1

Contributions to a radical practice in social work

Roy Bailey and Mike Brake

The question is often asked, somewhat sceptically, 'what is radical social work?' More often than not the questioner is not really expecting an answer. The question is posed as a sure way of changing the subject. Clearly, it is difficult and it certainly does not lend itself to an easy answer. However, before we get too worried that maybe there is no such thing as radical social work and that maybe we are all chasing shadows, we should remember that just about the same nervousness and anxiety is created by the question, 'what is social work?' Most of the people we know who are either engaged in the process of teaching social work students, or employed as professional social workers, steer clear of the question. The hesitation is often with good reason: after all, anyone who confronts it and attempts an answer leaves themselves open to attack and criticism

In the brief introduction to our first volume (Bailey and Brake 1975) we made it clear there were no easy answers. This remains our position. However, what is clear is that we have raised an issue which has found its place quite unambiguously into professional debates and into most, if not all, professional courses in Britain and the United States. If translations and publication in Sweden and Norway are anything to go by, then in those countries too radical social work has established itself as a legitimate object of debate and consideration. It is no longer possible to dismiss critical questions from students about the general purposes of social work or about a particular practice. Social workers, *like other workers*, are trapped in a social

structure which severely delimits their power and hence their ability to initiate significant change. Social workers, *unlike other workers*, confront daily, as their job, the victims of an economic and political structure that creates poverty and humiliation. Social workers and clients alike are bemused by forces beyond their control but to which we are all subject. The very weight of the institutional arrangements that bind us results in our hesitancy to make any grand-sounding claims for radical social work as a framework for practice that might resolve anything. Nevertheless, this is the task that radical social workers set themselves.

The issues of social work remain ideological. Theories and practices in social work are not detached propositions and techniques. The criticisms are not of case-work or working with individuals, not of group work or working with the family, not of youth work or working with and within a community: the criticisms are directed at the purposes to which these theories and methods are put. At the same time social workers are not above criticism by claiming that the consequences of their action were not intended by them. Most if not all our actions result in consequences either in addition to our intentions or in spite of them. We cannot abdicate responsibility for the consequences of our actions even if we did not initially desire or anticipate the results. No matter how well meaning a social worker, a criticism is justified if, as a result of dealing with a client, that client remains unaware of the public dimension of his or her problems. The problems and difficulties that are associated with a person becoming a client should be identified and located within some structural and political process. This is not to enable anyone, client or social worker, to avoid or deny responsibility for their personal decisions and choices, but rather to make it clear that their decisions and choices were made in circumstances not of their own choosing.

This criticism remains even if a client ceases to be a client. For example, a person about to have the gas or electricity cut off after failure to pay the necessary bills goes to a social worker, who with the best will in the world understands the problem and how it arose, can use his or her influence and persuade the appropriate authority not to take the action. This, coupled with social security payments, may 'resolve' the client's problem. The 'client'

becomes a person again, albeit not quite the same person that he or she was before. The social worker can feel pleased with a job well done. For the client, however, the problem was experienced as personal and remains so. Other people, however, were and are facing the same problem. Circumstances out of their control, and common to many individuals and families, are rendered private and personal. (For discussion of this issue, see for example Mills 1959, Pearson 1973.) The very commonality and public nature of the conditions that create the poverty leading to a denial of fuel are not exposed. The social worker knows about it, of course, but so should the client. Introducing the client to others in like circumstances, or at least offering the introduction, assists in no small way in sustaining the individual's self respect and potentially makes him or her aware of wider problems associated with the production, distribution and consumption of fuel. It may further contribute to the arguments concerning the Right to Fuel as a social service. Social work as an institutional process can simultaneously assist people and render them less able to help themselves. Social workers cannot avoid criticisms of their practice by pleading that a consequence of their action was not their intention, indeed was nobody's intention. The focus on the public and collective nature of private and personal difficulties is left to the social worker. Each particular case has to be handled within the context of the sensitivities of both client and social worker. For radical practice, however, such connections should be taken for granted as dimensions of daily practice.

Radical practice is more than dealing with clients. The possibilities of doing much in the way of creating the conditions for real structural change are severely limited in the day-to-day working with clients, whether conceived of as individuals, groups, families or communities. Assisting in a positive fashion, trying to sustain mutual respect and self-respect, and trying to locate a client's position and problems within wider social groups and political processes are all important moments in a radical social worker's task. So too is the awareness of the social worker's own position within the structure, and the recognition of the many things they have in common with clients themselves. For example, government policy decisions may freeze local authority employment, which potentially throws newly-qualified social workers onto the unemployment queues where they find them-

selves alongside others who might well have been, in different circumstances, their clients. The crisis facing capitalism is translated into the consciousness of professionals and the middle classes in ways that have long been commonplace for significant proportions of the working class. Indeed, it is likely that one talks of the crisis of capitalism only when the uncertainties and insecurities that are normal experiences for social work clients are experienced by middle-class professionals. Only then do we read of the 'current crisis of capitalism'. For many the 'current crisis' has been with them for as long as they can remember.

Working within a union and hence within the context of organized labour is important. Strengthening the collective social workers' voice within the labour movement is of considerable importance. After all, which other workers have first-hand knowledge of the consequences of the workings of our economic system for an increasing proportion of the population?

The director-designate of the Child Poverty Action Group is recently reported as saying, 'It's going to be particularly hard on the unemployed to have a government which thinks they are already too well off and even workshy' (*Community Care*, 19 May 1979, 2). The review of supplementary benefits currently being considered (DHSS 1978a) at once recognizes that an increasing proportion of the population is going to be needing and claiming assistance; it also begins a process of amending the regulations which will undoubtedly create greater hardship for those least able to bear further difficulties. Working within the trade union movement is of growing importance, not only to protect the interests of social workers themselves, but equally, if not more importantly, to inform the movement of the great hardship and suffering being experienced by those who find themselves the victims of a harsh and exploitative system. Social work has an accumulation of experience and information that is of critical importance to the labour movement. Social workers must make connections with the trade union and labour movements as a whole, and it must inform those movements of the harsh consequences of capitalism. No group of workers know better than social workers of the appalling consequences of an economic system that, as it faces crises of its own construction, creates more and more hardship for more and more people, and simultaneously is forced to cut the very welfare resources that

make at least some contribution to an amelioration of that hardship.

In recent years the changes that have taken place, and are continuing, serve to focus the attention of all social workers on the dilemmas they face. The reorganization of social services into large departments within the structure of local authorities continually threatens to bureaucratize and depersonalize a personal service. Massive cuts in welfare resources in education, in the health and hospital services and in housing, coupled with the failure by many authorities to fill vacant posts in attempts to economize, has resulted in social workers carrying heavier and heavier loads with insufficient time to concentrate on many important problems which demand time above all else. The structure of social work as an occupation and a career has resulted in social workers leaving 'the field' and moving into an administrative machine. This is regarded by many as an unsatisfactory career process. To be committed to the social work task and to obtain rewards means ceasing to practise social work. The rights and wrongs of these changes and experiences are less significant than the resulting unrest among social workers, be they radical or not. The long industrial dispute at the end of 1978 and continuing well into 1979 was an expression of frustration with social work, with inadequate resources, with the structure of social services and with the operation of the union to which most social workers belong. The strike action united and divided social workers. It raised important questions about the nature of the work and the plight of clients. The consequences of the action will be far-reaching, not only for clients but, very importantly, for the development of the profession itself.

Since the implementation of the Seebohm Report at the beginning of this decade, the social services have grown extraordinarily fast. The drive to train, educate and prepare people for the social work task has been associated with the investment of considerable sums of money. To social workers, who experience ever mounting caseloads and seemingly intractable problems, such an observation may seem a denial of their experience. Yet this money will certainly be referred to again and again during the coming debate on the future of social work. The longest strike of the winter of 1978/79 passed with little attention by the media and hence the appearance of little effect on the lives of most of 'the

people'. After all, the real effect was on those who are in danger of being cast into the bracket of the 'undeserving', and they are not in a position to influence either the media or public consciousness. The issue will be raised as to whether social workers are really necessary.

Arguably, a radical practice of social work and an overt admission by social workers of the political processes in which they are inextricably involved is not, in our terms, merely desirable, but in their terms urgently necessary. If 'It's alright for you to talk' was the expression that possibly enabled social workers to avoid some difficult questions in the seventies, then 'Whose side are you on?' is the question that must re-emerge and be confronted in the eighties. The need to obtain some security from the trade union movement was never more important. Social workers committed to a radical stance must involve themselves in their union branches and work on behalf of their union in those places where they have access, in trades councils and in social services committees of the local authorities.

They should not, however, lose sight of their day-to-day work as social workers with clients. A radical social work can be practised with clients and considerable help can be given to people who, at that moment, arguably need it most. To practise radically is to present oneself with considerable difficulties. It is not enough to have 'in one's head' a theoretically-refined view of the class structure of our society and possibly, as a consequence, sympathy for and sensitivity towards clients and their problems. From different or indeed incompatible world views, similar sentiments may be expressed.

The difficult questions are concerned with practice as socialists. These we suggest are the critical issues. What if anything are the *distinctive* modes of social work practice from a marxist and a socialist perspective? The task for those engaged in the issues from a position of sympathy is to raise and hopefully to answer such questions.

Social workers, like the rest of us, are entering a period where profound changes in the occupation structure of our society are likely to occur, coupled with cultural and political change. Problems and severe hardships will persist and intensify. New problems will confront us. We haven't yet learned how to deal with existing ones. We have to translate our theories of society

into a practice that at once helps and assists the victims of our system, and simultaneously, contributes to the creation of conditions which will transform that society into a socialist democracy. The idea that our task is not to understand the world but to change it is crucial to social work practice and, at the same time, a central dilemma for that practice.

Since we have introduced the issues concerning radical social work and, with others, helped to legitimize and popularize the term, a considerable debate has grown up within social work concerning the political function of welfare, and the practice of radical social work. These range from the cautious liberalism of Halmos (1978) to the openly marxist practice of Corrigan and Leonard (1978). Social workers have become aware of their historical role in the political economy, and in the politically important issues involving the debate and struggle between conservative and social democratic political traditions (Pritchard and Taylor 1978). There has been a response both in the practice and teaching of social work. Statham (1978) suggests that radical social work needs to draw upon already existing radical alternatives in society, and suggests the practising social worker needs to be involved in these. The importance of feminism has been emphasized, and the relation social work has to domestic labour and the social relations of reproduction (Wilson 1977, Mayo 1977). The increasing influence of urban management on the everyday and family life of the community has been indicated as an increase in the powers of the local state (Cockburn 1977). The debate has been raised in the professional journals. The importance of social workers developing a power base through the use of their trade unions to influence departmental management concerning client's needs (Davey 1977) has been suggested. The relation of the social worker to the prevalent ideologies in the social relations of production (Wardman 1977) and the need for social workers to join 'with all those who are exploited in an organized mass movement' (Simpkin 1979) have been raised, and the dangers of an abstracted radicalism which loses sight of the client definition of the situation has been warned against (Tasker and Wunnum 1977). These sorts of discussion were unheard of a decade ago, and the nature and practice of radical social work seems to have been taken seriously by social work students and basic grade workers. Despite the difficult con-

traditions facing social workers in a capitalist economy with a welfare system, and despite the serious public spending cuts as a result of the crisis in capitalism, the defensive cynicism of the profession has been absent and there has been an optimistic and comradely support. It is within this context that this volume attempts to look at models of practise in a radical paradigm, or the experience of social workers trying to practise in this framework.

Welfare state workers in particular are only too aware of the present crisis in capitalism (DHSS 1978b). The apparatus of the State approaches welfare in a very different way from that adopted in a period of economic growth and full employment. Historically, during the pre-war period the demand for money wages was held down by a period of mass unemployment, but the post-war period of full employment meant a shift in power which gave the trade unions a lever to gain money wage increases which were greater than productivity increases.

The tradition of monopoly conditions in the market protected profit margins for the employers. The 'affluent' 1950s were a period when investment in industry was low and when output was low; this resulted in a serious decline in profit, which led to a struggle for the existing resources between capital and labour. The multinationals evolved as a dominant force, able to switch investment and plant from sector to sector, and even to another country if faced with militant trade union resistance. During the post-war period there arose increasing State intervention in production, nationalizing heavy industries (coal, power, steel, and the railways), and taking an increased share in maintaining and developing services which became part of the 'social wage' — health, education and social services (as well as attempts to control consumption and demand in the economy). The development of the welfare state was, Saville argues (Fitzgerald *et al.* 1977) a combination of working-class struggle and the requirements of industrial capitalism for a more efficient environment in which to operate. There was a distinct need for a highly productive labour force, and a recognition that welfare was the price to be paid for political security. The welfare state was trying to operate in an economy which had too high profits extracted in private industry combined with too little investment, leading to the crisis in profitability in the 1970s. One result, which

has serious consequences for social work, is increased unemployment and the cutting of public expenditure. This has affected future development and the existing resources of the public sector. We have seen the lack of nurseries, the failure to improve housing stock, and the closure of hospitals, with the multiply-deprived inner-city working-class community particularly affected. Areas such as London's Dockland show the example of a traditional industry developed during the imperial economy of the last century, benefiting from little reinvestment, then being phased out when unprofitable. The once thriving shipping and docking industries were replaced by warehousing, requiring only a small labour force, with the loss of thousands of permanent jobs. The skilled workers left the area to the unskilled, the very young and the elderly. Such areas were promised redevelopment 'in the near future' and so were left to become run down. Now because of public expenditure cuts, housing and schools have not been built, health and personal social services have been over-stretched and such districts have shown a high incidence of disease, poverty and delinquency, all made worse by chronic unemployment. To save money, there has been an appeal to community care, which has meant that sections of the elderly, the handicapped and the mentally ill have been dependent on the 'reserve army' of voluntary female labour, appealed to under an ideological concept of their nurturing nature. Such neighbourhoods have been the traditional homes of immigrants for decades, and one consequence of the crisis has been an ugly increase in racism.

The welfare state faces contradictions arising from its need to reproduce not only the forces of production — the accumulation of capital, increased profit, stock, plant and the actual labour force — but also the relations of production. The welfare state's influence on the former was initiated by the pre-war introduction of national insurance schemes and the building of council houses, and was extended by the post-war national health and State education schemes. These services were gained by working-class organised militancy, but at a pace largely set by the bourgeoisie. The State is provided with a healthy, efficient and competent workforce in a quiet political atmosphere, and the workforce has gained genuine material benefits and democratic rights by collective action. Cockburn (1977) has interestingly argued that

the reproduction of the relations of production is also a potential arena for struggle. The State has developed specific local forms of power through the local State — the increased city managerial teams and their elected officers. The influence of these on every-day life and socialization into labour is far reaching. Not only has welfare definite progressive elements, it also possesses repressive features, as for example, the use of the benefits system to induce labour discipline, or the cohabitation rule to police the morality of single mothers. Cockburn suggests that this extends to the covert requests to teachers and social workers to regulate behaviour. It is important to note first that social workers and teachers come from different organizations and traditions than those of social security officers, and secondly that the role of the former is conceptualized more readily as being on the pupils' or clients' side than on that of local government officers. Finally, the teaching and social work professions have radical elements in their history, and operate in a completely different organizational tradition with different organizational goals. Nevertheless, if this tradition had been absent, one could see the teaching and social work professions being used more overtly as agents of social control. The city is, for Cockburn, a form of organization ideally suited to the collective reproduction of the labour force in partnership with the family. The difficult task of managing scarce city resources and of making unpopular increases in local rates and taxes palatable led to corporate management encouraging community organization and community development. The community was encouraged to participate in local affairs, but on the terms of the urban managers. Where the community workers in a locality have become involved in conflict with urban manage-ment the conflict has often been moderated and handled by a style of management that has the added bonus of displaying and reinforcing apparent democratic control. Community action is a spur into modernity for local authorities, which can be used to manage unrest in urban areas. This unrest is not always containable, as can be seen from the Community Development Projects documents (funded by the Home Office nationally and the local authority), whose analysis of the inner city set it not in a bourgeois pluralism but firmly in class struggle. Cockburn suggests that there are three areas of possible action concerning the reproduction of the relations of production. These are the

local State workforce, the clients of the various social services, and the area of privatized reproduction or family life. The struggle in the industrial workplace is paralleled in the struggle for conditions in housing estates, schools, streets and for better conditions for the impoverished family. This concept extends the terrain of the class struggle from the workplace to the home, and necessarily involves the public services and their workers. To organize only in the workplace leaves out half of the actual experience of exploitation. The extension of this struggle opens up an arena of great importance to social workers, and involves the conditions of the wageless, the sick, the old and the unemployed. Following on Davey's (1977) suggestion of developing a power base through strong unionization, social workers can involve themselves as welfare state workers in the local political economy. They can provide information about resource allocation and defend community needs. This may bring them into conflict with their own management, with senior bureaucrats and elected officers, but they may drive an important wedge between groups which are too often politically indistinct from each other in their conservatism in the corporate manage-ment structure of the city. During scarcity and decline, the demand for managerial efficiency and control will increase, and what needs to be resisted is the replacement by technocratic efficiency of the humanistic morality essential in social work.

The crisis and possible decline of the political economy in which social work operates presents the profession with its own contradictions. There is a very real possibility that social work's traditional role of mediation between the rich and powerful and the poor and deviant may become replaced by an insistence on its social control function. The resistance to this can only come collectively from the profession itself. There may well be a crisis in the ideology of social work which needs to take note of attempts to manipulate social work to assist the state rather than its citizens. The extension of the state's participation in society means that the opportunity of social control through ideology has increased and that ideology needs to be given more emphasis in analysis. Marx in a famous passage reminds us (1939, 39),

> ... the ideas of the ruling class in every epoch are the ruling ideas .... the class which is the ruling force in society is at the

same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it ....

Gramsci in particular developed this concept to suggest hegemony, wherein ruling classes in society control the legitimation of the social structure, not by the coercive means of force (which remains in the background) but by ideology, and the acceptance (but not necessarily the approval) of ruling class ideas, not the least being that the ruling class rules. One element of bourgeois hegemony is, as Corrigan and Leonard suggest, that social workers should not even conceive of their work as being related to working class struggle. At this moment in history the appeal to a 'common interest' is the strongest since the second world war, as the national press 'union bashing' reveals. Social work has an important role to play not only as a key sector within the welfare state, but also as an important counter argument to welfare state ideology. In this way it can radicalize concepts of social change in the welfare state system.

One difficulty that arises for social workers who wish to develop a radical form of practice is that they need to develop their political and social analysis of the role of their profession and its historical development. Having understood that the problems which their clients experience are fundamentally related to the political economy, and faced with difficulties like structured unemployment, what can they do for individuals to relieve their exploitation and pain? The rest of this article will attempt to deal with this.

Implications for the practice of a radical social work

Because of the nature of social work practice and the tradition of its training, social workers constantly appeal to the pragmatic practice of their day-to-day case load, asking for a recipe to help them deal with it. It is not possible to give a recipe for individual cases, but what is important is not so much the techniques used, but the analytical framework in which they are practised. There is a place for social work techniques traditionally used, such as case-

work, group work or community work, but these need to be used by a social worker who has analysed his/her relation to the State and has developed some form of political understanding of his/her role. The place to do this is during training, and the use of political and moral philosophy, social policy, sociology, economics and psychology is of primary importance in this. (At present the social work postgraduate courses in Warwick University in Britain and Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada, see Moreau, M. 1979 (and presumably in other places) are making serious attempts to evolve this basis for radical social work practice.) The practice of social work needs to be divided into two forms of activism — collective action and individual practice

1 Collective action

It is important to avoid the individualism evolved from the heritage of social work training. Basically, and ideally, the notion of a collective de-hierarchized practice of teams, and of teams and consumers, is important. This is not to say that the one-to-one situation is to be abandoned, but that the notion of the individualism of social work practice and decision-making needs to be resolved by more collective action. It is extremely difficult to work radically without involving the team, and other welfare state workers. Ideally collective work involves the consumers in policy decisions. The commonsense view is that most social work consumers are too damaged or 'inadequate' to be involved. One method of practice is to organize the team so that a few regular meetings are arranged to discuss policy (and also frank interpersonal team dynamics), and that — separately at first — meetings are held with client groups and teams to assess what the former feel their needs are individually and in the community. The community has got considerable resources, as any community worker or voluntary worker finds out. There is no reason why consumers and workers should not work towards the breaking down of the professional hierarchy as community projects do.

The second area of collective action is that of welfare state trade union politics. The social worker not only needs to build up trade union consciousness within his/her own section, but also needs to develop links with other welfare state trade unions. This

trade union base can be used to develop an informed opinion concerning the needs that welfare services consumers feel they need. This means that this base can be used to improve the position of basic grade workers in the corporate management of local authority services. Following on from this, representation can be forcefully made about public expenditure cuts, and strong resistance encouraged. The trade union can be used to improve conditions both for the worker and for the consumer.

The third area is involvement in community issues, particularly community politics. It is certainly important, as Statham (1978) suggests, to develop involvement in radical alternatives which are occurring *outside* social work practice, as they will have relevance for that practice. They offer alternative views of reality, and emotional and ideological support. An obvious example is in the area of sexual politics, either in feminism or gay liberation. There are other groups involved in class politics, fighting racism, or sexual politics. Feminism is important because of its useful insights into the political importance of women in servicing the economy. Cockburn quotes the council's use of the family (i.e. women) to keep their children from getting into care and being a burden on the rates, of defining squatters only as a family, and as such qualifying for rehousing if they begot children, as well as labelling families who were administrative problems to the council as 'problem families'. Wilson also suggests that the welfare state can be seen as the state organization of domestic life, with the woman acting as unpaid domestic labourer to service the wage labourer, and the wage labourer being motivated by his dependants' relation to him to work regularly and hard. Statham has suggested that there is, for example, an alternative to the traditional family which can be used to explore the alternatives to ideological concepts of the family. Involvement in these alternatives means that their example can be used in influencing the practice and theory of social work. Again the development of groups such as the Gay Social Workers Group or the Gay Probation Officers Group has had important effects on the consciousness of gay people at work and on alternative concepts of sexual orientation which challenge heterosexual hegemony.

The fourth area of collective action is involved in the decentralizing and democratizing of team work. It is important to develop a mode of operation which counteracts hierarchical

structures in the team. One important element is to set aside weekly an allotted time to discuss what the goals of the team are, and to what extent these have been prevented by intra-group dynamics and by organizational problems. This is essential if the team is to be developed in any collective sense. It also saves time in the end, because it can be used to delegate work, and to prevent the endless meetings that often bedevil social work. The actual work of the team needs to be community-based as far as possible, and obviously this raises problems for a team with statutory duties. This latter point is an important area for collective decisions. In attempting to gain a community-based social work, the social worker needs to know the area, rather in the way of the old 'patch system'. This a system of dividing up an area into neighbourhoods with a group of workers attached to this patch. The group work from a local sub-office in the neighbourhood, and one important element is the use of sub-office premises for community purposes. The benefits of this localization, Thomas and Shaftoe (1974) suggest, are that the worker gains an intimate knowledge of community resources and sees the multi-faceted view of the consumer group in the neighbourhood, and that this acts against a pathological or inadequate view of consumer groups. The worker is able to develop a more informal relation with the client, which has the advantage of breaking down the impersonal bureaucratic face of social service departments, and also provides the worker with more information about community needs. This is important in developing the role of the social worker in an educational role concerning resources and benefits. It also assists the worker to build up contacts between isolated cases sharing the same problems and exploring with them what they require as a solution. It is important for the worker to develop networks and contacts, using such diverse resources as sympathetic voluntary workers, clergy, trade union organizations and the local trades council. The sub-office can become a meeting place, community centre and resource centre offering advice, information and legal aid.

One advantage is that the team can be involved in broader community issues through contacts. For example, several youth workers have formed a group of workers with youth against fascism aimed at combating racism and the National Front's attempt to recruit young people. A similar group has been formed

by feminists against sexism in youth work. These have links with broader based political movements involving the Jewish Board of Deputies, the British Council of Churches, the Anti Nazi League, trade unions and the trades councils. Other issues can be organized around homelessness, fuel for the elderly and similar campaigns.

An important area of collective work is welfare rights and advocacy, although this should not be seen as the only area of work for radicals. It is important that consumers understand their position, and this means assisting them to get all the benefits they are entitled to, and helping them agitate in the community for more. Schragg (1977) suggests that hiding the availability of benefits is one of the most important mechanisms that the State has to reduce demands made on it, and that fighting for these benefits is an aspect of political struggle for social work. The social worker should not be manipulated as a buffer between the client and the bureaucracy which has the power to grant benefits, but should use this situation as a political lever against the State. Schragg suggests that one strategy is to document the social cost of concrete resources, and provide evidence to the State that it might for example be wiser to invest in perhaps nursery resources which will release people for work at a reasonable level of wages. In Britain the A code (a Department of Health and Social Security guidelines code containing details of the rights of supplementary benefits claimants and the strategies open to officials) is carefully kept secret from anyone except supplementary benefits officers. The present political climate is obviously aimed at labour discipline, and is characterized by attempts to drive people to work at menial tasks, the wage for which compares unfavourably with welfare benefits. The prevailing ideology means that these jobs are eulogized by those who do not have to perform that labour, and who extoll its dignity as preferable to living on welfare benefits. This reactionary backlash will have to be resisted as the crisis deepens and as the economy is geared to even more public sector cutbacks. Social workers need to resist this and to maintain this position — that welfare is paid for by the working class and as such remains a right for the poor.

2 Working with consumers in individual practice.

No matter how collective team work is, the social worker is always

faced with the one-to-one situation. Whilst it is essential to collectivize problems, it is worth noting that it is important not to use individuals or groups of the most vulnerable sections of society in confrontations against the state where they can be destroyed. This practice is cruel and dangerous. A radical political perspective and a radical concept of psychology need to be used as an analytical base to build from, and not used to manipulate the powerless in a confrontation in which they lose considerably, and which leaves the social worker unscathed. Any confrontation needs powerful allies in the community and in organized labour. Any political campaign for change needs long and careful preparation, otherwise social work becomes a substitute for political work. It is important to politicize social work, but this is different from being involved in political activist movements. This is not to suggest that social workers should not develop issue-based groups as far as possible with the intention of developing self-help groups and pressure groups. A radical, political framework such as socialism can be used to sensitize the social worker to the actual definition of the situation by the client, and also to sensitize the client to problems due to contradictions in the system. This is particularly true in the area where the client has lapsed into self-blame, as with racism or unemployment or depression in women. In work with families, for example, it is necessary to understand how the reproduction of social relations of capitalism involve family members in everyday oppression. Corrigan and Leonard make a pragmatic attempt to deal with family dynamics within this framework to gain an insight into all the members of a family, and this makes a valuable starting-point for social workers and social work students. This means that traditional techniques such as casework, group work and family work, and such traditional humanistic concepts as the autonomy of the client, are given a new meaning and a new dimension when affiliated to a radical socialist perspective. It is important to retain the client's perspective, including how the client sees the worker, and one important lesson is, to see their relation to the wider social structure, and not to romanticize them, which helps neither client nor the worker. It is important to make a distinction between radical work and the radicalization of consumers. The consumers of social services are not the vanguard of the revolution, and they mostly hold a mixture of reactionary and progressive views. They

are the least likely group to be involved in progressive action, but at the same time they must not be written off. They often have a very realistic appraisal of their situation and what they feel the social services should provide. Radical social work is not an evangelical campaign, and many people who seek help are at a moment in their lives when they are too brutalized or desperate to be reached. The danger is that this may provoke a cynicism in the worker, which has its basis in despair over the difficulty of the situation, and eventually a contempt for the consumer. It is essential that this is resisted, which is why involvement in an alternative movement in the wider society is important. It is essential to work through people's feelings of depression, aggression or despair with the aims of helping them at both an individual and a collective level. This means starting with their definition of the situation and their values, and then trying to extend these into a wider understanding of self and of society. It means trying to understand and work through the roots of depression or hostility, and using this to prepare the person to become whole enough so that they can engage in struggle against their situation individually and then, perhaps, collectively. Society has developed a competitive ethos for scarce resources which accepts that there must by definition be casualties. Consequently failure is personalized by the most dispossessed and powerless groups. Consumers need to be helped to understand their position, and their feelings, and given insight into their motivation. Care must be taken that this does not become a form of social control, or used as a substitute to meeting material deprivation.

Radical social work needs to develop an organizational context which provides a space to collectivize practice as far as possible. For this reason we suggest that the libertarian socialist tradition may have much to offer for a basic democratic structure. Within this space there must be room for work with individuals which is based on a radical theory of being, involving a socialist analysis both of the political economy and of human nature. Social workers are caught up in a contradictory role, as implementers of state aid which they are powerless to change as individuals, and a mediators against the extreme forms of injustice of this aid. Social workers need to use their training courses to develop analysis and to work out strategies which will genuinely enable them to be activists on their consumers side. Schragg has

commented on the necessity to bring together clients with common needs and problems to engage in collective action on their own behalf. An important step too is to break down the isolated individualism of the problem to collectivize it, to draw on resources among the consumers, and to initiate a campaign to resolve that problem. The basis of this problem is a political analysis, preferably developed in training and continued during practice, which can assess the consequences of different forms of action and practice. The solution lies not in a recipe book for individual problems, but in developing through practice ways of working which will give support to social change and which will genuinely affect the lives of consumers.

control over their own lives. But a trade union has a bureaucracy and can suffer from the same problems as any other hierarchy — its activities become primarily concerned with the perpetuation of the organization itself rather than the needs of its members. The men (mostly) at the top seem to resent being subjected to the democratic processes built into the trade union structure. But it is these very processes which can make a difference, which can enhance the potential of the organization to work for the collective good of its members. They are there for us to use and improve should we be willing to take the time and trouble to find out about how they work and to get involved. We will never know the limitations of the trade union until we test possibilities. My experience tells me that the further you push the boundaries, the wider they become. With this process goes our own ever widening consciousness of the potential of our collective strength.

Authority is a central issue in my life — as a socialist, as a feminist and as a social worker. It is, I think, the same sort of important issue for all of us. Passivity, deference and apathy are born of disillusionment and/or conditioned ignorance, and allow arbitrary authority to go unchallenged. Competition, possessiveness and individualism are cultural props for the way in which power is distributed and social control maintained. Myths of participation, democracy and caring condition us to accept this arrangement over which we come to believe we have no control. Those of us who try hard enough can even climb up on the backs of our clients/co-workers/comrades to a higher status, with more authority, thus bewildering ourselves into thinking authority is okay, useful, necessary.

If these ideas interest you or make some sense to you in terms of social work, I urge you to read *The politics of social services* by Jeff Galper (Prentice-Hall, 1975) where they are more fully and systematically developed. But also look hard at your own situations — work, campaigns, trade unions, relationships, political party, social work course — and try to tease out the authority-deference-passivity patterns. Try it in *every* situation. It's the way I stay sane in a world I believe can be very different but which at the moment is pretty resistant to fundamental change.

10

Social workers: pawns, police or agitators?

Ron Bailey

It started to rain and get cold as we sat in the waiting room — and that was bad news, as it meant that people's feelings of human sympathy for their friends or relatives would increase. We had been in that waiting room for hours and, frankly, I had been hoping that all the friends and relatives of the family that I was with would turn out to be heartless bastards, and answer 'no' when asked, 'Well, if your friends/relatives and their three children turned up here tonight with nowhere to go would you let them stay if only for tonight?' Many people would rally round and help their friends or relatives in such a situation, and, of course, they would be even more prepared to help if it was cold and raining. So they would answer 'yes' to that all-important question.

And the system would have won another round and claimed another victim.

No! This is not the beginning of a dramatic short story or TV play. It is a real-life situation that I have been involved in, in one way or another, about 2000 times, in locations all over England. So I will explain the setting.

The family are a homeless family who have just lost their home for one reason or another — eviction from unprotected accommodation or from 'tied' accommodation; unlawful subtenants who have had to move on; a fire in their previous home; breakdown of relationships with the family that let them use a spare room because they had nowhere else to go; rent arrears; need to move because of work ... . For the moment it does not

matter — they are a homeless family. The waiting room is the local Social Services Department where the family have applied for homeless family accommodation. The wait is caused by the fact that the social worker is checking up 'to see if the family is genuinely homeless, because only then have we got a duty to help.' And I am there because the family has already been turned away at least once and left, quite literally, to walk the streets.

Up until December 1977, when the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act came into force (and I will deal later with possible claims that what I am saying is out of date), when families became homeless they were required to go to their local social services department and apply for temporary homeless family accommodation; and in most cases the department was under a duty (pursuant to the National Assistance Act 1948 Part 3 Sections 21 and 35, as amended by the Local Authority Social Services Act 1970 Section 7 (1)) to provide temporary accommodation. In the cases where there was no absolute duty there was certainly a discretionary power to provide accommodation — and ministerial exhortations to use that discretion widely.

However, during the ten years when I dealt with homeless families, between 1965 and 1975, there were usually more families than units of accommodation in most areas. The result of this, therefore, was that the council officers — the social workers — who dealt with the excess families simply turned them away and left them to walk the streets. The official figures for those years show that for every six families applying for homeless family accommodation only one would actually end up obtaining it. The rest were simply turned away.

The official explanations of this discrepancy between the applications and admissions were, nearly always, wholly satisfactory. Those families refused accommodation 'made their own arrangements or were assisted through the various voluntary agencies' (Barking) or the application was 'resolved by advice or other means' (Kingston-upon-Thames) or 'our social workers [found] other ways of dealing with the problem' (Cornwall) or 'the problem [was] solved by alternative assistance from this Department' (Carlisle) or 'when the "crunch of homelessness" arises they make arrangements to move in with relatives or friends' (West Sussex).[1]

1 See Ron Bailey and Joan Ruddock, *The grief report* (London, Shelter, 1972), 28-9.

The truth, however, was rather different. In fact what happened in very many cases was that the families were tricked or bullied out of the office, or merely shown the door (in a very polite and caring way of course), and left, as I have said, to walk the streets. But not all walked the streets: some walked along to the offices of myself and other voluntary workers who were determined to ensure that homeless families were treated both legally and humanely.

I would then telephone the social worker who had turned the family away: the reply would usually be polite and concerned — initially at any rate. 'Yes, I'm very sorry, but we just don't have anywhere, I know it's awful, but what can we do if there just isn't anywhere available?' I would then politely explain that this was totally unsatisfactory and that, apart from anything else, the local authority had a legal obligation to provide temporary accommodation. There would then be further explanations as to the difficulty they (the local authority) were in and even perhaps how s/he (the social worker) sympathized with and supported my efforts on behalf of the family, but ... 'Well, I'm sorry, we just don't have anywhere — literally — but perhaps if you speak to my senior s/he can explain better.' And I would speak to the senior and perhaps his/her senior, who would also be sympathetic, but would explain the 'difficulties' which they were in regarding the shortage of emergency accommodation.

This would all be quite amicable and all the social workers would be polite, (perhaps) sympathetic and (probably genuinely) concerned — until! Until they realized that we were just not going to take 'no' for an answer. This was the crucial point. (I will discuss the implications of it later; here I will simply continue the narrative.)

From this point on they would try and get out of what they said earlier, or at least of what their attitude had been. The use of words like 'concerned', 'very sorry', 'understand', and 'sympathetic' would cease: statements like 'well, we don't really have any duty towards that particular family, you know, as our actual *duty* only arises in fire and flood cases' would emerge. A discussion on the law would then ensue, with me quoting the ministerial circulars and the local authority's duty to follow them under Section 35 of the 1948 National Assistance Act.

The social workers, not being lawyers, would find this difficult to counter, and so perhaps a team leader or assistant director of

social services would be brought in and the whole process would start again with them, and end up at the same place with 'concern' and 'sympathy' giving way to 'policy' and 'well, we don't have a duty as far as we interpret the law' at the more senior levels.

Meanwhile the family with their three children would be sitting across my desk listening and still having nowhere to go after all the hours that this would take.

Realizing that I was just not going to take any notice of their polite attempts to make me close both the dialogue and the case, and go away, the social workers would sometimes try one last tactic before allowing their ever-increasing irritation to take over and develop into hostility. They would try the 'divide and rule' tactic by taking me into their confidence: 'look we do understand that you've got this family in your office but, well you know, they have lied to us in the past; they're a pretty persistent rent arrears case; been married before; possibly neglect of the children; s/he has affairs; unhappy home' and the like.

I would reply that all this was quite interesting but totally irrelevant to the issue at stake: this family were homeless and wished to apply for temporary accommodation, and were the local authority going to carry out their duty or see the family on the streets tonight? I would then say that we were coming to the office to sort this out.

So we would arrive. The first battle would often be whether I could remain while the interview was taking place. 'We can discuss your problems better in private; a concerned social worker would say to the family who, having had a bellyful of concern, would tell him/her what to do with that.

I would therefore attend the interview, at the completion of which the social worker would say 'The first thing is that we have to see if you are genuinely homeless', and we would be left waiting while this was checked out. But in addition to the reasonable visits to the family's last accommodation the social workers would then visit the family's relatives, friends — indeed anybody — and ask if they had room for the family, and if one of them felt compassionate and said, 'I suppose they could stay for a couple of nights as one of my kids is away until the weekend so they can have his/her room', the homeless family would no longer be 'technically homeless' and so have no claims to temporary accommodation: and they would be dumped on the friends or relatives and

forgotten about. Case solved.

Often, however, none of the friends and relatives would have room so the social worker would try again. And we would wait in the waiting room dreading the rain that was starting and the sudden drop in temperature — because this second visit would be very different from the first low-key affair.

This time the social worker would ask, 'Surely you can find somewhere; we are very stretched at the moment; if they arrived here at 8 o'clock tonight and it was still raining and getting colder surely then you wouldn't turn them away.' Faced with this the friends or relatives, being human, kind and decent would find it very difficult to deny that they would let the family stay in such circumstances.

However, the game would not end there. Sometimes the friends or relatives were not very 'kind' — or rather they were too ill-housed themselves to be able to put up with additional strain and overcrowding — and they said so, despite feeling guilty and heartless. At this 'blatantly uncooperative attitude' the social worker used his/her final card: 'That's unfortunate, you see we're very hard-pressed just now and all we can do is help the children; we'll do that but, much as we hate it, we can't help the parents, so we'll have to "offer" care for the children.' Then, as the friends or relatives replied merely with stunned looks, the social worker would continue 'surely you wouldn't stand by and see your friends family/own flesh and blood/daughter's or son's children go into care — can't you squeeze them in somewhere?'

If, despite all this, the social worker could not resolve the case by such 'alternative assistance from this department' s/he would arrive back at the office and, at last, tell us what we had known all day — the family were homeless. The family would then receive the same treatment: 'offers' of care were made for the children. (The social workers were always careful to use the word 'offer' because, of course, being professional people they knew that they could not actually take the children into care, and it would be unprofessional to threaten things.)

Many of the families who arrived at my office had already been frightened away by such 'offers'; others had accepted them already, with the result that the parents were sleeping rough while the children were in care. By the time we went back, however, we were in no mood to accept this treatment, and we made it plain

that we wanted emergency accommodation for the whole family and would settle for nothing else.

By now the earlier concern of the social workers would have given way to irritation, which would in turn have given way to outright hostility. They were just fed up: they had been sympathetic initially but now we were taking things too far. At this stage, therefore, they would try to ignore us by leaving us in the waiting room until they all went home. To avoid this we would go and sit in the team leader's office, to the absolute fury now of the social workers. The assistant director would be called in to sort out this impertinence — and then the director who, as had the social workers earlier, would go through the stages of sympathy, irritation and hostility.

The whole affair was, by this time, a no-holds-barred battle, with us phoning elected councillors, the press, the Department of Health and Social Security, and them phoning the police to come and remove us. Many times have I and a homeless family been dumped on the pavement outside the Social Services office at 7 pm or later, and I have had to put the family up myself. All the soical workers had gone home, of course!

Battle would then recommence next day — until we won. Usually they would back down around 6 pm on the first day and a unit of accommodation which, for all the day had not existed, would suddenly appear. Despite the social workers' continual insistence that 'we just don't have anywhere, it's a matter of bricks and mortar', it was amazing how persistence could produce not only irritation and hostility but, in the final analysis, bricks and mortar. Sometimes, however, it took two, three or even four days to obtain accommodation for the homeless family: but in the end we would win — after a protracted battle against what can only be described as the enemy — the staff of the local authority social services department.

A day or a week or so later I would go to a meeting called, perhaps, to complain about inadequate social service facilities, or to protest about the disgraceful housing policies of the XYZ Council, and how these affected the homeless. I would hear words like 'disgraceful'; I would hear condemnation of 'capitalism' and 'cut-backs' and 'inadequate policies' and I would witness resolutions being passed calling for any number of improvements and changes. And I would look round the room

and I would see in the audience the very same people I had done battle with a few days earlier. The local radical social workers!

Later I will describe my subsequent conversations with them and how they explained their actions — but first I will discuss the implications and the points arising out of the battle over the homeless family.

The story I have told is, I hope it will be accepted, a horror story. It is no isolated case. I have personal knowledge and experience of some 2000 such cases, and colleagues of mine have similar experience.

The cases were not all, of course, identical: some, for instance, would escalate more quickly, but my example is fairly typical. It also, I believe, shows the social workers as reasonable people, initially anyway, and not as unpleasant and officious bureaucrats. Yet still these reasonable people who, I have no doubt, became social workers because they felt compassionate towards their fellow human beings and wanted to do a worthwhile job (and I emphasize here that I am *not* being sarcastic) became bitter enemies of that homeless family and the thousands of others that I and other people dealt with. Enemies to be overruled, exposed and defeated at all costs.

A look at the train of events shows how this situation occurred. The social workers' sympathy for the family and even for my efforts to help them first started to wane when we refused to go away like a puff of smoke — in other words, as soon as we made it clear that we were not going to accept treatment that was inhuman (for can leaving a homeless family to walk the streets be described as anything else?) and unlawful (very many of the cases with which I dealt clearly came within the categories to which the local authority owed a duty). At that point, and indeed earlier, the social worker had a personal choice to make: did his/her duty lie with the policy and practice of the local authority as carried out *then and there* — or with the interests of the client?

They chose — and words like 'sympathetic' turned into attempts to wheedle a way out of any responsibility for the family. At every level this happened and at every level they chose. And their choice made them the enemy of the family — for the only way the family could keep their sympathy was to walk out of the waiting room, into the street, with nowhere to go.

And when the sympathy had turned to irritation and still the

family were being a nuisance, the irritation turned to hostility and opposition. The social workers' actions all involved choice — and they chose to enforce the rules *at the expense of the family*. Until this point the social workers were mere pawns simply adhering to practices and policies with which, of course, they did not agree. After this, however, when they started putting the pressure on friends and relatives or putting the frighteners on the families (for that is what those 'offers' of care for the children were, and the social workers knew it) the social workers were no longer mere pawns: they had, in effect, decided to conspire with the system to oppose that family with which they were dealing. And they were the enemy of that family as much as bailiffs, workhouse masters and hard-nosed administrators. In fact they were more effective enemies for their 'concerned' approach would — at first anyway — be much more effective in persuading the families to go away.

But, as I have said, these social workers were not heartless people; so how could they do this? Two things probably enabled them to make the mental adjustments necessary — the family's unreasonable behaviour, and my presence. The unreasonable behaviour was the refusal by the family again (for it will be remembered that they had already done this before coming to see me) to walk out of the office with nowhere to go. As for my presence — I have no doubt that the social workers felt that I was egging the family on. They were right, of course: I was. After all, they had been turned away once already and it was due to me that they had come back. I did indeed urge the family that they did not have to accept being turned away; I did indeed encourage them to fight for their legal rights; and I did indeed offer my support come what may. So because they were egged on by me the families refused to accept being left to walk the streets, refused to accept being split up, refused to let their children be taken into care. I was thus labelled a troublemaker, and many social workers used this as their personal excuse to make the switch they needed to make.

I have no doubt that my attitude was 'unprofessional'. I certainly became very personally involved and I was certainly absolutely determined to support the families until we won. I asked myself what would happen if I did not do this and I knew the answer and so I took sides — but no more than the social worker who, in turning the family away before they (the family)

had ever contacted me, had certainly taken sides — 'professionally' of course, as presumably they had not become personally involved. (Although they certainly did later when they would not — personally could not? — back down.)

The point, I suggest, is that not just social workers but everybody, especially those in positions of authority who wield power and resources, has to make choices, and accept responsibility for those choices. I and others like me made a choice — to help our clients. That was our only consideration. And the social workers made a choice: they chose, by their actions, when the chips were down, to support the system. The system which carried out unlawful acts, as many of the families had a right to accommodation and the local authority had a duty to provide it; the system which *required them to carry out unprofessional acts* — for surely it cannot be seriously claimed that the moral blackmail of friends and relatives and the 'offers' to take children into care were professional ways in which to behave. Even — indeed especially — the attempts to categorize families as not being in the groups to which the council owed a duty, (even if such categorization was correct) cannot seriously be considered professional behaviour for *social workers*. Professional[2] behaviour is behaviour motivated solely by the principles of whatever discipline one works to. And the categorization of families as described with the effects as described can never be professional behaviour for social workers. It may be highly professional behaviour for, say, administrators, whose professional discipline requires them to enforce the rules properly and strictly, but not for social workers, whose professional discipline requires them — so they themselves claim — to consider the social needs and strains and problems of their clients.

It may be argued that resources are scarce and that demand exceeds supply and that not every applicant can be helped. True as that may be, it is an irrelevant professional consideration for social workers; and every time a social worker lets such factors influence his/her judgement then that social worker is not acting

2 The word 'professional' has two meanings. It can merely describe a worker who is paid rather than voluntary, or it can be used to describe 'a profession' and a code of ethics and behaviour surrounding that. It is in this latter sense that I use the word. This is, of course, the sense in which social workers themselves use it to describe their job.

to insist, but I had no choice. You recall that I kept you waiting — that was because I was arguing with my senior/principal/team leader [etc.] but s/he was adamant. I really stuck my neck out and actually phoned the Director, but to no avail: they all said there really was no accommodation [cash/telephones/aids etc.] available, so I had to carry out the decision. And what if I'd refused? Someone else would have come out and done it and I'd have lost my job — I already stick my neck out enough and I'm unpopular because of it. And losing my job would have done no good. I get on well with my clients and I get everything I can for them. If I'd lost my job over that one case my other clients would get another social worker; probably one of the reactionary old guard and they'd all have suffered. So reluctantly I did what I was told, thus enabling me to stay in the system until I become a senior when I'll be in a more powerful position to be able to help.

It all sounds very convincing, but there are three basic flaws in it. Firstly, the seniors said the same thing — only they were waiting to become principals, who in turn said the same thing, and so on right up the ladder. Thus none of them have any power to disobey in the *system's terms*: however high they get they all still find that the system remains in control — and always will do providing it can get its basic food — people (well-intentioned or otherwise; although perhaps it prefers well-intentioned people as they give it a better image!) to carry out its orders at all levels.

The second flaw in the explanation outlined above is that they all — or at least many of them — use it. They all claim to have to make these 'compromises' so that their clients will not get 'one of the others' in future. They are all 'unpopular' with their colleagues because they stick their necks out on their clients' behalf. So if all these claims are genuine then they are all unpopular with each other for doing exactly the same things; there is no need to worry about 'one of the others'; and anyway, if there are so many of them, why do they not choose to organize together in their clients' interests rather than conspiring together to frustrate their demands and needs?

The final flaw in the 'I'll toe the line until I'm a senior/principal/team leader' argument is that the very people who said that to me six years ago or more are the very people who have now

reached those positions and are acting in the very same way towards their clients and are saying exactly the same things to the person below them in the hierarchy that was said *to them* all those years ago.

And so the system is perpetuated by the very people who claim to oppose it. And these people are still going to meetings and passing their resolutions of protest, and going on militant demonstrations and complaining about 'the cuts' and 'the Tories' and 'capitalism' and the like. It is all so very easy: what is much harder for them to realize and act on is that, as far as their clients (the victims) are concerned revolution, as well as radical social work, begins much closer to home. In fact it starts — or fails to start — when they first enter their office tomorrow morning or see their first client and when they answer, by their actions with the client, the question, 'Which way will I put the pressure — up or down?'

Radical
social work
and practice

Edited by Mike Brake and
Roy Bailey

The original *Radical social work*, edited by Roy Bailey and Mike Brake, has been the subject of a great deal of critical discussion and controversy in the social work field and in the literature. But while the concept of radical social work has established itself as a legitimate object of debate and consideration by professionals and students, its practice poses a great many problems. Social workers have to operate within a social structure which subtracts students their power and hence their ability to initiate significant change. The very weight of the institutional arrangement that bind them result in their hesitancy to make any sweeping claims for radical social work as a framework for practice that might change anything. Nevertheless, this is the task that radical social workers set themselves.

The present collection, while avoiding the idea that there are any easy answers to these problems, sets out to examine some of the main areas of social work in which the issues present themselves most sharply. The emphasis in the essays is twofold: it is an attempt to throw into focus the ideological and sociological issues surrounding social work practice, and to examine in practical terms what changes can be made and how problems can be approached.

Edward Arnold

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Contents