

# BCR REPORTS

A Publication of the  
Bertha Capen Reynolds Society

Volume IX, Number 2

Fall, 1997

## “LET’S DO SOMETHING”

### A BCRS National Action Initiative to Move the Agenda Forward

**O**n Friday evening, June 13, at the St. Louis conference, the BCRS Steering Committee met to discuss future directions, especially challenged by one of the day’s workshops which had suggested that we initiate some kind of nation-wide action. A draft of the statement below was then written and discussed on the final morning of the conference and then again at the September Steering Committee meeting. We present it to the membership now as a direction for how we will operate this year with more specific ideas to follow after we hear back from members and finalize plans at the next Steering Committee meeting in January.

At this juncture in the history of BCRS, we believe it is time for the Society, through its work and initiatives, to join with other groups of progressives who are asking, “What’s next?” We should try to initiate discussion and actions that will both envision and begin the work of setting a progressive social agenda for the future.

- One goal of such activity will be to consider how to position ourselves in the midst of other social movements that are also engaged in the same quest: the national Welfare Rights Union, the Labor Party, the New Party, the efforts of IAF, ACORN and other national groups committed to anti-racist, anti-heterosexist and feminist agendas.

- A second goal will be to introduce a more coherent vision of the public and private social, political and economic structures we are fighting *for* in the long- run and to use that vision to guide struggles against the immediate, ever-widening assaults on low-income people.

#### Background:

Steering Committee member David McKell of Arizona described a situation where he was meeting with state legislators to protest welfare reform. When they asked him: “What are you *for*?” however, he wasn’t sure how to answer effectively. While “socialism” might be correct, it seemed a little provocative (not to mention counterproductive in that context), but “a more humane society” sounded a little lame.

Other members have suggested that there are lessons to be learned from international grassroots and policy-level efforts to create a shared understanding of “social development” and full “community development.” Questions are being raised by indigenous peoples’ struggles that challenge us all to redefine the meaning of a successful, fully life-affirming society. Many of us have experienced the power of discussions within welfare rights activism over whether strategies built around women’s special need for guaranteed income could be combined with appealing living wage campaigns.

Through all the range of work that characterizes BCRS members, there comes an appreciation of the unique energy that emerges when we engage in activism that is *both* active *and* clear about how it connects to broader and longer range struggles and goals. It is the effort to find that synthesis that is the driving force behind the recommendations that follow.

#### Recommendations:

We propose, therefore, that the Society encourage and support coordinated local efforts by its chapters and its members (March of 1998 was suggested as a target date but local conditions should determine timing) that will further the two broad goals stated above and embody one or more of the following activities:

- initiate or participate in a local action that *both* energizes people grounded in local community concerns *and* also helps participants identify a larger social vision, in essence answering the question “what are you *for*?”
- encourage collective efforts – including clients and client organizations, students, activists, teachers, workers in the field – to define more sharply the goals and strategies necessary to achieve a more just and effective society where human rights transcend property rights.

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## "LET'S DO SOMETHING"

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- support BCRS members in connecting activists and strategists from existing movements in their areas, in order to create a stronger sense of shared strategies and goals and build to a broader base for action.

Nationally, through the newsletter and with a special call, the Steering Committee will attempt to ensure as much unity of purpose as possible across the country and will encourage local efforts by providing materials and whatever other supports we can muster. Although we recognize that local priorities and conditions will legitimately differ, the Steering Committee hopes to assure some shared themes and to promote common learning that will allow the whole Society to make progress toward a more clearly articulated and deeply uniting vision. The materials and guidance we are able to provide could include such things as:

- a list of questions that might be addressed, and some guidelines that would apply regardless of the particular path taken – such as the goal of inclusion of poverty/labor/religious and other activists in all activities; or an effort to bring in human service workers of all backgrounds.
- concrete suggestions for possible actions – such as popular theater, teach-ins, forums, direct actions – with some approaches to helping differing activities achieve common goals.
- a statement of some of the possible ways to describe and elaborate on longer range visions. lists of national offices/contacts for organizations that might identify local people who would be willing collaborators in discussions and plans. bibliography of relevant material that might be helpful AND accessible for both immediate activism and sharpening a longer-

In other words, while it is beyond the scope and capability of BCRS to itself launch a national initiative, we can encourage coordinated efforts among its members that will help more of us to find pithy, creative, effective and grounded answers to the question asked by those Arizona legislators – and to become stronger in building an effective movement for transformative change. We will print reports and lessons from the activities in the Newsletter and hope that they will spur other actions.

At the September meeting, The Steering Committee agreed to include support for a range of national actions around welfare rights as part of its action initiative. This support will include encouraging members to join a national campaign (initiated by the Urban Justice Center) to urge non-profit agencies and organizations to resist workfare by refusing to participate. The first installment of a fact sheet about workfare is included in this issue of the newsletter. We also endorsed and support an effort initiated by the Kensington Welfare Rights Union (KWRU) to monitor and document the implementation of welfare reform as a violation of U.N. recognized human rights. Manuals on this campaign are available from the KWRU (phone: 215-763-4584 or e-mail: kwru@libertynet.org) – though be prepared to send a small donation to cover their expenses for getting the manual to you. Lastly, in this area, we support the creation of “underground railroads” of non-poor supporters of

recipients of welfare. The railroad’s work is to serve as allies of clients in our work relationships with them, as logistical supporters of their actions and activities, and as political and financial backers where and when needed. Local railroads can take whatever form they need to – individuals or groups working out whatever relationship they can with individual clients or their organizations.

Such activities are all in harmony with the past activity of the Society. This approach is in response to members who asked that the National organization take a stronger coordinating and leadership role while respecting the need of local chapters and members to act on local conditions and issues. We believe that this approach strikes that balance.

We also strongly encourage members to provide other examples of national activity that is being put forward by other groups. That information will be included in our materials and suggestion packets. Please relay your ideas to Fred Newdom (address included in the newsletter; e-mail: Fnewdom@AOL.com).

Before the next conference, the Steering Committee will review the lessons from all the activities. They will help us figure out how BCRS can play a stronger role in supporting coherent activism and in achieving a clearer vision of what we want to do. At next year’s conference, we will review what was learned and keep on trying to Move the Agenda. ■

*Ann Withorn and Fred Newdom*

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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

# STATEMENT AND PRINCIPLES OF THE BERTHA CAPEN REYNOLDS SOCIETY

Bertha Capen Reynolds was an eminent social worker, author, trade unionist and social activist. She courageously challenged the basic tenets of her field by calling for greater attention to the full range of human needs. She was equally committed to eradicating the root causes of war and the inequalities in the structure and values of society. In her search for a world in which human misery would be alleviated and human dignity restored, she came to adopt an understanding of society and an approach to social change that was grounded in Marxist theory.

Today her example inspires a new generation committed to the principles of social, civil and economic rights, social justice and peace. The Bertha Capen Reynolds Society is a national organization of hundreds of progressive workers in social welfare from all over the country. Founded in 1985, it is dedicated to promoting collective and individual action that upholds the rich legacy of Bertha Capen Reynolds' life and work. The Society is based on ten principles that reflect a concern for social justice, peace and alliance with progressive social movements.

## WHAT WE STAND FOR

1. To promote the study and practice of the progressive tradition in social welfare policy and practice.
2. To further communication, cooperative support and collaboration between and among social service workers, activists, scholars and the people who receive services, thereby reducing the gap between theory and practice and building a base for unified action.
3. To further the study of society and the state by developing a critique of the nature of social welfare, social services, social work and social change.
4. To develop and work on agendas for alternative social policies aimed at both incremental and fundamental social change.
5. To clarify the requirements and methods of humanistic direct practice aimed at supporting individual, community and broad social changes through advocacy, activism, transformation and empowerment
6. To stimulate exchanges among social service workers of diverse backgrounds who are employed, retired or students that will generate activism around social service and social policy issues, and will promote the expectation that social service workers should become active participants in the struggles of low income and other oppressed people
7. To further coalition work between the human service community, the left, peace and labor movements, organized community-based activism and with all social movements whose objectives are integral to the achievement of a just, caring, and humanistic society.
8. To expose and oppose the nature of the effects of racism, ageism, sexism and heterosexism, xenophobia and discrimination against persons with disabilities or psychiatric labels.
9. To promote the tradition, mission and methods of progressive social work by facilitating the presentation, publication and distribution of papers, books, monographs and by stimulating research and contributions to progressive publications including those of feminist, Marxist and anti-racist perspectives.
10. To educate members of the human service community about the life and work of Bertha Capen Reynolds. ■

## POVERTY OUTLAW VIDEO AVAILABLE

Many who attended the conference in St. Louis expressed interest in obtaining a copy of the film *Poverty Outlaw*. This video documentary is the story of hard choices posed by living in poverty without the protection of society's "safety net." It is told through the eyes of one woman in one neighborhood in Philadelphia. She never shows the audience her face nor reveals her name, but recounts her story with disarming honesty. Her life in Philadelphia has led her on a perilous descent from middle class security, to welfare, to abject poverty. Her fierce and tenacious drive to raise her children has brought her up against bureaucrats,

politicians and her own self-doubt. Eventually the choices she must make put her on the wrong side of the law. She has become an "outlaw." This documentary is the first to show, from the point-of-view of welfare recipients themselves, some of the devastating effects of "welfare reform." VHS cassettes of *Poverty Outlaw* are available from: Skylight Pictures, 330 West 42nd Street, 32nd floor, NY, NY 10036. Phone (212) 947-5333, Fax (212) 947-5401. Price per cassette \$10 welfare recipients and poverty rights activists; \$20 individuals; \$50 institutions; please add \$5 for shipping and handling, checks made payable to Skylight Pictures. ■

Revised 9/21/9

# REPORT ON THE 1997 CONFERENCE IN ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

The 1996 Bertha Capen Reynolds Society Conference sought to overcome the initial handicap of moving off the East Coast for the first time in a number of years. Their exciting program of 35 workshops on diverse, activist issues in social work, drew both the East and West coast social work communities to St. Louis. It also showed how many die-hard social work activists exist in the Midwest. About 150 people registered for the conference and many old members remarked how many more students came compared to years past.

The Bertha Capen Reynolds Society (BCRS) once more got in touch with its radical-left roots at the St. Louis University School of Social Service conference. The conference's St. Louis organizer, Maria Bartlett and the school's Dean, Sue Tebb, welcomed the attendees. BCR chair Fred Newdom then addressed the crowd in his usual entertaining way and introduced uncompromising socialist David Gil of Brandeis University as one of the conference's keynote speakers.

The thrust of Gil's discussion revolved around examples of how the words used in "free market" societies are often double-speak. He cited the "securities market which should be called the 'insecurities market'" and he asserted that "we have to change the public discourse."

His discussion further touched on the farce of "scarce resources," the domination by defense industry for exploitation, and the need to do away with self-censorship in discussing socialism. One of the most interestingly practical principles he applied to socialism was that everyone should have to do some "shit" work for the community so that everyone also gets to do some creative work.

He closed with examples of how discourse can be changed in more meaningful casual conversations such as really challenging someone with whether they really want to know when they ask how you are.

Diane Dijon, a former welfare recipient, current editor of *Survival News*, and co-author of "For Crying Out Loud," with Ann Withorn, followed Gil. She stated that Clinton took us back to Civil War times with welfare reform, after Reagan

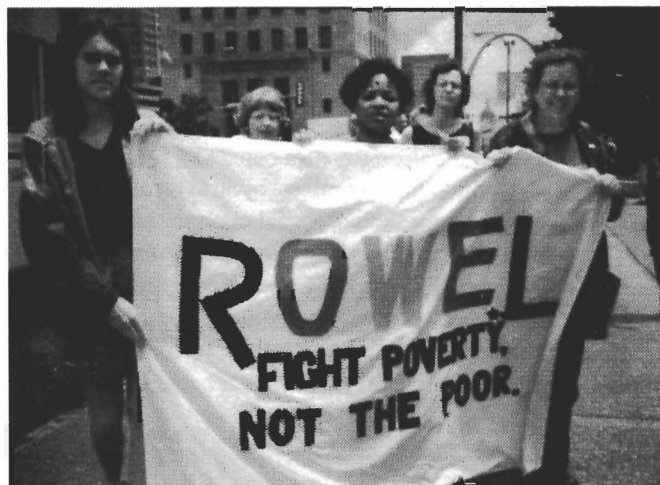
asserted that "people are poor because they want to be."

Dijon also analyzed the public discourse in stating that there's talk about "welfare dependency" yet we're all dependent on something, such as this earth. She further echoed Gil in citing the meaninglessness of many jobs as "dignity from our jobs is a joke."

She cited the forgotten biblical-based value of sharing and how welfare reform comes with other attacks on the entire working class, citing the erosion of workers' rights and management's pay raises. One of her concluding remarks was the understated notion not taken into consideration by welfare reformists, that "motherhood is work - hard work."

The workshops touched on many social work issues that could be grouped from its overlap with labor issues, welfare activism, multicultural issues, social work education, and countering the monopolized media. This writer attended a few sessions revolving around the media and presented a workshop on the subject before catching some labor issue workshops.

A "Publishing for Change" workshop discussed the monopolization of the book world by franchises such as Barnes and Noble and Borders. If anyone wondered why



televangelists such as Billy Graham get window space, conservative marketing departments now have the dominant say on what books reach the shelves.

After lunch that Friday, many BCR attendees joined ACORN at the City Hall to protest the closing of St. Louis's last public hospital. Dozens of social work students, professors and practitioners joined ACORN members in a spirited demonstration where aides to the Mayor were confronted on the City Hall steps. This protest was covered in the June 14th edition of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.

This writer's workshop focused on the interlocking of the boards of directors of the largest city's dailies and the top multi-national corporations. It further highlighted an eye-opening essay by Australian professor Alex Carey. The essay reviewed the history of how the National Association of Manufacturers went about setting the public discourse from the early 20th century on by spending up to billions of dollars a year just to attack anything remotely infringing on unfettered corporate profit-making from union rights to worker-safety, environmental-protection and consumer rights legislation.

In the second afternoon workshop sessions, the *Journal of Progressive*

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Human Services, out of University of New England Social Work, discussed how to help activist social work educators broaden social work education. This journal is one of the only scholarly social work journals that consistently covers community organizing. The NASW's *Social Work* recently put out a special issue devoted to community organizing – nice idea but a few years too late.

University of Houston's representatives, Susan Collins and Karen Stout, showed why the political emphasis of that social work school makes their activist group so strong. Houston's activist group is comprised of students, professors and workers.

On Saturday, keynote speaker Mary Kay Blakely showed why her savvy wit and sharp writing landed her on TV talk shows such as *Oprah*. She opened her talk stating the desire to put a cover on her book "Red, White, and Oh So Blue," of "the Statue of Liberty having a bad day, sitting on a park bench with her head in her hands." She read from her book many humorous and touching sections while also relating her brother's homelessness and eventual suicide due to mental illness. "Health care policy now jails the mentally ill before treating them," she remarked. She further mocked the mental health establishment's label of who's normal with the idea of having everyone wear signs saying "we aren't what you think." Blakely concluded with an example of how marketing has subsumed actual writing: "They've already put more money into the cover than they gave me to write the book."

Saturday's workshops included a feisty experience as the attendees challenged the presenters in an "Anti-racist Activism" session. After a presentation on journal-keeping to note personal observations of oppression, attendees Tonya Hutchinson and Janey Archey challenged the presenters on the issue of presenting papers and lectures without enough interactive discussion. They further questioned the lack of people of color among the presenters.

Presenters Janet Nes of St. Francis College, Jim Williams of Illinois, and Mike Dover of the University of Michigan School of Social Work, allowed a big change in their session's format to accommodate the dissent. While attention was paid to concerns of the participants, the energy may have better been used in hashing out why the flaws in the presentation are symptoms of general societal problems.

One explanation might be academia's over-emphasis on presenting "knowledge" through lectures and texts, versus "experiential" learning.



A second might be advocating for the "other" instead of merely supporting other people to advocate for their own issues.

Afternoon workshops included University of California-Sacramento's Arline Prigoff, who gave a harrowing overview of corporate hegemony through global governmental financial institutions. She cited examples of how the World Bank and International Monetary Fund direct countries to enforce draconian social spending cuts or be cut off from loans. She stated that the other "Structural Adjustment Policies" of these international institutions were for countries to:

produce for export, lower barriers to investment so that outside companies could buy up all their natural resources, and privatize all public assets.

A final workshop pointed to some of the possible problems with coalition organizing. There were two men representing the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). The others were the aforementioned Diane Dijon, who also is on the women's executive committee for the AFL-CIO, and Anne Withorn.

SEIU and Citizen's Action rep. Pat Harvey discussed building coalitions as not about being right but about building power and finding shared interests. While seeming to offer a lesson in the reality of organizing, he cited Clinton's new ruling applying pro-worker labor standards to workfare workers as a sign of progress. He probably did this to show labor's new influence they reportedly bought for millions of dollars (though this is small compared to corporate money funneling).

*Harper's Magazine* cited how environmentalists pressured Clinton to attach many environmental protection clauses to NAFTA, yet not a dollar has been spent to enforce any of them. And workfare workers still seem to be getting slave wages.

Harvey did inspire with accounts of getting beat up and arrested with striking miners, including AFL-CIO leader Rich Trumka. Withorn spoke movingly about spending time with Bertha Capen Reynolds in the final days of Reynolds' life. Reynolds resigned (was forced out) as Associate Dean of Smith College School for Social Work rather than give up support of the school's striking workers among many other matters of political principle.

Saturday night included an inspiring performance by a group of ex-offender women in a St. Louis support and service organization, most of which told stories of hardships including domestic abuse and addiction.

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# CHAPTER UPDATES:

## Houston

Although the summer months have historically slowed the Houston Chapter's activities down, a lot was accomplished during the summer of 1997.

For the second year in a row, BCRS members marched in the gay pride parade to publicly express our support for and celebrate with the local lesbian, gay, and trans-gendered community. For the first time in U.S. history, Houston's "Glowing with Pride" parade was held at night - illuminated festively with floats covered with lights.

Members also recently participated in "Citizenship Day," organized by the Houston Immigration and Refugee Coalition, an immigrants' rights organization. Throughout the day, over 50 immigrants filled out applications for citizenship with the help of volunteers and consulted attorneys regarding their particular case and possible pitfalls during the difficult and lengthy process of naturalization.

Finally, the Houston Chapter has already begun planning for next year's annual BCRS National Conference to be held at the University of Houston's Graduate School of Social Work. We look forward to seeing y'all there!

## Kalamazoo

The Kalamazoo Chapter is campus based and consists mostly of students. We meet every Wednesday at noon and about 20 to 25 attend. We work a lot in coalition with the progressive organizations on campus and in the community. In the community, we work especially with the Coalition of Compassion (church-based social justice organization) on issues of welfare and poverty. Our state legislators meet with us and we are able to effect state policies on poverty. For example, we worked with the groups to get money restored for a state program for poor children called "Strong Families, Safe Children."

With other groups on campus and in the community we are organizing speakers, an annual "peace week" and two action projects - one to close the

School of the Americas and one to work on issues of hunger here and internationally with Ox-Fam.

We are very much involved in the campaign of one of our members, Don Cooney, for the City Commission. We see this as a way to raise consciousness on social justice issues, mobilize progressive organizations and work for social justice at the local level.

## New York City

New York City BCR broke into a spate of frenzied activity with the arrival from Philadelphia of the Kensington Welfare Rights Union on their March for Our Lives from the Liberty Bell to the United Nations.

Over 85 foot-weary activists crossed into New York over the George Washington Bridge around noon Sunday, June 29th, coordinated by cell phones and accompanied by two vans carrying supplies, water, and children. Chapter members had volunteered to care for the children while their parents marched through the Bronx and into Manhattan to the Cathedral of St. John the Divine where they were to spend the night, with those too ill or weary staying with BCR "homestay" volunteers. We thought this day would be the most difficult, but the children and their chaperones - seasoned activists - required little assistance and no one needed a homestay. Monday turned out to be the big day. The 13 member NWRU contingent arrived from Michigan to use "homestay" showers, then adults marched on Wall Street while BCR members helped out with child care and banner making in Thompkins Square Park, then provided homemade fried chicken, macaroni salad, and ice cream for all comers at Judson Memorial Church.

On Tuesday, July 1st, everyone marched from Union Square Park at 14th Street to the United Nations at 46th Street, then held a tribunal at the Dag Hammarskjold Plaza, with Kensington. Teamsters Workfairness organizers and members, and the

Suffolk County New York Welfare Warriors, among others, testified that the United States is in violation of the International Declaration of Human Rights, which it has signed, by not providing food and shelter to its citizens. The march uptown, the comaraderie, the networking and coalition-building, and the tribunal testimony provided an exciting and hopeful boost for welfare reform organizing. An unexpected highlight of the day was the arrival of Dick Gregory, asking why he wasn't invited, and announcing that this was the sort of effort he wants to be part of. The bummer of the day was no media coverage, with the much-appreciated full coverage by Pacific Radio station WBAI providing the usual exception. The Fall issue of the *Social Justice Action Quarterly*, edited by John Potash, who marched with KWRU, does have a long story.

In naming BCR participants, we're bound to leave some out, so apologies in advance while we thank: Pat Brownell, Susanna Jones, Marilyn Moch, Fred Newdom, John Potash, Tim Scott, Diana Stokke, and to Diane Borko and Elaine Congress who carried the NYC NASW banner, for all your help. And welcome to you new members who saw our banner and signed on during the march and for whom this is your first newsletter! Others in the New York area interested in getting involved, please let us know!

## Penn School of Social Work

BCRS members attended the conference in St. Louis and joined in mobilization efforts coordinated by the Kensington Welfare Rights Union this summer. Ursula Bischoff, Patty Loff, Joe Surak, Travis Winter and Ann Heberger represented BCRS in the KWRU March For Our Lives; Ursula spoke at the kick-off rally, while Patty, Joe, Travis and Ann each marched at least one leg of the trip from the Liberty Bell to the United Nations. Patty also participated in "The Next Step" conference held in Philadelphia in early September, which focused on developing organizing skills and

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# WORKFARE AND THE NON-PROFITS?

## Myths & Realities

(Part One)

by Mimi Abramovitz with The Task Force on Welfare Reform  
New York City Chapter, National Association of Social Workers

(Editor's Note: Due to the length of this fact sheet, it will be printed in two consecutive issues of BCR Reports)

An estimated one million welfare recipients nationwide will be expected to be at work or involved in some kind of work activity by October 1997. During the next five years, another million recipients of Temporary Aid To Needy Families (TANF) (formerly Aid To Families With Dependent Children or AFDC) will fall into this category. The new welfare law allows but does not require states to have a workfare program. Nonetheless, workfare is expected to expand nationwide, placing new pressures on nonprofit agencies to increase their workfare participation. This fact sheet highlights some of the dilemmas that non-profit agencies can be expected to face.

Workfare is not a new concept! Ever since towns in colonial America auctioned off the poor to work for the lowest bidder or placed them in a workhouse, welfare officials have periodically resurrected the controversial practice of requiring public assistance recipients to exchange their benefits for "work." The emphasis on work in the new welfare law and the lack of low-skilled jobs in many communities has placed a high premium on expanding the current workfare program.<sup>1</sup> In 1994, only 30,000 out of 5 million public assistance recipients nationwide had a workfare assignment.<sup>2</sup> By mid-1997, the number of workfare slots in New York City alone stood at 37,000, up from 21,000 in 1996. In 1997-1998, the city expects to fill a total of 65,000 positions. Since each recipient must work at least 20 hours a week, to fill all the slots the city called-in more than 120,000 adults during fiscal year 1996-1997. Another 180,000 are expected to rotate through workfare "jobs" in fiscal year 1997-1998.<sup>3</sup>

New York and other cities will

continue to place most workfare recipients in city agencies where thousands already sweep streets, clean parks, and perform clerical tasks in exchange for their welfare grant. However, the mounting pressure to expand workfare – along with the political fire that workfare attracts – has sent city officials scrambling for more workfare slots elsewhere. Of the 65,000 workfare placements planned for 1997-1998, 10,000 are targeted for non-profit institutions.<sup>4</sup>

The growth of workfare within non-profits has already sparked an intense debate in New York City which currently operates the largest workfare program in the nation, called the Work Experience Program (WEP). Some non-profit agencies are eager to take on workfare "workers" believing they can do well by them. Others are ambivalent. Still others – more than 70 churches, synagogues and non-profit institutions – have refused to cooperate with the city's workfare program because they find it morally unjust.<sup>5</sup>

Here are some of the issues.

———— 1 ————

**MYTH:** Any Welfare Recipient Who Wants A Job Can Find One.

**FACT:** Job Seekers Exceed Available Jobs In Many Areas. The NYS Department of Labor predicts that New York City will have 91,170 new job openings a year until 2002 – less than one job for every eight job seekers. Similarly, California has projected some 269,000 new jobs per year through 2005, but expects job seekers to outnumber available jobs in all but one county.<sup>6</sup> According to one calculation, if every new job in New York City were given to a welfare recipient (470,000 in 8/96), it would

take 21 years for all recipients to be absorbed into the economy.<sup>7</sup> While there are some 355,000 entry level jobs in New York City, welfare recipients will have to compete for them with 278,000 jobless workers and countless numbers of employed people seeking additional part-time work. Of the new jobs created since January 1997, many of the 22,000 that required higher skills are being filled by suburbanites who have flocked to the city whose official unemployment rate reached 10% despite the robust economy.<sup>8</sup> The *New York Times*, found that the vast majority of the 8000 women who completed the city's 4 week job-readiness clubs "pounded the pavement with resumé's and newly fired dreams," but most failed to find work.<sup>9</sup>

**DILEMMA:** Nonprofits that accept workfare placements participate in a punitive system that raises the employment expectations of welfare recipients,<sup>10</sup> but does not address the need for job creation. Despite their best efforts, it will be very difficult for non-profits to offer real jobs to the vast majority of workfare participants.

———— 2 ————

**MYTH:** Non-Profits Provide Workfare Participants With A "Better" Experience

**FACT:** Not On All Fronts! The belief that non-profits provide "better" workfare slots than those at public agencies rests on two faulty assumptions: (1) that non-profits assign recipients to white and pink collar rather than blue collar tasks; and (2) that filing paper and answering phones is uplifting while de-littering the parks is demeaning.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, until we know if the law requires non-

profits to treat recipients as employees, few WEP workers will benefit from seniority, promotions, family and medical leave, Social Security and Unemployment Insurance payroll deductions, or other personnel rules.<sup>12</sup> If WEP workers are not employees, collective bargaining will also be beyond their reach.<sup>13</sup>

**DILEMMA:** While non-profits may genuinely seek to treat workfare participants with dignity they are limited by laws and policies that create strong incentives to take advantage of recipients and by staff who may treat WEP participants disrespectfully because they lack the status of regular workers. The harsh realities of workfare cannot be smoothed over by the belief that white collar workfare assignments in non-profits are "nicer" than blue-collar city work. There is no such thing as degrading work, only degrading pay and working conditions.

— 3 —

**MYTH:** Non-Profits Can Provide Workfare Participants With Effective Training

**FACT:** Workfare Interferes with Better Education and Training Opportunities. New York City regularly sends recipients to workfare placements without assessing their literacy levels, English proficiency, educational attainment, recent work history or job interests.<sup>14</sup> Presuming that everyone on welfare needs a "work experience" to become "job ready," skilled recipients are made to answer the phone, serve food or sweep the floor. While people with limited literacy or highly marginal job skills may benefit from learning how to find a job, "write a resumé" or "show up at work on time," this is not the case for many others such as the laid-off Coney Island Hospital nurse who ended up cleaning the parks. In addition to undercutting existing skills, workfare obligations prevent recipients from developing new ones. The City sends most recipients to workfare rather than to programs which offer real training and job placement.

Workfare has caused many recipients to drop out of GED, literacy, and English as a second Language (ESL) programs. It has also forced some 9000 recipients attending City University of New York ( CUNY) out of college. Many, like one mother of three with a 3.72 grade point average had to give up studying to become a teacher to take a workfare assignment.<sup>15</sup> Making CUNY a workfare worksite will help individual students. But it does not change the punitive nature of workfare.

**DILEMMA:** Some non-profit agencies provide useful training experiences for one or more workfare participants, but cooperating with workfare may bring harm to the large majority of recipients. Can the non-profits train all the 10, 000 workfare participants in the non-profit pipeline? What about those among the thousands of recipients who are in less protected settings in non-profit or city agencies? Do the benefits for a few outweigh the human costs of a program that keeps the poor from large scale education and training programs that might actually lift them out of poverty and off welfare?

— 4 —

**MYTH:** Having Workfare "Workers" Helps Non-Profits Make Up For Budget Cuts.

**FACT:** Workfare Participants Are Not (And Should Not Be) Cost Free. Non-profits participate in workfare to help recipients. They also hope workfare will help them stretch already tight budgets and restore critical services that have been gutted by government cutbacks. However, workfare incurs its own expenses. The directors of 1380 well-established non-profit agencies in 13 U.S. cities with large welfare caseloads, and good experience with workfare participants, report that the use of staff to train and supervise workfare participants and other such costs are making them cautious about accepting workfare placements.<sup>16</sup> If the U.S. Labor Department ruling that work-fare participants are entitled to minimum

wage law protection pre-va-ils, can the costs of documenting their hours, cutting a regular check, buying liability coverage, and paying for overtime and fringe benefits for workfare workers be far behind?

**DILEMMA:** Although many non-profits take workfare recipients to help them become more employable and/or to make up for staff shortages, dwindling funds, reams of welfare department red tape, and new costs leave many agencies wondering if the demands of workfare will compromise their ability to treat workfare participants fairly and to provide proper service to clients.<sup>17</sup> In addition to requiring more organizational resources, acceptance of workfare allows the city to expand the program with minimal opposition. It also permits city, state and federal officials to downplay the impact of government cutbacks and to ignore the true causes of poverty: race and sex discrimination, the lack of jobs, and the absence of a living wage.

— 5 —

**MYTH:** Non-Profit Workfare Assignments Yield Permanent Jobs

**FACT:** The Prospect of Moving From Workfare to a "Real" Job is Slim. The available data indicate that a mere 1.6% of NYC workfare participants working for a non-profit found a job through that site: 6% found employment on their own.<sup>18</sup> Other reports show that from July 1995 to August 1996, only 5% of the 80,000 work eligible home relief recipients found a public or private sector job, including jobs secured independently.<sup>19</sup> New York City has reported that 18.5% of all AFDC and 15.1% of all Home Relief recipients assigned to workfare and other work programs moved into regular jobs. However, instead of actually tracking what happened to participants, the city counted as "successfully placed in employment" cases that were closed for any reason after being called into a work activity, as well as applications for public assistance that were rejected and withdrawn.<sup>20</sup>



**DILEMMA:** Workfare not only fails to produce much permanent employment for most recipients but it can cost "regular" employees their jobs. Workfare may help financially strapped agencies lower their labor costs. But accepting 10,000 more workfare participants into the non-profit sector will mean fewer paying and permanent jobs for all workers. It may also reduce agency morale as waged workers begin to fear for their own jobs.

— 6 —

**MYTH:** Non-Profits Can Become Workfare Sites Without Compromising Humanitarian Values.

**FACT: Workfare Is Not A Win-Win Situation.** Many non-profits accept workfare participants hoping to provide them with a good experience or at least to help recipients hold onto their welfare grant. However, non-profits may end up policing the very people they want to help.<sup>21</sup> Non-profits must monitor the attendance of workfare participants, report on their behavior, and provide other information to the city that can result in severe penalties for recipients. From July to December 1995, 13,563 out of 50,094 workfare participants were sanctioned and stood to lose their cash, Food Stamp, and Medicaid benefits for some period of time.<sup>22</sup> Since then, the number of sanctioned cases has grown enormously.<sup>23</sup>

**DILEMMA:** Instead of being seen as an ally or advocate, clients and communities may conclude that the non-profit agency is an extension of an already intrusive bureaucracy or just one more social control agent.

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Mimi Abramovitz, Professor, Hunter School of Social Work. Copies available from NASW, 15 Park Row, 20th fl., NY, NY 10038. Ph: 212-577-5000; Fax: 212-577-6279. Copies may be made and distributed.

Part Two of **WORKFARE AND THE NON-PROFITS? Myths & Realities** will be printed with the next issue of BCR Reports.

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## CHAPTER UPDATES

*Continued from page 6*

methods of documenting human rights violations flowing from the implementation of welfare reform.

Michael Reisch has made several presentations on the impact of welfare reform during the past few months: along with Mark Stern, he co-keynoted the University of Pennsylvania's annual Alumni Day conference focusing on various dimensions of welfare reform in May. He also made presentations at a conference sponsored by the Friends Neighborhood Guild, and to an interdisciplinary program for social work, law, nursing and medical students at Penn called "Bridging the Gaps." Along with Janice Andrews of Minnesota, he continues to research and write a history of radicalism in social work. ■

## REPORT ON THE 1997 CONFERENCE IN ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

*Continued from page 5*

The final session on Sunday morning offered a session by Mary Bricker-Jenkins of Temple University and Tara Colon from the Kensington Welfare Rights Union. They presented a role play of a social work session showing the limitations of even the most competent and best intentioned clinical work if it avoids dealing with the political context of the work. They called for a true collaboration between client and worker and called on human service workers to form an "underground railroad" in support of clients.

If next year's conference in Houston is half as stimulating as this one in St. Louis was, it's highly recommended. ■

*This article was donated by Social Justice Action Quarterly by BCRS member John Potash. For more info, and to order call John Potash at: (212) 222-9081 or email: jlp24@columbia.edu*

## JOB VACANCY SURVEYS

**A**s a founding member of the National Jobs for All Coalition, the BCRS should participate in social action projects of the Coalition. At present, NJFAC is advocating enactment of legislation which would mandate the Labor Department to conduct Job Vacancy Surveys as a complement to regular Unemployment Surveys.

Job Vacancy Surveys could provide information on the numbers of job vacancies and the qualifications required for available jobs, for local, state, and national labor markets. Such data could be used to challenge the myth that everyone who wants to, can find appropriate work. This information is especially important in view of the coercive practices of the public welfare system. Revealing the actual gap between the numbers of job vacancies and the numbers of people needing work, be they on welfare or merely unemployed, could strengthen arguments against terminating welfare support, and for job creation by public authorities. According to the Congressional Progressive Caucus, the cost of a job vacancy survey is about \$12 million each time it is conducted, a small price to pay for such important information.

The budget resolution passed recently by the Congress and signed by the President requests the Department of Labor to support, through its research budget, job vacancy surveys on an experimental basis in a number of communities.

BCRS members should urge their Representatives in the Congress to support the enactment of job vacancy surveys. Representative George Brown is taking initiative on promoting such legislation. His assistant, Bill Grady, is handling the legislation and can provide information. Grady's telephone is 202-225-6161, or 1-800-972-3524. ■

*by David Gil  
Member Executive Committee  
National Jobs for All Coalition*

### HOUSTON IN JUNE?

**Bertha Capen Reynolds Society**

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The Bertha Capen Reynolds Society (BCRS) is a national organization of progressive workers in social welfare dedicated to a concern for social justice, peace, and alliance with movements for fundamental change.

The working title of the 1998 BCRS Conference is **DARING TO STRUGGLE TOGETHER: LET'S TALK, LET'S ACT**. The conference will include examining individual and collective strategies for advancing a progressive human rights agenda.

Regional issues of national concern will be highlighted with a strong emphasis on moving beyond discussion of problems to generating solutions that lead to action.

For more information or to receive a Call for Proposals, contact: Susan Collins, 622 Studewood, Houston, TX 77007, (713) 861-8730; email: FBFHC@aol.com

**Y'ALL COME!**

# DRUG WARS AND RACIAL SENTENCING DISPARITIES

by Keith M. Kilty and Alfred Joseph

**W**ith the advent of the Reagan-Bush years came the contemporary "war on drugs" and a mounting frenzy that has had a profound impact on the lives of black men in American society. This latest round of the "war on drugs," though, is nothing new. It began gradually with the Harrison Act of 1914, which was a tax and registration act for opium and related drugs. That first drug law was not intended to bring about prohibition of opiates. In fact, alcohol was the drug of most concern at the time, and the drug war frenzy in the early part of this century was aimed at the prohibition of alcohol, a goal that was realized for 13 years with passage of the 18th Amendment.

It is unfortunate that we did not learn more about the consequences, both intended and unintended, of making war on social problems. Crime and a loss of respect for the law proliferated during the Prohibition Era (1920-1933). Thousands of people ended up in prison for violations of the new laws, including a steady increase in imprisonments for violation of the Harrison Act. In fact, there were more people in federal prisons for narcotics violations than for alcohol violations by 1928. Perhaps more disturbing was the corruption of the legal system and its workers. In the first 11 years of the Prohibition Era, 9% of the appointments to the Prohibition Bureau were dismissed for bribery, extortion, theft, and other crimes, while 67% were dismissed "without prejudice" because crimes could not be proven.

Rather than learning from the experiences of the Prohibition Era, crusaders against the use of other drugs gradually took on a prohibitionist stance against these other substances. Legal restrictions against other drugs started to emerge in the decades following the repeal of Prohibition, but not all drugs were targeted. Rather, at various times concerns arose about some particular

substance, often linked to some particular group that was believed to use the substance at an alarming rate. Following in this tradition, we see that today the media give the impression that only blacks use or sell illegal drugs in the United States.

Hysterical connections between race and drug use have occurred throughout the twentieth century. At one point or another, many racial and ethnic groups in this country have been victimized by being linked as a group with illicit drug use, often without a shred of evidence to support these racist fears. As noted earlier, criminalization of drug use began with the Harrison Act of 1914, which revolved around popular images of Chinese immigrants smoking opium. Even contemporary concerns about blacks and "crack" (or cocaine) are merely a revisiting of history. During the first two decades of this century, newspapers feverishly raised the specter of black men becoming crazed on cocaine, when in fact there was no evidence to support these fears. A decade later, hysteria about Mexicans and marijuana served as a justification for increasing legal penalties for marijuana use. Then came alarms about urban gangs (particularly black and Hispanic) and opiate use in the 1950s and 1960s.

Drug wars may be symbolic events, but all wars, even symbolic ones, inevitably produce casualties. One of the more significant outcomes of the contemporary "war on drugs" has been the rapid escalation in incarceration rates, particularly for African American males. Nearly one out of every three young (age 20 to 29) black men is now in prison or on parole or probation. That amounts to a staggering 827,440 individuals. Drug arrests, mainly for possession, are largely responsible for those numbers, with a 500% increase in incarcerated drug offenders between 1983 and

1993. In fact, while blacks make up only 12% of the total U. S. population and 13% of drug users, they account for 35% of all drug possession arrests, 55% of all drug possession convictions, and 74% of all prison sentences for drug possession. If Hispanics are included, then nearly 90% of all people sentenced to state prison for drug possession are minorities. What is perhaps most striking about these numbers is the fact that drug cases peaked during the Reagan and Bush administrations, dropping during the first two years of the Clinton administration.

The total number of people now incarcerated equals nearly 2% of the adult male labor force, and an almost identical number are employed by the criminal justice system, including police, prison guards, judges, attorneys, etc. The total cost is about \$100 billion a year. Indirectly, this growth in "employment" is expected to help with "welfare reform." According to a recent article in the *Columbus Dispatch*, three new prisons will be completed in Ohio in the next two years, with a need for some 1,500 to 2,000 additional employees. A manager with a "workfare" type program in Ohio reported that his program had already placed over 100 welfare recipients in prison jobs. These jobs are especially popular because of stability, salary, and benefits.

We believe that it is institutional racism that is the dynamic which has operated for the past decade to produce outrageous and unjust sentencing disparities between whites and blacks for drug offenses: institutional racism that is covert and unintentional. In 1986 and 1988, the U.S. Congress for the first time established minimum mandatory sentences for federal cocaine offenses. The 1986 legislation applied to trafficking, but the 1988 legislation applied the minimum mandatory sentence to simple possession. The critical element was a distinction between crack and powder cocaine. According to the U.S. Sentencing Commission, "The [1986] Act treated powder cocaine differently than crack

Continued on next page ▶

# PRISONER UPDATE FROM THE COMMITTEE FOR INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS INQUIRY:

**T**he International Concerned Family and Friends of Mumia Abu-jamal has issued a call to endorse the PEOPLES INTERNATIONAL TRIBUNAL FOR JUSTICE FOR MUMIA ABU-JAMAL in order to investigate a criminal conspiracy to deny justice and take the life of Mumia. The Tribunal will be made up of an international panel of prominent jurists, political leaders, labor and community activists, cultural figures

and others concerned with social justice. The Tribunal, scheduled for December 6, 1997, can bring to the world's attention the case of Mumia and the broader pattern of injustice and the death penalty which this case represents.

Your active participation and support can help magnify the impact of the work of the Tribunal. To lend the name of organizations to this effort, or for more information or a list

of sponsoring organizations to date, contact the Friends at P.O. Box 19709, Philadelphia, PA 19143, E-mail: Mumia@aol.com or check their Web Site: [Http://www.Mumia.org](http://www.Mumia.org).

The Justice Department has dismissed the case of the Immigration and Naturalization Service against Olga Gonzalez of the Children's Defense Fund in New York City. As wonderful as this news is, thousands continue to be deported unjustly under the Effective Death Penalty and Anti-Terrorism Act, and this Act hangs over all of us as it allows the INS to declare as terrorists anyone affiliated with an organization who the INS declares to be terrorist. To join the struggle to repeal the Act, contact the National Committee Against Repressive Legislation (NCARL), 1313 W. 8th St., #313, Los Angeles, CA 90017, fax: 213-484-0266 or e-mail, ncarl@aol.com.

The Mercy Committee in Granada decided not to release Phyllis Coard, although her native country of Jamaica offered to accept her. We have not heard from her in some time, but we understand that the publicity surrounding the call for her release did result in a considerable improvement in her treatment, the last we heard.

As for the Palestinian human service workers held in Israeli prisons, the news is mixed. As you probably read in the papers, Rula Abu Duhou was released last Spring along with all the other women prisoners, and she has returned to social work school. Riad Essa Yunis Za'qiq was released in June after a year of administrative detention without trial, and his employer, the Defence for Children International, asks us to say to all of you who wrote and organized on his behalf that "Your support was influential and helped in pressuring the Israeli Government to release Riad". The Israeli government also stated it has determined that he is not, after all, affiliated with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, which was the reason for his detention.

However, we have now learned of another human service worker,

## DRUG WARS AND RACIAL SENTENCING DISPARITIES

*Continued from page 8*

cocaine by establishing what has come to be known as the 100-to-1 quantity ratio between the two forms of cocaine. In other words, it takes one hundred times as much powder cocaine as crack cocaine to trigger the same mandatory penalties. Thus, a person convicted of selling 500 grams of powder cocaine is subject to the same five-year mandatory minimum sentence as a person selling five grams of crack cocaine, while a person convicted of selling 5,000 grams (five kilograms of powder) is subject to the same ten-year mandatory minimum sentence as a person who sells 50 grams of crack." In 1988, Congress introduced a mandatory minimum sentence for simple possession of five grams or more of crack cocaine.

It should come as little surprise that blacks are most likely to be arrested for crack cocaine offenses while whites are most likely to be arrested for powder cocaine offenses. Even though blacks are arrested more frequently for crack cocaine possession or dealing, whites are more likely than blacks to use the drug in either form. Yet the federal courts, the U.S. Congress, and other authorities, including social scientists assert that there is no racial bias in sentencing practices. According to the U. S. Sentencing Commission, "The current

penalty structure results in a perception of unfairness and inconsistency."

Is that, indeed, the case? Are these laws racially neutral and merely a reflection of the "realities" of the crack cocaine marketplace? Is the problem indeed simply one of "perception?" Some experts argue that crack cocaine is more dangerous as a substance and is used under more dangerous circumstances. Yet crack is to powder cocaine as wine is to beer, and the use of crack under dangerous circumstances is a throw-back to the 1960s "culture of violence" notion of life in the inner-city. What these drug policies amount to are institutional racism that has had a profound impact on the black community. These drug policies need immediate change. There is definitely a perception of unfairness and inconsistency because that is precisely how drug laws are applied to black and white.

For more information, see K. M. Kilty and A. Joseph, "Institutional Racism and Sentencing Disparities for Cocaine Possession," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, Toronto, August 1997. (Kilty can be contacted by email at [kilty.1@osu.edu](mailto:kilty.1@osu.edu) and Joseph at [josephal@muohio.edu](mailto:josephal@muohio.edu)). ■

*Continued on next page* ▶

# Letters to the Editor

Central issues of what it means to be a progressive social worker have been raised in the B.C.R.S. journal. These include the last issue's article by Michael Dover, "Activism, Professionalism and the Future of B.C.R.S."; and the Spring 1996 article, "Progressive and Professionalism a Contradiction in Terms" by Fred Newdom; as well as the Fall & Winter, 1996-1997 article by Ann Withorn titled, "Professionalism Vs Radicalism and the future of BCRS."

I understand and to some degree I agree with the criticism of professionalism and licensure in the field of social work. An eliteness exists: poverty sometimes gets looked at in pathological terms. It is difficult to hear this criticism from academics, since academia requires an elite degree to enter. I feel strongly that it is time to accept these structures and find other ways of joining with and

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## **PRISONER UPDATE FROM THE COMMITTEE FOR INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS INQUIRY:**

*Continued from page 6*

Ibrahim Issa Moh'd Ibrighith, with the YMCA Rehabilitation Centre in Beit Sahour, who has been in administrative detention for 18 months. The YMCA asks us to please pressure the Israeli authorities not only to release Ibrahim but to cease administrative detention altogether. Such pressure would also assist a move in the Israeli legislature to sharply curtail the practice, including placing a three month limit for detention without charges. Please write to Benjamin Netanyahu, Prime Minister of Israel, 1 Kaplan St., Bakarya, Jerusalem, 91007 Israel FAX: (011) 972-2-664-838 or write: c/o Embassy of Israel, 3414 International Dr. NW, Washington, D.C., 20008, and cc:Israeli Ministry of Justice, Attn: Tamar Gaulan, Salah-a-din St., P.O. Box 1087, Jerusalem 91010 or FAX: (011) 972-2-586-9473. ■

radicalizing social workers.

There are issues of licensure and status that we need to talk about, and that we need to hold in tension with the very structure of society driven by status and professional degrees. Yes, licensure keeps us separate from our clients, but in many cases so does where we live, where we send our kids to school, the class we grew up in, and even our gender, and the color of our skin. It is impossible to both interact and change a society while totally divorcing ourselves from its very nature. I would argue that our professional status and licensure can give us the legitimacy to help change the very policy and structures that are oppressive. It is not easy to side step or overcome these issues. We need to constantly struggle with them together.

I also think the strategy of undermining professionalism is unrealistic. Asking a profession to give up status when members are feeling increasingly marginalized at work, is a call that is difficult for social workers to take seriously.

All through society links need to be established between the working class and the middle class. We need to join together to redistribute wealth from the top 10% of the population that controls 70% of the wealth. Seen this way, the anti-professionalism movement becomes, in practicality, a wedge issue between the poor and social workers, rather than finding natural links between them. Inroads need to be made for the poor into the profession, and licensed social workers need to join the poor in protest over inhumane conditions in our society.

It think a clear natural link between social workers and the poor is labor issues. Many social workers who have families can't make a living wage. Case loads have increased from 20 to 30 clinical contact hours per week in the last few years. Jobs are turning from full time with benefits to fee for service (parts work) or contingent work.

If this list sounds familiar, it reflects exactly what is happening to the working class and parts of the middle class. In fact, the same war being waged at the poor is also being waged at human service providers. I am an example of this. My former position went fee for service. Since then, I have only been able to find part time work and I have two children to support. Losing worker rights presents a clear way for social workers to identify with each other and work together.

A powerful (popular education) image is that of a social worker and a worker standing on their respective assembly lines that are constantly being sped up, and being paid less for each part they produce. I know that most social workers in agencies can identify with this image in a way that would cause them to look critically at their practice.

The most obvious place to start working with social workers is their own struggle for rights. This would be metaphorically "starting where the client is at". This struggle in and of itself could become a transforming experience for workers. The transformation could be the discovery of all oppressed peoples' struggles. We need to make the connection between social workers and all workers over and over again. This will allow us to join with our clients in a tangible way. What is a radical and what is radical work are important issues that we need to keep discussing and looking into our own hearts to discover.

There need to be more links between organized labor and social work. Both groups have much to gain from an alliance. An obvious strategy could be to promote education about unions and labor policy in social work schools. Rick Colbath-Hess is currently putting together a committee to organize around these issues. Rick Colbath-Hess can be contacted at: E-mail [RCCOLHESS@aol.com](mailto:RCCOLHESS@aol.com), or 79 Amory street Cambridge, Ma 02139. (617) 354-6471 ■

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## HOW TO ORGANIZE A BCRS CHAPTER:

"How to Organize a BCRS Chapter" organizing packets are available by contacting Steve at Communication Services at (518) 463-3522, 8 Thurlow Terrace, Albany, NY 12203. 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 more! Allow 4 weeks for delivery. ■

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