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FORWARD TO OUR ORIGINS: SOCIAL WORK SKILLS AND POLITICAL ACTION IN THE CURRENT CRISIS
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A Glimpse Back

The last decade of the 19th century and the years prior to World War I was an exciting and fruitful period in United States history. It was a time of unrest, but characterized by vigorous discontent, not cynicism or despair. There was an aggressive optimism that fostered confidence in social action, even to the belief that poverty could be abolished. The failure to achieve that goal remains our burden today, but to have begun the struggle then was a significant step. It was the developing profession of social work that initiated that battle against poverty.

From the 1890's to 1917 there was a rapid spread of reform and social legislation, and social workers were there. The names -- Addams, Devine, Kelley and Wald -- are but a few of those remembered. Tribute was paid by United States Senator Robert F. Wagner, Sr., who said that "one could not overestimate the central part played by social workers in bringing before their representatives in Congress and in State Legislatures the...insistent problems of modern life."¹

Social workers, along with populists, socialists, city reformists and progressives, were struggling to establish programs and institute policies which would mitigate the negative effects of industrialization, urbanization and laissez-faire.² Social workers recognized the tie between social conditions and economic forces. They responded to the impact of the social sciences. They instituted surveys of social institutions. Legislation was seen as a means of attaining social welfare goals. Action organizations, on a national level, were established. In 1910, Jane Addams stated social work's goal to be "raising life to its highest value." At that moment in history, and again in the depression of the 1930's, through the leadership of Bertha Reynolds and her colleagues, the challenge was met. Where are we now?

Eduard Lindeman posed the question in 1946. "What part are we playing in determining the direction in which America is moving, with the clear presumption that we must be involved in both the movement and its direction?"³ In 1951, the American Association of Social Workers offered an answer. The AASW Standards for the Professional Practice of Social Work stated that social work should be responsible for "modifying or reshaping social and economic institutions which are inimical to the attainment of democratic goals."⁴

The Current Crisis

The reshaping and recreating of those institutions, our professional charge of almost twenty-five years ago, remains as the task in our current crisis. The present plight of our economy, of our cities, of our social service system demands basic change. We need the skill, and the courage, to take on that responsibility.

We are in a desperate depression despite euphemisms to the contrary. Each day

we see how hard the economy hits the individuals, the families and the communities with whom we work. There is a chilling fear that the slump is to be long-term, and severely and permanently damaging. Nationally, there are indications that the so-called "recession" of 1975 looks and feels like the depression of the 1930's. In Detroit, a quarter of a million auto workers are unemployed. Busloads of people have left that city to look for work in southern towns.⁵ In Boston, over one hundred demonstrators, angered over proposed cuts in the welfare budget, stormed the Massachusetts House Chambers.⁶

The financial solvency of New York City is threatened. Layoffs of municipal workers, cutbacks in funding of programs, rescindments of capital projects are all orders of the day. There is talk of default and of bankruptcy. There is a lack of confidence in the city, in the system, in ourselves.

Unemployment is at 9.2%. Even more disturbing is the record 1.2 million who are the "discouraged workers wanting jobs, but who have given up looking."⁷ And a further measure of the depth of our trouble is the 33% jobless rate for Black teenagers. The Federal Administration insists it is concerned, but can do nothing without regenerating inflation. This is recklessness, not caution. Such a policy produces tension, resentment and trouble.

A bleak picture is on view in most communities throughout the country. One wonders how families manage without, or even with, unemployment payments. There are no statistics on how many families have been left without income from a job and without benefits either. Of the 8,567,000 unemployed in June, 6,181,000 were drawing some kind of compensation.⁸ We know nothing about the remaining two million and more, except the assumption that they are mostly young people. Those who are on unemployment compensation average \$69.00 per week, hardly adequate for decent living. An additional aspect of the problem is revealed by a recent Labor Department survey which showed that of unemployed married men, 59% had wives also unemployed or not in the labor force. The latter category refers to housewives, the largest group of unpaid workers in our society.

Anyone working with jobless people is aware of the difficulties and disruptions which permeate their lives. A recent bankruptcy in New York City's Bronx County caused two hundred employees to lose their jobs, many after 25 years with the firm. This group of Black and Hispanic workers, whose families numbered almost 1,000 people were forced into unemployment when efforts to save the business failed.

Aside from the casework skills and referral knowledge required to assist those families, it was necessary to have an understanding of the economic factors involved and essential to possess the political leverage needed to move elements of the business community and the city, state and federal governmental system. The Borough President's office provided guidance to the workers and their families, direction to those in the public and private sectors attempting to save the business and leadership in pressing for financial and political support.

The effort failed because the economic interests were not prepared to finance a workers' cooperative; an approach which had become the only feasible one for success. And so we contribute to the extension of poverty, rather than to the expansion of

opportunity. Nationally, as locally, we allow failure. The social venture we called "the war on poverty" was "too limited in means, too timid in ideas" to have any significant impact.⁹ We remain too timid, too limited.

The intent, we were told, was to close the gap between rich and poor. Quite the opposite has occurred. Inequalities in earnings in the United States have widened since 1950.

In 1958, the bottom decile of the population had 14% of mean earnings; by 1971 its relative position declined to 8.6%. During the same period, the top decile improved its position from 197% of the mean to 263%.¹⁰

A further demonstration of this inequality is seen in the fact that 18.9% of the population hold 76.2% of the wealth. The wealthiest, the top one percent, own 26% of all private wealth. Thus, our present scene, one of depression and dismay, is also one of dramatic distance between economic classes -- the rich and the poor. For those at the bottom, those we label "clients," life is hard and unfair.

It is in the cities of our country where most of our people live; and our cities are in deep trouble. But the hard and unfair life is in the suburbs and rural areas as well. It is a condition of our society itself. Physical decay, an aging population, drug abuse, a rising crime rate, and increased unemployment know no geography. The problems are most intense and visible in our densely crowded, older and poorer central cities.

The nation's troubled cities cannot recover by themselves and the Administration in Washington seems to be willing to let them sink. As usual, the poor are chosen to pay, by cutting the services they need. Social service programs are denied or restricted due, the President states, to the inflationary impact of the funding. The economy's improved health will come about by reducing taxes paid by corporations and their shareholders, declares the Secretary of the Treasury. He proposed a plan to reduce corporate profit taxes by \$7.5 billion a year, or more than 10%, over a six-year period, beginning in 1977. The humanitarian concern which gave rise to the approach is explained by the Secretary, who stated that "corporations are people."¹¹

One segment of the nation's economy appears to remain viable. This summer the Congress agreed on a military procurement measure that authorized preliminary funding for production of a B-1 strategic bomber costing \$84 million a plane and construction of a \$1.2 billion nuclear-powered cruiser for the Navy. The cruiser project has since been dropped but the total amount appropriated for weapons was \$25.8 billion for the current fiscal year. That is about one-quarter of the total defense budget.¹² With expenditures for armaments at such levels, our priorities are apparent. But a society's stability -- both economic and psychological -- cannot rest on its ability to produce weapons.

No single factor is sufficient to judge whether we are financially and mentally healthy, but one measure of a society's worth is the way in which it treats its older citizens. On that score we do poorly. The record reveals shameful deficiencies in income levels, housing, nutrition, health care, and perhaps most damning, a lack of

a dignified role in society.

Another measure is the quality of health care and, here again, we do not do well. "Whether poor or not, many Americans are badly served by the obsolete, overstrained health system which has grown up around them, helter-skelter, without accommodating...to changing technology, expanding population, rising costs and rising expectations."¹³

The cost of medical care in the United States is rising more rapidly than the cost of living. A major cause of that increase is the reluctance of Blue Cross and Blue Shield to impose cost controls on doctors and hospitals. A recent study by the Associated Press indicates that billions of dollars could be saved annually if Blue Cross would implement one of its original objectives to keep costs down. Health care delivery, as well as its economics, is determined by the private sector which controls Blue Cross and Blue Shield. The eighty-two million people covered have nothing to say about the running of the 144 plans throughout the country. Each Blue plan is dominated by doctors and hospital officials, or by laymen chosen by medical societies.¹⁴

"Surely the care given to children is a measure of a good society. But good care for children cannot be given by a poverty ridden, disease ridden, crime ridden, despairing adult population. Nor can it be given by adults who find no meaning to life beyond the purchase of equity in a suburban house from which their children will move away, leaving their lives, once narrowly devoted to their own children alone, empty and meaningless."^{14a}

As our deficiencies and inequalities become more apparent, we reach what Daniel Bell calls "the end of American exceptionalism."^{14b} We are not what we foolishly believed ourselves to be. Our dominance in world affairs is ending; there is no manifest destiny; there is no mission. We have not been immune to the corruption of power. We have not been the exception.

Our common value is hedonism - the thoughtless pursuit of what we think is pleasure, the idea of consumption and exhibition of our middle class culture - and that provides no common purpose or common faith, only bewilderment.

Social Work Skills and Political Action

Whatever human services we assess in an attempt to measure our commitment to improve individual and community well-being, we find a basic lack. It is evident that the vast majority of people served by the social service system will not be able to improve their conditions in life without a redistribution of wealth and power in our society.

The poor need money, jobs and power on a large scale; all three require equally large shifts in the political, as well as the economic relationships between the poor and the rest of society. The only way to manage the current crisis of increasing -- and perhaps permanent -- unemployment and poverty is redistribution.

It is in this campaign for the redistribution of wealth and power that social

work has a significant role. This is the time to carry out the responsibility Lindeman identified. This is the time to act on the AASW charge to us. In this effort, there are new skills to be learned and old skills to be revitalized. Political action is the requirement and social workers must be ready and able. "No longer can social workers not be involved politically."¹⁵

Social workers must help to create a coalition of forces to carry on the fight they began at the turn of the century — the struggle to abolish poverty and to provide a living standard of the highest quality for all. To succeed in that struggle, we must identify our enemies as well as our allies. We must recognize the seriousness of Lorenzo Traylor's observation in reaction to HEW's businessman's approach to social welfare. "It is precisely the businessman's attitude and his lack of concern for the plight of others that has contributed to the conditions which make the welfare system so desperately needed."¹⁶

The newly elected President of NASW, Maryann Mahaffey, has stated what our role should be. "The problem in America," she declared in her 1975 address to the Delegate Assembly, "is that the overwhelming majority of people in policy making positions are oriented to the bureaucracy, to profit and to products. We, the social workers of this nation, are people oriented. That's why our input is crucial."¹⁷

Powerful forces hostile to a humanitarian philosophy are in our society. They fear democracy, freedom, equal rights and equal opportunity. It is a false idea that the good society results automatically from technology and so-called "free enterprise." The chief battle of our times is not with an external enemy; it is with ourselves and our institutions.

Social work must play an active, aggressive and militant role in the political arena. Politics is an indispensable activity in a democracy. To ignore political turmoil around social work issues is to do a disservice to the field.

Our political program derives from what we know people need. Beyond an improved system of social service, beyond greater accountability, we need basic change. "We need tax reform and redistribution of wealth, power and income, so that full employment, at socially useful jobs, can be provided in the public sector of the economy."¹⁸

The skills to achieve our political program are attainable. Social workers must be able to speak with knowledge and understanding of the social and economic issues of our time. We must be familiar with the structure of our social institutions, the nature of our social forces, the functioning of our economic system.

Social workers must possess full knowledge of our political arrangements. The organization of governmental activity, the role of political parties, the action of political movements must be studied and well known. We must have the ability to assess the scene quickly, formulate policy positions and fight for them on any level of government.

We must develop the talent to devise optional courses of action. We must learn to create "up front" and "fall back" positions. Of special importance is the need

to identify allies on an issue and be creative in developing alliances.

We must know how to organize and mobilize local groups. We must become skillful negotiators. We must be able to speak and to write with passion as well as with precision. We must be forceful and flexible, imaginative, inventive and innovative. We must maintain our sense of purpose and direction. We must, as has been said of Richard Titmuss, be "ideologically rooted but not doctrinaire."¹⁹

A commitment to planning should be part of our ideology. The crisis in our nation, characterized by unemployment and inflation, has created a new interest in economic planning. Legislation has been introduced in the Congress proposing various forms of planning.²⁰ "The time has come to develop a truly home-grown American form of national economic planning...a planning approach that will be American in character and democratic in nature."²¹

Social workers should take an active role in support of national economic planning and incorporate social planning into the program. Social planning provides an experimental approach to means. It allows for the abandonment of ineffective methods and their replacement by new or modified ones which may be treated in relation to changing social conditions. If a laissez-faire orientation continues, we will be faced with the burden of unchanging means in a world of constantly changing circumstances.

None of the fundamental problems of the aged, the chronically ill, the physically and mentally handicapped, as well as the unemployed and under-employed, will be met unless social work adds its strengths to the development of national and local planning of the highest order.²² We can recognize the philosophic definition of planning given our experience as practitioners -- "The method of creating new wholes out of parts which have become so fractionalized as to have lost their functional relevancy."²³

The basic principle of democratic planning is "an awakening in the whole people of a sense of common moral purposes. Not one goal, but a direction. Not one plan, once and for all, but the conscious selection by people of successive plans."²⁴

It has been said that all improvements start with an act of dissent, an act of non-conformity. The story of human advance is the story of the unconventional which has become commonplace, of the untried which has become routine, of the non-conforming which has become customary.²⁵

What is needed is adventure in ideas--a creative rebellion against tradition and the status quo, when these are obstacles to human welfare.

Social work is not rising to the challenge of the times. It is too routine and unimaginative. Something good which characterized early social work pioneers has been lost. We must regain that early heritage and adapt their fighting spirit to our time.

Our time is a time of crisis. It is not merely a fiscal crisis; it is another dysfunctional phase of our economic system. What has been and is now crisis becomes a condition, under which our social service structure suffers in a special way. Those

who utilize those services are those who are most hurt. The financing of public services through investment by profit-making interests eventually benefits not the poor, but the rich.

What we require is a change in our economic system from profit purpose to people purpose. Let us advocate such a change to a socialism in the great tradition of Eugene Victor Debs,

"We tend to forget that preparation of life in a democracy involves more than a narrow concept of adjustment. It necessitates knowledge of political, economic and social institutions, attitudes toward them, skill in utilizing them, and skill in changing them if they prove to be inadequate....In a rapidly changing world we must be courageous in interpreting the changing scene and equally courageous and radical in testing our new methods and new hypotheses which reflect the stream of changes."²⁶

FOOTNOTES

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- 14b. The Public Interest, October 1975.
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