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THE RANK AND FILE MOVEMENT:  
THE RELEVANCE OF RADICAL SOCIAL WORK  
TRADITIONS TO MODERN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

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Social work, like many fields, has sometimes suffered from an inadequate and distorted understanding of its own history. A profession's inattention to its past is an unfortunate thing. As Clark Chambers has noted, the study of social work history provides models for social work practice and yields insights into social processes (3: 11-22). Works like Cloward and Piven's Regulating the Poor have demonstrated the rich potential of the social welfare case study for social analyses (4). In addition, examination of goals and motivations of specific social workers in the past have served to further our understanding of professional issues and problems of the present (see for example, 16, 21).

As a basis for some rethinking about social work's stance in today's society, we would like to present just such an investigation into the goals and ideology of a movement often neglected in the study and teaching of the profession's history (see 22; 8; 6; 7; 11:552-54). The particular phenomenon with which we are concerned is the development of the "rank and file," movement in social work in the 1930's, a development peculiar to its own special time and setting, and yet predictive of issues which we are encountering today. Examinations of this particular set of social work responses to the American Depression proves useful on two major levels. First, the philosophies and techniques of the rank and file groups suggest guidelines for expanding or modifying the basic goals of the profession. Secondly, these same philosophies and techniques indicate ways of changing and clarifying practice roles, not only in the realm of social policy and community organizing, but in the area of providing services to individuals and groups as well. Within both levels there emerges the most basic and dynamic legacy of the rank and file movement: its conception of social work not as an isolated profession, but as a field and group of people inextricably tied to the total structure of American social, political and economic life. Thus, it was the particular genius of the rank and file groups to expose not only social work's connection to its often well-to-do sponsors in American society, but its potential link with mass political movements as well (17:13-14).

### The Historical Setting

The rank and file movement in social work developed in response to one of the most severe economic upheavals this country has known. American social work, having grown up during times of poverty for specific groups, such as immigrants to the U.S., found itself confused and thrown off course by an economic crisis which reached into almost all classes and sectors of the population. The depth of the crisis reawakened old debates and introduced new strains in professional thinking. As the private agency's failure to handle the problems of unemployment became more and more apparent, social workers intensified their controversy over the most effective role to play in helping individual clients, and the nation, cope with the problems of the Depression. H.L. Lurie aptly described their dilemma:

Even in the intimate and personal aspects of our lives ... the insecurities of the outside world act as disruptive forces.... Shall (the case worker) continue to create, if he can, those little islands of security which may give some tangible expression to his effort or shall he plunge into the general turmoil and engage in the larger battle for social welfare? (17:13-14)

By and large, as the Depression deepened, social work, and particularly the rank and file, left off its infatuation with Freudian psychiatry, and turned back to concern with broader economic and political issues. Part of this concern focused on the need to go beyond alleged "new deal reformism" and to establish what Mary Van Kleeck and other democratic socialists called an "industrial democracy." Other social workers, while highly critical of the inadequacy of New Deal reforms in the social welfare area, advocated progressive changes within the context of a capitalist economy (see for example, 2:3-14; 5:138-39; 13:3-20).

Both groups could claim precedents in the thinking of earlier social work leaders. It is important to note that the rank and file and other reform movements in social work did not spring up out of a void, but instead are reflective of an ongoing tradition in the field, a concern with social and institutional change. This tradition has varied in its strength but has had proponents in every period of American social work history. Thus, reformers and radicals in the 30's could look back to the earlier works of Lillian Wald, Grace Abbott, Paul Kellogg, Graham Taylor, Florence Kelley, Jane Addams, and others for a sense of continuity.

On top of the general social and economic policy questions raised by the Depression, specific conditions within the social welfare field spurred the development of a rank and file movement. Private agency workers increasingly experienced the agony of turning clients

away because of rapidly diminishing funds. In the public welfare sector, now greatly expanded under the New Deal, problems were even greater. Workers not only had to face the frustration of dealing with clients caught in an overwhelming crisis situation, but also had to carry on their endeavor under the most trying work conditions. Public welfare workers worked at low pay for long hours, including at times nights and weekends. They received no paid vacations or compensation for overtime and were set up in over-crowded, ill-equipped offices. Usually untrained and inexperienced in social work, they were generally given little support. Job security was tenuous, as the firing of more critical, outspoken, or radical workers could testify, and the fact that many public welfare workers had themselves been brought off the relief rolls into their jobs added a further urgency to the job security issue (9:5-6; 10:2; 18:158-68).

#### The Development of the Rank and File Movement

These specific practice and job-related issues, along with a larger awareness of the inadequacies of the existing economic and political system, joined together in triggering the birth and development of the rank and file. Although we have spoken up to this point of "the movement" as a single entity, in actuality the rank and file phenomenon represented a rather loose collection of groups formed for somewhat differing purposes. Overall, the movement included a number of radical and progressive groups, interested both in broad structural changes and in the conditions of their own employment as workers in the welfare system, along with the effects of these conditions on practice. Group memberships and interests of course overlapped, but it is useful to view the rank and file movement as made up of three general segments: social work discussion clubs, practitioners groups, and protective associations.

Each type of organization had its own contribution to make to the movement. The discussion groups, historically the first kind of rank and file groups, were organizations of workers from both public and private agencies interested primarily in the discussion and exploration of the pressing social, economic, and political issues of the day. The first of these groups, the Social Workers' Discussion Club of New York, emerged in the spring of 1931 when a number of young social workers from New York's private agencies hired a hall to stage a debate on the nature and causes of depression. The New York Club called itself "an open forum for the analysis of basic problems and their relation to social work." Similar groups soon grew up in major U.S. cities (10:8).

While they concerned themselves largely with social issues, the discussion clubs also showed some interest in social work personnel problems; in both areas they were echoed by the practitioners' groups, or rank and file

groups developing in specifically professional settings, and affiliated with chapters of the American Association of Social Workers. The practitioner organizations, such as the Case Workers Group of the Chicago Chapter of the AASW, concentrated primarily on professional issues, but as these were seen by persons in the field, rather than by executives. Jacob Fisher, major contemporary chronicler of the rank and file movement, described the practitioners' groups as including "within the scope of their concern all the issues agitating protective associations and discussion clubs, but always in terms of the professional problems these issues create." Social workers in private agencies were drawn to such groups through an increasing desire to forge a new concept of their job and its relation to the client and to society at large (10:14).

From the discussion club came inquiry into the causes of social and economic crises; from the practitioners' group there emerged concern for maintaining and adapting professional standards in relation to these issues. The third and largest segment of the rank and file movement, the protective organizations, reflected both of these themes, and added to them a major emphasis on social work personnel policies and occupational problems. The protective organizations, were made up chiefly of public relief program personnel, and they generally adopted the industrial union model of organizing all levels of workers at a public welfare agency, from case worker, to secretary, to maintenance staff. An essential aim of the protective association was the protection of the occupational interests of its members. Often, this goal was paralleled by a stress on more adequate provisions for general social welfare and on the "democratization" of economic decision-making (10:9ff).

As the New Deal's social welfare structure grew, the public welfare employee unions became the most prominent element in the rank and file movement. Any cuts or changes in public relief programs, such as the transition in 1935 from the FERA to a WPA system of diminished direct relief allocations and cutbacks in public relief jobs, brought increased growth and militancy to the protective organizations. In their fight against poor working conditions and an inadequate public welfare program, the protective groups employed not only publicity and petitions, but also the trade union tactics of work stoppages and picket lines. Occasionally, rank and file members would join in the picket lines of the radical unemployment committees to demonstrate solidarity with all workers (18:162).

Despite differences in their make-up and some of their goals, all three types of rank and file groups sought some level of analysis of the relationship between basic social problems and the practice of social work. Some groups went one step farther in linking multiple social problems to the failures of an unplanned economy. All three segments of the movement stressed the importance of maintaining standards for effective social work practice. This

basic complementarity of interests can be seen in the growth of a national rank and file movement, beginning with the calling of a national convention in Pittsburgh in 1933.

This first convention marked in many ways an outgrowth of a progressive social work spirit fanned by Mary Van Kleeck at the 1934 National Conference of Social Work, where the audience was "swept off its feet by (her) stirring dissent..., and social action suddenly became a major issue in social work after a lapse of twenty years" (10:22). Rank and file groups held four meetings at the 1934 National Conference and went on to hold their own convention the following year. This first national meeting drew representatives from seventeen protective organizations, six discussion clubs, and four practitioners' groups. Sessions dealt with "personnel practices, professional standards, federal relief, social security, social action, and proposals for national coordination of all rank and file groups" (10:36). Out of the sessions and meetings came a far-reaching rank and file platform emphasizing two major areas: Social welfare and personnel practices. Highlights of this platform included support of a Federal program of "genuine unemployment insurance," recognition of the right of the unemployed to organize for redress of grievances, a call for cooperative action "with other workers' groups and with professional organizations in their demands for adequate relief and security measures, and the improvement of working conditions and job security for social service workers, including adequate wages, reduction of caseloads to workable levels, protection against dismissal because of organizational activities, and the freedom to organize into employee organizations" (10:36).

In the years following, the national movement grew to some 15,000 members, a figure surpassing the membership of the American Association of Social Workers. The movement supported a journal, Social Work Today, under the editorship of social work unionist Jacob Fisher. By 1936, rank and file groups had developed into a federation operating through the National Co-ordinating Committee of Social Service Employee Groups. A number of these groups affiliated locally with chapters of the American Federation of Labor, identifying particularly with the progressive wing of the AF of L. National affiliation of the NCC with the AF of L was often discussed but failed to materialize, partly because of the perceptive concern that this might bring about the dividing of social work employees among the craft unions (10:36-38). In its roughly seven years of activity, then, the rank and file movement remained a fairly loose national federation of social work groups, with public welfare employees predominating. Throughout this period, its major emphasis was the stress on the economic organization of social workers, aligned with all workers in society, as an essential source of power for social change.

With the advent of World War II, the movement's fortunes went downhill and both the NCC and Social Work Today eventually folded. During the war, social workers in trade unions split on issues regarding participation in the war, Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union. After the war, another major division developed in relation to affiliation with the AF of L, with several groups of more radical social workers joining the Industrial Union of Marine and Shipbuilding Workers instead (11:553). What made these splits all the more devastating was the growing upper class repression against the political left - a reaction in which the search for politically "dangerous" public welfare workers coincided with vast reductions in social welfare programs at the end of the 30's (18:197-209, 240; 20:697-99).

#### Implications of the Rank and File Movement for Today's Practice

When Social Work Today went out of existence in 1942, one prominent rank and filer observed that "a light went out of social work that has never been rekindled" (18:240). It would seem that from the post-war years to the mid-sixties, social work, like many fields, accepted the optimistic scenarios that were being run out by Daniel Bell and John Kenneth Galbraith. Basically, social theorists were accepting the "end of ideology" and "Affluent Society" myths. The prevalent notion was that Keynesian "fine tuning" had resolved the fundamental economic problems such as depressions, recessions and inflation. The message for social work was clear: "the poor will always be with us but can be helped without restructuring the political economy." The political repression that accompanied the McCarthy era took its toll on those activists and theorists in social work, and all fields who dissented from this view. However, the Civil Rights and student explosions during the sixties played a significant role in calling into question both the liberal and conservative optimism that held that America had resolved its structural, political, economic, and racial problems. The social work literature during this period reflected the broader conflicting ideologies and debates regarding how best to resolve these problems. During the Nixon years, however, there has been less debate in social work about social change - that is, until Watergate signaled how concentrated wealth can corrupt the political process. The present inflationary spiral, accompanied with high unemployment rates, energy crises, food crises, housing crises, environmental crises are simply surface manifestations that all is not well, and that the old debates which evolved out of the 30's may still have relevance for social work today.

Human suffering is cutting into moderate income groups with fewer public resources to deal with these problems. In response to both an economic crunch and political crises, social work rank and file employees

can expect 1) a tighter job market, 2) case overloads (speed-up?) and 3) inflation and regressive taxes eroding past economic gains. More importantly, social workers will increasingly experience the frustration and alienation that stems from being given bandaids to deal with open wounds.

In evaluating the potential legacy of the rank and file movement for social work today, it seems profitable to explore its insights in four particular areas related to social work theory and practice. These are 1) a recognition of the need for philosophical, sociological, and political perspectives on practice, 2) an analysis of the nature of "sponsorship" of organized social work in the U.S., 3) an understanding of social work's relationship to consumers, labor, and other mass movements, built on the awareness of social worker as employee, and 4) an appreciation of the importance that social climate has on developing professional standards for innovative and effective practice.

#### Philosophical, Sociological, and Political Perspectives on Practice

The very existence of a national coalition of rank and file groups attests to a recognition of the interplay between socio-political and economic issues and the practice of social work in the 1930's. As Chicago settlement worker, Karl Borders stressed:

No intelligent social worker can fail to be concerned with the whole social and economic order in which his work is set. The logical pursuit of such a concern will bring him out a political and economic radical (1:590).

This transition from "professionalistic" identification to radical identification was perhaps best implied by the forceful writings of Bertha Reynolds, a psychiatric social worker who forged relationships between her earlier Freudian training and the insights gained during her involvement in the rank and file and political movements in the 30's. Freudian psychiatry, Reynolds noted, had shown that human behavior could be studied scientifically. What was needed next, as the Depression years so clearly demonstrated, was a science of the behavior of individuals within societies. Reynolds, and others within the rank and file, found this science in the works of Marx and Engels. Reflecting back on this period in her autobiography, Reynolds wrote:

...a Marxist outlook finally relieved us of the 'Jehovah complex' which had always plagued our profession. It was not we, a handful of social workers, against a sea of human misery. It was humanity itself ... and we were helping our own peculiarly useful way (18:167-84).

Not all rank and file members or socialists agreed with all of Marx's analysis; however, the movement as a whole stressed the general need for viewing the goals of practice in relation to economic and political realities. As this was expressed in one NCC report: "A growing number of practitioners are coming to feel ... that only through a basically sound social philosophy is it possible to gain a true understanding of case work and to work toward a complete fulfillment of its objectives" (10:45). Such works are currently being echoed in the writings, for example, of David Gill, Richard Cloward, Francis Piven, Willard C. Richan, and Allan R. Mendelsohn (12, 4:21).

### The Sponsorship Issue

An important aspect of this needed social analysis consists of an understanding of the nature of the various forces constituting the sponsorship of organized social welfare in American society. As a step toward this understanding, the rank and file movement offered a number of insights regarding the relationships between the economic and political power structure, agency executives, and social workers employed by the agencies. Sensing the social control functions which social welfare agencies could be used to carry out, rank and filers tried to analyze the relationship of the financial and political base of social welfare - whether represented by community chests, private agency boards, or forces in the public sector - to the policies and procedures of social agencies (23:92-102). As an article in Social Work Today noted, "the American Association of Social Workers is dominated by high-salaried social work executives who fear to offend contributors."<sup>1</sup> One reflection of the suspicion of coercion of agency executives by upper class elements in the community was the protective groups' general policy of not organizing any agency personnel above the level of supervisor. Sometimes even case work supervisors were excluded, in this social work version of the theory of conflict of interests between employer and employee (10:9-40).

Concerns and suspicions about the motives of agency executives and New Deal politicians was part of a broader recognition of the nature of organized social welfare as an institution in American Society. "Our agencies," wrote Bertha Reynolds, "are social institutions, molded by the same contending interests in our communities that produce both the relationships which bring people together and those that drive them apart." Recognition of the principle that social conflicts are reflected in our social agencies helps to explain why "good publicity programs" will not magically produce adequate social measures (19:165-66). Such insights bear obvious relevance for understanding today's welfare structure, as Cloward and Piven and Richan and Mendelsohn have recently pointed out.

1 "A Glossary for Rank and Filers," Social Work Today III: 19020, November, 1933.

## Social Worker as Employee

In viewing social welfare as an institution allied with upper class interests, the rank and file movement paid particular attention to the occupational status of those employed by this institution. In fact, the conception of social worker as employee stands as potentially one of the most profitable contributions of the movement's thinking. It is through this stress on social worker - professional and "untrained" alike - as worker that one can appreciate the essential tie with all workers, with clients or social welfare consumers, and with mass political movements.

The NCC platform for the 1935 Pittsburgh Convention stressed "our belief that employees in social agencies are members of America's working population and must relate their understanding of their function, their place in society, their desire for better standards of service, of remuneration and of job security, to the needs ... and the aspirations of American labor" (10:36). Underlying this statement was the bitter recognition of the depressing working conditions in most public welfare agencies, and awareness of the lack of worker-consumer involvement in the decisionmaking of both public and private social work organizations.

While much of the impetus for organizing protectively to improve working conditions arose within the ranks of the non-professional public welfare workers recently recruited to the field, various groups of professionals, notably the New York Association of Jewish Federation Workers, joined in the fight against poor job situations and lack of involvement in decisionmaking (10:9). The labeling of both untrained and professional social workers as "agency employees" along with other agency staff opened up two new perspectives on social work practice. On one level, social workers could be viewed as influenced in their goals and behavior by their work, or agency setting, which in turn reflected the pressure of powerful segments of American society. On another level, social workers could be seen as possessing the same problems of powerlessness and the same need for organization as other workers and disadvantaged groups, including clients.

In 1936, Mary Van Kleeck noted that as welfare programs grew, social work staff were placed increasingly "in a position of hired hands whose salaries and conditions of employment are determined by the same process of decision at the top which characterizes many business enterprises" (24:280). Van Kleeck, Reynolds, and others recognized that undemocratic, external control and internal stratification created a competitive agency climate not unlike the factory and corporate structure. Neo-Marxian theorists have related the Marxist concept of alienation to the human service sector. Essentially their message is not unlike the analysis that existed in the 30's, namely that social service employees and consumers are

excluded from major policy questions such as how services and benefits can be improved given existing economic constraints, and how social welfare employees and consumers can assume control over the nature of the service delivered (15).

Most present-day critics of social work seem to overlook these crucial connections between social workers and other alienated groups and between social welfare policies and the relationship these policies have to upper class interests in our society. Although they may concur with rank and file thinking in conceiving of social workers as employees within repressive agency structures, they generally fail to stress the ties between the social welfare institution and larger political-economic forces, and the similarity between the social work employee position and that of other relatively powerless groups. Writers like Richan and Mendelsohn thus find it possible to promote the image of a profession fairly single-handedly attempting to eradicate poverty in the U.S. In doing so, they fall into Reynolds' "Jehovah complex" and fail to realize the wisdom and promise in her statement "we saw fellow workers in our clients, in labor unions, in organizations of all kinds.... We were not separate from but a part of the life of our time" (18:183-84).

#### The Rank and File Ideology and Professionalism

Rank and file thinking regarding the need for a broad social perspective, the significance of social work "sponsorship," and the conception of social worker as employee would thus seem to bear obvious relevance to a contemporary critique of social work practice. Yet none of these three areas can be completely useful without an appreciation of their relationship to the professional role and the direct services model. Rank and filers recognized the existence of the long-standing fear that somehow professionalism and a reform or radical ideology could not co-exist, and thus took particular care to emphasize the connection between improved working conditions for agency personnel and improved service to clients. Moreover, they went beyond this in their stress on the importance of seeing clients' "individual problems" in their larger social, political, and economic context. Finally, behind the rank and file insistence on a more equitable social insurance program and a better distribution of wealth lay the belief that if such programs existed, case work would be freed of its palliative, relief-giving aspects, and could turn its attention to a number of significant areas of social life.

#### Messages for the Present

Study of the rank and file movement then, yields specific points relevant to the actual delivery of direct services, and at the same time brings insights to the clarification to the goals of the social work profession

in the 1970's. In the direct service arena, what could be more sensible and useful than the rank and file stress on lower case loads, improved worker morale and effectiveness through organization and shared consumer-worker decision-making, and the ability to make more socially-aware, and comprehensive diagnoses of problems? In addition, the now-popular practice of client advocacy is of limited scope and utility unless social work job security can be assured, and unless such advocacy can be carried out within the context of some larger program of social and institutional change.

If we turn to this larger context, and begin to rethink the goals of social work as a profession, knowledge of the rank and file experience illuminates three major themes. The social work profession today needs to understand and come to grips with 1) the rise of the consumer movement. 2) the phenomenon of powerlessness shared by a number of groups in our society, and 3) the need for professional support groups in dealing with the inequities in social welfare. As consumerism as a general movement grows, it appears likely that more and more social work client groups will identify common needs and demand accountability from social work agencies. Will social work agency employees resist flexibility and changes in agency programs, or will they seek productive alliances with client consumer groups, based on mutual desires for an expansion of essential social services and for a greater part in the decision-making process? Will they, moreover, go beyond these alliances to a recognition of a basic commonality with other relatively powerless groups in American society? As a partial way of dealing with an inequitable power structure some social workers may well turn to sustained and thorough attempts at democratizing the social welfare system and reordering economic priorities. In order to do this with any success, it will be necessary to rediscover the rank and file wisdom of finding support for such efforts towards change in organized social work groups and broader social movements, both within the agencies and on a national level.

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