Towards Socialist Welfare Work

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Towards Socialist Welfare Work

Working in the State

Steve Bolger, Paul Corrigan,
Jan Docking and Nick Frost

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Editor's Introduction

The first volume in this series was published in 1978, towards what we can now see as possibly the end of a long post-war period of social democratic hegemony. My introduction to that book began with the indisputable assertion that the welfare state was in a condition of profound crisis and I went on to criticise various explanations of the crisis as a preliminary to introducing a series which was to be based upon marxist analyses of the crisis.¹ In the two years which have passed since the series began we have experienced the beginning of a far-reaching change in British politics, namely a concerted effort by the radical right to shift the balance of class forces in this country irrevocably in its direction. There can be little doubt that these radical right forces have been successful in their ideological penetration of sections of the working class and that the consequences for the social democratic welfare state are profound.

The crisis for the welfare state has therefore deepened, as a government committed to fragmenting the working class and subjugating the trade unions has implemented its policies of public expenditure cuts and restructuring. The inauguration of a new form of class rule is accompanied by a set of policies designed to establish a new political and ideological offensive in the heartlands of working-class consciousness.

So far as social policy is concerned, this offensive has important features which distinguish it from the social policy of all previous post-war governments. Whether Labour or Conservative, these governments in practice followed a Keynesian economic and social programme which required the state to be a manager of demand and a provider of welfare

as a basic prerequisite for capitalist growth. The organisations and institutions which were established during this period, especially within the field of welfare, all bore to some degree the imprint of social democratic ideology and politics within an overall commitment to capital accumulation and profitability. The various services within the welfare state also reflected the fundamental contradiction of social democracy: on the one hand, an aspiration towards greater equality, on the other, a response to the demand of capital that the social reproduction of class relations shall continue unhindered.

Into this social democratic hegemony in welfare, then, enters the radical right. In social policy it constitutes a planned assault on the benefits, however meagre, which the working class has achieved in the welfare field, based upon an *anti-statist* ideological offensive. The present volume argues that this anti-statism is authenticated in the daily lives of working-class populations, for the welfare state is rarely experienced now as primarily beneficial. As Stuart Hall points out:

In the absence of any fuller mobilization of democratic initiatives, the state is increasingly encountered and experienced by ordinary working people as, indeed, not a beneficiary but a powerful, bureaucratic imposition. And this experience is not misguided since, in its effective operations with respect to the popular classes, the state is less and less present as a welfare institution and more and more present as the state of 'state monopoly capital'.²

The anti-statism of radical right welfare policy is, then, deeply connected to the experiences of the working-class population in its dealings with education, housing, social services and social security. As these experiences are predominantly alienating, a valuable base is established for a right-wing onslaught, not of course on the undemocratic structures of services, but on their level and content. This anti-statism, allied to authoritarian responses to 'law and order' and the reinforcement of institutionalised sexism and racism, provides the foundation for radical right social policy.

As the power of the right appears to increase, the left is presented with a challenge to both theory and practice. In

the past, marxist analysis of the welfare state, if it was convincing, had to be based upon a deep critique of the social democratic ideology and practices embedded in the various services. The present book furthers that analysis considerably, but it must be acknowledged that many marxist commentators have failed to distinguish the specifically *social democratic* nature of the welfare state from a general picture of welfare as simply a feature of class exploitation in advanced capitalism. The entry of a right-wing government which attempts to sweep away social democratic institutions in the pursuit of radical change may well encourage more attention to be given, by the left, to the particular contradictions and possibilities contained in these institutions. Certainly, more attention is being given to analyses of class struggle in relation to the state apparatus of welfare. Recently, for example, Norman Ginsburg wrote a book for this series on struggles over social security and housing,³ whilst the Conference of Socialist Economists has provided a useful survey of the cuts and restructuring undertaken in the 1970s.⁴ For the left, a major question becomes: can we use the beleaguered social democratic institutions as part of a wider strategy against the right without being incorporated into social democratic reformist politics?

In the first book in this series, *Social Work Practice under Capitalism*,⁵ an attempt was made to begin the process of defining and analysing the possibilities of a practice within the welfare state which was based upon marxist theory and marxist politics. This present book, by Steve Bolger, Paul Corrigan, Jan Docking and Nick Frost, is a direct successor to that first attempt, incubated within the same concerns, similarly committed to working on the contradictions within the welfare state, and continuing the examination of the possibilities of pushing forward class struggle within the state institutions themselves.

A major theme of this book, especially where it examines the practice and structure of social service departments, is the analysis and utilisation of the contradiction between individualisation and collectivisation in welfare operations. So far as social work is concerned, we can identify the commitment that the state has both to collectivise and to individualise

social workers. The move towards some collectivisation was intensified by the Seebohm Report: the establishment of 'community-based' area teams in the new social services would, by being closer to the working-class clientele, be more accessible and effective. At the same time the size and complexity of social service departments demanded a degree of decentralisation to local areas within an overall strategy of central control. The other side of the coin is the need continuously to individualise both social work and social workers. Such individualisation serves both to reproduce the ideological legitimisation of individual pathology explanations – blaming the individual victim – and also to fragment and control social workers. *Towards Socialist Welfare Work* shows us the possibilities of using this and other contradictions as part of developing a socialist practice in the welfare state, and it does so not by reference to abstract theory or general rhetoric but by a very practical examination of what is feasible. Because the authors are themselves immersed in practice, their prescriptions emerge with particular force.

But the entry of the radical right presents us with a problem. If, as Cynthia Cockburn has argued,⁶ local government is simply 'the local state' and so subject to the same imperatives and processes as the central state, will not the radical right's ideology and policies sweep through local government demolishing those institutions which have been erected by working-class social democratic politics? It may be possible to argue that the central state is concerned primarily with *social investment* whereas local authorities have the task of *social consumption*⁷ and that therefore there is bound to be contradiction and conflict between these different levels. For its part, *Towards Socialist Welfare Work* argues that the social democratic institutions of local government, however much under pressure, are a suitable arena of struggle both against the radical right and against social democratic reformism in welfare. More positively, the authors propose tactics and strategies which will contribute to the democratisation of welfare services and the eventual development of a socialist consciousness among those involved in welfare operations.

Towards Socialist Welfare Work will, like the previous books in the series, provoke argument and debate. This will

be especially so because it is about what workers in the welfare state might actually *do*, rather than simply an analysis of existing structures. Even where the book is concerned with general issues about the welfare state – for example, in its examination of welfare ideologies and its account of the restructuring of capital and the state – it speaks directly to the experience of the worker in the state apparatus. Where it explores specific areas of welfare practice – the area team in social services, child care practice and community work – it cements a deep relationship between theory and practice. Its proposals for socialist welfare work are based upon a careful materialist analysis of the particular problems and possibilities which workers face at this precise point in our history; it shows how an understanding of this history can enable us to use the contradictions in a progressive way.

If *Towards Socialist Welfare Work* leads to socialist experiments in welfare practice and encourages others to dispute with it from the point of view of practice, then, for the authors and for the series editor, it will have served its purpose. In my view, this is a profoundly important book for those who are struggling with the day-to-day problems of practice in the welfare state.

PETER LEONARD

NOTES TO THE EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

1. See especially Ian Gough, *The Political Economy of the Welfare State* (London: Macmillan, 1979).
2. Stuart Hall, 'The Great Moving Right Show', *Marxism Today*, January 1979.
3. Norman Ginsburg, *Class, Capital and Social Policy* (London: Macmillan, 1979).
4. CSE State Group, *Struggle over the State: cuts and restructuring in contemporary Britain* (CSE Books, 1979).
5. Paul Corrigan and Peter Leonard, *Social Work Practice under Capitalism: a Marxist Approach* (London: Macmillan, 1978).
6. Cynthia Cockburn, *The Local State* (London: Pluto Press, 1977).
7. See P. Saunders, 'Local Government and the State', *New Society*, 13 March 1980.