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Mary L. Wentworth Papers

1966-1997

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The activist Mary Wentworth has worked throughout New England on behalf of a variety of progressive causes, beginning with the antiwar and feminist movements in the 1960s and 1970s and working against racism and other forms of discrimination, militarism, patriarchy, corporate power, and U.S. imperialism. In 1984, she ran for U.S. Congress against long-term incumbent Silvio O. Conte, winning almost thirty percent of the vote in a district in which Conte had run unopposed.

The Wentworth Papers include records relating to her congressional campaign against Conte, material on U.S. involvement in Central America during the 1980s, and other issues of concern throughout her career.

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Women and feminism

Background on Mary Wentworth

An activist for social justice and peace, Mary L. Wentworth was born in Maine on April 15, 1929. Following her undergraduate work at Smith College, Wentworth parlayed her linguistic skills into a job in 1951 with the top secret Armed Forces Security Agency in Washington, D.C. But it was only after marrying Alexander Maccoll, an educator, in 1952 and moving to Philadelphia, Pa., that Wentworth was drawn into social activism. Galvanized initially by the civil rights movement and the desire to confront racism, she began to get involved in antiwar protests during the 1960s and became an ardent feminist by the end of the decade.

After divorcing her husband in 1973, reclaiming her maiden name, and relocating to Amherst, Massachusetts, Wentworth began to delve deeper into social justice work. Among her more important commitments, she worked at the new Everywoman's Center at UMass Amherst during the late 1970s and early 1980s and she became director of the Poor Woman's Task Force. The list of organizations she was involved with is both long and exceedingly diverse, ranging from Colonial Village Tenants Union, to the NAACP, the Nuclear Freeze Campaign, CPPAX, and the Grey Panthers, and she particularly drawn to anti-poverty activism and the anti-imperialist struggle that grew around U.S. intervention in Central America during the Reagan years. She was arrested in 1979 during the protests at the Seabrook nuclear power plant and again during antiwar protests at Westover Air Force Base in 1985.

In addition to issue-oriented activism, Wentworth has been drawn at several points into formal politics. A regular presence in Amherst town meeting, she has had a deep engagement with local issues surrounding education, poverty, and housing, though most famously, she opposed thirteen-term Republican Congressman Silvio O. Conte for his seat in the House of Representatives. Although Conte occupied the liberal end of the Republican spectrum and was popular enough that he often ran unchallenged, Wentworth was highly critical of his stance on social issues and his record of cutting funding for social programs. In 1984, she won the Democratic nomination and ran as a peace candidate in a bid to unseat the congressman, who was completing his thirteenth term in office. Although the Democratic Party seemed little interested in opposing a powerful politician like Conte, especially with a long-shot candidate, Wentworth nevertheless won a comparatively strong 27% share of the vote.

An internationalist, Wentworth traveled widely during the 1970s and 1980s, including early trips to the People's Republic of China (1974) to Central America, Cuba (1978), and Europe. A writer, she is a frequent contributor to the *Hampshire Daily Gazette* and the *Valley Advocate*, and has written an autobiography *Discovering America: A Political Journey* (2003). She currently lives in Amherst.

Scope of collection

Spanning her long and diverse career as an activist, Mary Wentworth's papers include records relating to her electoral campaign against long-term Republican incumbent congressman Silvio O. Conte, material on U.S. involvement in Central America during the 1980s, and other issues of concern throughout her career.

Series descriptions

Series 1. Campaign against Silvio Conte

1980-1984

In anticipation of the 1982 primary elections, Wentworth made a bid for Silvio O. Conte's seat in the House of Representatives. Citing what she considered to be Conte's political failures to adequately address issues related to women's rights, workers' rights, and his support of President Ronald Reagan's economic policies, Wentworth galvanized a sizable constituency in her sticker-campaign that eventually garnered her nearly thirty percent of the Democratic vote in the 1984 elections. This series

includes some of Wentworth's campaign speeches, photographs, items from her sticker-campaign, fundraising letters, notes on Conte's voting record in Congress, and a host of other materials related to her Congressional run.

Series 2. Social Justice

1968-1997

27 folders

Wentworth was deeply committed to social justice. She involved herself in a wide array of organizations and broadened her scope across the sociopolitical spectrum. This series contains information regarding Mary's support of abortion rights and her growing concern for single mothers, as evidenced by a speech given relating the "Feminization of Poverty". She was also involved in welfare education and promotion during the Reagan years. Mary committed herself as well to education reform and joined a committee raising awareness of inaccuracies/misinformation in textbooks used by the Amherst area school system. One of Mary's most impressive accomplishments is her organization of the Colonial Village Tenants Union. Mary was very aware of the growing problem of rent control and endeavored to promote tenants'-rights awareness in the Amherst, MA area.

Information relating to the various politically-oriented groups to which Mary belonged. Mary's activism undoubtedly played a key role in her decision to run for Congress, but she did not stop after her campaign. Involvement ranges from the late 1960s with the South Jersey Peace Center to opposition of the Boltwood Parking Garage in downtown Amherst, MA circa 2000. In between, her involvements cover citizen-based activism regarding tax legislation and political action, pursuing racial equality with the Grey Panthers and the NAACP and support of nuclear disarmament.

Wentworth spent a great deal of time traveling before her Congressional campaign; she viewed her experiences as integral to deciding to campaign against Conte. Mary traveled to China in the mid-1970s as part of the United States-China Friendship Association and she also visited Cuba and Central America during the early 1980s; both trips are particularly intriguing given their respective time periods. Upon her return, Mary became even more committed to change abroad, frequently writing to newspapers and giving speeches/talks around Amherst; she even published *Seeking Common Ground*. This series contains: information relating to groups in which Mary was involved; journals, mementos, and correspondences from her trips to China, Cuba and Central America; Mary's involvement in a Sister City project in Nicaragua; and a wide array of other political interests from around the world.

Series 3. Everywoman's Center

1971-1983

27 folders

From 1979-83 Mary L. Wentworth worked at the Everywoman's Center (EWC) at the University of Massachusetts Amherst as director of the Poor Woman's Task Force (PWTF). In the spring of 1983, Wentworth and Malika Jones, director of the Third World Women's program--also under the umbrella of the EWC--were informed that they would not be reappointed for the following year for failure to fulfill job-related duties. The contexts of this box include general information regarding the EWC and specific materials related to Wentworth's and Jones' termination, the subsequent struggle to get reappointed through a series of grievances filed, signed petitions and letters from community members in support of her (Wentworth) past efforts, advocacy, and contributions to issues involving women's rights.

Series 4. Universal Health Care

1983-1996

50 folders

Materials related to the Clinton administration's efforts to pass a universal health care bill, including articles and publications, reports and studies, and Wentworth's local efforts in western Massachusetts as co-chair of Franklin/Hampshire Health Care Coalition to get Congress to support a single-payer system of health care delivery which would be publically funded and provide universal coverage.

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Series 3. Everywoman's Center

1971-1983

50 folders

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Provenance

Acquired from Mary Wentworth, 1999.

Processing Information

Processed by Janiece Blackmon, Zach Burchell, David Kaczmariski, and Ashley Purvis, December 2010.

Related Material

Among several collections in SCUA related to Wentworth and her activism, see:

Silvio O. Conte Papers (MS 371)

Gray Panthers of the Pioneer Valley Records (MS 468)

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Wentworth, Mary, *Discovering America: A Political Journey*. Philadelphia: X-Libris, 2003. Call no.: CT275.W3875 A3 2003.

Language:

English

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Cite as: Mary Wentworth Papers (MS 522). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

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