Session on "Political Action for a Social Welfare Program"

Address by Aubrey Williams
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It is a particular pleasure for me to talk to the so-called rank and file groups in the profession of social work. It is perhaps inevitable in the early life of a new profession that with the necessity of achieving and maintaining their professional status its practitioners are inclined to forget that they are also citizens and workers. This has not been true of all social workers. We are all proud to claim Jane Addams as a social worker, not only because she exemplified the qualities of disinterested devotion to her job and high standard of achievement which we believe should characterize a true professional worker, but also because she entered into the political life of her community in order to achieve, through the functioning processes of democracy, a better life for her friends and neighbors.

The rank and file movement has brought that same spirit into the entire profession and with it a new vitality, a new realism, and above all, a new humanity for which all social workers should be grateful.

For I am convinced that the very nature of social work is such that its practitioners cannot afford to hold themselves aloof from their clients, the organized labor movement, or the processes of government. The old fashioned notion that a wide gulf of disparate interests must of necessity and should properly stand between social worker and client has gone the way of many distinctions during the depression. For the worker in a relief agency differs from the relief
So it is with the labor movement. There used to be an idea that membership in a trade union was inconsistent with the standards and ideals of professionalism. We are learning like the musicians, actors, teachers and other professional groups that this is not so. We are coming slowly to accept the principle that we are first workers and second professional workers. I believe that social workers have not only the right to organize along trade union lines but that they have an obligation to recognize that the trade union movement is a part of the struggle of all workers to achieve, through democratic activities within the democratic framework, that better life which is surely the essence and reason for existence of social work.

Most evident of all, it seems to me, is the obligation of social workers to participate in the processes of government. If we believe, as I am sure you all do, that the principal function of government is to promote the welfare of its people and that this function should be exercised through the democratic process, social workers have more than a simple obligation of citizenship to participate in governmental affairs. They, as a group directly concerned in their daily jobs with the welfare of the people, have an obligation not only to take their place in the vanguard of those who are working for measures to insurrect and extend that welfare, but also to give expression to the all too frequently inarticulated needs of the people they serve.

I have little patience with people, social workers or others, who speak of politics with disgust, as if there were something inherently nasty in the "art and science of government", as Webster defines politics. If the processes of government are abused and misdirected for the benefit of a few, whether they be so-called politicians, lobbyists, or unscrupulous business men, social workers have the same obligation as other citizens in a democracy to rise up and repudiate them. If democracy is to function, we must do away with a negative attitude toward government and assume a position of positive and active participation. We who are concerned with the administration of relief measures are not nearly so
effective activity on the part of those who believe that federal expenditures should be reduced at whatever cost to human suffering, but there are only faint murmurs from those millions who surely must believe that the government in a democracy has no more compelling obligation than to guarantee to every able-bodied citizen the right to participate in our economy through work and the right to some security for himself and his family when he is unable to work. This is not a simple question of one political party as opposed to another. It is a question of the vitality of our democracy and its ability to maintain itself against all attack.

Our present situation may be viewed in two lights. It may be regarded as the culmination of a long and hard-fought struggle for the acceptance of public responsibility to protect members of our society against the hazards of unemployment and insecurity. Looking at it from this vantage point we have reason to be heartened by the progress that has been made. But obviously no social worker can view the present scene, knowing that suffering, want and insecurity do still exist, with such self-righteous complacency. For each of us has in his own mind another point from which we view the present realities of our world. This is our conception of the ideal state of affairs, the goal toward which our thinking and our actions are constantly impelled. In the light of these dreams we can feel only heartache and distress for the inadequacies of our present achievements and a sense of the compelling necessity for bringing reality ever closer to our ideal.

Both of these viewpoints are necessary, I believe, if we are to approach our problems courageously, realistically and above all, effectively. For nothing could be more unrealistic in our present situation than a blind complacency and nothing could be more ineffectual in overcoming it than a blind disregard for historical process. It is not the idealism of the progressive few that brings about progress in a democracy; it is only when that idealism becomes the will of the majority that it becomes effective. And that, it seems, is a slow process.

Let me explain what I mean in terms of our present relief situation.
existence, we can feel that we have come a long way. We have seen the federal and state governments come to accept the relief of unemployment as a public responsibility. We have seen that relief gradually assume a greater adequacy and a greater decency; as people came to accept the idea that unemployment was no indication of personal failure and inadequacy, so they came to realize that emergency relief should cease to carry with it the humiliation and opprobrium of its predecessor, poor relief. With the growth of this conception came what seems to me its inevitable corollary, the belief that the able-bodied person had a right to more than a handout to keep him alive during the period of his unemployment, that he had a right to a job.

There is much that I might say about the part that work plays in our national psychology. I can say only a part of it. I believe that we as a nation regard work as something far more than a necessary evil; I believe we regard it as the badge of a man's worth. As a nation we have little respect for our idle rich; we have a traditional contempt for the shiftless idler whose poverty, we have been accustomed to think, is but the price of his laziness. These habits of thought are not easily eradicated from our national consciousness. And I am not at all sure that they should be. For I believe that a democracy should give to each and every one of its members two inalienable rights: first, the right to chose the method and the people by whom he shall be governed and second, the right to take his proper place in its economy by means of his labor. But what could be more unfair and more cruel than to inflict upon the unemployed person the contempt that we feel for a parasite, at the same time denying him all opportunity to prove himself through work. This would be the ultimate injustice.

It is the assertion of this national sense of justice that has brought the element of work into our relief program. From the point of view of society there is a double benefit in a work program. The individual worker is spared the humiliation of useless idleness; he can take his rightful place as a free man who contributes his share to the functioning economy in which he lives; his working habits, his skills, that indefinable thing we call 'morale,' are improved.
acting through their government, to support strong and willing men in idleness while their roads remain impassable in winter, their sanitary arrangements antiquated and unhealthful, their children housed in leaky, drafty, ill-lighted school buildings, their public parks and playgrounds unkempt and inadequate, their land eroded, their crops and livestock beset by disease and pest, and so on through an endless list of evils and inadequacies that properly directed labor might remedy. I will never believe that the energies and talents of every person in this country cannot be used to advantage on work of general public benefit so long as these things exist.

While work seems the only logical answer to distress occasioned by lack of employment, it obviously does not answer the total need. For there are many fine and worthy people in this country who either cannot or should not work. We have come to realize that under the vicissitudes of our present economy, these people cannot be expected fully to protect themselves against the hazards of old age, widowhood, ill-health, or other circumstances which make self-support impossible. If our economy fails to yield them enough in their working years to provide security for themselves and their dependents, this deficiency must be supplied by society-functioning through legislation which either compels adequate insurance arrangements or provides from the public treasury direct public assistance in such times. It is on the basis of this acceptance of a widening field of public responsibility that the Security Act came into existence.

The Social Security Act is significant not only in recognizing the obligation of the state to guarantee security to its citizens but also in requiring it to provide assistance in such a way as to do no violence to the spirit and self-respect of those who receive it. We are accustomed to speak of relief in terms of "grants" but we think of insurance and assistance measures in terms of "rights". Under the Security Act we have come to recognize not only the obligation of society to provide at least a minimum of security for all its members but also the right of those members to enjoy such security.

Viewed in the light of history the Security Act and the Work Program
of security and the acceptance by the state of its obligation to take such steps as will guarantee these rights wherever private employment fails to do so are achievements which social workers can surely view with satisfaction.

And yet how little satisfied social workers can feel when they think of the present situation in terms of the star to which their wagons are necessarily hitched, the vision of opportunity, security and a decent standard of life for all people. I believe that this dissatisfaction arises not as much from the form and principle of present measures as it does from their inadequacy. The organism is sound enough but it needs a lot of filling out. It needs to be extended so that it will reach more people. Almost all of our difficulties in the Works Progress Administration grow out of the problem of deciding who shall be assigned to the limited number of jobs from the throngs of people who are clamoring for work. We are urged to extend the period of eligibility so that those who have been compelled to seek assistance since November, 1935, would not be arbitrarily excluded. We have been urged to give consideration for full time employment to so-called secondary wage earners in relief families so that relatives may be spared the continued humiliation of dependence and young people may establish their own homes. We have been strongly urged to do away with the relief requirement altogether so that those who have made great struggle and sacrifice in order to maintain their independent status shall not be penalized for what should properly be regarded as virtues. Farmers feel that they should be entitled to work during the winter, especially work of a rural character, such as soil conservation, reclamation or farm-to-market road projects. Former relief workers feel that they should be entitled to work under the agency which displaced them, and government employees, let out in personnel reductions, feel that they should have special consideration for WPA jobs. Obviously with the number of jobs limited to the funds available we have had no choice but to adhere to restrictive and arbitrary eligibility requirements. Obviously by the same token the total need has not been met.

In the same way many of you feel that even those people who have
him full value in wages for the work performed. So you find us falling far short of your ideal in the matter of the security wage for adult workers and the one-third security wage for one-third time for youth workers. This is a point, I believe, where public opinion is beginning to catch up with you, if recent developments in Congress can be taken as an indication. But even assuming acceptance of the prevailing wage principle, the total benefit will still be limited by the number of hours that the individual is allowed to work to earn the equivalent of the security wage.

Both of these problems, the number of people who can be employed and the total amount which each of them shall receive, are but two faces of the same issue. And that issue is simply this: how much money are the American people willing to spend in order that none of their number shall be involuntarily idle or none without the minimum security in the event that they cannot work? This is the fundamental issue in American public life today, I believe, and it is exactly at this point that the disparity between your ideal and present realities takes on the proportions which we know exist.

It makes little difference how thoroughly you may be convinced that the present number of jobs should be doubled or trebled and that every worker should work full time for an adequate wage, if the majority of the American people are unwilling to see that sufficient funds are appropriated to make this possible. I realize that our democratic machinery is somewhat cumbersome and functions slowly so that it is difficult at any one time to know exactly what our population wants. I realize that power for controlling public opinion is frequently vested in the hands of a small minority who find it to their own interest to reduce public expenditures whatever the cost to the majority. I realize that the apparent reflections of public opinion through such channels as the press or local political issues frequently represent only the opinion of a small but active minority. I realize that apparent apathy may become strong public sentiment in either direction over night when the conditions are propitious. But accepting all of these qualifications, I am still unable to arrive at any conclusion other
It is unfortunate that the issue is confused by a number of considerations which appear to be unrelated but are actually inseparable. Take the question, of long and honorable standing in American political history, of the relation and respective responsibilities of the federal, state and local units of government. There are those who believe that the maintenance of states rights and privileges is the very bulwark of our democracy and that any tendency to increasing power or activity on the part of the federal government foreshadows the development of dictatorship and absolutism as we have seen it in other lands. Another group holds that the forces of progress are with the federal government, that a nation-wide economy requires a national government. I believe these academic questions of political theory mean little to the vast rank and file of our people. What they need and what they want is to find a way that all may know prosperity, security, and opportunity. The only thing of real importance to the unemployed man is that his assistance should be adequate and administered in a way that brings no shame or discredit to him and his family. It is our opinion that if relief is to be adequate all the resources of the federal, state, and local governments must be brought to bear to make it so. We believe that the federal government should use its greater taxing and borrowing power to meet the greatest need, that of providing work for the able-bodied unemployed, and should also assist the states in making provision for social security measures. We have learned by hard experience that the best public interest demands that federal funds be expended under federal supervision, but that the responsibility for determining who shall receive their benefits and the type of work which shall be done should be shared by local communities.

It seems quite evident that if the federal government were to relinquish to the states full responsibility for the relief of unemployment and for the guarantee of security against this and other hazards of life, the total amount of money available for these purposes would be greatly reduced, and the adequacy of relief proportionately less. And yet there is evidence in the press, in Congress, in certain political circles that there are those who strongly hold that
American Institute of Public Opinion which revealed only 45 per cent of the people questioned in favor of federal participation in relief, and 55 per cent definitely opposed to it. I have no way of judging the degree to which this survey is actually representative of all groups in this country. I hope it is not, but we who disagree can ill afford to ignore indications of this kind.

A second issue in which we are all immediately concerned is that of whether the federal government should resume the financing of direct relief. As time goes on I believe our position that this also, in reality, becomes a question of the amount of money which the public is willing to spend is vindicated. Those of you who have followed this session of Congress closely know that the issue in respect to direct relief has not been whether Congress should appropriate additional funds so that relief could be added to the present work and security measures, but whether direct relief could not replace them and permit a reduced expenditure. With the exception of Congressman Marcantonio, (speaking in defense of his own bill), I cannot recall one member of Congress who has suggested a relief program plus additional funds. In fact those members of the social work profession, who have publicly come out in favor of a relief program find themselves cited as authority again and again by those who favor a lower appropriation, return of relief to the states and abandonment of an employment program. The A. A. S. W. has become a power in the conservative camp; it has lent respectability to those who would reduce relief appropriations.

Leaving aside all question of the relative merit of a work and relief program, I believe we would agree that the best type of assistance is that which gives the highest benefit to the unemployed person with the least cost to his self-respect. It has been our experience that only a work program can do that. But the work program is unquestionably more expensive in terms of immediate outlay. It is more expensive because work requires tools and materials, but it is more expensive primarily because the worker on a WPA project is receiving an average of $50 a month where the recipient of relief received only an average of $25 a month. We feel that this gain must be protected at all cost and that, under present circumstances, it cannot be protected if we return to federal relief.
be clearly drawn so that the American people could actually go to the polls in November and make their wishes effective. But it is probably inevitable that we will have political charges and countercharges in the accepted fashion of election years and that when the vote is counted it will reflect only the direction of general public sentiment rather than its clearcut absolute expression. But even this direction will surely be crucial. For it is my firm belief that it is this question of whether the people as a whole are willing to pay the price of extending an opportunity to work and adequate assistance to those of their number who are unemployed and destitute that will determine the eventual vitality of our democracy.

Even though I believe that social workers must accept the fact that in the final analysis the will of the majority must determine the public policy, I am certainly not advocating that you passively accept the present state of public opinion as final. I can only repeat that I believe you have an obligation of leadership and an obligation to bring your knowledge and your experience to a clarification of these issues. For it is not we who are employed by the government who determine its policy but the vast body of the electorate.