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The Relationship Between Social Work and Labor Unions: A History of Strife and Cooperation

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The historical relationship between social work and organized labor has been an ambivalent one, with fluctuations paralleling historical changes in social and political values. This paper examines the changing nature of the relationship, with emphasis on the period from the 1870s to the 1940s. While today's relationship is a mutually beneficial one, the fragile nature of the link between organized labor and the social work community cannot be ignored, particularly in light of the increasing involvement between social work and private industry.

Since the 1970s, there has been a resurgence of interest in the field of occupational social work and both industrial and union settings have emerged as important facilities for the training and employment of social workers (Akabas, Kurzman, and Kolben, 1979; Kurzman, 1987; Ozawa and Alpert, 1981). While a review of the literature reveals that much has been written regarding the historical relationship between social work and industry (Brandes, 1976; Carter, 1977; Popple, 1981), there is a paucity of literature dealing with the relationship between social workers and the labor movement.

This paper provides a historical analysis of the ambivalent and fluctuating relationship between social work and organized labor, with emphasis on the period from the 1870s to the 1940s. It was during these years that frequent shifts between cooperation and strife were most dramatic, paralleling changes in social and political values of that period. It was not until the Great Depression that social work and organized labor entered into a

less antagonistic relationship. This has evolved into the mutually advantageous connection which we see today, reflecting the complementarity of interests and activities that have emerged over the past forty years.

The Era of Social Darwinism: Conflicting Ideologies of the Knights of Labor and the Charity Organization Societies

Rapid economic and scientific growth, coupled with the ascendance of the ideology of Social Darwinism during the years following the Civil War (Hofstadter, 1977) led to the emergence of organized labor unions as we know them today as well as the beginnings of professional social work in the form of "scientific charity" (Trattner, 1984).

A number of unsuccessful attempts at organizing labor had taken place before the Civil War. The earliest, an unnamed society of shoemakers in Philadelphia, was established in 1792 and lasted less than a year (Taft, 1964). In 1794 the shoemakers organized themselves for a second time, establishing the Federal Society of Cordwainers. This Society conducted a number of strikes and remained active until 1806, when some of the leaders were arrested and charged with "conspiracy to raise wages" (Boyer and Morais, 1955, p. 16). During the same year, the Society of Printers was formed to provide general aid and death benefits to its members, and the next few years saw the establishment of numerous local benevolent societies developed by various craft organizations. However, the local nature of these societies, the availability of slave and indentured labor, the severe depressions of 1827 and 1857, and the prosecution of trade unions which were viewed "as a conspiracy using force as a method of subverting society" (Boyer and Morais, 1955, p. 16), combined to severely limit the budding trade union movement prior to the Civil War.

Most important amongst the post-Civil War unions was the Noble Order of the Knights of Labor. Founded in 1869, it distinguished itself from many of the preceding labor organizations by opening membership to all workers regardless of sex, religion, race, skill and occupation.¹ The Order sought to secure labor "a proper share of wealth that they create; more of leisure that belongs to them; more societary advantages; more of the

benefits, privileges, and employments of the world" (Taft, 1964, p. 87). Cooperation between producers and consumers was a basic principle of the Knights of Labor, as was concern about child labor, the reduction of the hours of labor to eight per day, and equal pay for equal work for all workers—both men and women.

While the labor movement was attempting to organize itself, so were the existing social welfare organizations. The Charity Organization Societies, first established in the United States in 1877 in Buffalo, New York, expanded rapidly to every city. These Societies, which saw as their mission the organization of the sources of charity in the community, and the provision of moral relief to their clients, reflected the values of their time: predictability, rationality, and efficiency. They attempted to apply the prevailing business methods to charities, and, not surprisingly, found their greatest support in the business and professional classes (Trattner, 1980).

The almost simultaneous development of the Noble Order of the Knights of Labor and of the Charity Organization Societies reflected antithetical approaches to the social and economic problems of the time. While the Knights of Labor maintained that it was the social system which led to the "pauperization and hopeless degradation of the toiling masses" (Schonfarber, 1890, p. 59), the members of the Charity Organization Societies, many of whom belonged to the upper class, focused on "attempting to alleviate the sufferings of the deserving poor" (Schonfarber, 1890, p. 58).

While the Knights of Labor demanded justice, the Charity Organization movement sought charity. During the 1890 Conference on Charities and Correction, a labor representative invited as a guest speaker poignantly wondered why the Charity Organization Societies' members were not concerned "if there is not something radically wrong in that system which compels men willing to work to stand idle and poverty-stricken in the midst of plenty" (Schonfarber, 1890, p. 59). The labor speaker further pointed out, "In all charitable literature it is assumed that poverty is the natural lot of the masses. The members of charity organizations . . . take it for granted that this is the condition which the Creator intended for many of his children. It

is to this assumption that we take exception . . ." (Schonfarber, 1890, p. 61).

The value conflict between the social welfare community and the early labor unions was also demonstrated in their differing views regarding strikes—the main fighting tool of organized labor. Strikers, and even their families, were not viewed as "worthy recipients" of charity and were considered "neither entitled to sympathy nor aid" (New York Association for Improving the Conditions of the Poor, 1883, p. 37).

Labor Unions and the Settlement Movement

Changing economic conditions and the shifting social norms during the last years of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century affected both the labor movement and the field of social welfare, and the gulf between them was bridged for a brief period.

The Noble Order of the Knights of Labor declined in the late 1880s. Its demise was the consequence of numerous internal policy problems, as well as conflicts with the developing "pure and simple" trade unions which were concerned with specific needs of union members within a given trade rather than more global social problems.

These new and rapidly growing trade unions formed the Federation of Trades and Labor Unions of the United States and Canada, a loose federation which was later renamed the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Formally organized in 1886 under the leadership of Samuel Gompers, the AFL was an alliance of trade unions composed of skilled workers within craft lines. Among the basic principles of the AFL was "exclusive jurisdiction" which held that only one union should be active in a given trade, thereby eliminating the existing competition among unions (Fitch, 1930).

The resulting unity gave craft unions power to attain some of their objectives, such as gradual reduction of work hours. In addition, dissatisfaction with the government's existing laissez-faire policies, which were viewed as benefitting industry at the expense of labor, and with the perceived "degrading character of charity handouts" (Deutsch, 1944, p. 44), led the craft unions to create their own welfare system for their membership. Unions

began to provide old-age pensions, as well as sickness, disability, death, and unemployment benefits. Although such benefits were minimal, their provision by unions signified that attending to the social welfare needs of members was as important a function of the labor movement as its goals of improved working conditions, higher wages, and shorter working hours (Munts and Munts, 1968).

The severe economic crisis that gripped the country in the early 1890s had a devastating effect on workers. It also evoked criticism of the prevailing business practices. For the first time, public opinion supported the workers' quest for greater economic security. As corporate corruption and glaring inequalities in the treatment of employees were exposed, the union movement gained acceptance. Between 1897 and 1904, union membership climbed from less than half a million to over two million, and by the end of World War I, more than four million American workers were union members. Legislation designed to benefit workers increased at both the federal and state levels (Taft, 1964).

During the period between the 1890s and the First World War, the field of social welfare was also affected by the social, political, and economic events—so much so that Jane Addams referred to this time as the “coming together of the Charitable and the Radical” (Addams, 1910, p. 1). Changes within social work, such as the shift from upper-class volunteers to paid workers from middle-class backgrounds, the growing emphasis on formalized training for those involved in social welfare, and the rapid growth of the Settlement Movement, all contributed to a breaking down of some of the barriers that existed between labor and social work (Deutsch, 1944).

The ideological affinity of the Settlement Movement with the labor movement led a number of Settlement leaders, including Jane Addams and Lillian Wald, to become instrumental in the development of the National Women's Trade Union League (Christman, 1930), and to participate in the formation of other labor unions as well. According to Gladys Boone, who wrote about the background and origins of women's involvement in trade unions, Chicago in the 1890s was the scene of numerous cooperative activities between labor and social work. Efforts at organizing women workers were centered at Hull House, while

at the University of Chicago Settlement, Mary McDowell and Michael Donnelly assisted in transforming the Maud Gonne Club, an informal group of women workers in the meat packing industry, into Local 183 of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America (Boone, 1942). In 1915, Hull House again showed its support of labor by providing strike funds and supplies, and orchestrating public support for the disorganized union that was to become the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (Addams, 1920; Chambers, 1963).

However, this alliance between labor and social work was short-lived. During the conservative years following World War I, settlement houses withdrew from political activity. The social work community, preoccupied with psychodynamic theory, shifted its interest from the socioeconomic environment to social casework. Consequently, trade unions once again became suspicious of social work. Labor's trust in social work was shaken by the activities of many individual caseworkers which, inadvertently, undermined the efforts of the unions. For example, union members did not look kindly upon the social worker whose concern with an individual client led him to suggest that an unemployed man "go out and apply for a position as a strike breaker." Likewise, union members were enraged when, after a bitter struggle of the unions to gain a six day work week, a staff member of a family casework agency was found "actually writing to an employer . . . asking him to give the employee seven days' work a week because his large family and other complications made an increased income desirable" (Scott, 1929, p. 358).

Welfare Capitalism: Social Work and Unions in Opposition

Welfare capitalism, which Stuart Brandes defined as "any service provided for the comfort or improvement of employees which was neither a necessity of the industry nor required by law" (1976, p. 6), was introduced during the period of rapid industrialization following the Civil War, and reached its point of greatest popularity during and immediately following the First World War. An important motivation contributing to the development of welfare capitalism was the protection of industry

from trade unionism—" . . . the anti-union overtones of welfare were clear and definite" (Brandes, 1976, p. 32).

The increase in the demand for products used in defense during the First World War and the decrease in the labor supply, placed workers in a new position of power. Not only did union membership grow, but the labor movement became increasingly militant. Fearful of the demands of workers for a share of the wealth, businessmen who accumulated enormous profits during the War, responded by offering expanded welfare programs. Businessmen hoped to improve the image of the old industrialism by emphasizing not only their commitment to productivity, but also by recognizing the mutuality of interests between workers and management. Some companies made massive expenditures for welfare programs, including schools, playgrounds, visiting nurses, accident prevention, pensions, and relief for injured employees (Brandes, 1976).

Another popular type of welfare capitalism was an early form of industrial social work that was generally aimed at assisting female employees. Many companies hired a "social" or "welfare" secretary, whose function typically fell into one of four categories (Brandes, 1976; Carter, 1977): physical welfare, including responsibilities for the health, safety, sanitation and housing of workers; cultural welfare, addressing areas such as recreation, libraries, education and basic acculturation of the employees to the workplace and American values; economic welfare, including administration of loans and pensions, and hiring firing and wage setting for employees; and personal welfare, covering casework services for workers and their families and the utilization of such social work roles as brokerage, support, advocacy and therapy (Popple, 1981). A 1919 Bureau of Labor Statistics survey of 431 of the largest companies in the United States found that 141 companies employed a full-time welfare secretary and 154 companies contracted with outside agencies for social work services (Popple, 1981).

This early industrial "social worker" became an important instrument of social control in a kind of behavioral engineering designed by industry—"the transformation of laborers into the kinds of people closer to the company's heart's desire . . ."

(Brandes, 1976, p. 115). At the same time that these social workers provided services for employees, they also provided the employers with such information as employees' complaints about the company, personal habits and life styles, as well as union activity and efforts of union organizers (Brandes, 1976).

Welfare capitalism declined during the 1920s due to the relative prosperity of that decade, the increasing availability of services provided by the social work community, and the growth in industrial technology which lessened industries' dependence on a skilled labor force. The final blows to welfare capitalism were dealt by the economic devastation of the Great Depression and the financial burdens this presented for industry, and by the Roosevelt administration's stand to protect employee rights and support the development of unions. The effectiveness of welfare capitalism in curtailing activities of labor unions was thus severely limited and, from the point of view of industry, the role of the social secretary became obsolete (Brandes, 1976).

Thus, with the dissolution of the industry—social work relationship and the legitimization of labor unions, the doors were open for a renewed alliance between labor and social work.

Turning Points for Social Work—Union Relations: The Crises of the Great Depression and the Second World War

The economic and social upheaval of the Great Depression, accompanied by shifts in societal attitudes towards workers and unions as reflected in the federal legislation of the New Deal, resulted in a new complementarity of interests and objectives of social work and labor unions. A fundamentally cooperative stance evolved, which, allowing for some fluctuations in response to changing social conditions, has prevailed through the past fifty years.

The endurance of the Great Depression brought to an end the debate within the social work profession over the involvement of the federal government in funding and administration of relief and social insurances, and whether social workers should maintain their focus on individual dynamics or shift to a concern with poverty (Chambers, 1963; Fisher, 1980). Once again social workers became concerned with "the problems arising out of insufficient income—whether due to a low wage scale, inter-

ruption in opportunity to earn, as in case of accident, illness and unemployment, or to a termination of ability to earn, as in old age" (Fitch, 1930, p. 333).

During the decade of the 1930s, as social work experienced shifts in ideology (Phillips, 1985), it developed a closer alliance with labor. The unionization of social workers was an important factor in the development of a closer labor-social work relationship during the 1930s. Starting in 1932 with the organization of the American Federation of Government Employees, social workers became members of six different unions. Although it is not known how many of the members were professional social workers, these unions were credited with improvements in wages and salary scales for social workers (Moore, 1949). The employees of public welfare and voluntary social agencies, who had been members of two different unions, affiliated with the newly formed Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in 1934, forming the Joint Committee of Trade Unions in Social Work. This Committee coordinated the efforts of the unions representing private and public sectors of social work and arranged for participation of the unions in the national conferences of social work (Moore, 1949).

The Rank-and-File movement, a radical faction in social work, was another example of the increasing social work support of organized labor. The movement contributed funds to several striking unions and defense funds (Fisher, 1980), and introduced the radical journal, *Social Work Today*, which provided a forum for voices of reform during the period of critical social and economic change from 1934 to 1942. The expressed aim of this journal was to promote "an interest in the fundamental reorganization society must undergo to provide security for all and to support labor's struggle for a greater measure of control as the basic condition for that reorganization" (Reynolds, 1963, p. 156).

Significant shifts affecting labor unions also occurred during the 1930s, which has been described as "the most significant decade in the history of the American labor movement" (Haber, 1966, p. 105). A shift in attitude from tolerance and even hostility towards the labor movement to one of encouragement was seen in Federal legislation in the Wagner Act and the establishment of the National Labor Relations Board. Efforts were made

by unions to increase the purchasing power of workers, to improve the bargaining position of organized labor so that it could better its own economic position, and to enable labor to receive a more adequate share of the nation's income (Haber, 1966).² Union membership tripled between 1935 and 1943 (Brandes, 1976), and what had been a "dispirited and demoralized labor movement became a vital and powerful force on the American scene" (Haber, 1966, p. 105). Labor unions, which previously had been suspicious of any attempts by the government to interfere in trade agreement matters, developed "a more favorable attitude toward all forms of social insurance" (Fitch, 1930, p. 333).

The goals and objectives of both labor and social work coincided as they had not done for years. Both labor unions and the social work profession campaigned for the Workers Social Insurance Bill, introduced into Congress by Congressman Lundeen in 1934 (Fisher, 1980; Reynolds, 1963). Although defeated in Congress, this bill stimulated public interest in the issue of unemployment insurance and ultimately influenced the content and passage of the Social Security Act of 1935.

Even stronger ties between labor and social work communities developed during the Second World War as both the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations became important contributors to the various community chests and councils (Deutsch, 1944). The alliance was further strengthened by the growing labor representation on boards of social agencies. Phillip Murray, President of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, pointed out in 1944 that there were more than 4,000 members of the CIO in policy-making boards of social service agencies on the national, state and local levels (Kinney, 1945). As a result of cooperative efforts of unions and social agencies, new recreation, health, child welfare, and educational services for industrial workers were developed during the war years (Kinney, 1945).

It was during the Second World War that social workers were first employed directly by labor unions. They trained industrial workers in plants to serve as official CIO welfare referral agents in advising fellow union members in the availability and use of community services (Kinney, 1945). They also provided direct casework services to union members, as exemplified by the pi-

oneering work of Bertha Reynolds with the National Maritime Union (Kyle, 1949; Reynolds, 1963).

Epilogue

As both the labor movement and the social work profession made attempts to survive the growing Communist hunt during the Cold War years, the cooperative alliance that had formed during the Great Depression and the Second World War diminished.³ During the 1950s, both the labor unions and the social work profession turned inwards, focusing on unifying and strengthening their respective organizations. The various social work organizations merged into the National Organization of Social Workers in 1955, and during the same year the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Workers also merged, resulting in a membership of 15 million workers—"the largest labor group in the history of the United States and the free world" (Taft, 1964: 661).

Common values and objectives resulted in the cooperation between social work and union leadership during the 1960s. For example, in 1966, the president of the Communication Workers, J. A. Bierne, became the first labor leader to serve as President of the Joint United Community Funds and Councils of America (Weiner, 1967; 1971).

During the 1970s and 1980s, both the labor and social work communities were adversely affected by the social and economic conservatism prevalent in the nation, thus promoting linkages between them based on mutual need.

Today, unions have recognized the importance of social workers in providing services to their declining and increasingly elderly membership⁴ while social workers have recognized the professional opportunities that unions hold for them. By the end of 1984, 79 social workers were employed by 14 different unions throughout the country (McManus, 1984) and their numbers continue to grow.

Simultaneously, we are witnessing an even greater increase in social workers employed by private industry—a development which raises difficult questions. Can social workers serve both unions and management? In a scenario reminiscent of welfare capitalism, will social workers be used by management against

labor, or by labor against management, and consequently be trusted by neither? To what extent will the labor movement or private industry provide essential social services in this era of shrinking federal spending for social welfare? Can labor unions and private industry work together with the social work profession to ensure the provision of social welfare services for workers?

While we can only speculate on the answers, the pattern of fluctuations in the relationship between social welfare and organized labor must be remembered. In the past, as today, there have been shared values and goals, and a complementarity of interests and activities. History, however, also makes us aware of the fragile nature of this link.

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Footnotes

1. In 1886, when the Knights of Labor was at the highest point of its membership, women comprised nine percent of the members (Taft, 1964).
2. This New Deal legislation signified a major shift in the Federal government away from the philosophy of voluntarism promoted by Herbert Hoover in the 1920s and during his Presidency (Hoover, 1922).
3. An example of this cooperation is seen in the 1958 award by the Council on Social Work Education to Mr. Leo Perlis, Director of Community Services for the AFL-CIO, for "his work in developing the participation of organized labor in social welfare activities" (Perlis, 1977, p. 29).
4. In 1980, 23 percent of American workers were union members; by 1984, union membership had declined to 18.8 percent (Serrin, 1985: E5).