

# Terry Telfer, educator and socialist (1947–2022)

David Walsh  
25 March 2022

Terry Telfer, 74, died March 23, 2022, at his home in Temperance, Michigan of natural causes. Terry was a member of the Socialist Equality Party and a writer for the WSWS for two decades. He is survived by his wife Ann; son Daniel; stepsons Jeremy, Jason and Joshua; five grandchildren; and one great-grandchild.

Terry was won to Trotskyism on the basis of the SEP's program during the time of the protests against the Iraq war in 2003. He was attracted by its internationalist perspective, its commitment to the interests of the working class, its fight against war, and its opposition to Democratic Party and pseudo-left politics.

Terry's contributions and presence will be sorely missed. Beneath a calm and patient demeanor, Terry possessed a fierce commitment to the liberation of the working class from exploitation. He remained dedicated to that struggle until the end of his life.

Terry taught at Monroe County Community College (MCCC) for 25 years. As a professor in the English department he taught English Composition, Introduction to Poetry and Drama, Introduction to Short Story and Novel, American Literature, Women's Writings, British Literature: Romantic to Modern, History of American film, Film and Society: 1920s to 1960s and Film and Society: 1960s to the Present, among other courses. Several of those courses were his own creation.

In a tribute at the time of his retirement from the college in 2017, granting him emeritus status, an assistant to the Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences noted that Terry had "motivated, inspired and guided thousands of students in their writing, reading, and analyses of cinema and literature." This was surely no exaggeration.

In an article published in the MCCC student newspaper, *Agora*, in 2017, devoted to Terry's teaching career, MCCC history professor Edmund La Clair observed that Terry was "deeply interested in history—it was actually one of the fields he wanted to be in. His passion there has always been 19th Century American history and literature. We often talk about Herman Melville and 'Bartleby, the Scrivener.'"

"He's a brilliant enough man," La Clair continued, "to have taught at a four-year research university, but he grew up as a working-class kid. He worked in factories before going back to college. He's brought his love of learning here, and we're lucky to have that."

Terry was born in Monroe soon after World War II, when the

southeastern Michigan city was a significant industrial center. It was headquarters to the firm, founded in 1919, that eventually manufactured the Monroe Shock Absorber, the best known such product in the world, used by most American car manufacturers through the 1950s.

After graduating from the University of Michigan in 1974, Terry worked for a publishing company in Cincinnati as a proofreader. In 1991, he received a doctorate in both Early American Literature and Early American History from Bowling Green University in Ohio.

Speaking of his childhood to *Agora* in 2017, Terry explained that on "my dad's side, they were what they used to call Roosevelt Democrats. My mother's side wasn't political, but they all came from down there in Appalachia." He went on, "We had a lot of political talks—my mother's family didn't talk politics, my dad's family lived for it. So every dinner was that, and when his brothers and uncle came over that's what they did for the weekend: drink and talk politics." Terry's mother came from northern Tennessee and his father from Illinois; they were married in Ypsilanti, Michigan in 1946.

In one of the articles Terry wrote for the WSWS (under the name Charles Bogle) that must have had a special significance for him, "Closing of Monroe, Michigan factory marks the end of a way of life" (September 18, 2007), he noted that "the closing of the Ford Motor Co. subsidiary Automotive Components Holdings (ACH)" was particularly "ominous" in light of the "loss of thousands of good-paying jobs during the past 30 years" in Monroe.

"A community that once offered hope," he wrote from personal experience, "for generations of immigrants and transplants from the South is being gutted by the lethal combination of financial profiteering and a complicit, impotent union bureaucracy [in the UAW]."

"Monroe," Terry continued, "was also once a thriving center for the manufacture of paper and paper-related products. River Raisin Paper Co. (est. 1911), Monroe Corrugated Box Co. (1917), Monroe Paper Products Co. (1921) [where Terry's father once worked] and Consolidated Paper Co. (1921) provided good-paying jobs to generations of Monroe citizens, but all of these plants and jobs are now gone. Furniture-maker La-Z-Boy once manufactured its products in Monroe, but only the headquarters remain in the Michigan city, as its furniture is now made largely in China. ..."

"In the early twentieth Century, immigrant Europeans found work in the paper mills; during the Great Depression and after

WWII, both black and white workers migrated from the South, particularly Appalachia, to work in the steel and automobile factories.”

In the same 2017 *Agora* article, Terry explained that he’d had a grandmother “who was a manic reader … She’d come over for Sunday dinner about once a month, and she’d be reading in her chair. Then she’d fall off to sleep for maybe five to ten minutes; then she’d wake up and start reading again. All she did was read.”

“She gave me the collected works of Charles Dickens when I was about seven or eight. That had a big influence on me.” This history, rich with politics, social struggle, economic convulsion and culture, indicates something important about Terry—he was a working class intellectual who devoted himself to educating others about critical political and artistic problems. Culture was critical to him, above all, because it meant the intellectual development and uplifting of his class.

Terry’s background and interests attracted him to the Trotskyist movement when he encountered the *World Socialist Web Site* and met the SEP in 2003. In one of his last discussions with SEP members before his untimely death, he stressed that he was particularly drawn to the internationalist perspective of the International Committee of the Fourth International and its commitment to historical truth. Many of his early discussions with party members focused on what happened in the Soviet Union, the origins of Stalinism, and the continuity of the Trotskyist movement embodied in the ICFI.

Terry invited SEP members to speak at dozens of events over the years at MCCC. He presented a variety of films to his students and to the college community at large, including the Iranian film *The Mirror* (Jafar Panahi), Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane*, Ken Loach’s *Land and Freedom* and the indispensable documentary of the Russian Revolution, *Tsar to Lenin* (produced by Herman Axelbank). He also hosted discussions on postwar *film noir* and the media and social inequality. Terry did not shy away from difficult material or give an inch to political prejudices.

Terry helped campaign among striking Cooper Tire workers in Findlay, Ohio in 2011. He frequently brought students to University of Michigan International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) meetings in Ann Arbor. The SEP held meetings at MCCC on the Egyptian Revolution and the 2012 and 2016 SEP election campaigns.

His nearly 75 articles on the WSWS, dating back to 2003, cover a wide variety of subjects, including the state of the community colleges and cuts in education; poverty; American history and the Enlightenment; silent films and *film noir*; contemporary films and television (*John Adams*, 2008); film biographies and personalities (for example, Barbara Stanwyck, Nicholas Ray, D.W. Griffith, Mary Pickford, Marlon Brando); the 75th anniversary of the historic Toledo Auto-Lite strike; the destruction of Yugoslavia by the US and NATO; the Hollywood blacklist and the censorship of American filmmaking; and labor history.

One of his early articles for the WSWS, “Secularism and the American Constitution” (July 18, 2005), was a response to the attack on the separation of church and state by politicians of both capitalist parties. Terry wrote: “In the United States, the decay of democracy has taken the form, given the collapse of the trade

unions and the political putrefaction of American liberalism, of an ultra-right minority, basing itself on the most reactionary religious ideologies, accumulating enormous power. Under conditions in which bourgeois democratic forms of rule are breaking down, and the working class has yet to understand its revolutionary tasks, this ultra-right minority has come to exercise a virtual veto power on the policies of the government.”

Reviewing a collection of Hollywood films in “Film noir and postwar America” (July 1, 2008), Terry commented on the period and the society in which he grew up. During the years 1948 to 1955, “the US underwent a striking political transformation. The real face of postwar American capitalism showed itself, and the illusion that the New Deal would lead to serious social reform was dashed. The US emerged as the dominant imperialist power in the world and for reasons of both foreign and domestic policy, launched the crusade against communism. Officially sponsored fear and suspicion attended the unfolding of the Cold War.”

In one of his later articles, “Early Women Filmmakers: An International Anthology—A largely untold story” (August 17, 2017), Terry reaffirmed his commitment to the truth-telling and subversive possibilities of film and art. He noted that the anthology in question was “an important contribution to our fuller understanding of the crucial role women directors played in the development of film as an art form. In the process, many of them wrote about the oppression of women as the result of capitalism’s class divisions and the economic and social inequality that follow. Contemporary filmmakers, male and female, would do well to follow their example instead of remaining tethered to the gender politics spewed forth by academia and the media.”

Terry was devoid of demagogery or the desire to show off or “impress.” His work and his personality were marked by honesty, sincerity, objectivity.

The 2017 *Agora* article ended on an appropriate note:

“Telfer himself has been part of the Socialist Equality Party for the last two decades. He clarifies that it is ‘very much different’ than the Socialist Party of America. ‘It’s recognized as the only actual Marxist party out there. Period,’ he says. ‘For a lot of people out there, especially on what they call ‘the Pseudo-Left’, that’s not good, but that’s their problem.’

“It’s a life-long thing. That’s what I do until I don’t do anything anymore.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**wsws.org/contact**