

The Bertha Capen Reynolds Society

VOL. 1 NO. 2
FALL 1986

Newsletter

P.O. BOX 850169
New Orleans, LA
70185

WHAT IS PROGRESSIVE SOCIAL WORK?

By Ann Withorn

In her autobiography, Bertha Reynolds explained the five "simple principles" of the Rank and File Movement of the 1930s:

1. Social work exists to serve people in need. If it serves other classes who have other purposes, it becomes too dishonest to be capable of either theoretical or practical development.

2. Social work exists to help people help themselves and therefore should not be alarmed when they do so by organized means, such as client or tenant or labor groups.

3. Social work operates by communication, listening, and sharing experiences.

4. Social work has to find its place among other movements for human betterment.

5. Social workers as citizens cannot consider themselves superior to their clients as if they do not have the same problems. (Uncharted Journey, pp. 173-174).

Today, we members of the Bertha Reynolds Society might consider how to reaffirm these principles in the light of current realities. Doing so may help us begin to answer the question we so often ask ourselves: what is progressive social work? Below I suggest --much less sharply than Bertha Reynolds did-- how we

might interpret the "simple principles" today. I hope that in future issues of this Newsletter we can learn from other members who are willing to write about their own perspectives to this question.

First, understanding "which class we serve" means that progressive human service workers need a clear analysis of the welfare state--a far more complex entity now than it was in Bertha Reynolds' day. We need to think about the relationship between public and "private" programs, as well as the tensions between the social control functions of agencies and their continued capacity to reflect demands for social justice. One purpose of the Bertha Reynolds Society can be to suggest readings that will further this analysis, both at a national level and in terms of the agencies we work for.

Second, "supporting organized efforts by clients" means that private practice, or even effective work with individuals in agencies, is not enough. Progressive social workers must also support the efforts of welfare recipients to raise benefits and fight workfare, of groups like the Alliance for the Mentally Ill and the Disability Rights Coalition to improve services, or small-scale efforts by clients of any agency to influence policies that
(continued next page)

affect their lives. We must also recognize the inherent distrust that members of such groups may feel toward workers. Our task is to act, both individually and through the actions of our unions and professional associations, in ways that build trust. We hope the "Progressive Rumblings" section of this newsletter will become one place to discover examples of our effort to build such alliances.

Third, we still need to consider what constitutes progressive work with clients. Reynolds stress on the basic skills of respectful "communication, sharing and listening"---instead of on fancier clinical approaches---remains crucial. The main assumption is that progressives cannot split off political work from work with individuals; we need to continually struggle to define what non-racist, non-sexist, empowering assistance means, at the policy and individual practice levels. The Bertha Reynolds Society groups in New York City and in Chicago have made such questions a focus of their initial activity; maybe other groups will want to take up similar concerns. We hope to report on lessons learned, and good resources for this work in future issues.

Fourth, now as much as ever, progressive human service workers need to ally ourselves with other movements: for peace and nuclear disarmament, to end apartheid, and to defend revolutionary societies against American imperialism. In this newsletter, we report on the activities of the Bertha Reynolds Brigade of the AWSW to support social work in Nicaragua and on the work of the Committee for Chilean Inquiry. The BCRS chapter in Kalamazoo MI has also taken initiative in working with campus based anti-apartheid movements. This highlights an important role for the Society---that of linking international and domestic issues and of deepening the left analyses of social workers who are concerned about global issues.

Finally, the fifth principle of seeing ourselves "as citizens with the same problems as our clients" remains crucial for progressives. And today's human service workers are not only divided from

clients by functions as well as by class, we are also divided from each other---by degrees, by class, and by job titles. Many MSW social workers look down on the work of non-degreed mental health, day care, and other direct service workers. The importance of professional identity and professional status has often taken precedence over a mutual respect for differential skills and duties among all human service workers, the result being that many direct service workers view professional social workers as "bosses", not as allies. Struggle and rhetoric over licensing and third party payments have heightened such tensions. Progressive human service work means seeing such tensions as a means by which workers are split off from each other and critically weakened in our ability to fight for a better society. A major goal of progressive human service workers must be to honestly understand and oppose --in schools, and unions, as much as in the workplace---the disastrous effects of such divisiveness.

Of course, there is more to be said: about fighting racism, sexism, homophobia, and agism among human service workers and in the broader society; about how to counter assaults on the welfare state without losing our ability to criticize it; about stopping the turf wars that find children's advocates fighting activists for the elderly for inadequate funds. But enough for now, we need not overwhelm ourselves but to gain energy from each other and from the knowledge that we are not alone struggling with these terribly difficult questions.

CALL FOR LETTERS, ESSAYS, AND NEWS ITEMS
FOR NEXT BCRS NEWSLETTER

Please send us your ideas, opinions, and accounts of progressive social work activities. The next (somewhat flexible) deadline for the BCRS newsletter is December 1st, 1986.