The Problem and Policy of Works Progress Administration Interpretation

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I hope I may be forgiven if I spill over the rim of our subject, the
Problem and Policy of WPA Interpretation, into the broader considerations that
surround it. For one quickly finds in thinking of how we shall interpret our
job in the Works Progress Administration that one cannot answer that question
successfully without first having a clear conception of what it is that we have
to interpret and why. These questions in turn are rooted in our conception and
philosophy of government as a function of human society. It is from this point,
then, that I approach our subject.

In the unsettled and perplexing state of the world today, it is difficult
to penetrate the confusing multitude of surface phenomena to the fundamental issues
that underly them. But to my mind there is one basic issue in the world today,
the significance of which is so inescapable that no one of us can afford to ignore
it. This is the issue of democracy - democracy in its broadest sense. There are
numerous schools of thought as to how society should be constituted and what form
of government would best suit its purposes. But fundamentally there are only two
philosophies of society: that which holds that certain individuals or groups
should benefit at the expense of the rest and that which holds that each individual
is important in his own right and entitled to a voice in the determination of the
conditions under which he lives and the method and policies by which he is governed.
It is the latter philosophy which I believe we properly be called democracy. We
But there are other forces that oppose the democratic principle in a less direct fashion in our own country. It is true that the majority of our people can still go to the polls and cast their vote for the persons who will represent them in the various units of government, town, county, state and federal. But political activity and political rights represent only the effective will of current political philosophy. And it is in our philosophy that the threat to our democracy lies. One has only to pick up his morning paper to be confronted with the evidence. It is not as yet a threat against the franchise. It is a threat against the right of the vast body of our working people to join organizations of their own choosing in order to better the conditions under which they work and live and in order that they may bargain on an equitable basis with their otherwise all-powerful employers. It is a threat against man's most precious endowment, the urge to seek always after further knowledge, to broaden the sphere of human understanding, wherever that urge might interfere with the privileges of certain groups. It is a threat against the right of a large number of our people, the unemployed, to participate in the economy of the country in which they live, or, in some cases, against their right to receive the means to even the barest livelihood. It is a threat against the government wherever the government undertakes to maintain these rights or wherever the government undertakes to improve the lot of the masses of our people at a cost to the privileges of the few.

The Works Progress Administration is necessarily, by the very nature of its function, in the midst of this battle. I hope it is not necessary for me to tell you that we, both as an organization, representing the will of the elected representatives of the nation and its elected executive, and as individuals, believe in the principle of democracy. We believe not only that every adult person is entitled to a voice in the government, but that this government, his government, owes him some assurance of security for himself and his family and an opportunity, if he is able, to participate in the economy of the country by work.
that the vast majority of our so-called middle class population, business men, professional people and the like - when the true facts are known to them - seek anything for themselves at the cost of suffering to other groups. It is not, in fact, to the true interest of any of these groups that others should be destitute and outcast. For the very nature of our economy is such as to make us all dependent on the prosperity of others for our own well-being.

And yet these threats exist. It is difficult - with all the respect in the world for legitimate differences of opinion as to how the well-being of all people may best be achieved within the framework of democracy - to avoid the conclusion that in many instances the issues are deliberately confused by powerful and selfish interests seeking to maintain their own power and privilege by falsely identifying it with the public interest. Since these interests frequently control the channels of communication and information, their comparative success is not surprising.

The misconceptions about the unemployed and unemployment relief, for example, are distressingly widespread. Take the recurring rumor, so often repeated that it is accepted widely among respectable people as a fact, that the unemployed are destitute because they won't work - while private jobs go begging. Never, in any of the efforts we have made to follow back along the path of these rumors have we found confirmation of the charge that the unemployed were deliberately refusing private employment. Yet this thing is serious. A prominent Congressman was quoted in the press, misquoted, I hope, as saying in connection with a proposed relief appropriation which he believed was too high: "Those unemployed people who don't get reabsorbed by private industry will just have to get out and look for a job". What hope can we have for a realistic solution of our problems when large numbers of people are confused by the strange conception that ten million people can, through those vague qualities popularly referred to as "rugged individualism" and "personal initiative", lift themselves by their boot-straps into self support? Or when they are reassured by the deluding thought that unemployment is caused by relief that we be able to \nonition relief
Second: that this condition exists not because these are inferior, incompetent people who can contribute nothing to our economy but because that economy, through its own maladjustment, has rejected them.

Third: that there are only three alternatives for meeting the immediate problem. These people may be deprived of all rights and allowed to starve in complete independence; they may be cast upon the mercies of private generosity; or the people as a whole, through their government, may accept the responsibility for seeing that those of their own number who are unemployed or incapacitated for work shall not starve.

Fourth: that assistance may take the form of grocery orders and soup lines, a cash dole, compulsory insurance or a work program.

Fifth: that assistance to those who have nothing cannot be provided without cost to the more fortunate, and that relief which is cheapest in terms of immediate expenditure is the most expensive in terms of human demoralization.

Sixth: that there are only two ways of raising the public funds, through taxation or through borrowing. It is impossible to provide assistance without either increasing some form of taxation or the public debt and the more adequate the assistance the greater must be the increase.

There are other considerations, of course, (and some of them I shall discuss later) but these are the fundamentals. I believe that the future of this nation as a democracy depends upon the realism with which we face these facts and the degree to which the democratic principle determines their solution. For it seems to me self-evident that millions of our people will not quietly starve or continue their existence miserably, in poverty and degradation, so long as they have a voice in the way their country is run. If this occurs, it can only be because a small number of people have undertaken to run the country for their own
catastrophe to occur. I believe there are many forces opposing such a development as well as many favoring it. I believe we have seen evidence in the past few years of a developing sense of public responsibility, not only for assisting the victims of social and economic forces, but also for removing the causes of their misfortune, which many of us would have thought utterly impossible a few years back. We have seen public relief on an increasingly adequate scale, replace the frantic and frequently misdirected efforts to provide even meagerly in the first days of the depression. We have seen the development of a program of work for wages whereby the employed person is enabled to participate in our economy as a functioning unit, making his contribution to the social whole and receiving his wage in payment, rather than a grudging handout. I believe most of you agree that this is an advance, whatever quarrels you may have with us on related issues. We have seen a landmark, the significance of which I feel to be very great, in the passage of the Social Security Act. For the first time the people as a whole, the electorate, has recognized its obligation through its government to guarantee each others security! Here is a bright and unmistakable sign of the vitality of our democracy. There are other evidences: the guarantee of the right of labor to join organizations of its own choosing and to bargain collectively, the recognition of the obligation of the body politic to assist in the equalization of income and spending power between city workers and farmers, the growing recognition of the necessity for the government to assist in providing decent housing for its people. These are only a few of the evidences of a developing social conscience in this country.

I do not think it is irrelevant to discuss this general and fundamental question in connection with our specific problems in the Works Progress Administration. For if this problem were solved, most of our other difficulties and perplexities would resolve themselves. If the public were willing to spend the money necessary to guarantee that any of its number who were able and anxious to work should have employment and that any who were unable to work should have decent and adequate assistance our principal worries would vanish.
bitterness, futility, and misery of enforced idleness. There are those of you who
think we do not see these things. It is not we who are blind. We have reason to
know these things. It is your neighbors, your friends and associates, your board
members who ignore the true facts when they deplore the public debt, when they
deride the "extravagance" of paying the unemployed head of a family $50 a month
for public service performed, when they minimize the total need.

It is perhaps not surprising that these blind spots exist in our
national consciousness. Never has there been a more concerted drive to force the
federal government to reduce its relief expenditures. Only a few weeks ago a
New York newspaper juggled employment figures and produced, as if by magic, the
startling but reassuring conclusion that there are only 3,276,790 unemployed persons
(excluding agricultural and domestic workers) in the United States at the present
time. This does not explain the fact that more than that number are receiving
assistance from the federal government at the present time, that 1,800,000 more are
eligible for that work even under our highly restrictive eligibility requirements,
that we are constantly besieged by those who are outside of these requirements,
and that over nine million are actively registered with the offices of the United
States Employment Service.

It is claimed that present appropriations do not reach the unemployed
but are fattening up the Democratic henchmen, even though we can demonstrate that
our administrative costs are 3.6 per cent and that more than 95½ per cent of the
persons on our projects came from the relief rolls.

There is an effort to discredit us by attacking our projects, although
I believe the "boondoggle" charge has become frayed about the edges. Sponsors are
beginning to realize that it is their cherished dreams in the way of improvements
for their own communities that are being attacked, not simply the federal officials
in Washington. And thousands of people listening to symphonies, attending plays,
learning in our classes, playing in our parks, finishing school through the NYA
program, getting their produce to market, saved from floods and so on through the
whole gamut of living — are not impressed by the reiteration of a worn-out word.
voter and taxpayer to give him a chance to work? We see this attack reflected in the bridge table talk of ladies who claim a scarcity of domestics. Recently a telegram was sent to the President from a fashionable suburb of New York by a woman who asked why people should be supported by the government when the people in her town could not get cooks, waitresses, chauffeurs, butlers and gardeners. When our people went to her for names and dates, she confessed that the telegram had been sent as a joke by a party of people whose political enthusiasm was running high on alcoholic stimulation. This kind of thing is no joke to the unemployed. Neither are the radio jokes about status that turn out to be WPA workers, or the comic strips that demonstrate how fine people keep off the relief rolls while worthless chiselers live at ease!

I do not believe that you as social workers believe that we are spending too much money or that the unemployed are worthless people, undeserving of consideration. Those of you who quarrel with us do so largely on the grounds that the federal government has undertaken to provide jobs for only a part of the people who are in need, and left the rest to the states and communities. I have no question as to the sincerity of those of you who believe that this has been a backward step and an unnecessarily cruel one to certain groups of people. I respect your position but I want you to know ours.

No one, I believe, questions the desirability of a job for the able-bodied man or woman who is unemployed. There is work that needs to be done and there are people who are competent to do it. What more logical responsibility does the government than to bring the two together! Public work for the unemployed is socially desirable in that it uses for the public benefit the talents and capacities of those people whom industry has rejected. But there is another aspect to this question, perhaps more important. I do not believe that any direct relief program for the able-bodied, however ably administered, can fail to humiliate and degrade the individual who receives it! There is something deep-rooted in a democracy like ours that demands that each person shall pull his own weight,
laborer is worthy of his hire but the able-bodied man who depends on charity for his livelihood is thrown a pittance in contempt. I think that this is a trait in our American character which we should not despise. But I think also that we must accept its inevitable corollary - a public responsibility to see that every able-bodied worker has the opportunity to take his rightful place in our democratic society not only through the exercise of political rights but through a job.

Assuming that we are agreed on this principle, I have pondered long and seriously the reasons that bring many of you to urge a resumption of federal relief. It cannot be simply that the present work program does not provide jobs for everybody for the only logical answer to such a criticism is more jobs. You say that the states and localities will not, and, in many cases, cannot provide adequate assistance for those who are unable to work, let alone for the unemployable persons for whom we have had no job. It is said that only federal relief grants can meet the entire need.

I realize what it means to you to read of families cut off relief in different localities, to see the distress of these same families besieging your agencies for some small bit of aid. I know how you must feel when you read of soup lines in Houston and organized begging in New Jersey, when you see states setting up border patrols against the unemployed and jungles flourishing by the freight yards. I know that it is difficult in the face of these things for you to listen when we urge upon you the long range view, the view which we believe shows these as a part of the growing pains of progress. We know that it is difficult for some of you to comprehend the stand which we have taken against federal relief when there are these daily evidences of suffering.

Even so we cannot yield in what we so firmly believe to be true. Recognizing the suffering of those who are now cast out in the shadow, we still will not relinquish the bright light of achievement and opportunity in order that all may know the murky gray of security in defeat. On the bright side of our picture we have these: a definite acceptance of the responsibility of our federal government to provide work for its able-bodied unemployed and an acceptance of
who is in need. So it appears no one should suffer, for relief would fill in the
gaps of suffering between our present programs until such time as new measures
could be achieved.

But in reality it is that very flexibility and elasticity of relief
that menaces our hard won victories. For why should states pass legislation for
social security measures if there is hope of securing an all-purpose relief grant
from the federal government? And why should tax payers accept the cost of a
work program if half the amount of money can be stretched to aid twice the number
of people through a relief program? You have only to read the Congressional
Record to learn that the issue is not whether we shall have a federal work program
plus federal relief but whether federal relief could not displace the work
program.

Perhaps you members of the A. A. S. W. noted that your program has
been cited as evidence by one of the members of the Senate that new appropriations
for aid to the unemployed would be unnecessary if we returned to a relief program.
It has been three times cited by other Senators as authority for attacking the
work program and urging the cheaper program of direct relief. You who insist
upon federal relief find yourselves in the company not only of the political
opposition but also, and more serious, of all those who favor the form of as-
sistance that can be stretched to the thinnest possible point, to that fine point
of adjustment which costs the least to their pocketbooks and still does not en-
danger their loss by revolt. For half-starved people, living on crumbs that fall
from the tables of the rich, are too weary and too weak even to lift themselves
to demand that they be fed from the table. They are slaves and outcasts; they
are no longer free men in a free democracy.

I am at a loss to know how to conclude what I have been saying to you.
We should like to have the support of social workers in our fight because we feel
that you should understand the problem that confronts us, that we should be working
side by side for the people whose tragic plight we know so well. I think it is
more than a fight for the unemployed, important as that is. I think it is a fight
for the preservation of all that we hold most precious in our American heritage,