
Asserting that the expectation of eliminating nearly all of our unemployment through war-trade is a "fantastic and absurd" notion, Corrington Gill, Assistant Commissioner of the Work Projects Administration, addressed the Pennsylvania School of Social Work, of the University of Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia, Monday night.

The text of Mr. Gill's address, "Pros and Cons of WPA," follows:

I am glad to be here with you, and I am always glad to talk about the WPA. I am glad you have asked me to discuss the WPA, both "pro" and "con." And that is just what I am going to do. I am going to point out as clearly as I can both its merits and its weaknesses.

This seems to me a good time for just such a discussion. Our emotions have been turned of late to the tragic struggle in Europe, and it is time our attention is redirected to the struggle on this side of the Atlantic.

First though, one word about the European war. You know, of course, that some people expect our war-trade to be so vast as to do away with practically all our unemployment. That notion, of course, is fantastic and absurd. I don't think I need to bring any facts and figures before this audience to show how fantastic and absurd it is.

It is no doubt true that if our country should actually enter this war and send millions of our young men to the battlefield, then there would be little or no unemployment -- for a while, until the survivors poured back home. And of course if there were but few survivors returning home, our unemployment figures would remain low until a new generation grew up. But I am sure that nobody proposes to cure our unemployment by killing off five or six million able-bodied workers.

And I am sure that everyone here realizes fully that the European war cannot solve our American economic problems for us. We have at present about 9 million unemployed; and, if our country remains at peace, we shall have nearly that many unemployed next spring. Again Congress will have to face the question of what to do about it.
In my opinion we have passed definitely through and beyond the stage in our national thinking in which the dole was proposed by various groups as the way of dealing with unemployment. I don't think we shall hear much about the dole any more. It now seems pretty clear that the great majority of our people are firm believers in the principle of work for the unemployed -- public work, rather than a dole for needy able-bodied workers who cannot get jobs in private industry.

The evidence -- from sample polls, and statements of public officials, regardless of political alignment, everywhere -- all the evidence goes to show that today the principle of public work for the unemployed is solidly grounded in our American feeling, and has become the accepted method of dealing with unemployment.

This does not mean that the Federal work program is perfect. Its great merit, upon which I will not dwell at this moment, is that it does provide work for the unemployed. Its serious weakness is that it does not provide work for enough of the unemployed. WPA funds as appropriated from year to year by Congress permits us to provide work only for the most desperately needy segment of the unemployed.

I shall not pause to say why this is so. We all know why. The principle is relatively new in application, the costs are already large, and the general public still regards large-scale unemployment as a temporary emergency. I want to pass over to the consequences of the fact that the WPA is not able to provide public employment for enough of the unemployed.

Or rather I want to concentrate upon one particular consequence of this fact, one that I think is of great social importance, and incidentally of considerable political importance. Under our present arrangement, the States and localities are required to look after their unemployeds, with such help as is given by the Federal Government through the Social Security program. In actual practice, the States and localities have to bear the burden of caring for a large number of needy persons, many of whom are capable of working, and would be working for the WPA if there were enough WPA funds to permit taking them on. In some localities, as you know, this burden is shirked as far as possible, because of lack of funds and because of unwillingness to carry that burden. In other localities the burden has been carried by means of direct relief. It is a burden that the localities have carried dutifully but protestingly, and so far as they are supporting able-bodied workers on a dole, their protests have been worthy of more attention than they have received. The fact is that our American communities do not believe in the dole
for able-bodied workers — least of all when they have to pay out that dole from their own local treasuries.

But now they are beginning to do something more than complain about this situation. Before their eyes has been the comparison of their own fruitless dole with the fruitful labors of WPA workers in their own communities. And they have asked themselves, "Why shouldn't we get some work out of the people to whom we give a dole?"

They have not only asked that question, but they have begun to experiment with an answer to it. In various parts of this country, States and localities are beginning to get up what are sometimes described as "little WPA's," in which relief clients work in return for the support they receive.

These "little WPA's" are of different kinds, and different degrees of authenticity. Some of them are shams, based upon fraudulent claims; others are undertaken in earnest, and deserve our serious consideration. The phenomena are significant.

There are now local work programs of varying kinds in at least 13 states. These programs are fairly extensive in some States, and insignificant in others. We find in Rhode Island that 53 per cent of those on general relief were receiving work-relief wages this July, while in Illinois and in Iowa less than one per cent were so employed. In the matter of State financing and control there are wide variations. The State governments in California and here in Pennsylvania, for example, finance the work program except for relatively small sponsors' contributions. Ohio matches local funds on a 50-50 basis. California exerts great control over local sponsors; while State control in Pennsylvania appears to be limited.

The kind of work typically done varies wildly from State to State. For example, California emphasizes "production for use" projects, while in West Virginia the program seems limited to the repair, maintenance and new construction of roads. The general tendency in all States appears to be to limit the program to projects not acceptable to the WPA. Maintenance and repair work are conspicuous. Large-scale projects are evidently out of the question, for financial and other reasons. The quality of the projects is low according to WPA standards, and so are the wages paid to the workers.

It is clear that these State programs have come into existence because the WPA has not had funds sufficient to provide work for all needy employables. Throughout the summer and early fall of this year, the WPA has had the largest waiting list in its history. This was chiefly due to the removal of about 950,000 persons from the WPA rolls, as a result of the requirement
of the last relief appropriation act that all persons who had been on the rolls for 18 consecutive months must be dropped. But a large WPA waiting list would have existed even without that provision. The WPA waiting list is a chronic weakness of our public work system. There are now eligible for WPA employment some 1,000,000 workers whom we are unable to employ. We are employing at the present time 2,000,000 — two thirds of the eligible needy unemployed. We have had — indeed, we have usually had — a higher percentage of eligibles on our rolls; but never all of them. I think I hardly need to say that it is not our fault; we can only go as far as Congressional appropriations will permit. But there is no use trying to dodge the fact that we do not go far enough in providing employment. If we were inclined to dodge the fact, these "little WPA's" here and there over the country would be a significant reminder of our shortcomings.

It would be interesting to discuss these "little WPA's" in detail, and compare them at various points with the WPA. But I shall have to be content here with the general comparison I have already given. This comparison might be summed up by saying that the "little WPA's" suffer much worse from what the big WPA suffers — lack of funds. They cannot pay as good wages, nor do as important work for the community. Moreover, they have a characteristic which from our point of view is a serious fault and one that we ourselves have striven to avoid. They perform the kind of maintenance work which ought to be a regular function of local government. That is, they do regular city work, and they do it for relief wages. Let me repeat: They do regular city work, and they do it for relief wages. The WPA avoids, and goes to much pains in avoiding, the kind of work which should be done on a regular city job for regular wages. We don't want to supply cheap labor, and thus displace normal labor. That would hardly diminish unemployment! I know that the line between what the WPA should and should not do is thin in places, open to argument, and has not always been consistently maintained. We have had to fight this very thing out with a thousand local governments. And when a local government sets up its own work program, it does things that the WPA won't do. This is not a theoretical but a practical matter. And in this respect, as well as in its lower wages, the local work programs are going in the wrong direction.

To the question, then, "Are these State work programs accomplishing satisfactorily the task which the WPA has been unable to carry out, of providing public work for the surplus of employables?" — the answer has to be "No."
I note also that the administrative costs are, unavoidably perhaps, much higher than they are in the WPA. In Pennsylvania, for example, where the administrative costs were at first frightfully high, they have now been reduced to, I believe, nine per cent, which is doing pretty well. But nine per cent still compares unfavorably with the WPA's 3.4 per cent administrative costs.

The WPA used to be accused of conducting "leaf-raking" projects, until the roll of substantial WPA accomplishments made the charge ridiculous. But any public work program which is unable to do substantial work will have to fall back upon "leaf-raking" projects in lieu of anything better. I don't want to press this unkind charge against the State work programs, but they are obviously a step backward — in fact, several steps backward from the WPA.

The verdict has to be: "These State work programs are cheap programs. They are what you would expect a cheap program to be."

And they exist, it should be noted, side by side with the WPA program. After the WPA has provided all the employment that its funds permit, these small programs try to meet the remaining needs. They do not compete with the WPA — they are at best supplementary.

But — and now I come to a significant development in the political sphere — these State work programs are being advertised as "something better than the WPA." It is pointed out that they are cheaper. And the idea in some quarters is: "Make Federal grants of money to the states to run their local work programs, and then you won't need any WPA."

Well, I have just been saying that these State programs are cheap programs. I can't deny it. I don't like cheap programs, and leaf-raking projects, and low wages. But some people do. For instance, there is Clarence O. Sherrill, City Manager of Cincinnati, who grows lyrical over the cheapness of one of these little work programs in the Autumn number of the Harvard Business Review. I had never realized how expertly defects could be turned into merits until I read Mr. Sherrill's article. He tells how wonderful these cheap work programs are. The worse they are, the better he seems to like them. His interpretation of statistics is at least refreshing. But there is one point on which he is accurate. He says that the program he is describing is a cheap program. And he makes a shining merit of it. "Solving the Unemployment Problem" is the title of his article. And his argument is that if the Federal Government would only drop the WPA and make grants of money to the States for their work programs, it would be
States where $8 or $10 a month, and a few surplus commodities, is considered quite adequate for a family on relief. The WPA has never attempted to put its wages in line with such low relief standards; and I trust it never will.

I am sorry to record the fact, which has been shown in extensive studies, that the highest security wage paid by the WPA to unskilled workers in any city in the country is less than the minimum required in that city to support an unskilled manual laborer's family of four at a basic maintenance level.

So I think that the wages we are paying on the WPA are already quite low enough. I wish they were higher. And I certainly don't think they can safely be cut any lower.

"Cutting costs of work relief" is easy to say; it can only be done by cutting the throats of the workers. You know that. And you know that when the genial Mr. Sherrill writes of "efficient administration," he can only mean cutting the wages of the workers on public projects.

In this kind of economy I don't think the corner grocer will be willing to go along. The corner grocer, and small businessmen throughout the country, know that the WPA dollars that come into their stores mean just the difference between a small profit and being in the red.

And I don't think our municipal officials will be very keen about this kind of economy when they realize that it means spending little on materials — that instead of hospitals, streets and school buildings, they will get snow-removal and leaf-raking.

I want to say a few words about the "grant" system. In Mr. Sherrill's vocabulary, "grant" is a magic word. The WPA is a dark and dreadful system, but change over to a "grant" system and work relief will be all sweetness and light. What is this wonderful "grant" system? If you recall, we had it back in FERA days. The Federal Government granted funds to the States for relief and the States used that money as they saw fit. The Federal Government tried to impose its own standards on State relief work. Theoretically, it could withhold funds. But if it did withhold funds, the poor were the only ones to suffer. Even now under the Social Security system, the same situation arises. And the more anyone knows about the methods and standards in use in some of our States, the more one is likely to feel that the Federal Government can spend its money more usefully itself than by handing it over to local politicians.

Politics in work relief is another matter of the same sort. There is no reason to suppose that turning Federal work-relief funds over to the States
would make for less politics in work relief. It is no secret that the difficulties the WPA has had in this line have been local, not Federal. Would there be less politics in work relief if we gave local officials greater control over our program? It is sheer naivete to suppose so.

We have been through all that. We have tried out the "grant" system under the FERA. It was less efficient and more costly than Federal control has been. To return to the grant system would be a long step backward.

Nevertheless, I think we shall hear a good deal about "grants" next Spring and summer when Congress is considering new WPA appropriations. And there will be one interesting feature of the discussion. We will see certain individuals who have fought bitterly every year to keep down WPA appropriations, this year shedding crocodile tears over the unemployed workers for whom the WPA has not been able to provide work. We will be surprised at how sorry they are for the poor unemployed — and how delighted they are that the States have come to their rescue with a work program just in the nick of time. We will hear them point out how cheaply these State work programs are run.

We will wait, breathless, to hear the conclusion that they draw — which, sure enough, will be that the WPA should be abolished, and the good old system of Federal grants revived. Under the grant system, we shall be told, the unemployed will have all the advantages of the WPA at only a third of the cost. Yes, I expect to see the old "grant" argument dusted off and given a new sugar coating next spring. It will probably be called "the Good Old American Way," or "Back to the Constitution!"

It is when I compare our WPA with such proposals as those that I begin to realize its merits and forget its defects — I get to thinking of the WPA as nearly perfect. And if you hear me saying so next spring, that will be why!

But tonight I can turn aside and compare the WPA for a moment with what it ought to be. And I can say earnestly that it is not good enough. It has many minor defects, but they are all negligible beside its one great weakness — its inability to provide public work for all who need it — desperately — its inability to provide work right now for the million men and women on its waiting list.

I have tried to be fair and impartial. I don't know whether you will feel that I have succeeded in being so. But I will conclude with a reference to some testimony that, I think you will agree, is unbiased. I refer to the United States Community Appraisal of WPA work, the national report and summary of which was presented to the President last February.
Behind this report as sponsoring bodies stand such organizations as the American Public Welfare Association and the American Society of Planning Officials. The national committee had as its chairman Morton Wallerstein, Past President of the American Municipal Association, and there are other distinguished names which would command your confidence and respect. The committee drew up its findings upon the basis of about 8,000 reports from State and local officials and other interested citizens. The committee had criticisms to make of the WPA program — and you will be interested to know that one of its criticisms was in regard to the failure of the program to take care of a larger percentage of destitute employables.

On the credit side, the committee found that 75 percent of all the reports from communities declared that the quality of WPA administration was good; 79 percent, that their own local fiscal condition was improved by the program; 80 percent that the work had maintained the skills and employability of the workers; 85 percent, that the quality of workmanship was good; 90 percent, that relief was better than the dole, both for the unemployed and the community; 93 percent, that the work was badly needed and of benefit to the communities.

That is what our communities think of the WPA. I believe their opinion is just and fair. And I feel confident that the verdict of history will be to much the same effect. We have not done all that we might have done in meeting the unemployment situation. We have made mistakes. But on the whole the work has been good; it has been needed; and it has maintained in the right way the hope of millions of American families, as no cheap program could ever do.