



THE WORKS PROGRAM

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--Works Progress Administration--

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The following address was delivered by Aubrey Williams, Deputy Administrator of the Works Progress Administration, at the 38th anniversary of the State Conference of Social Work in the Manhattan Opera House, New York City, at 8:30 p. m., Tuesday, October 19, 1937:

Any one of us connected with the Federal government's relief and welfare activities is always happy to appear before an organized State Conference of Social Work. Professional social work is largely represented in our Federal, State and local relief administration; without the trained personnel of voluntary social work, our earlier administrations could not have been set going. Social workers have contributed some of the most constructive criticism of the Federal-State program. Their continuing participation, both as administrators and as helpful critics, will always be needed.

As experienced social workers, familiar with the forces at work in our present economic system, and knowing something of the currents that are carrying it in hitherto unplotted directions, you will not expect me to talk to you tonight in terms of the technical problems of voluntary social work, or of the special problems confronting voluntary philanthropic agencies in a time when public welfare activities seem to be increasingly dominant. Experience will show the best ways of coordinating the two types of activity. No matter how great the expansion of public welfare work, there will always be room and need for the special contribution of social work financed out of voluntary contributions.

Four years of relatively uninterrupted business recovery should provide us with a vantage point in our social march from which a look backward over

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ground traversed, an inventory of objectives gained, and a candid recognition of social set-backs, may be had. At the same time, we may be pardoned for attempting to look forward into the future and of restating the larger social objectives and indicating some of the goals which vitally concern all of us, whether social workers or lay board members.

Every social worker knows how impossible it is to understand an individual "case" without regard to its social context, and how rarely a case is successfully closed without the cooperation of environmental forces surrounding the agency's client. The history of voluntary social work in our country is a record of recognition of the necessity of transforming the environment before any marked improvement in the condition of individual cases could be expected. First, the case is picked up on the basis of an emergency. Once the emergency is met, the social work agency worth its salt sets about organizing the forces capable of bringing about modification of the environment responsible for the individual distress which is, after all, merely the symptom of a destructive environment.

I submit that this administration has necessarily approached its social task in that same light. First, an emergency had to be dealt with. We are now definitely out of, at least, that emergency period. How grave that emergency was which the nation faced in the spring of 1933, when President Roosevelt first took office, it is difficult for us to recall, from these comparatively untroubled days of 1937. It is even more difficult to remember that many of those same business leaders who now charge governmental interference with responsibility for the decline of the stock-market and its unfavorable repercussions on business activity in general and new investment in particular, were among those who called most insistently for Federal government intervention to save the country's collapsing business structure four and one half years ago.

One of the tasks, possibly the major one of the liberal forces of the nation, is without further delays to set about modifying the economic environment which for so long has stood in the way of equality of economic opportunity. The legal basis for a more equitable sharing of the total national income produced by the voluntary collaboration of nearly fifty

million individual workers also needs to be established.

In order to be clear as to the magnitude and complexity of our social task, it is vitally important to break it down into its most important components. Unemployment, of course, does not adequately describe the social problem confronting the nation today. The truth is that for five years we have been wrestling with a major problem of poverty, extending into practically every corner of the country. We have been inclined to generalize this problem by dubbing it "unemployment." This has had the effect of making us ignore the significant fact that a large part of the wide-spread destitution is due to a break-down of the country's agricultural economy. A farmer may be destitute though not unemployed. A farmer may be destitute because of the failure of his crop. This failure may be due to a natural calamity, like drought or flood, affecting a particular section of the country. Or, it may be due to his inability to cover the cost of production of his crop in the selling-price fixed by world competitive conditions. This farmer and his family are just as hungry as the family of the unemployed worker in the nearest town, but he is not "unemployed" in the sense in which that term is rightfully used. Nationally we must recognize this distinction before we can set about modifying the environmental conditions from which the destitution of the farmer on the one hand, and the industrial wage-earner on the other, stem.

It is the hope of all of us that American agriculture can be re-established on a basis where it will provide a reasonably secure living for at least the great bulk of the families dependent on it. This is not to minimize the complexity of the problem. In fact, a sense of realism compels one to recognize that under the best conditions (taking the world economic situation in its present and prospective state) our agriculture will not yield an American standard of living to all those now engaged in it. Secretary Wallace intimates that the land now utilized for crops needs to be considerably reduced (some experts say by as much as 100 million acres) in order for a reasonable balance between the farmer's input of capital and labor and his marketable output of crops can be established.

This curtailment of crop acreage means an ultimate diminution in the number of families now engaged in agriculture as their principal means of livelihood. Without trying to offer any definite solution for the problem of what is to

become of farm operators displaced by crop acreage reduction, it is plain that to the extent that the land will not support them, some alternative means of livelihood must be found for them in non-agricultural pursuits.

Nor can we generalize about the best way of dealing with the poverty which is characteristic of such a large part of our agricultural population. Any one who travels this vast country of ours soon comes to appreciate that economically, - we are dealing not with one economy, but with half a dozen different economies. The problems of economic stabilization in the cotton belt are different from those of agricultural adjustment in the corn-belt. And there are three different cotton areas, each with its own peculiar economic and cultural problems. There is the old South, with its small-scale farms worked by an archaic and uneconomic system of share-cropping. There is the Mississippi Delta cotton area, with its relatively large plantations, and its increasing reliance on mechanical equipment and wage-labor. And finally, there is the cotton growing section of the High Plains of West Texas and Oklahoma, with its even larger cotton farms, an already highly developed technique of mechanical cultivation, and its dependence on migratory Mexican and Negro wage-hands.

The mal-utilization of the land and water resources of the Great Plains dry-land grain regions constitutes a different problem from the insufficiency of self-sufficing farming in the Appalachians and the Ozarks. The problem of stabilizing employment for the migratory seasonal wage-hands in the irrigated areas of the Salt River Valley of Arizona, the Imperial, Salinas, and Sacramento Valleys of California, is entirely different from that of devising measures for bringing a reasonable degree of economic security to the worker who is at one and the same time a part-time industrial wage-earner and a part-time farm hand.

Part of the difficulty which has been encountered in connection with governmental participation in relief since the enactment in July 1932 of the first R.F.C. relief "loan" bill is traceable, in my opinion, to the fact that industrial unemployment on an unprecedented scale, and widespread destitution among agricultural producers, coincided. No other great

capitalist country, so far as I know, has had a problem of such magnitude and complexity. Great Britain, for example, while it had a grave problem of unemployment among wage-earners, has had a comparatively insignificant problem of agricultural destitution to cope with. This is due, of course, to the relatively small percentage of the working population of the British Isles engaged in farming.

Farming is inherently a risky business, but it has been amply demonstrated that in certain sections of the United States, it is practically an unbeatable game which the farmer is now playing against Nature. How the agricultural producers of the United States are to be assured a reasonable degree of economic security is a problem with which the intelligence of the nation must wrestle for some years to come. No one pretends that relief, along the lines followed since July 1932, offers anything in the nature of a definitive solution to the problem of economic security for the farmer. It does, however, constitute an economic "dug-out" into which the farmer can descend, temporarily, when overtaken by a calamity for which he is in no wise responsible and against which his own individual efforts are powerless.

It has been truly remarked that unemployment is a function of the competitive system. Any system in which the production of goods and services is dependent on the unrelated efforts of a multitude of competitors will inevitably result in mal-adjustments and economic disturbances in which the production outruns consumption, and workers, willing and eager to work, are deprived of the income which they would gladly spend on the things they themselves produce. The totalitarian states can bring their unemployment under control, perhaps even (as claimed by Soviet Russia) eliminate it altogether. But the American people show no inclination to adopt the economic policies and political ideology of Soviet Russia, Nazi Germany or Fascist Italy. We hold the price they pay in loss of freedom and liberty far too dear and we prefer to struggle with the admitted evils of the competitive system. In other words, we do not pretend that we can eliminate unemployment or prevent it. But we maintain the evils of unemployment can be mitigated by means of tested systems of unemployment insurance, unemployment assistance and public works employment, and by the maintenance of purchasing power of workers thrown into involuntary idleness through no fault of their own.

Of course, the problem of poverty in the United States is not disposed of by re-establishing our agricultural economy on a rational basis, and by surrounding our industrial wage-earners with the safeguards of social insurance. These solutions involve only those families with a breadwinner who is both able and willing to work. Social workers do not need to be

reminded of the large number of persons who are unable to fend for themselves. But our competitive system must also recognize their existence. Ways must be found and supported that endeavor to bring a reasonable degree of economic security to these categories of persons, viz., the aged, dependent children, the blind and other physically handicapped persons. And for many whose conditions place them rightfully in the categories contemplated by the Social Security Act, yet due to the limiting definitions and the financial inabilities of certain states, they fall outside of its benefits. While contemplating them, it does not include them.

The social security legislation is an outstanding example of what I mean by the necessity for governmental action to modify the environmental conditions of our present economic system. The Act is admittedly imperfect and will, of course, in due season, be itself modified in order more adequately to meet the changing demands of our people for social insurance. How dependable a shelter unemployment benefits paid out of separate state funds will prove in the next important business recession remains to be seen. There is great likelihood that states with relatively heavy cyclical unemployment will see their reservoirs of contributions run dry while states with a less heavy incidence of cyclical unemployment still have funds. The waiting period seems too long to take care of the type of frictional unemployment represented by enforced shifting from one job to another. The Wisconsin experience seems to indicate that workers now in employment and subject to the protection of the state unemployment compensation system are those who have not in the past had to have recourse to relief or public assistance. Does this mean that the relief load will continue to be almost as heavy after unemployment compensation is in operation in all of the states? An accurate answer to this question is but one of the many that need answering in order for the unemployment compensation scheme to meet the needs for which it was designed.

What is to be done regarding relief for the "insured" worker after he has exhausted his right to unemployment benefit? The answer Great Britain has given to this question is a national unemployment assistance scheme covering the great majority of employable workers between the ages of 16 and 65, and financed largely out of the national treasury. How shall the admittedly inadequate coverage of state unemployment compensation be enlarged and the obvious inequalities among states be corrected?

Similarly, the old age annuity plan is faulty, many competent authorities believing that in creating a reserve fund which, -- if the intent of the law were carried out -- would ultimately amount to thirty billion dollars, a factor will have been injected into the economic situation capable of intensifying the very dislocations the Social Security Act attempts to smooth out. The coverage of

old-age annuities needs to be enlarged to take in the agricultural population, domestic servants, employees of governmental and voluntary philanthropic agencies. The contributions weigh too heavily on the younger workers. But the important thing is not whether the Social Security Act is adequate or not, but that the principle has been laid down that the masses of the wage-earners are entitled to the economic security which tested forms of social insurance can provide, and it is unthinkable that any future administration should wipe this protective legislation off the federal or state statute books.

There are thousands of other workers with and without dependents, who, while excluded from the type of statutory public assistance contemplated by our present social security legislation, are unable, under existing conditions, to gain a livelihood for themselves. Although these persons are classed by the United States Census as among the "gainfully employed", they are liable to long and frequent periods of unemployment because of the limitations imposed on their employability by premature old-age, impaired physical vitality, susceptibility to sickness and industrial accident, and other causes having nothing to do with their moral behavior. Our industrial system puts a premium on youth, mental alertness, physical dexterity, etc., which tend to reduce the saleability of experience in a particular line of industry, manual skill or mechanical aptitude, when offered by a worker who is no longer young. Many large industrial concerns discriminate against the worker who cannot show outstanding qualifications for the available job, merely because he has passed the age limit arbitrarily fixed by themselves. All over the country, experience with relief during the past five years shows clearly that we need to take increasing thought for men who, while they may be "employable" for purposes of relief classification and administrative convenience, are in fact unemployable in the light of the employment policies actually enforced by industrial concerns in their community.

To these workers - "invalid workers" schemes of social insurance in certain European countries dub them - old age assistance under the Social Security Act offers no haven because they have not reached the eligible age of 65. Many of them, however, must look forward to ten years or more of great and increasing economic insecurity because they are not able to measure up to the physical standards attaching to locally available jobs. During periods of unemployment (which will inevitably become more frequent with advancing age) local relief is the only recourse for this type of worker. Works Progress employment can only

take care of these "invalid" workers by lowering its own standards unreasonably. And local relief, in the face of the growing resistance of taxpayers to increased assessments for financing the mounting costs of government, becomes more and more precarious.

The devising of wise and economically sound measures for dealing with the wide-spread poverty that still characterized our economic system must be thought out in the larger context of the social and economic reforms implicit in the New Deal. The chief points in the Government's program are well known to all of you, but it will do no harm to review them briefly, because their objectives are not yet won and still need to be fought for.

On the side of agriculture, there was the A.A.A. program, the efficacy of which was demonstrated before the adverse decision of the Supreme Court put an end to its operations. The income of American farm producers for 1937 - in spite of severe declines in the prices of the principal farm products - bids fair to come within reach of that for the boom year 1929. The task of agricultural re-adjustment, of balancing the farmer's input of capital and labor with his output of marketable crops, is unfinished, and has been made the first order of business at the special session of Congress called by the President for November 15.

N.R.A. notwithstanding the criticism voiced against it in many quarters, was a statesmanlike attempt to introduce a new philosophy into the American competitive system. Certain practices which militated against the welfare of smaller business concerns and endangered the economic security of employees generally, were condemned as "unfair." A new ethical principle was written into the industrial code by Section 7-A, which guaranteed to workers the right to organize freely and without restraint by their employers in unions of their own choosing. The "Company Union" was outlawed. The invalidation of N.R.A. by the Supreme Court carried the newly conferred guarantee of collective bargaining into the constitutional discard likewise, but the Wagner Act, - duly sustained by the Supreme Court, - reaffirmed this right to all industrial workers. The spread of collective bargaining, and the growth of union membership - in both the A. F. of L. and the C. I. O - testify to the validity of the main premise on which the Roosevelt Administration based its sponsorship of the original N.R.A. Collective bargaining between employers and representative unions freely chosen by their employees, constitutes one of the most important bulwarks in the framework of our economic security which we now recognize to be a fundamental right of our workers.



The wages and hours bill, left swinging in the last Congress, represents an effort to write into our Federal law provisions for limiting an over-long working week and building a floor under which rates of wages shall not fall. Here, again, we have the viewpoint expressed that while the individual case of economic distress must be relieved, equally close attention must be paid by government to modifying the conditions out of which the need for relief grows. N.R.A. attempted to accomplish this end by the voluntarily accepted provisions of industrial codes. But the invalidating of the Act of the Supreme Court was followed by a gradual lengthening of the working week in many industrial plants, and, during the periods of active demand for goods, overtime became general. There is a strong belief in the country that the shortening of the work-week will, in the long run, provide additional employment, and take off the relief rolls many of those now there.

Progress in raising the lowest wage rates in "sweated" industries and shortening the prevailing work-week will probably be slow, but with competent administration, the nation should, within a few years, be in possession of knowledge about wage rates and working conditions in all parts of the country on which it can build social legislation capable of ameliorating human distress.

Against all these efforts of the Administration, certain reactionary business interests raise the charge of undue, destructive governmental interference in private business activity. But, in the light of world conditions and the present plight of the competitive system in other capitalist countries, that objection is puerile. Our present economic system not only needs to be curbed in the interests of the masses of the producers and consumers; it needs to be saved from those who will gain increasing strength to destroy it if its greatest abuses are not soon corrected. One does not need to be a dangerous radical to offer the prophecy that another business depression like the one from which the country is just now emerging will leave little of the present economic system for its chief supporters and beneficiaries to recognize.

Business is fearful that the cost of bringing a reasonable measure of economic security to the masses of the American people, under legislation that by no stretch of the imagination can be called revolutionary, will be saddled on business enterprise. That the cost of the enlarging social services which present day economic insecurity makes imperative must be met out of taxation goes without saying. It must be recognized that the end of the borrowing era is approaching. The creation of public debt in order to suck out into the channels of consumption billions of dollars of idle capital which business men had not the urge to borrow and bankers had not the temerity to lend, was an emergency urgently called for by the

theoretical and practical exigencies of the situation and amply justified by the results in stimulation to business and increase in general employment. Wisdom will be needed in deciding how and where taxes to meet the cost of social security are to be levied. But to the extent that income is diverted from those who normally save a considerable portion of their total income to those who in the nature of things spend all they take in on their daily consumption, the country is benefited. Disbursements out of tax funds for unemployment benefits, old age assistance and other forms of governmental social services are as much justified on the economic ground that they help to maintain mass purchasing power, as they are on ethical grounds that organized society must provide for those who, through no fault of their own, cannot provide for themselves.

The necessity for planning constructively and with foresight in the field of social welfare leads me, in conclusion, to refer to a bill which has so far received scant public attention, which made little progress in the last Congress, but which the President has put on the order of the day along with agricultural stabilization, wages and hours legislation, and Federal governmental reorganization. This is the so-called regional authority bill. It sets up seven distinct regions, bounded not by political lines, but by economic. This proposed legislation is based on the idea that our human problems are inescapably tied up with the way in which our natural resources are utilized.

The anthracite coal mining area of north-eastern Pennsylvania has been prominently in the public light during recent months, and the problem of what to do about 40,000 unemployed anthracite miners in view of the decline in the consumption of hard coal has brought forth recommendations by a Commission appointed by Governor Earle that only stopped short of state operation of the mines. The remedy for the plight of the population dependent on the anthracite industry can be visualized in its broad outlines, even if it cannot be realized: either other industries capable of employing the idle population will be set going in north-eastern Pennsylvania, or the surplus population will have to migrate to places where a livelihood can be gained. The State of Pennsylvania, however, is powerless to accomplish either of these objectives. This is because the fate of the anthracite industry is bound up with conditions outside the State. Pennsylvania can, if it thinks wise, modify the conditions under which anthracite coal is mined, but it cannot in any particular control the conditions in New England and New York which determine whether oil or natural gas or bituminous coal is to be used as a substitute for anthracite coal.

In the northern part of Idaho, the lumber industry is in decay and the region is dotted with derelict towns and stranded population, due to the ruthless cutting out of the best timber. The State of Idaho can impose restrictions on the further cutting of timber, but it cannot dictate the competitive conditions in the populous centers of the Middle West which determine whether builders and wood-working establishments shall use Idaho white pine or fir from Oregon or Washington, or yellow pine from the southern part of the United States.

The regional authority bill is but a beginning, and it does not contemplate more than providing a regional basis for planning the best use of the region's land and water resources. But out of this new "regional economic" approach, the foundations for economic and social planning may ultimately develop. Social workers should know about this proposed legislation, for in the long run it may give us the basis for some new type of collaboration between Federal and State governments for the best utilization of natural resources in the interest of all of the people.

Reactionary business interests likewise express fear over what they call the centralization of power in the Federal government. But this consolidation of legislative and executive power away from governmental units inherently incapable of exercising it into a central authority, where it can be exercised, is a worldwide tendency which we in the United States cannot escape. In a time of crisis, the people demand a strong government. In our own case, the states have shown their inability to cope with the disastrous human and economic effects of the depression, and the Federal branch had no choice but to step in and use power with a view to saving the national economy from total collapse. Responsibility and authority go together. Those who demand that the Federal government assume responsibility must be logical enough to accord it the authority to make that responsibility real.

However, to say that the Federal government must have enlarged authority does not necessarily signify that in every instance, administrative functions must be exercised by Federal officials. Federal authority can, where the public interest will be best served thereby, be delegated to appropriate state or local bodies. This, of course, is part of the question of how relief is to be administered, and whether Federal or State administration is better. The answer is that there is room for both and that in certain instances, Federal administration will best meet the need of the situation,

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and in other, state and local administration should be relied on. The essence of the problem is to develop the most effective type of collaboration between the Federal and the State government. But without authority this becomes illusory.

The American people, if one is to judge them by the way they vote on such matters, do not any longer accept it as necessary that they and most of their friends should continue poor. This attitude is, basically, something different from that of every one expecting secretly in his heart to become one of the rich. This new attitude is at once anti-poor but not pro-rich. It is a general thing, in which the total is raised up. There is a conviction in the air that men generally have a right to something more than continuous, grinding want, week in, and month out. There is a new and positive assertion abroad that with our natural wealth, our organizing and mechanical ability - and our world-acknowledged industriousness, we should all be able to have a better living than we have now.

Our ideals concerning the obligations and responsibilities of government have undergone some major changes.

We are coming to regard government as something more than a police agency with a foreign relations department.

We are coming to regard Government as having responsibilities not only for the peace and order of our national life but as the authorized collective agency in our individual struggle for economic and social well-being and security.

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