

Workfare is a human rights violation

by Marianna Wertz

When the question of “human rights” is raised, the issue of workfare, and the forced labor of millions of young mothers and other welfare recipients, working for minimum wage or less, must be included. While nobody will rightly claim that the old welfare system functioned adequately, what is replacing it is, by design, a “human recycling” institution. Workfarers, forced to work for their welfare checks without adequate training or education to gain real jobs, have become an integral part of the pool of cheap labor—which also includes prisoners and workers in the “developing world,” such as the *maquiladora* labor in Mexico—who are being used to drive down wages and working conditions generally, and specifically to destroy unions.

In the early 1970s, when experiments in workfare first began under the Nixon Presidency, Lyndon LaRouche and the political movement he heads firmly opposed what he then rightly called a “slave labor” policy, that would pit welfare recipients against urban municipal workers, for an increasingly smaller share of a shrinking pie. The LaRouche movement waged a fierce battle, particularly in New York and Philadelphia, to create a political movement that would unite the employed and unemployed, welfare recipients and trade unionists, in opposition to workfare slave labor and in support of economic development policies and financial reorganization that would require the training of welfare recipients and other unemployed into a skilled labor force. That fight sparked the creation of the National Unemployed and Welfare Rights Organization, which, with allies in labor and welfare rights organizations, successfully fought off the full-scale implementation of workfare in the United States at that time.

The Conservative Revolution program

But the slave-labor policy didn't die. In August 1996, it was institutionalized in Federal and state law, when the Conservative Revolution-controlled Congress passed its landmark welfare reform legislation, outrageously named the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, one of the first and most proclaimed planks of the “Contract on America.” President Clinton, in one of his worst political moments, signed it into law.

The AFL-CIO Executive Council passed a resolution on “Welfare and Workers' Rights” on Feb. 17, 1997, which made

clear union workers' view of workfare. “The new Federal welfare law will have a profound impact on all workers, no matter what job they do or where they live. While the new law requires that states place up to a million welfare recipients in ‘work activities’ in 1997, it doesn't say how enough new jobs will be created to absorb this astounding number of people into the workforce in such a short period of time. Without a sufficient number of jobs for everyone, the new law will result in ‘musical chairs,’ denying welfare recipients the real jobs they need and placing tremendous pressure on current workers. Lower-skilled workers are particularly threatened by the loss of protections that were contained in the old welfare law. . . . We in organized labor know that the establishment of a sub-class of workers without labor protections will bring down the wages and working conditions of all workers,” the statement read. A second resolution committed the labor federation to organize the welfare workers into unions, and to fight for their right to the same protections under the law to which all American workers are entitled.

The New York model for slave labor

New York City has come full circle since the battles of the 1970s. Today, New York is the model workfare city, where the most vicious policies pitting workfarers against the employed are being carried out with unparalleled thoroughness. Today, there are more than 120,000 Public Assistance recipients laboring for free in New York City, in jobs left vacant by “redundant” municipal workers.

The New York Work Experience Program mandates welfare recipients to work in city agencies, performing city work, for no pay other than their minimal assistance check. Those who refuse, or who cannot keep a job, are purged. Since 1995, nearly 400,000 people have been purged from the welfare rolls in New York City. Many of them now work in throwaway jobs, while countless others have become part of the “missing” workforce—the vagrant and homeless millions who wander the streets of our urban centers, doing transient work, sleeping in shelters, many of them victims of, or participants in the ever-present drug trade, uncounted and uncared for by those who proclaim that workfare has been a “success.”

On July 20, New York Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani proclaimed victory for his workfare policy. Giuliani, a likely candidate for the GOP nomination for vice president in 2000, announced his plan to require virtually all adults on welfare in New York City to work for their benefits by the year 2000. “From the welfare capital of America, we will become the work capital of America, the place that understands the value of work in a deep philosophical and metaphysical sense much more than any other place in the United States,” the Mayor boasted.

His words are reminiscent of the declaration over the entrance to the Auschwitz concentration camp in Nazi Germany: “Work makes you free.”