

THE WORKS PROGRAM

--Works Progress Administration--

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The following address, "Politics and the WPA", was delivered by Harry L. Hopkins, Administrator of the Works Progress Administration, over a nation-wide hook-up of the Columbia Broadcasting System from Station WJSV, Washington, D. C., between 7:30 and 8 p.m. (Eastern Standard Time) Sunday, May 8, 1938.

POLITICS AND THE W.P.A.

For the sake of some unnamed critic who at this very moment may be planning to attack the W.P.A. for spending relief funds on radio time, I want to say at the outset that I am "not speaking at government expense." This time is being contributed through the courtesy of the Columbia Broadcasting System.

The radio chains and radio stations of this country have made available to the W.P.A., without cost, every minute of radio time we ever have used. I want to thank them publicly for their generosity.

On March 13, 1936, when the W.P.A. was only a few months old, I issued a notice to all W.P.A. workers which included the following sentences:

"No employee of the Works Progress Administration is required to make any contribution to any political party. No person shall be

employed or discharged by the Works Progress Administration on the ground of his support or non-support of any candidate of any political organization."

That statement was issued because 1936 was an election year, and partisan voices were being raised in a thunder of charges that the holders of W.P.A. jobs were being coerced to vote in favor of the administration which had created the W.P.A.

Now we are in another election year, and again the charge is being made.

It isn't being made in as many places as it was two years ago, and the opposition is being much nicer to me personally. They usually say "Hopkins means all right, but he doesn't know what the local ward-heelers are doing out in the precincts."

I don't want anybody to think I regard these charges lightly, or feel they are not important. This is a serious matter. I know full well that the American people are very jealous about the way relief funds are administered, and deeply resent the idea of any political tampering with them. Surely I don't need to say at this late date how heartily I agree with this point of view.

The W.P.A.'s job is to direct the spending of Federal money for work-relief projects in such a way that both the workers and the communities get the most for the money. Beyond that, the program is

localized. Local officials pick out the improvements they want, and draw the plans. Local welfare officials certify to us the people who are eligible for W.P.A. jobs, and we put as many of them to work as we can, with the money Congress appropriates.

I don't want everything centralized and regimented anymore than you do. We have to watch over this federal money, and see that this program is sound and honest. Beyond that, it's up to each community, and the kind of local government you have is up to you.

I have sent a letter to every worker in this country who is participating in the program which I administer. It says in part:

"I want to repeat once more our rules about elections so that there can be absolutely no misunderstanding. Every person who works for the Works Progress Administration, whatever his job, has the right to vote in any election for any candidate he chooses. Moreover, no W.P.A. worker is required to contribute to any political party or any campaign fund in order to hold his job. No supervisor may attempt to influence the vote of any worker or solicit contributions to campaign funds from the people who work under him. Anyone who uses his position with the W.P.A. in any way to influence the votes of others by threat or intimidation will be dismissed.

"No one will lose his W.P.A. job because of his vote in any election or his failure to contribute to any campaign fund. This always

has been an absolute rule of the W.P.A., and it is my responsibility and yours to see that there are no exceptions. What's more, I want you to let me know if anybody tries to tell you anything different. Your personal opinions and your politics are nobody's business but your own."

This letter will be placed in the hands of three and a half million workers. I now want to invite anybody who finds any evidence that this policy is not carried out to give me that evidence.

My subject tonight is "Politics and the W.P.A.", and the question of whether W.P.A. workers will be permitted to vote as they please is just one part of it.

There are a number of other ways in which politics can be played with the question of unemployment relief. One of the most cowardly ways is to attack millions of unfortunate people whose only offense is that they can't find private jobs.

For years the few people who don't like Federal work-relief have been saying that W.P.A. workers are a bunch of loafers who don't want to work, and who won't take private jobs when they're offered.

Now that the W.P.A. has been operating nearly three years, we have full documentary answers to those charges. The new charge this year is that W.P.A. workers are working too much -- that they are getting out and finding extra work on the side. These stories

grew out of a limited survey of several thousand skilled workers in five cities, where about 60 per cent of this small group were found to be getting a day or two of extra work each month. I don't think this is important, in spite of the play it got in the papers, and I do think it is the perfectly natural thing for a good American workman to try to do.

Suppose you were a skilled worker with a family, under similar circumstances. Would you, or would you not, hunt odd jobs in your spare time?

I am willing to grant that a great many W.P.A. workers probably are trying to get odd jobs on the side, even though only a few of the ablest and best-trained are succeeding in even a small degree.

But where does that put the political critics who still are saying that the unemployed don't want private jobs so long as they can take it easy on the W.P.A.? I have contended from the beginning that it is ridiculous even to entertain the thought that any important number of American workmen with families are going to cling to a W.P.A. job if there's a chance of something better.

W.P.A. workers are NOT refusing decent private jobs. I can say that with complete confidence, because for more than a year we have investigated every charge of this sort we could find. And out of the thousands of workers involved in such charges, the number who actually refused to take decent jobs under decent conditions is so small as to be insignificant.

We visited 29 canneries because a produce company listed them and said they needed workers, and we found that only one of them needed a few women to clean strawberries. Over half of them weren't even operating. A contractors' association demanded that we stop W.P.A. construction in a certain state because it needed electricians. We immediately submitted the names of over 300 unemployed electricians in that state. It apologized to us, but it didn't hire any electricians. The demand was printed prominently in the papers, but not the apology.

There are hundreds of other stories like these in our files. We'll send summaries of them to anybody with an interest in them. I don't cite any of them in a spirit of intolerance, but only in fairness to the unemployed and to the W.P.A. Our workers WANT private jobs, and we want to help them GET private jobs.

I want to make this appeal to all fair-minded Americans:

Don't mistake political fiction for fact. Sensational charges too often are regarded as big news, no matter how flimsy the evidence on which they are based. When an investigation proves they were in no sense true, it's old stuff and a line or two is printed about it back among the want-ads.

It is often said or implied nowadays that a lot of Federal money has been wasted -- particularly by the W.P.A. This, too, is politics -- the political propoganda of people who are still unwilling to accept the idea that every citizen has a right to a certain minimum of security. They resent the beginnings that have been made in this direction because the Federal government has made them, and Federal taxes are based upon ability to pay. Surely you can remember, all through 1930 and 31 and 32, how carefully and completely the Federal administration dodged every responsibility for relief. This same crowd has fought the W.P.A. every inch of the way, and is still fighting it. It wants to return relief to the states. That not only will put the cost of it on real estate and sales taxes and take it off the income tax, but it also will lower relief standards generally.

These fellows are having a hard time with the W.P.A. First they said the workers wouldn't work, and now they say they

work too much. First they said W.P.A. work was all boondoggling and leaf-raking, and now they say we're building too many fine big public improvements, and there ought to be a law not to let us build anything that costs more than \$25,000!

I say to you once more that, in spite of overwhelming public sentiment, this crowd still wants a dole for the unemployed instead of work, because in immediate dollar outlay a dole looks cheaper.

I am always glad to argue with them that a dole is NOT cheaper, to anybody who can see beyond his own nose. It is my conviction, and one of the strongest convictions I hold, that the Federal government should never return to a direct relief program. It is degrading to the individual; it destroys morale and self respect; it results in no increase in the wealth of the community; it tends to destroy the ability of the individual to perform useful work in the future and it tends to establish a permanent body of dependents. We should do away with direct relief for the unemployed in the United States. We should reach a concept where the able-bodied unemployed are entitled to a job as a matter of right.

The giving of useful public work to the able-bodied unemployed appears, at first glance, to cost more. But what do you get for the outlay?

I would like to take only the W.P.A., which is alleged to be one of the most wasteful of the emergency agencies, and do a little auditing of it for you. In its first two years of operation, well over a million of its workers went back to private jobs. It is difficult to appraise the value of a thing like the human spirit, but I am convinced that those people kept fit and kept their heads up because of their W.P.A. work.

But we might deal only with tangible assets. The W.P.A. recently took a complete inventory of all the work that had been completed on its 158,000 projects. It has completed 43,000 miles of new roads and improved 116,000 miles. It has built 19,000 new bridges, 185,000 culverts, 105 new airports, 12,000 new schools and other public buildings, 8,000 parks and playgrounds, 15,000 small dams, 10,000 miles of water and sewer lines. W.P.A. workers have planted 10 million trees, and improved millions of acres of land in manifold ways.

Those are just a few of the accomplishments in the field of construction. Four-fifths of the program is construction work, because that is the kind of work which four-fifths of the needy unemployed can do best. The other one-fifth of the W.P.A. program consists of projects for what is generally known as "white collar"

workers -- unemployed men and women trained as clerks and doctors and salespeople and architects and nurses and artists and teachers and many other professional or technical pursuits. Some of the women have been trained only as housewives, and yet are the economic heads of families.

Jobless W.P.A. teachers have taught more than a million American adults to read and write English, reducing illiteracy in this country almost one-fourth. Would you call that a tangible asset?

Women on the W.P.A. have produced 85 million garments for men, women and children who hadn't enough clothing. They have served 128 million hot school lunches to hungry children, and renovated 30 million library and school books. Would you question the value of such services?

These are only a few of the things the nation got because it had the courage to give public work to its able-bodied unemployed. These things constitute national wealth and national assets. Any private business which builds improvements to its physical plant counts those improvements as assets, and considers itself richer because it has them. Government alone counts the cost of such improvements on the red side of the ledger without setting up the assets they represent on the black side. I am not particularly

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concerned about the bookkeeping, so long as the American people know their money is not being wasted, but is being used carefully and constructively to make democracy work.

Up to this point I have told you only what the W.P.A. SAYS it has done. All the bookkeeping thus far has been our own, even though it has been honest bookkeeping. We are extremely fortunate, however, in being able to inject here the results of an independent nation-wide study of the Program which has just been completed.

Ten national organizations agreed with us near the close of last year that an impartial survey of the merits and demerits of the Federal Works Program would serve the public interest, and agreed to cooperate in such an undertaking. The organizations which cooperated are the American Engineering Council, the American Institute of Architects, the American Municipal Association, the American Public Welfare Association, the American Society of Planning Officials, the National Aeronautic Association, the National Education Association, the National Recreation Association, the United States Bureau of Public Roads and the United States Conference of Mayors. So much for the prestige of the survey, which was called the United States Community Improvement Appraisal.

The Appraisal was carried out in 42 states. About 9,000 local reports were submitted by the various community officials. These local reports were studied, judged and evaluated in each state by a committee of civic leaders selected by the state sponsoring organization. These state appraisal committees included engineers, architects, labor leaders, farm leaders, heads of women's organizations, college presidents, social welfare experts, bankers, ministers, editors and publishers and many others.

I can give here only a few brief excerpts from the findings of these committees. But I hope they will convey to you, as they do to me, that the Federal Works Program is a far different thing in the eyes of those who really know it than its political opponents would have you believe.

Out on the coast we'll take Northern California. I quote: "The most obvious characteristic of the community reports is their virtually unanimous endorsement, regardless of political differences, of the work relief program. The public facilities constructed are permanent and much needed. The workmanship is found to compare favorably with private industry."

Here's the State of Washington: "Improvement projects

have maintained a high technical standard, have been well planned and in many cases have stimulated community planning. They could not have been undertaken without Federal aid. Work payrolls have meant increased purchasing power."

In the middle west, here is Minnesota: "The projects are not only useful but permanent, the quality of workmanship satisfactory."

Now Indiana: "Public works improvement in Indiana is ten years in advance of what it would have been without the various Federal programs. It is the opinion of the governmental officials of this state that the quality of workmanship is on the whole, as good as that on private construction."

Here's Northeast Texas: "The projects have created in the workers a sense of real public service. The committee finds a wide variety of permanently useful projects carried on in a manner which commends public respect and approval."

Now let's move over into the deep South, to Georgia: "The workmanship on construction projects compares favorably to that found on privately constructed jobs. The committee emphatically calls attention to the fact that there has been no suggestion of misuse of money."

Now let's take two reports from New England, where unusually close scrutiny might be expected. Maine: "Many improvements of a highly desirable and permanent nature have resulted. The advantages of work relief over direct relief have been conclusively demonstrated."

Massachusetts: "Through the Federal Works Program, tax rates have been favorably affected and improvements of permanent value have been secured. The relative worthwhileness of the program to the needy unemployed is not debatable."

That's only eight state reports, but there are 34 others like them. I have not quoted them on the question of work versus the dole, because they ALL favor a work program for employable people. I hope a great many of you will look up the Appraisal in your own state, see who made it, and read it.

Evidence of this sort is why I have no hesitancy in speaking of the careful and constructive use of Federal money. I am proud to have been associated with the millions of hard-pressed men and women who stepped from the relief rolls and wrought such a record of achievement -- such a triumph of democracy -- across the face of this country.

I notice that the only living ex-president of the United States says we are headed straight for Fascism. He wants us to

return to the policies he pursued in 1930, 1931 and 1932. He wants, in some occult way, to go in for production and work and yet to stop spending. He is still talking about waste in the W.P.A. and still wanting to return relief to the states. He proposes to take one-third of the present relief away from the unemployed.

Mr. Hoover has just come back from visits to several of the Fascist nations, and he ought to know certain things which seem to have escaped him completely.

What he seems to have missed entirely is the basic fact that Fascism came to those countries because the masses were not getting their fair share of things, and were willing to submit to anything in the way of a change.

I am entirely willing to lay down the record of this Administration along side that of Mr. Hoover for the purpose of judging whose policies make toward dictatorship. I wonder if his stubborn refusal to recognize realities, when the house was crumbling about his head, strengthened the people's faith in Democracy. I wonder if the pious phrases he gave to millions of desperate people, while denying any Federal responsibility for relief, strengthened the popular faith in this form of government.

I wonder if the tear gas with which he greeted the bonus army was his idea of the full flower of Democracy. I say it is policies like these which strike at the existence of our form of Government.

Is it dictatorship to try to operate a Government for all the people and not just a few? Is it dictatorship to guarantee the accounts of small bank depositors, and keep phony stocks and bonds off the market? Is it dictatorship to save millions of homes from foreclosure and make possible the financing of new ones? Is it dictatorship to give the farmer the same break as the manufacturer, and protect the rights of labor to bargain collectively? Is it dictatorship to give a measure of protection to millions who are economically insecure, and jobs to other millions who can't find work? Is it dictatorship to try to put a floor under wages and a ceiling over working hours?

I have confidence in this nation's ability to solve its problems by democratic means. I think the American people are determined we shall go ahead instead of back -- determined that the whole economic curve move uphill.

Conditions are serious today, but people are not frightened, as they were a few years ago. The measures I have just cited are the reason they are not frightened.

This administration met the depression by fortifying the

purchasing power of its people. It understood the effect on business activity of putting money in the pockets of workers, and of putting workers on payrolls. The measures put through by Congress set the wheels turning, and raised the national income from 40 billion dollars in 1932 to 68 billion dollars in 1937.

What caused the present decline in business? I have my own opinions and I am quite sure that anybody who fixes on some one single cause of the decline is pretty sure to be wrong. It is very apparent that consumer incomes did not increase fast enough to take goods off the market, but to assign this as a cause of the decline is to duck behind words which do not explain. I believe that the major contributing factors were: (1) purchasing power in the hands of consumers failed to keep pace with production; (2) tremendous increase in inventories; (3) the failure of the promising building revival because of rising costs; and (4) unwarranted increases in prices.

Our problem is how to get the national income up -- how to so treat destitution and low incomes and unemployment that the underprivileged one-third of the American people can become consumers, and thus participate in our economy.

The passing of the frontier left a gap which we have not filled. As long as we had a frontier, aggressive and resourceful individuals could repair the ravages to their families caused by

the ups and downs of the business cycle. The new frontier is idle men, money and machines, and all the resourcefulness, ingenuity and courage that resides in 12 or 13 million unemployed is helpless to take up this new frontier without tremendous organization of productive forces such as only government can supply when business is in the doldrums.

Our failure to conquer this new frontier of idle overhead has cost us at least 200 billion dollars in lost income we might have produced and didn't since 1929. That 200 billion dollars is about equal to the 1932 value of the entire wealth of this nation. We have been losing nearly every year since 1929 almost two-thirds as much as the entire national debt.

But raising the national income to full employment levels is not enough. To attain more than a fleeting prosperity, income must be distributed among the mass of people so that consumption can parallel output.

No one in his right mind is suggesting that we divide up the present national income. It has to go up. And certainly I do not believe that government spending can do the whole job. Without the traditional investment of private money in a rising economy there can be no permanent recovery.

But a subsidy of purchasing power started the ball rolling

five years ago, and it can start it again. This is not a new thing. Ever since the early days of the nation, the government has been in effect subsidizing purchasing power. It gave the railroad systems vast grants of land, and it gave the manufacturers protective tariffs. Why should anybody question further subsidies of purchasing power, just because they are given to many individuals instead of a few?

The problem is not simple. There are no ready panaceas for unemployment. Sincere men and women will differ as to its cause and cure. Its solution can only be achieved by the fullest cooperation between government, labor, agriculture and business. It can only be solved if they all work for the same end, avoiding wage reductions, keeping prices in line and reducing them as soon as unit costs justify it. It can only be solved if profits to business under genuine competition are encouraged; if labor is paid a fair wage; if the farmers attain a proper share in the national income; and if the great masses of people who for any reason cannot obtain a minimum share in the national income are protected by an all inclusive program of social security.

On this basis I believe that not only can we get a rising national income, but we will be able to maintain it; for it will be based upon a balanced distribution of purchasing power and well-being

among all the American people. That is the way to fulfill the destiny of a democracy, to provide economic security without regimentation, and above all to maintain the personal as well as economic freedom of every individual in the United States.

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