



Voluntarism can not make up for the Welfare Cutbacks

This coming Sunday President Clinton, George Bush and Colin Powell, will appear together in Philadelphia to promote a new era of volunteerism in the name of helping young people. In attendance will be scores of CEO's of major corporations that are pledging to donate services and resources to help young people who are in need. LensCrafter's for instance will donate eyeglasses to young people who cannot afford eye care.

Outside this much ballyhooed Presidents' Summit on America's Future thousands of other people, mostly young and many who are volunteers, will be demonstrating. They call the Summit a sham and a "cruel hoax." Their message to these political leaders will be: move now to overturn the disastrous welfare legislation passed in 1996.

This law, as President Clinton knows, will have a profoundly destructive impact on millions of children. It is utter hypocrisy to promote the idea that private charity and the benevolent activity of corporate CEO's can take the place of the rights that poor families won sixty years ago. In fact, service providers and charity groups that feed hungry people and house the homeless report that they are already overstretched beyond capacity.

The welfare legislation is not welfare reform. It does not lift people out of poverty. It does not provide real jobs at decent wages. According to a study commissioned by Clinton's own Department of Health and Human Services, the new law will move 2.6 million more people, including 1.1 million children, into poverty.

The HHS study showed that a total of 11 million families would lose income under the law. How much will they lose? Enough to push many over the edge. Eight million families, mostly the working poor with children, will lose an average of \$1,300 per year largely as a result of the food stamp cuts in the law.

Other provisions in the 1996 legislation will cut off monthly Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits for about 250,000 families with disabled children. Legal immigrants, who often work for years and pay taxes, are now ineligible for food stamps and SSI. 800,000 legal immigrants receive SSI. Many elderly and disabled non-citizens who have been in the country a long time will be evicted from nursing homes and other group residential settings that are no longer reimbursed for their care.

President Clinton is obviously a master politician and the Philadelphia Summit will undoubtedly provide another grand photo opportunity to show how he, and America's corporate leaders, feel the pain of working families and poor people. But to what end? Is private charity a real solution to expanding poverty?

There is a sense of real irony when listening to the current crop of political leaders asking corporate leaders to do their part as volunteers. These politicians, their campaign coffers overflowing with corporate contributions, have regularly slashed corporate taxes. The share of the federal tax burden for corporations has shrunk from 40% to 10% since 1947. One could certainly argue that if the big corporations and banks were paying taxes at the same rate as then, the government would be able to expand, not cut, education, health care, childcare, job training, housing, and other programs.

Those demonstrating outside the Summit are insisting that poverty is neither preordained nor inevitable. Nor is poverty the result of a character flaw among the poor. This demonization of the poor, colored by a

strong strain of racism, has created the political climate that has made possible this anti-people legislation.

Poverty appears to be endemic to the political and economic system inside the United States. We are not in the throes of a recession and yet one of out every four children live in poverty. The figure is one out of every two African-American children.

The United States stands number one in the world in spending on military technology. It ranks first in it's number of millionaires and billionaires. But it is 18th in the gap between rich and poor children. Poor children are being de-futurized. Ten million children have no health insurance. Almost 15 million live in poverty. Is it really OK that 100,000 children are homeless in the richest country in the history of the world? Should these young people be forced to wait for the charitable handouts from the same corporate executives who are busily engaged in massive downsizing so that they can export their operations and jobs to low wage areas in the Third World?

The Philadelphia Summit is not building a bridge to the next century. This road of charity rather than rights, known disparagingly now as "entitlements," leads straight back to unfettered 19th century-style capitalism with all its attendant human suffering for working class people.

Those who will be demonstrating on April 27 will march not because they naively believe that a single activity can undo this legislation. They seek to change the political climate in the country. The organizers hope that this first national protest against the welfare law will be a catalyst for a new movement for social justice that offers an alternative vision of society. One that puts people's needs before corporate profits.

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