

BCR REPORTS

A Publication of the
Bertha Capen Reynolds Society

Volume IX, Number 1



Spring, 1997

"GUILTY, YOUR HONOR, BUT NOT GUILTY ENOUGH"

by Fred Newdom

Have social workers become such a powerful force for the Left in this country that their influence must be the target of a campaign by Right-wing policy types? To read James Payne's article ("Absence of Judgment") in the Heritage Foundation journal, Policy Review, (November-December 1996) one would think so.

Payne warns that social workers are ideally placed to undermine the country's long-needed (from his perspective) reform of welfare programs which will force people to work for their benefits, at the same time that the benefits are reduced, constrained, and made ever more punitive. He lays this fear at the door of the schools of social work and the professional organizations (APWA and NASW) which, respectively, socialize students into a non-judgmental attitude toward the poor and advocate for progressive social policies. If this were a trial with Mr. Payne as prosecutor and judge (a role he seems to think social workers should play), I'd be forced to plead: "Guilty, but not guilty enough."

He is correct to state that social work schools do try to teach a non-judgmental attitude and to place individual problems in an environmental context. Sounds good to me. Yet, it also seems to me that the Schools also tend to be similarly non-judgmental about capitalism, economic injustice and class issues. The environment we ask students to consider tends, most often, to be family and community; occasionally one's gender or racial identity; seldom, one's sexual

orientation; and, hardly ever, the economy. That's a mighty narrow view of the environment but clearly not narrow enough to suit Mr. Payne.

He is also correct to note the policy positions of APWA and NASW in opposition to much of welfare reform and many other pieces of egregious legislation. If only we were more effective, we might not be in a position of asking social workers to do body counts and other forms of damage assessment. Yet, we do know that you can't fight something with nothing – bad policy needs to be countered by strong alternatives. I'm still waiting for the profession to take a lead in developing the kind of client/labor/worker/community alliance which might advance proposals more radical than improved child care and transitional health coverage.

Beyond the specifics of Mr. Payne's indictment of social work, though, the question that intrigues me is: "why attack social work?" What is it that social work represents that the Right sees the profession as an important target? It's kind of flattering to be taken so seriously. It reminds me of those days gone by when I would be marching against the Vietnam War behind the banner of the student union at the school of social work I attended. An occasional, inspired heckler would call out: "You mean socialist worker, don't you?" Our response would be something along the lines of: "Not yet, but we're working on it." Thirty years later, it's safe to say that social workers are still much more in the

mode of the liberal welfare state than of class-conscious allies of low-wage and no-wage workers.

So what is the Heritage Foundation concerned about? One thing that occurs to me is that the political debate has shifted so far to the right that social workers may actually look like the Left. We may be the objects of some "Operation Mop-up" designed to eliminate the last vestiges of resistance to Right-wing social policy hegemony. In this analysis, there are virtually no other groups of the managerial class playing an even mildly oppositional role when it comes to welfare policy.

Another take on this is that social workers are the people who will have to implement welfare reform and that this may be part of an effort to scare the profession into playing the social control role that social workers have played so often. Accusing us of being on the Left fringes of polite society may be enough to instill a sense of status-panic sufficient to have us take our assigned places in the welfare system. Refuse and the threat of a new McCarthyism may become a reality.

Mr. Payne and his sponsors at the Heritage Foundation see social workers as enemies of the state. In countries throughout the world, the welfare state and the workers within it have stood against the imperial state. Perhaps it is time for workers in what is left of the American welfare state to do likewise. I am proud to be an enemy of the state. Join me. Social workers of the world unite, you have nothing to lose but your license. ■

THOUGHTS ON WORKFARE

Marilynn Moch

Realistic and humane parameters for social policy debate on work would range between versions of Jobs For All and various guaranteed minimum income plans. But, in the United States at least, such is not and never has been the case. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 requires states seeking federal Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF) dollars to make recipient participation in approved work programs a condition for receipt of welfare (commonly referred to as "workfare") for all but a small class of teen-age mothers in educational programs. Applicants or recipients for welfare with disabilities or illnesses, however chronic or recurring, that do not qualify them for OASDI or SSI or with young, old, or ill family members requiring home care are not from the baseline calculation of participation rates required from the states and are therefore seldom and only reluctantly exempted.

Some states may have up to 20% of workfare participants in qualifying training and educational programs, but since these 20% are still included in the baseline, there is no particular incentive for states to encourage such programs. While the Act has flowery language about "welfare to work", there is nothing about it requiring or even assisting states to prepare to help poor parents, (overwhelmingly, though, not exclusively, single women), get into or return to the work force. The most well meaning and even high level discussions in public welfare agencies consist of encouraging "concurrent activities". With recipients of welfare facing a five-year lifetime benefit level whose clock has already been ticking for several months - agency staff are being trained to be "job counselors", telling recipients, "You must work for your check. If workfare does not meet your needs, what else can you do *at the same time*, to help you to get a job?" Workfare, according to the act,

is intended to instill work habits of getting to the job regularly and on time, putting the job before personal and family problems, and learning to work as a team, including accepting and following instructions, and getting a good work recommendation for a potential employer. If these are not your issues, or if they are and workfare is not resolving them, then do something else, on your own, while you do workfare.

Everything about this Act places it squarely within the predicted response of a capitalist society to a period of high employment, with upward pressure on wages. Pushing the welfare population into the workforce, first with workfare, then with the pressure, followed by the reality, of loss of benefits, adds millions of workers, never counted in the official 5.5% unemployment rate since they were not considered as looking for jobs, forced to work for the lowest wages of all - their welfare benefits. With the insecurity of workers already cited as a key factor in limiting wage demands, adding workfare increases that insecurity along with the push off the welfare roles adding to the reality of those desperate for work. Security companies, home health care, temp agencies, and companies willing to hire welfare recipients with government incentives are already assuring that recipients can be pushed into the job market at rates even lower than welfare, often without benefits, and with no skills or training to prevent their being pushed out of the market again as soon as the unemployment rate rises.

The welfare recipients I work with want to work. While I am depressed and angry and want to fight, for many of them the current Act is largely "same old, same old". Welfare has a cyclic history of encouraging training-to-work programs whose funding is discontinued mid-stream, and of funding and de-funding child care assistance to enable mothers to attend

school or training. As Fred Newdom and Mimi Abramovitz pointed out in the Spring 1992 *BCR Reports* in "Talking Back to the Welfare Bashers" half of the 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. They know the vagaries of the job market and of public aid. They want to know, and they need to know, how this latest iteration of welfare affects them, what is available to them and what to avoid. I cannot ignore, either, that many of my clients who were not already in school or training do like workfare. Everyday I hear, "I love this job," and "I like that I am helping," and "I feel good to be working for my check."

Given the economic and political climate and the realities of the lives of those involved in workfare, what is an appropriate response for progressive human service workers and welfare rights activists to workfare?

While we certainly must continue to insist that the parameters of current policy discussion and implementation is misplaced, our first responsibility is to those affected by workfare. States have a great deal of flexibility in implementing and supplementing workfare. We need to learn what the rules are, and whose rules they are. Those involved in workfare bring their own experience and need. Activists and allies need to provide accurate knowledge, organization and a commitment to work with, not just for, welfare recipients in workfare.

In my own city of New York, we are fortunate to have the organizing commitment and capacity of the labor unions, ACORN, and others. Their success in helping some in workfare to organize for better working conditions and pay is not only good for those ready to organize, but provides publicity and an educational resource for work with others in workfare. But most welfare recipients in workfare just want a job or get back to school or have their need for welfare accepted while they care for family members

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THOUGHTS ON WORKFARE

(cont'd.)

or struggle with health problems. Whatever our own objective, we must start with theirs. We need to share strategies that are effective through all the local variations of workfare to help recipients to make their own decisions and to provide support to change the rules at the appropriate level of government, to help to organize to provide information, to do what it takes to move forward.

The task is not easy. Not only is the job made more difficult by decentralizing the rules, but the intent of the Act remains to push this population into the workforce at the bottom. The Heritage Foundation knows that social workers can be a potent force against this intent and has launched a nationwide campaign in ads, op-ed columns, and editorials, warning that social workers will be an active force against these changes. Let's prove them right. Add to the dialogue by sending your experiences and strategies to the *BCR Reports*. ■

WORTH READING

The New Temperance: The American Obsession with Sin and Vice, by David Wagner, Westview Press, 1997 (\$16.00). "The war on drugs... the campaign against smoking cigarettes... censoring the internet and Calvin Klein jean ads... bipartisan lectures about the dangers of teen sex... constant warnings about food and fat ... are all examples of what David Wagner terms the 'New Temperance.'

While the obsession with personal behavior in America over the last two decades has sharply reversed the liberatory trend of the 1960's and early '70's, *The New Temperance* argues that this behavior parallels rather closely the 19th-century and early 20th-century social movements such as the Temperance, Social Purity, and Vice and Vigilance movements. (from the promotional flyer) ■

BEYOND THE BAND-AID: CONFRONTING MEAN STREET POLITICS

For the first time since Kalamazoo, BCRS is holding its annual conference in the midwest. Saint Louis University's School of Social Service is co-sponsoring the conference with the University's Center for Social Justice. Join us in the heartland for what promises to be a conference rich in content with over 40 workshops and roundtable discussion groups.

All day Friday and Saturday we will offer consecutive workshops on welfare. Other workshops will include the topics of racism, affirmative action, homophobia, homelessness and housing rights, activism, international issues, and hands-on strategies for action and social change. On Friday we will form caucuses at the end of the day based on our areas of interest. New to BCRS this year will be presentations addressing issues of the print media by an independent book store, the *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, and the *Social Justice Action Quarterly*.

A free-standing photography exhibit by inner city kids will be on display all weekend along with the Walk of Pain depicting stories of health consumers and providers. On Saturday, a group called Let's Start will present "Stories of Hope," a dramatic portrait of the lives of women before prison, and after the process of Let's Start.

Our kick-off speaker will be David Gil on Friday morning. David will give us an economic and political analysis which will help frame the weekend. Mary Kay Blakely, author of *Red, White, and Oh So Blue*, a memoir of a political depression, will be our featured speaker on Saturday. And Mary Bricker Jenkins will facilitate a Sunday morning discussion.

Saturday night we plan to have an outdoor BBQ with live music provided by a band from the Harbor Lights Men's Shelter. And they are great!!!

Be sure and register early as we have only 100 dorm rooms reserved for out-of-towners. Cost per night is approximately \$26-\$30.

Don't miss the chance to hear great speakers, and get involved with a wide variety of workshops, and more!

Contact Maria Bartlett at Saint Louis University for more information: 314-977-2717, FAX: 314-977-2731, E-Mail: bartlemc@sluvcu.slu.edu.

"Meet Us In St. Louis!"

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

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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 *BCR Reports* is **June 15, 1997**.

A Review of *For Crying Out Loud*,

edited by Diane Dujon and Ann Withorn, 1996,
South End Press, 116 St., Botolph Street, Boston, MA 02115.

by Jackie Dee King

In the same month that the federal government abandoned its 60-year commitment to welfare as an entitlement for single mothers and children who need assistance, a powerful new book has been published which should rally us all for the long fight ahead.

In *For Crying Out Loud*, Diane Dujon and Ann Withorn bring together the voices of welfare mothers, activists and scholars in a brilliant collection. This volume appears ten years after the first version of this book was published, edited by Ann and another collaborator, Rochelle Lefkowitz. The political climate has worsened dramatically since then.

One purpose of that collection was to present a wide range of voices, from women in very different life situations – rural and urban, young and old – to show the depth and breadth of women's poverty. In the new book, the focus has narrowed to single mothers who are seeking or surviving on welfare. The purpose is to show how these women and their families are endangered by the current attacks on the welfare system, and how their status both reflects and influences that of all women. As Withorn writes in the introduction, "no woman is any more secure than a single mother is secure."

One great strength of the book is how openly personal the editors dare to be. The decision to include their own feelings, and to talk about welfare in frankly personal terms, springs from the editors' assessment that many working and middle class Americans are engaged in an elaborate game of *denial* where welfare is concerned. The withdrawal of public sympathy from mothers surviving on welfare does not make sense from the point of view of the public's self-interest, the editors observe, and therefore is not much influenced by rational argument, by the marshaling of ever more detailed and compelling facts and figures. Rather, poor people are afraid for themselves. Nobody wants to believe that it could happen to her/him – the catastrophic illness, the lost job, the spouse that leaves.

So the overarching theme of this collection is "you're next." Over and over again, the book makes the connections between women on welfare and all women, between families seeking assistance and all families, between mothers who work at home and all workers.

The book skillfully interweaves chapters which analyze large-scale economic and political trends with chapters which describe in moving, personal terms how those larger forces play out in individual women's lives.

The book's first section explores the myriad ways in which women are poor or become poor and why it is so difficult for them to climb out of poverty despite their most heroic efforts. Several personal narratives – by Laura Walker, Beth Harris, Susan James, Marion Graham, and women from the Roofless Women's Project whose stories have been edited by Marie Kennedy – all describe the catalyzing events which can start women down the slippery slope into poverty, even homelessness.

The articles in the middle section of the book explore the question of why welfare is so hated and how women can get what they need as the system is being dismantled around them. A lively chapter by Claire Cummings and Betty Reid Mandell describes both the history of *Survival News* as a vehicle through which low-income women's voices can be heard and how our collective operates. Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon trace the genealogy of the word "dependence" from its original use denoting property relationships to its current derogatory use describing a psychological state of being. Diane Dujon and Sandy Felder talk about the common problems faced by women in and out of the workforce, and the need for unity. Throughout this section the theme is developed that the welfare system is deeply flawed, but it provided some measure of independence for single mothers.

The authors in the final section of the book discuss how to build and sustain a movement capable of turning back the overwhelming assault of the current system. This section is an unusually thoughtful exploration of strategies and a stirring call to action.

One particularly potent chapter is "Speaking for Ourselves" by Marian Kramer, president of the National Welfare Rights Union. Her life seems to embody a central current in movements of the past several decades. She grew up in Louisiana and was a full-time organizer for CORE during the voter registration campaigns in the South. Later she moved to Detroit and became involved in community organizing against urban renewal. She discusses the birth of the NWRU a decade later. Marian talks about the need for low-income women to be in the leadership of their own movement, to "speak for themselves," and at the same time the vital need to link up with professional and middle-class women.

The editors describe how the National Welfare Rights Union of today has issued a call for Survival Sanctuaries in every community. The union wants to create situations with an activist, leadership-training orientation, where Runaways from Poverty can receive food, shelter and clothing, but also where they can link up with others in their same situation, engage in political education and discussion (Freedom Schools) and begin to act together. As the economy gets worse and the safety net is increasingly shredded, these sanctuaries could become important models for organizing: for the vivid symbolic point they make, for the very real needs they serve, and for the concrete opportunity they offer to draw people together for a common cause.

In the end, it's not just the energy and anger of these final chapters that give this collection its power. Like the all-inclusive Abolitionist Movement the editors hope to see, it's the wide-ranging, creative diversity of these strategies for organizing and visions of the future that give cause for hope in the coming dark period. ■

This review was edited from a longer version published in the Fall 1996 edition of Survival News.

ACTIVISM, PROFESSIONALIZATION AND THE FUTURE OF THE BCRS: ANOTHER VIEW

by Michael A. Dover

The last few issues of *BCR Reports* have included articles raising key issues for progressive social work. These include Ann Withorn and Fred Newdom's Fall 1995 article, "Poverty is the Link"; Fred's Spring 1996 "Progressive and Professional: A Contradiction in Terms?", and Ann's article in the last issue, "Professionalism vs. Radicalism and the Future of BCRS".

Ann proposed the Society consider four options: (1) Accept what BCRS is, a de facto progressive caucus within social work, and proceed to mobilize and raise political consciousness among social workers, despite little "direct connection with broader groups of human service workers or non-social work intellectuals" and a somewhat muted critique of the contradictions of professionalism; (2) Also accept our base within social work, and reach out to social work students, but "challenge the profession with a more radical analysis and practice by fighting professionalism, challenging NASW and CSWE, and opposing licencing; (3) Broaden the base of the BCRS by fully involving human service workers in the day care, residential care, and public welfare sectors. This would involve a transformation of our leadership and a fundamental challenge to social work as a "guild-based elite that consistently mutes the potential for radicalism"; (4) Rename the organization and become a source of networking for those seeking to understand the nature of the welfare state.

The conclusions of those who have researched social movement organizations may help us answer such questions and consider such options. Modern social movement activists have long debated the relative merits of building stable membership organizations (with their inherent danger of oligarchy), as opposed to seeking to spark social protests. In some ways,

the current debate is related to this larger debate. Movement organizations which flourish may be those which forge a compromise around that debate. The BCRS's first compromise was a structural one: To build our membership organization in a way which falls between a rigid organizational hierarchy and a loose network". To an extent, the Society has followed David Knoke's principle of cumulative leadership and its corollary, a principle of leadership infusion. According to these notions, as new activists step up, earlier activists remain active but in other capacities. The second compromise concerned organizational principles, and is reflected in the brochure's 10 points. Now a third compromise, one over organizational identity, may be needed as we near our teen years.

Support for a compromise over organizational identity can be found in BCRS member David Wagner's book *Quest for a Radical Profession*. David developed a typology of the political evolution of members of *Catalyst*, predecessor to the *Journal of Progressive Human Services*. The first, "mediated" type of member was highly identified with both social work and radicalism. To relate this finding to the issues Ann and Fred raise, "mediated" members would prefer to do what longtime progressive social worker Mary Russak has argued the Society must do: seek to influence the field as a whole to reflect their progressive concerns. A second type of member, "critics", was highly critical of social work, and enamored of social movements both inside and outside the human services. In terms of Ann's options, such members would be pessimistic about the value of serving as the radical wing of social work, and would favor the second option of allying their activities with labor and poor people's organizations. A third type identified was the "detached",

highly bureaucratized member. Eschewing faith in either social work or radicalism, they had essentially chosen to focus their energies on work within particular organizational contexts, what might be seen as "burrowing from within". Wagner argued there is also a fourth, "professionalist" type, identified primarily with social work, not radicalism. Perhaps one resolution to an organizational identity crisis is to live and let live, by embracing members with all four kinds of orientations, including members who will work to advance activities associated with all four of Ann's options.

The work of Linda Reeser and Irwin Epstein in *Professionalization and Activism in Social Work* also helps to clarify these issues. They made an essential distinction between the ideology of professionalism and the process of professionalization. The first, professionalism, is often (not always) associated with a conservative or a political notion of being a professional. The second, professionalization, is fully consistent with mobilization of members of a profession on behalf of social change as well as professional advancement.

Recognizing this distinction might help resolve the identity crisis. The BCRS opposes the conservative aspects of professionalism, but objectively speaking may represent one organizational expression of the process of professionalization of social work. Similar organizations have successfully survived on the periphery of most major professions. The National Lawyer's Guild for law is the best example. Like the Society, the Guild welcomes both degreed and non-degreed workers, but is primarily made up of professionals. Over its 60 years, the Guild has maintained a

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A CASE FOR RAISING THE MINIMUM WAGE TO A LIVING WAGE

by Gary Norman and Stephanie L. Smith, BCRS Houston

A single mother with two children pays \$425 per month for rent. Her home is a two-bedroom apartment in Houston, Texas. She usually pays \$100 per month for food. Her utilities total around \$65 for one month. She cannot afford health insurance for her family so her family's health needs usually total about \$50 per month. She cannot afford a car, so she needs to purchase a bus pass to get to work which costs roughly \$40 per month. A friend of hers takes care of her two children while she is at work. In return, she cooks meals for her friend once per week. She works as a medical receptionist and earns \$5.15 per hour, working a 40 hour work week. Her costs per month total \$730, while her income totals \$824 per month. That leaves her about \$96 per month to cover everything else.

This conservative sketch of a typical family situation shows that earning \$5.15 per hour may allow a family to exist. Exist. She may or may not be eligible for some forms of public assistance, and she may be allowed to use those funds for only a short period of time.

There has been a movement around the U.S. in a number of cities to raise

the minimum wage to more of what has been called a Living Wage. The initiators of this movement include various labor unions and the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN). Some cities have passed the wage hike, while others have not. In either case, the amount of support and energy created by the simple idea that a person should be paid enough money to live while working full time has pushed the discussion to a new level.

In a time when welfare may soon become only a memory, the need to look at other forms of welfare becomes necessary. We do not know what the effects of the new welfare reform will have on all of us, but we can speculate: women's shelters and family shelters will have longer waiting lists than they already have; food pantries will be empty on a daily basis; more children, families and individuals will be living on the streets; medical care will be reserved for the elite; the mortality rate will increase; racial and class tensions will be (understandably) raised and the scapegoat buzzword from moderate liberals, education, will be more of a privilege than it is already.

Even though Maslow's hierarchy of needs may seem somewhat outdated, it serves as an appropriate framework to view results of continued oppression, directed specifically toward persons of color. These people will not have their basic needs (food, shelter) and the lack of those spiral toward psychological and spiritual illness, thus breaking friends, families, and eventually, hope.

In Houston, Texas, labor unions and ACORN, along with other community organizations, including the Bertha Capen Reynolds Society, have made a statement that people simply cannot live on the current minimum wage. We also believe that the federal raise to \$5.15 per hour isn't enough. The stakeholders collaborated to form a strategic plan to meet our goals. We needed to either 1) have the city council vote on whether the City of Houston should raise the minimum wage to \$6.50 per hour, or 2) have the voters of Houston cast their ballot in an election. Understanding that the city council would most likely not see the issue in the same light as ACORN, the unions and BCRS, we knew we would need to obtain enough signatures to offer the vote before the people of Houston.

What may occur then is that the stress of the work is lessened and the stress at home is also lessened. Many people who experience stress at home can directly relate it to stress experienced at work. Taking this argument a few steps further, one can see what organizational development experts have been saying for years: work life affects home life, and vice versa. We can no longer assume that we "leave our work at work," and that "homelife does not affect our work performance."

Paying people a living wage is the main force that has been guiding much of Houston BCRS for nearly a year and a half. The priority was to raise the wages of people in Houston, then have it filter to other cities around the U.S. and bring national discussion of power, class, and control to the forefront of the people in our societies. A less noticeable outcome of the

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ACTIVISM, PROFESSIONALIZATION AND THE FUTURE OF THE BCRS: ANOTHER VIEW (cont'd.)

simultaneous, three-fold focus on the legal profession, the legal structure, and social movements. The BCRS's parallel focus is on (1) the social work profession, (2) the social welfare system, and (3) on social movements. The tremendous diversity of interest within our membership is apparent in the Second Edition of the Membership Directory. The Society membership includes dozens of rank-and-file and elected activists in the trade union movement, but also has included several past Presidents of NASW, including the late Mitchell Ginsberg. Membership data demonstrates that at

least half of all BCRS members are in NASW, and that at least 117 of the 224 current members who are faculty are in CSWE. Our Society includes members who are active both in the mainstream organizations and in the Society, and those who are involved primarily in one or the other. The BCRS needs to find a way to include and more fully involve members of all kinds. ■

Michael A. Dover has been a member of the Membership Committee of the Society, and is active in the local chapter at the University of Michigan.

A CASE FOR RAISING THE MINIMUM WAGE TO A LIVING WAGE (cont'd.)

efforts of BCRS has contributed to the issues with raising the wage, has been the coalition of groups which were formed to confront the common fight. Working with ACORN, unions, and other community agencies has given us practical experience regarding building coalitions and being able to work through differences in the light of common passion. Our hope is that the coalition which was built will continue to meet and share each other's struggles. The people involved in the Campaign are dedicated to changing not only people's lives, but the entire manner in which we look at power and societal structure.

Some social workers have long advocated for persons with low income and strive to educate the community about the reality facing these individuals and families. Certainly, that was what Bertha Capen Reynolds tried to model for us as a profession. Many persons opposing the wage increase told us in so many words that people making minimum wage are unskilled, and that if they want to make more money, they need to earn it by getting "training" and "education" to give them added skills. Realistically of course, many people who work at minimum wage unskilled jobs because there are not jobs available for them in areas for which they were specifically trained. In addition, because \$6.50 per hour seems such a large jump from the previous minimum wage, many have described it as "helping the poor," which to some seemed to imply charity. As social workers, in conjunction with other community organizations and unions, we must advocate for fair wages and define them as earned wages, wages that have been due to many workers for decades. If you are interested in seeing wages raised in your city, please contact the national ACORN office at (202) 547-2500.

On January 18, the Living Wage Campaign was defeated in Houston. This does not bode well for our single mother with two children discussed in

the opening story as well as many other families in the fringe of poverty who rely on minimum wage income. Important to note is that in precincts where ACORN, unions, and BCRS were active with the campaign, there were larger than expected turnouts and voters (overwhelmingly in some cases) voted in favor of the wage increases. Community organizing efforts are successful where implemented, but without community support and more volunteers in more precincts the families named above will still be scraping by on \$5.15.

The City of Houston informed the Campaign, what became known as the Living Wage Campaign, that we would have a total of 30 days to obtain a certain percentage of signatures, based on the voter turnout from the previous election. The Campaign needed approximately 22,000 signatures to put the referendum on the ballot. The Campaign approached the situation from a number of angles: we went door to door in targeted neighborhoods to get signatures; we visited all of the public housing complexes in Houston to gather the signatures; we networked with various area churches; and we raised money through contributions and a garage sale.

This mostly volunteer effort resulted in obtaining about 30,000 signatures. We knew we had won a victory by having the wage referendum be on a citywide ballot. At the same time, we knew we would be faced with a very powerful, well-funded opposition. A coalition of CEO's and business people called the Greater Houston Partnership, came out against the wage raise and initiated it's own campaign deceptively called "Save Houston Jobs."

As we expected, businesses came out of the conservative woodwork to jump on the wave. The National Restaurant Association and many others either donated funds against the wage hike or came out formally against the raise. With estimated donations ranging anywhere from 150,000 to 1.5 million dollars to make sure people vote "no" on the raise, we knew this could not be fought in the financial world. We needed to get out

to the voters again; to the people who would be directly and indirectly affected by the wage increase. We needed to let people know that the opponents would be using their money to run negative ads and try to make people believe lies which serve the Big Money interest and not the worker who is making minimum wage.

The opponents suggested that raising the wage would drive jobs out of Houston city limits because businesses will move where they are not required to pay a Living Wage. Also the opponents said that raising the wage would cause employers to fire staff in order to make up for the difference needed to pay other staff members at least \$6.50 per hour. They also make a point that prices will need to be raised to cover the costs of raising the wage.

Although the issues raised by the opposition are valuable to discuss, they fall short of historical truth and practical application. In the past, where the minimum wage has been raised, none of their points have proven to be true. When one looks at the true possibilities, one can see that the issue is much simpler: people deserve to be paid enough to bring a family of three out of poverty when they are working a 40 hour work week. In fact, if we look at the issues in the sense that people will have more money in their pockets to purchase the merchandise offered by the neighborhood businesses, the wage will actually help the economy and the amount of profit for the businesses, both large and small.

An added point to consider is the emotional and psychological issues brought up when experiencing a company who cares about its workers enough to pay them what they're worth. The worker will feel more of a connection and responsibility to the company which says, "yes, I value your work this much." People will be more committed to their work, their supervisors, and their company as a whole. Turnover rates are likely to decrease if people feel they are valued and contributing to the overall benefit to the company. ■

CHAPTER UPDATES:

THE PENN SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK CHAPTER OF THE BERTHA CAPEN REYNOLDS SOCIETY:

We've had a busy winter! Our efforts in January were directed at increasing member awareness of the life and work of Bertha Reynolds, and conducting a membership recruitment drive within the school and on Locust Walk, the main thoroughfare through campus. We plan to continue outdoor outreach now that the weather is finally warmer.

The chapter launched a successful letter writing campaign in support of "Ellen" coming out as a lesbian on national television, co-sponsored a panel discussion on building community-based organizations and coalitions, and has joined the Kensington Welfare Rights Union in demonstrations protesting Pennsylvania's plan to "reform" welfare. Several BCRS members, along with other concerned students, requested and received permission from the faculty to hold a teach-in on the impact of the state's plan in place of all regularly scheduled practice classes during the first week of April. Spearheading planning, BCRS has secured participation from KWRU, local community organizers and policy analysts, community legal services attorneys, the director of the county department of public assistance, faculty and students to provide instruction and run groups. Our goal is to educate the student body and provide resources that will enable us to educate our clients and others in the community.

Activities planned for April include our fourth annual Lecture on Social Justice, entitled "Political Action, Ethical Principles and Social Justice", which will be delivered by our own Fred Newdom and Rufus Lynch, President of PA NASW. The lecture will help kick off a weekend conference to mobilize social activists to be held at Temple University. The conference has been planned entirely by students at metropolitan area

schools of social work, with BCRS members representing Penn. We hope to bring together community activists, students and educators for the purpose of strategizing and networking. Plenary and workshop sessions include a showing of Peter Kinoy's and Pam Yates's film "Poverty Outlaw", and presentations by Michelle Tingling Clemmons, Bartlett & Steele (Who Stole the Dream), Cheri Honkala (KWRU), Richard Cloward, Henry Nicholas (1199, AFL-CIO), and Ron Cassanova (Each One Teach One: Memoirs of a Street Activist). The chapter also plans to publicize and rally support for our own conference in June!

NEW BCRS CHAPTER!!! UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN CHAPTER

The University of Michigan started a new BCRS chapter this past December. The response so far by students and professors has been incredible. After our first meeting we had over 40 members! As with any new group, we are working on its structure and organization, as well as thinking about how to involve people from the larger community. We currently meet twice a month and have a potluck dinner once a month.

Our group focuses mainly on educating ourselves and other social work students about progressive issues in policy and practice, as well as planning and participating in social actions at all levels (university, local, state, etc.) We decided to divide into 5 small working groups, each focusing on a relevant progressive issue: welfare rights, criminal justice, homelessness, local School of Social Work issues and policies, and communications. Our welfare rights and communications groups are extremely active. The communications group has acquired a bulletin board at the school which will be used for social action announcements and other news of concern to progressive social workers. This group is also presently working on a Web page

which will have a similar purpose, but be accessible to many more people. In addition, we spoke with Fred Newdom about possibly contributing or helping with the National BCRS Web page that is currently being developed at another school.

The welfare committee has several actions in the planning stages. One of these is in protest of Governor Engler's refusal to request a waiver for the newest federal Food Stamp work requirements. Our plan is to gather a large group of concerned citizens and appear at the governor's place of work or residence with empty bowls, which will signify the numbers of people who will go hungry because of the new law. Another group of us have planned a welfare rights panel featuring welfare recipients dialoguing with the University and Ann Arbor community about their experiences with the welfare system, and presenting challenges to us as future professionals. This panel is this week and we are expecting a large turnout.

Other than this, we are keeping up with issues and actions around the campus and community. We hope to be an active group and are looking forward to the conference and meeting other Bertha members. We have already gotten together with the Kalamazoo, MI chapter at a recent demonstration at the governor's State of the State address. We would be happy to share ideas with other chapters before then. If anyone would like to get in touch, I can be reached on e-mail at hgoldber@umich.edu, or our group e-mail address is bcrsociety@umich.edu. The latter goes to our entire membership list.

HOUSTON: For the past year, the energies of Houston BCRS have been directed toward a local effort to raise the minimum wage within Houston city limits to \$6.50/hour. Initiated by ACORN, SEIU, and other labor unions, the Living Wage Campaign attracted the help of BCRS members and other community groups and

Continued on next page ♦

CHAPTER UPDATES

Continued from page 8

churches.

During the Campaign, the BCRS Chapter contributed over 3,000 of the 30,000 signatures gathered from registered voters to force a city-wide referendum; raised \$800 for the Campaign PAC through a garage sale; put in several days of door-knocking and phone calling in the grassroots effort to generate people's support for the Campaign; and participated in actions and protests targeted against large employers supporting the "Save Houston Jobs" opposition campaign. In the face of this million-dollar funded opposition, the Living Wage Initiative did not pass in the recent election. However, the struggle to raise wages is not over. For more on the Houston Living Wage Campaign, see the article included in this issue of *BCR Reports*.

In the midst of this fight, we continue to nurture the mixed membership of students, faculty and community folks – with each year these links become more effective. Over the next months, we look forward to heading to St. Louis for the national meeting, where we hope to facilitate a working session about the impact of the Political Social Work concentration on the graduates from the University of Houston Graduate School of Social Work. ■

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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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

As a member of the BCRS for several years, with a history that goes back to Social Work Today, and my association with Bertha Reynolds, I am prompted to write because of the inspiration I received from reading the current *BCR Reports*.

While I have been retired from active social work, I am still – at almost 86-years-old – concerned about activism in social work. I am a charter member of NASW and hold a gold card as a life member.

While Murray Gruber in his article defends NASW and by inference criticizes BCRS, I believe his attack on Fred Newdom in the latter's article in *BCR Reports* (Spring 1996) was unfounded. I agree that professionalism and progressives are "contradictions in terms." I believe, contrary to Gruber, that NASW is a "conservative monolith" even with its many positions or policies which could be considered progressive, or at least moderate.

No, I believe NASW and CSWE do "induce conformity." Gruber's defense of capitalism misses the mark of the nature and structure of a corporate controlled economy. To compare capitalism in the U.S. with the system in operation in Sweden and Canada (Italy and Germany are corporate controlled to a greater extent) begs the question. Which brings me in this extended discourse to my main point concerning the future of BCRS. My recommendation is that we should challenge NASW and CSWE's role "in defining social work in the broadest possible way," even if it means doing battle with the two groups and their related adjuncts who control social work practice today.

I believe BCRS should broaden its base to "other front line human service workers," and actively recruit among social work unions and such groups as the Kensington group. I did note that the NASW New York Chapter did work in tandem with the BCRS and that was encouraging but I find no evidence that National NASW is interested in working with us.

We as an organization have to stop putting obstacles in our own way by reaching out as BCRS to "community based service organizations" where providers are struggling with the demands placed on them by welfare reform and immigration laws, not to mention organizations which deal with domestic violence and child abuse. The Children's Defense Fund should find common cause with BCRS. To beg the question of such mobilization along a common and united front by saying it would be "extremely difficult" and "would have to include non-social workers in leadership roles is

ludicrous. What is wrong with that kind of outreach? This was done in the 1930's and 1940's. It might be a direct challenge to social work as a guild-based elite which is what NASW, with its multi-million dollar budget and tremendous staff resources, has increasingly become.

I realize I have written at undue length but I was inspired to express myself because of the dynamism expressed in the lead article by Ann Withorn. She has thrown down the gauntlet. What shall be our response? ■

Milton Feinberg



Illustration by Nicole Hollander

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