

# BCR REPORTS

A Quarterly Publication  
of the Bertha Capen Reynolds Society

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## TALKING BACK TO THE WELFARE BASHERS

by Fred Newdom and Mimi Abramovitz

In a political season devoid of substance and long on symbols, welfare bashing has become a potent political strategy calculated to play on racial fears, class resentments, and the anti-government climate.

At a time when the gap in income between rich and poor is greater than at any point since the second world war, it is appalling that poor people – and especially those on public assistance – are once again singled out as being responsible for the consequences of the Reagan-Bush economic policies.

As part of an effort to help local activists counter the many myths and distortions of reality which characterize the welfare debate, the Bertha Reynolds Society has developed a fact sheet on welfare. This document, which is inserted in this issue of *BCR Reports*, identifies key myths surrounding welfare, provides a factual rebuttal to the myth, and then offers a brief comment placing the issue in a larger political context.

While the facts themselves are available from a variety of sources, it was the feeling of the BCRS that it would be important to pull this material together and make it available to our network around the country. We encourage members to copy it, distribute it, or use it in any way which will help alter the terms of the debate on welfare in your area.

This material can become the basis for a public information effort which would include presentations to community groups, letters to the editor of local newspapers, Op/Ed pieces, or even as responses to the ignorance and bigotry expressed on radio talk shows.

We need to provide a counter to the pernicious myths surrounding the welfare issue while also placing it in the larger context of the racist, sexist, and classist underpinnings of American society. It is our hope that members of the BCRS use this material to establish a local presence for the organization and to broaden the debate on this issue which has been used to divide people when they should be focusing on the necessary task of advancing a progressive agenda and electing candidates who support the agenda.

## Radical Social Work and the L.A. Uprising

Ann Withorn

At best, mainstream social welfare professionals react to the LA uprising by demanding social action on problems afflicting the so-called "underclass": racism, powerlessness, hopelessness, violence and persistent poverty. This is important and good, but it is not enough.

It is the role of radicals today to go beyond such positive responses and to re-introduce the equally critical change needed in this country: a challenge to rule by the "overclass."

The small but pathological overclass controls most of the wealth in this society. It had the power to loot savings and loans without breaking a window. Its obsession with violence has created the deficit which ransomed our future to purchase weapons of death. Its ostentatious accumulation of material goods sets dangerous role models for the youth of society.

Yet for twelve years, public attention has been focused not on the anti-social actions of the overclass, but instead, on the purported behavioral roots of the "underclass" — the weak work ethic, the violence, drug use and "welfare dependence." The light of urban fires counterposes such distorted characterizations with an image of an overclass unable to manage both public and private money, or to set priorities, beyond

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## Letters To The Editor

### "THE LAST CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT"

I am involved with a center that addresses the oppression inherent in the medical model's diagnostic system as applied to those called "mentally ill." Part of the effort is to dispel the myth that "healers" are not themselves "wounded." The work also includes the encouragement of "ex-patients" with degrees in the profession to "come out" and/or to work against the system actively in agencies of employment dominated by the medical model.

This cause, largely ignored (overlooked?) in social work education and organizations is one example of oppression in our own "backyard"; one we actually help to perpetuate daily, both directly and by affiliation. It has also been called "the last civil rights movement" among psychiatric survivors and observers of the ex-patient movement - a phrase I hope may interest the BCR Society membership. Progressive possibilities?

In my growing professional experience, I find such separations as appear on your membership list of choices of primary fields important to address. "Mental Health" is inextricably entwined with survival; at last, more is being revealed in too few studies about the connection between histories of abuse and development of "symptoms."

I see a strong connection on the membership list of choices between the seemingly disparate issues. Emerging from diagnosis and "treatment" often has parallels to abuse survival; but also becoming more clear is the power of giving the history of abuse its due as *the* formative factor (vs. disease/intrapsychic processes) for so many people labelled with diagnoses of mental illness.

It's late and I'm jotting these words just to get them down. the struggle to find ways to integrate these interests and (paying) work,

etc., in a more active way is ongoing for me, as I know it is for many. Perhaps letting you know a bit of what channels I seek is a beginning.

- Mary Auslander, New York, New York

### "FRIEND OF BERTHA'S WRITES"

I want to express to you the pleasure with which I received the last issue of *BCR Reports*. I knew Bertha Reynolds from 1950 until her very last years and I know she would be very proud of what you are doing in her name. I was particularly pleased to see Marti Bombyk's fine tribute to Rachael Levine who was so close to Bertha. It is very gratifying for older and retired social workers to witness such a living memorial to Bertha in your activity. In the stormy period ahead, midst all the distress, society will need all the clarity it can get.

- Bob Glass, Hampton Bay, New York

### "ORGANIZE FOR NATIONAL HEALTH CARE"

As a founding member of the Bertha Capen Reynolds Society and a devoted participant at its annual conferences, I am sad not to be able to attend the event this June, since I will be in Europe.

Perhaps this letter can be accepted as a substitute for what I had hoped to discuss at the meeting. BCRS has a grand opportunity, given the setting of an international forum, to engage in a dialogue on national systems of health care and coverage and to urge members in the United States to join in mobilizing support for the NASW/Russo/Wellstone/Single Payer/Public/Universal/Comprehensive system. Such legislation can be passed - and soon - if the organizing talent which we can tap would be put to work. A massive lobbying effort can be mounted to press for passage, if social workers organize colleagues, people served by their agencies, board members, local officials, friends and even relatives to form delegations in each

Congressional district. Visit the Congress member as a well-prepared jump on the issue and then continue to monitor the member of both the Senate and the House of Representatives to assure response. Thus far, 68 members of the House are co-sponsoring the Russo measure. If one's Congress member is of that group, then congratulate her/him and urge the signing up of other members. If one's Representative has not endorsed Russo, urge that it be done. Use case examples from experience to demonstrate the need; have people from the 40 million Americans without coverage and the 50 million with inadequate insurance join in the endeavor to tell their story.

Before we celebrate the 100th anniversary (at the turn of the century) of the struggle to legislate a system of national health care and coverage (which every other industrialized nation, aside from South Africa, has) let us act in the true tradition of Bertha and recruit, organized, mobilize, lobby for a too long denied entitlement. Health care is a right!

- Bert Weinert, DSW

Please mail all contributions for the next *BCR Reports* to:

Barbara Kasper, Editor  
Social Work Department,  
Faculty Office Building  
SUNY College  
at Brockport  
Brockport, NY 14420  
FAX #716-325-1503

Letters to the editor, essays, news items, BCRS Chapter activities, cartoons, etc., are all welcome!

**Please Note:** The deadline for materials submitted for inclusion in the next *BCR Reports* is September 1, 1992.

## **BCRS Chapter Updates:**

**Maine:** The Maine Chapter's first informal meeting was at the 1991 National Conference. Since then, we have met on a monthly basis. We have had 7 to 15 members at each meeting, but we have about 50 people on our mailing list and approximately 20 national members. At each meeting we are encouraging everyone to join the national membership. As a young organization, we are in the process of developing our direction and mission. We have looked at becoming a study group, activist group, or a combination of both. The organization has marched in the Fight Against Homelessness March at Kennebunkport and has had an open house to introduce BCRS to the social welfare workers of Maine. We had an excellent turnout of about 50 people. We served food and conversation. It appeared that everyone had a good time. We were also accepted to present at the Maine NASW conference in April. We all feel that the Maine Chapter will become an active and exciting chapter for the radical movement that is taking place in social work and in the country.

**Pioneer Valley:** The Pioneer Valley Chapter (Mass.) continued to discuss the difficulty of engaging in progressive organizing given the reactionary leadership in Massachusetts and Washington. On the other hand, members of the group have had an opportunity to express their frustrations and gain support from people in similar situations. Most important is that all of our consciousnesses are being raised or re-raised and the discussions we have had suggest ways we might work more progressively with clients and our colleagues in times of alienation, privatization, and cutbacks. There has even been a suggestion that we have hit bottom and that a more conducive context for progressive and radical work may be on the horizon.

**Puget Sound:** The Puget Sound Chapter has been experiencing success with a monthly meeting structure that includes discussion on a selected topic related to progressive social work. Topics have included: defining empowerment; putting empowerment principles into action, and; promoting cultural diversity.

Several BCRS members also spoke about progressive social work at a local hospital's commemoration of National Social Work Month.

The chapter continued with its educational forums in April with a panel on possibilities for tax reform in Washington State. BCRS members also assisted with a highly successful Empowerment Conference that drew more than 350 participants.

**Kalamazoo:** The chapter continues its ongoing struggle against human service cuts in Michigan. It sponsored a two-day workshop with Bill Moyer from the Movement Empowerment Project on "Organizing for Social Justice." Out of the workshop, we developed a new group, the Citizen Action Network, to work against Human Service cuts in Michigan and for transfer of defense expenditures to Human Services. We planned an action for Tax Day. The Chapter joined with AFL-CIO to fight Western Michigan University's attempt to change policy and give out building contracts at less than prevailing wage. We also sponsored a presentation by peace activists on "The Aftermath of the Gulf War." Finally, we are planning a two-day conference in the Fall on advocating for children and teens working with the Children's Defense Fund.

**Bay Area:** Our chapter is staging a Spring series of presentations and discussions. Featured speakers include Lori True from the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation on Governor Pete

Wilson's California Tax Payer Protection Act, Ken Grossinger of SEIU on National Health Care Reform Strategies, and an evening focused on women's reproductive rights. Members Carlos Morales and Anna Lawson fired off a BCRS letter to the California legislature opposing the proposed draconian cuts in AFDC and SSI.

**Houston:** The one-year old Houston Chapter divides its attention between social actions and organization building. Given that the former was our priority, we began our efforts this year by tackling the problem of the revictimization of battered women in the Texas legal system.

Karen Stout, a BCRS member who is an expert on women who kill in self-defense and who is on the faculty of the Graduate School of Social Work at the University of Houston, brought the case of Jalene Murphy to our attention. Murphy is a 19-year old woman who pleaded guilty to manslaughter in the death of her husband. She stabbed her husband in self defense. He had beaten her repeatedly and she was trying to ward off another attack. Last Fall we staged a demonstration to protest her prison sentence which was the maximum of two to twenty years. The demonstration, seeking to make ties with national efforts, took place during National Domestic Violence Month.

Since the demonstration, the Houston chapter has continued to modestly support Jalene and her family with personal letters, letter writing campaigns, and efforts to increase the community's awareness of battered women. We had a "work party" in which we wrote letters to the Governor on Jalene's behalf, signed up four or five new members, and got the opportunity to relax with each other afterwards. Currently the case is in the clemency process,

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## BCRS National Steering Committee

BCRS Mailing Address:  
Columbus Circle Station  
P.O. Box 20563  
New York, NY 10023

Mimi Abramovitz  
395 Riverside Drive 4-A  
New York, NY 10025  
H: 212-866-2429  
W: 212-452-7106

Dan Bannister\*  
3418 Emerson Ave. So.  
#206  
Minneapolis, MN 55408  
H: 612-827-0608  
W: 612-546-1866

Sandra Bauman\*  
232 Mather Rd.  
Jenkintown, PA 19046  
H: 215-885-5790  
W: 215-898-5540

Joel Blau\*  
203 11th Street  
Brooklyn, NY 11215  
H: 718-965-1721  
W: 516-444-3149

Marti Bombyk  
412 W. 110th St.  
New York, NY 10025  
H: 212-316-3150  
W: 212-636-6651

Catherine Bradshaw  
1623 S. King St.  
Seattle, WA 98144  
H: 206-323-6567

Don Cooney\*  
701 Norton  
Kalamazoo, MI 49001  
H: 616-349-3027  
W: 616-383-0961

Michael Cronin  
412 W. 110th St. #74  
New York, NY 10025  
H: 212-226-5787  
W: 212-769-6278

Joan Dworkin\*  
712 Judson Avenue  
Evanston, IL 60202  
H: 708-869-7948  
W: 312-996-7384

Sharon Freedberg  
5 Travis Place  
Hastings-on-Hudson, NY  
10706  
H: 914-478-4759  
W: 212-960-8840/8193

Ken Grossinger\*  
176 Peralta  
San Francisco, CA 94110  
H: 415-648-7013  
W: 415-673-8755

Susan James\*  
956 10th Ave., E.  
Apt. 203  
Seattle, WA 98102  
H: 206-324-8155

Carol Kaplan  
Graduate School of  
Social Service  
Fordham University  
113 W. 60th St.  
New York, NY 10023  
W: 212-636-6672

Barbara Kasper  
265 Carling Rd.  
Rochester, NY 14610  
H: 716-482-2517  
W: 716-395-5509

Beth Lewis  
2 Brewery Square 110  
New Haven, CT 06513  
H: 203-865-3691  
W: 203-737-2373

Kane Loukas\*  
12 Orchard Rd.  
Windham, ME 04062  
H: 207-892-5056

David McKell\*  
1000 N. Beaver, #209  
Flagstaff, AZ 86001  
H: 602-779-1400  
W: 602-523-6556

Marilynn Moch\*  
412 W. 110th Street  
New York, NY 10025  
H: 516-232-3156  
W: 212-274-2613

Fred Newdom\*  
347 Wellington  
Delmar, NY 12054  
H: 518-439-6411  
W: 518-475-1199

Jerry Sachs\*  
4 Spring Terrace  
Greenfield, MA 01301  
H: 413-774-7564  
W: 413-585-7950

Laura Stravino\*  
215 13th Ave., E.  
Apt. 101  
Seattle, WA 98102  
H: 206-322-5950

Ann Withorn\*  
143 Winchester St.  
Brookline, MA 02146  
H: 617-738-7081  
W: 617-287-7365

\*Chapter Contact Person

## Goodbye to Michael Dover

In late February, Michael A. Dover submitted his letter of resignation to the National Steering Committee. Michael needs time to concentrate on his academic work as a doctoral student in social work and sociology at the University of Michigan. He hopes to become more directly involved in activism and take on special projects for BCRS in the future. He will remain a member of the Membership Committee for the time being, which will now be chaired by Catherine Bradshaw. Michael wrote a detailed letter to the Steering Committee and closed by saying this:

"I care a great deal for what the Society stands for, and - despite the differences we have occasionally had - for the people I have worked with. I know that I will miss this work - and you - very much. It is hard enough to be a student and no longer employed full-time in social work, now I'm unemployed as the Society's voluntary membership secretary! I do look forward, however, to remaining a member of the Society, and to being able to concentrate my energies on my new responsibilities."

Thanks Mike, for all your hard work.  
Best wishes!

## On-Line Activists

One of the first outgrowths of the formation of a Faculty Network of the BCRS by Prof. Carol Kaplan of Fordham University has been the development of a Bitnet Network for the Society.

Currently Joan Dworkin, Patty Coleman, Bob Fisher, Marti Bombyk and Mike Dover are on-line. Open to any university-based members of the Society on the Bitnet network, or any member with access to Internet, the goal of the network will be to link the Society's members with the growing community of "on-line activists". A message group has already been formed to enable the sending of messages to all members of the BCRS On-Line Network. To join the message group and receive the Bitnet addresses of all members, e-mail Mike.Dover@UM.CC.UMICH.EDU.

Members who are currently members of PeaceNET or HandNET are urged to contact us, as we are seeking someone who could forward information from these networks. A coordinator is also sought who would be able to maintain a user directory for the BCRS On-Line Network and dispatch messages to our message group. Members are also urged to link up with the Concerned Faculty or Concerned University Community networks (if any) at their school.

In the future, this should make possible further successful initiatives like the January 1991 *New York Times* ad calling for a peaceful settlement of the Persian Gulf conflict initiated by Carol and others.

# FIGHTING BACK! CHALLENGING AFDC MYTHS WITH THE FACTS

## I. WELFARE "REFORM" TODAY

Welfare "reform" has become the major focus in the newest "backlash" against government programs and a hot political issue, with the welfare mother replacing Willie Horton as the new code word in racial politics. Coercive new plans have gained wide public support by playing to a host of stereotypes and myths about AFDC and the women who use the program. The following myths, facts, and comments can be used to undermine the stereotypes that fuel current welfare "reforms" and to build support for more progressive social policies.

## II. BACKGROUND

In 1988, the Family Support Act transformed the program called Aid to Families With Dependent Children (AFDC) from a program to enable single mothers to stay home with their children into a mandatory work and training program. The 1988 legislation, dubbed "welfare reform", was controversial from the start and has remained so as states try to implement welfare-to-work programs, with only modest results. But, the Family Support Act was just the first of a series of "welfare reforms" that use government dollars to dictate the behavior of women on welfare. If work was the first target of the "new paternalism," the second is the family life of AFDC mothers. States are now rushing to offer "marriage bonuses" and to deny additional benefits for children born to women on welfare. The "Wedfare" or "Bridefare" proposals require women on welfare to marry and have fewer children in order to qualify for aid. Other programs cut benefits to families who fail to see a doctor, to keep kids in school, and to pay the rent on time. In the name of monitoring fraud, some states now fingerprint welfare mothers.

## III. MYTH AND FACTS

**MYTH:** Women on welfare have large families.

**FACT:** The typical welfare family is a mother and two children, slightly less than the size of the average family in the United States.

**COMMENT:** *AFDC families, like other families in the U.S., are getting smaller.*

**MYTH:** Welfare mothers live "high on the hog."

**FACT:** The average welfare benefit is \$367 a month or \$4400 a year. This is almost \$9000 less than the federal poverty line for a family of three. The real (after inflation) value of the AFDC grant fell 42% from 1972-1990, 27% if Food Stamps are counted. In no state of the union do food stamp and welfare benefits together lift a family of three out of poverty. Meanwhile, during the 1980's, the average pretax income of the richest 20% of all families rose 77%, while that of the poorest 20% declined by nine percent.

**COMMENT:** *Instead of helping poor women and children live high on the hog, AFDC keeps mother-only families living in poverty. But government programs do not have to keep people poor. Cross-national studies show that U.S. income support programs lifted less than 5% of single mothers with children out of poverty in the 1980's, compared to 89% in the Netherlands, 81% in Sweden, 75% in the United Kingdom, 50% in France, 33% in Germany, and 18.3% in Canada.*

**MYTH: Welfare recipients are lazy and do not want to work.**

**FACT:** Of the 13 million AFDC recipients, only 4 million are adults, 90% of whom are women - many mothers of the young children. In more than half of welfare homes, the youngest child is under 5 years of age. Many adult women on welfare are not able to work due to illness, disability or lack of education and job skills. Many others have worked at some time in their lives and others combine work and welfare. Still other AFDC mothers want to work but cannot find a job (10% of all single mothers are unemployed) or cannot find jobs that pay enough. (The \$4.25 an hour minimum wage is \$2.75 an hour less than the \$7.00 an hour needed to keep a family of four out of poverty.)

**COMMENT:** *If work paid enough, fewer people would need welfare. If taking care of one's own children was defined as "work", all mothers would be considered to be working. According to a recent calculation, their labors would be worth at least \$17,000.*

**MYTH: Few women on welfare are white.**

**FACT:** Of all AFDC mothers, 40% are African-American, 38 % are white, 16 % are Latina, 2.7% are Asian, 1.3% are Native American, and 1.5% are of unknown race.

**COMMENT:** *Women of color are overrepresented among those on welfare because they are overrepresented among the poor. The idea that AFDC is a program primarily for women of color is used to mask the fact that so many AFDC mothers are white, to divide women from each other, and to make welfare a tool in the politics of race.*

**MYTH: Once on welfare always on welfare. Welfare is a trap from which few escape.**

**FACT:** More than half of women on welfare stay on the rolls for less than one year. A quarter leave within four months, and only one-third stay more than two years. Research on intergenerational welfare use has not been able to establish that daughters of welfare mothers necessarily end up on welfare too. Some do, some do not.

**COMMENT:** *The biggest cause of welfare seems to be poverty. It is very hard for children of poor women to escape poverty, especially in the current economy with its falling wages and rising unemployment. It's hard to work your way out of poverty. People working at minimum wage jobs earn less than \$9000 a year. Employers pay women 65 cents for every dollar earned by men.*

**MYTH: Women on welfare have "kids for money".**

**FACT:** Despite years of research, studies have found no link between the AFDC grant and births outside of marriage. Those births are no more frequent in high benefit states and no greater in states with rising grant levels than in states with flat or falling AFDC payments. The states provide somewhere between \$40 and \$65 a month per additional child. In contrast, the average taxpayer receives a \$2300 (about \$190 a month) tax deduction for dependents. No one claims that taxpayers have more children just to get a larger tax deduction.

**COMMENT:** *Neither AFDC nor the tax deduction for dependent children are rewards for having children. Rather, these income supplements recognize the value of children to society and the high cost of raising children. The U.S. is the only industrial nation other than South Africa and Japan that does not provide families with an automatic grant for every child.*

**FACT:** Single-parent households are on the rise but it is not due to AFDC. While the value of the AFDC benefit fell during the last twenty years, the number of mother-only households rose. Meanwhile, the number of married-couple households in the U.S. fell from 40% in 1980 to 26% in 1990. Of all the women who are eligible for AFDC (poor unmarried women with children under age 18), the proportion who actually used AFDC fell from 60% in 1970 to 45% in 1988. The number of all poor children on AFDC fell from 75 out of every 100 (1972-78) to 59 out of every 100 in 1988.

**COMMENT:** *Unwed motherhood predated AFDC and is on the rise due to divorce, delayed marriage, changing sexual norms, the falling standard of living, and other social conditions. AFDC does not cause families to break up, but does give women an alternative to unsafe and insecure marriages. The country would be better served by an income support program that served individuals regardless of work effort or marital status.*

**MYTH:** The AFDC program is costly and bloated, has enlarged the deficit and deepened the recession.

**FACT:** The federal and state governments together spent \$23 billion on welfare in 1991. The federal share amounted to 1% of the \$1.3 trillion Federal budget. The State share equaled 3.4% of the average state budget. Ninety percent of the AFDC budget is spent on benefits; 10% on administrative costs.

**COMMENT:** *The costs of AFDC can be compared to the \$300 billion in tax dollars received by the Department of Defense and the \$130 billion spent in 1991 alone on the savings and loan bail out.*

**MYTH:** Mandatory programs are needed to get the welfare poor to behave properly.

**FACT:** Mandatory programs do not work very well. Workfare has produced only modest, if any, increases in employment and earnings and mandatory programs do not fare any better than voluntary ones. A recent study of California's GAIN program found that workfare participants averaged only \$1902 a year in earned income. The participants earned an average of \$271 more per year than non-participants and received \$281 a year less in welfare. A University of Wisconsin study found that Learnfare (the program which docks up to \$200 a month from a welfare mother's check if her children miss school without an acceptable excuse) failed to improve the school attendance of welfare children but did exacerbate pre-existing family problems.

**COMMENT:** *Mandatory programs imply that the poor will not work, marry, plan their families, send their children to school, or take them to the doctor unless the government makes them do so. Supporters of mandatory programs for the poor are often the same people who argue that the government should "get off people's backs." But, when it comes to the poor, especially poor women, they support government telling people what to do and how to live.*

**MYTH:** Female headed households are responsible for rising poverty rates.

**FACT:** The number of female headed households has grown only slightly in recent years, but poverty rates have soared.

**COMMENT:** *Gender does not make people poor. Rather, the differential treatment of women based on gender has contributed to the povertization of women. Blaming women for rising poverty rates does*

**MYTH: If poor women only married, they would not be poor.**

**FACT:** Family composition does not affect poverty. Although two incomes are clearly better than one, the poor tend to be poor before, during, and after they tie the knot. The two-parent household is the fastest growing poverty group in the United States. The majority of the poor live in households with workers employed full year, full time. Sixty-four percent of all poor children live in families with one or more workers.

**COMMENT:** *Marriage is not an effective anti-poverty strategy for women.*

**MYTH: Those who work are not poor.**

**FACT:** Eight million workers, or seven percent of the work force, work but are poor. Sixty percent of all poor families contain someone who works part or full time. Until the mid-1970's, the minimum wage lifted those who worked full-time, year round, out of poverty. Today, it leaves a three person family \$2300 below the poverty line. Average hourly pay rates for non-supervisory workers were lower in 1990 than in any year since 1964. Poverty rates declined less during the 1980's recovery than during the 1960's recovery; even though low-income households increased their employment levels more in the 1980's than in the 1960's. The main reason for this was that, in the 1980's, the decline in wages canceled out some of the gains from increased work. In addition, unemployment rose from 5.5% of the labor force in 1990 to 6.7% in 1991.

**COMMENT:** *For a segment of the population, the promise of the American dream, that if you work you will not be poor, has not been kept for the past 15 years.*

**MYTH: The poor are freeloaders on government programs.**

**FACT:** Forty-seven percent of the population receives some kind of direct government benefit, with 5.1% of the population receiving AFDC. In addition, the tax code provides numerous health, education, and welfare benefits to the rich and the middle class and another set of subsidies to corporations.

**COMMENT:** *Everyone's on welfare.*

Prepared for the **Bertha Capen Reynolds Society** by:

Mimi Abramovitz,  
Professor of Social Work  
Hunter College School of Social Work  
129 East 79th Street, NY, NY 10021  
(212) 452-7106

and

Fred Newdom,  
ProAct Consulting Services and  
Adjunct Assistant Professor  
Smith College School for Social Work  
Box 2392, Empire State Plaza, Albany, NY 12220  
(518) 475-1199



## Members In Action:

MIMI ABRAMOVITZ co-authored an article published in the February 4, 1992 edition of *The Washington Post* entitled, "Wedfare - or Welfare?" The article critiques the recent spate of legislative proposals across the country which seek to use state welfare programs to control the behavior and family structure of poor women.

BRUCE BENTLEY, a BCRS member from Chicago, published an article, "A Call to Action" in the Winter 1991 Chicago DSA Newsletter.

NILO KOPONEN, a Representative in the Alaska State Legislature has been working to raise public consciousness on the need for health care as "our Canadian neighbors enjoy." Koponen is a Finn who received a doctorate from the Harvard School of Education and studied at the London School of Economics, earning a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and Social Work Administration from Wilberforce (now Central State) University in Ohio, being the first "white" graduate.

ARNOLD KOROTKIN, from Montclair State College, had a letter to the editor published in the January 1992 edition of *Social Work*. The letter focused on the U.S. government's spending billions to support a military-industrial complex when social and human needs are given a lower priority.

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## More Institutional Members Needed

In an attempt to broaden its membership base and increase revenues, BCRS is presently trying to draw in more institutional members. For being a member, an institution receives 25 newsletters each issue, one free quarter-page ad in the newsletter each year, a free subscription to the *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, representation on the National Steering Committee, and one free access to the BCRS mailing labels each year, upon request.

We need your help in identifying organizations - academic, labor, activist or other - who may want to join as an institutional member. If you know of any such institutions please call Catherine Bradshaw, National Membership Committee, at 201-323-6567, or send her the information at 1623 S. King Street, Seattle, WA 98144.

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## How To Organize A BCRS Chapter

"How to Organize a BCRS Chapter" organizing packets are available by contacting Tara Quillnan at Communication Services at (518) 463-3522, at 4 Central Avenue, Albany, New York 11210. The contents of the packets include such things as posters, brochures, book order forms, recent newsletters, copy of by-laws, names of BCRS organizers from the Steering Committee who will help you, and much much more! Allow 4 weeks for delivery.

## Join a National Teach-In During the Week of October 19-23rd

The schools of social work located in New York City propose to organize a nationwide effort in which:

- (1) social work students would document the ill effects on children of the 15-year policy of neglect and abuse of welfare as seen from their field placements and
- (2) social work faculty, students, practitioners, and clients would document, analyze, consider alternatives to, and protest this assault on child well-being at locally organized, but nationally coordinated, teach-ins during the week of October 19-23, 1992.

For nearly two decades the insecurity of children living in single mother families has increased. The real value of AFDC benefits has declined by more than 40%. In addition, states are increasing the number of requirements that must be met for aid to continue. Last year 30 states froze AFDC benefits and nine states cut them.

Social workers are united in opposing the continued erosion and deliberate reductions in benefits to poor children. That is why we protest this attack and seek to document its ill effects. There is disagreement within the profession about the direction that reform should take, particularly about the extent to which recipients should be required to work or engage in other socially productive behavior (in addition to raising their children). That is one reason why our protest takes the form of a teach-in. We seek to educate ourselves and our profession with regard to this critical issue. In addition, a teach-in is appropriate because it demonstrates symbolically the most powerful message we wish to communicate: It's time to both stop cutting and start learning about welfare.

Each local school of social work and NASW chapter would decide for itself the form of the teach-in and protest. Social work faculty would develop teach-ins for their own students and perhaps also for their local social service and broader university communities.

A national executive committee composed of leading social work educators and practitioners would be created and staffed with a half-time coordinator and student help. The committee would be responsible for approving and the staff for developing a common methodology and forms for the documentation effort. The committee and staff would also be responsible respectively for approving and developing a set of alternative teach-in formats and curricula.

We are trying to keep the planning as simple as possible so as to be least disruptive of every school's academic program. Given the seriousness of the situation, we hope that you will want your school to fully participate in the national teach-in. Below is the central mailing address for the teach-in as well as the phone numbers of a few of the planning committee members:

### TEACH-IN

Columbia School of Social Work,  
622 West 113th Street, Room 703  
New York, NYr 10025

David Fanshel, (Office) 212-854-3250  
Irving Garfinkel, (Office) 212-854-8489

# SOLUTIONS FOR SOCIETY'S ILLS NEED LOCAL, STATE, FEDERAL ACTION

Don Cooney

(A longer version of this article was published recently in *The Kalamazoo Gazette*.)

The causes of the nation's fiscal crisis are complex and reach deeply into the changing international order. Much is rooted in changes through the 1980s in the nation's economy, fiscal policy and commitment to basic needs. Much also stems from sexism and racism in our society.

**A - The Economy.** Two phenomena stand out:

1 - The enormous increase in wealth for the top 20 percent of the population and especially the top 5 percent during the 1980s.

2 - The deteriorating economic status of other American working people.

From 1979 to 1989 the real income of the poorest 20 percent of Americans fell 6 percent. The income of the middle 60 percent rose only 2.8 percent. The income of the top 20 percent rose by 16.7 percent and that of the top 5 percent rose 23.4 percent.

In 1990 the top 20 percent got about half the national income, about as much as the other 80 percent combined. Political scientist Kevin Phillips estimates that in 1983 the top 10 percent of the population owned 51 percent of liquid assets, 72 percent of corporate stock, 70 percent of bonds and 86 percent of tax-exempt municipal bonds.

Yet in the 1980s working class Americans worked longer and earned less. Adjusted for inflation, wages fell more than 9 percent; salaries were at about 1960 levels. Hourly benefits (health care, pensions) fell 13.8 percent.

**B - National Fiscal Policies:**

The federal government granted huge tax cuts almost exclusively benefiting the wealthy, carried out a policy of huge military spending and tried unsuccessfully to compensate by huge cuts in special programs. The result was a

crippling national debt. In 1981 the interest on the national debt was \$96 billion. In 1988 it was \$216 billion (about half of all personal income tax receipts).

**C - Federal expenditures for meeting basic human needs:**

The federal government revised policies and principles carried out since the 1930s. The U.S. Conference of Mayors estimates that federal spending for key urban programs fell 72 percent between 1979 and 1989. The segment of the population falling fastest into poverty was children. A high percentage of middle class families were one paycheck from disaster.

**D - Sexism** increasingly imposed a double burden on women - almost total responsibility for children and more burdens in the workplace in the lowest-paying jobs.

People of color continued to be disproportionately represented among the poor. Black family income in 1987 was only 56 percent of white. The median net worth of white people is 11.7 times that of blacks.

It is time for this nation to reorder its priorities and make a serious investment in its people. This can be funded in two ways.

First, through a large cut in military spending. Second, through a progressive tax re-instituted on the most wealthy people. A recent study showed that if, in 1989 the wealthiest 10 percent paid taxes at the pre 1978 rate, they would have paid \$93.1 billion more.

Tax cuts are not an appropriate step at this time. It is a myth that if people don't pay taxes they don't

have to pay for problems. Lack of responsible public spending on our problems leads to greater payments in the long run. The Michigan Correction System is a good example.

In outline the nation needs to invest in:

1 - A national employment policy that promotes jobs in the private sector, provides needed service and rebuilds the infrastructure, re-educates the work force and offers welfare not only as support but as an investment in our people.

2 - A national accessible and comprehensive health care system which is based on the principle that health care is a right and which stresses prevention, closely resembling the Canadian Model.

3 - A real safety net focusing on families and children and including child care, family leave for caregivers, shelter as a right and greater investment in education.

At the state level we need to:

- Find a more equitable way to balance the budget than disproportionately on the backs of the poor.
- Search for new revenues through a thorough study of tax breaks and progressive taxation.
- Urge our elected officials to lobby hard for increased federal revenue.
- Call a summit to devise immediate and long term strategies for the crisis.

At the local level we need to follow similar policies and work, for greater neighborhood government and business cooperation.

## **BCRS Brochure Available:**

Members wishing to order copies of the Society's brochure may request up to 100 copies by calling Tara Quillinan at Communication Services at (518) 463-3522, faxing her at (518) 426-3961 or writing her at: 4 Central Avenue, Albany, New York 11210. The brochure has an easy to use tear-off return form, and features an "Our Members Say" section with quotes from Chauncey Alexander, Millie Charles, Herman Curiel, Lorraine Gutierrez, Barbara Joseph, Maryann Mahaffey, Mary Bricker-Jenkins, Irmgard Wessel, Susan Kinoy and Sandy Felder. Order copies for your school or workplace today!

**Radical Social Work ...**  
*Continued from page 1*

pure profit taking. It is time to explain how overclass dependence on self-serving tax structures has spawned a "cycle of wealth" that, in turn, has created generations of persistently rich hedonists who neither work themselves nor invest in society's future.

Radical social workers know better than anyone that the Bush/Kemp call to create "enterprise zones" would allow the overclass even more unrestrained power in urban neighborhoods. It amounts to giving the biggest, baddest gang in this country - maybe we should call them the "overlords" - free rein. We must lead the public challenge to the assumption underlying such programs: that private enterprise, after centuries of failure, can still be expected to end poverty.

Just because Soviet-style socialism has let us down does not mean that we who know so much about the horrors of capitalism must deny our own experience. It is not just the lack of investment in social programs that destroys our cities, it is the fundamental injustice of the increasingly top heavy class structure.

Many of our colleagues will be uncomfortable with such a response to the LA uprising, perhaps because it seems hard enough just to oppose racism and to call for new programs and the taxes to support them. But now is the time to reaffirm, and not deny in quest for some palatable "new paradigm", the basic left precept that class struggle is the driving engine of social change. If, to echo Tracy Chapman, the time is not now to get "at the root" of the profound inequity of this society, then when?

**Houston** - *Continued from page 3* and the chapter is organizing a mailing to encourage people to write letters to the Board of Pardons and Parole, which will review the case and make a recommendation related to clemency to the Governor.

Some members have also been putting effort into building the

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local chapter. There is a tension in such a small group as ours between social action (which most people want to do and is the primary reason why most joined, "not just to sit around and talk") and at least a minimum of organization building. The ideal is for the social action to build the

organization. We discussed this at our last irregular monthly meeting, and decided to establish a bit more structure and clearer leadership roles. We planned a reception in April for Mimi Abramovitz and used her visit to Houston as an opportunity to attract new members.

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