committee, when they were students at the same high school. She said she, like Quentin and Ruth, believed in the "same basic principles" that "affected us all our lives." She told me about the intellectual training she received in the CP, although she said she didn't like the Party "always telling you what you should think." She said then "people were not arguing but talking about how to better understand the required point of view" as they discussed current issues and Party policies in depth. "We were all convinced that we were making a better world," she said, and this view "has lasted all our lives." However, she claims, "there is no Communist Party anymore," and the few remnants are inconsequential. "I remember in those days if you would question something, for instance, Stalin, [it] was said to be because you were quoting the 'capitalist press'. . . . Yes, that was true, but they were right about Stalin. Quentin had his questions about the Party but stayed in," she said, while Ruth felt angry about being betrayed by the Party and left it.

The American–Soviet Friendship movement began in 1929 to encourage an anti-fascist alliance. This record was part of a program to send American music to Red Army soldiers during World War II.

Bernice's husband, a progressive, liked Communist Party people best, "really dedicated people," but not the Party itself. He wouldn't join the Party: "he was smarter than I am," she said. On the other hand, she said that Quentin told her, "don't forget the good things" the Party did. Activism "was the core of our lives," Bernice summarized. "We were working for the cause all the time—health, racial justice, the Spanish Civil War. We were there. It was important to us."

Beatrice Lumpkin

The centenarian Beatrice Lumpkin, born in 1918, a white woman married for six decades to African American trade union leader Frank Lumpkin, was also a teacher, union organizer, and author. She looked back at her and her husband's decades in the CP and summarized, "as the kids say, another world is possible—a much better world" of good housing and good education. We were inspired by that vision" with the "common goal of ending all forms of oppression associated with capitalism." Although she described herself as "more of a rank and file activist" without "an overall view of every club at the time," she believes in the "advantages and goals of a united front, and the all-encompassing role of the working class." Speaking enthusiastically about present political movements, she said, "I'm very proud of the role Black Lives Matter" has played this past year and of the role young people are playing in the ongoing campaign for racial justice in this country.

Frank Lumpkin, pictured here with others in 1985, helped form the Save Our Jobs Committee in 1980 to protest illegal actions taken during the shutdown of Wisconsin Steel in South Chicago.

As I have shown here, in my research on the CP activists who had been so influential in the Chicago health movement of the 1970s, the issue of who did or didn't still have a Party card at that period seemed far less important than the common goals and networks that held this group together and inspired their activism.

As I continue to research this history, I'd be happy to hear comments or corrections from other participants.

I thank the following people who were willing to be interviewed for this essay, who provided information, or who discussed the draft with me: Stephanie Allan; June Finer, MD; Richard Gardiner, MD; Beatrice Lumpkin; John Lumpkin; Linda Rae Murray, MD; Peter Orris, MD; Jo Patton; Kelly Reiss; Don Rose; Margie Schaps; Peter H. Sporn, MD; Gail Warden; Bernice Weissbourd; and Michael K. Welch.

Judith Kegan Gardiner is professor emerita of English and of Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago. From 1971 to 1974 she was a member of the Editorial Collective of Health Rights News *and active in the organization Medical Committee for Human Rights.*

ILLUSTRATIONS | Illustrations are from the collection of the Chicago History Museum, unless otherwise noted. Page 30, ST-13001882-0040, Chicago Sun-Times collection. 31, top: ICHi-176308; bottom: DN-0102486, Chicago Sun-Times/Chicago Daily News collection. 32, left: Bill Bronson/Physicians for a National Health Program; right: STM-038501642, Jack Lenahan/Chicago Sun-Times. 33, top: Physicians for a National Health Program; middle: ICHi-019012; bottom: ICHi-054211. 34, STM-038501634, Gene Pesek/Chicago Sun-Times. 35, ICHi-070256. 36, ST-15003104-0012, Chicago Sun-Times collection. 37, ST-13001884-0010, Chicago Sun-Times collection. 38, top: STM-038544806, Keith Hale/Chicago Sun-Times; bottom: National Council of American–Soviet Friendship, russian-records.com. 39, ICHi-031930.

FOR FURTHER READING | Anna Brehm-Moline, "Ruth Rothstein," *Today's Chicago Woman* (1984): 6–8; John Dittmer, *The Good Doctors: The Medical Committee for Human Rights and the Struggle for Social Justice in Health Care* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009); Beatrice Lumpkin, *Joy in the Struggle: My Life and Love* (New York: International Publishers, 2013); Linda Rae Murray, "The History Makers," March 25, 2021, https://www.thehistorymakers.org/biography/dr-linda-rae-murray-40; Ruth Rothstein, "In First Person: An Oral History: Ruth Rothstein," interviewed by Emily Friedman, August 20, 2009; Kate Weigand, *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women's Liberation* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); "Women Executives Blaze Trails to Top Management," *Modern Health Magazine* (May 1981): 84–88; Quentin Young (with Steve Fiffer), *Everybody In, Nobody Out: Memoirs of a Rebel Without a Pause* (Friday Harbor, WA: Copernicus Healthcare, 2013).

ENDNOTES

1. Vivian Gornick, *The Romance of American Communism* (Brooklyn and London: Verso, 2020), 164.
2. Ron Grossman, "Irene Turner, 76, Social Activist," Obituary, *Chicago Tribune*, June 21, 1997.
3. The American–Soviet friendship movement first arose during the late 1920s and early '30s.