

SOCIAL ACTION IN JEWISH SOCIAL WORK

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WHAT is the role of Jewish social work in social action? The answer to that question can be as broad or as narrow as we choose to make it. We social workers are all engaged in activity which in one way or another contributes to social progress. Those of us who are engaged in individualized casework can make a legitimate claim to being engaged in an activity which is a small part of social progress. Others of us are engaged in social work with groups as in recreational and cultural activities. These also may claim a contribution toward social progress. Still others in Jewish social work may claim that their work in the field of community organization or social research makes a definite contribution toward social progress. And that also is a legitimate claim.

But this paper is not devoted to any exploration of the effect on social progress of our primary service activities. Instead, I am devoting the next few minutes to a consideration of the possibilities for social action by Jewish social work agencies over and beyond their primary function in serving clients. In particular, I would like to address myself to exploration of the relation of Jewish social work agencies to social action as this may affect progressive social legislation. The definition of social action I use is group action toward socially desirable goals.

First of all, I would like to examine the question as to whether social action by social agencies is desirable. There are also questions, of course, as to whether it is feasible and whether the results obtainable by such action are worth the expenditure of effort. For the moment, however, let us examine the question of whether social action by Jewish social agencies is desirable.

To answer that question I think it is fair to make two assumptions: that social progress is a desirable objective, and that the prevention of social maladjustment should be as much a part of the profession of social work as the prevention of disease is a part of medicine. I know of no social worker who questions these assumptions. But should the social worker's role in advancing social progress be limited to his primary service with clients? This is, in fact, not as simple a question as it may sound. A good many of us assume that because the social worker has knowledge of social maladjustments plus the skills to deal with a few individual cases, that it automatically follows he should utilize this knowledge and skill actively in any way that will effectively advance social progress. In practice that assumption is not too often implemented. The family agencies in many communities, for instance, have ample knowledge of and skill to deal with the social conditions which affect or in-

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tensify social maladjustment in individual situations, and nearly all family agencies accept as one of their responsibilities the remedying of faulty social conditions where these affect their clients. But not very many carry this into what we call social action. As a matter of fact, a good many social agency executives and boards are either unable or unwilling to take any action beyond the provision of primary services to individual clients. There is one explanation of this stand in the shortages of personnel and the pressures of manifold responsibilities of the every day job; these are so pressing that there simply is no time available for organized social action, regardless of how desirable or directly related the objective. Also, there are agencies which do not accept any responsibility beyond the direct service to clients.

But the answer to the question, is social action by Jewish social agencies desirable? must be yes. Who better than the social worker can testify to the ill effects of inadequate medical care, of inadequate income, of bad housing, or limited leisure time facilities, of racial tensions. Even granted that these social conditions may not always be primary factors in causing social maladjustment; and even granted that increasingly we recognize personality structure as a basic cause of social maladjustment, will any realistic social worker argue that the social effects of missing or inadequate income, inadequate psychiatric and medical care, poor housing, limited recreational opportunities, continuing racial discrimination, do not have a large part in either causing or emphasizing personality difficulties?

So having at least to my satisfaction answered the first question by saying that social action by social agencies is desirable, let us go on to another ques-

tion: Can social action by social agencies be effective? Let us accept without argument the statement that the social work profession is new, its numbers small. Let us further accept the fact that as a group we are not agreed upon all subjects with which we are concerned. Nevertheless, let us remember that effectiveness in social action is not always directly proportional to numbers. It is an interesting fact in social work, and those of us who are engaged in community organization know it well, that the desire for social progress is not limited to social workers and agency board members alone. Nor is it limited to organized special cause groups and organized labor either. On the contrary, it is, I think, safe to say that the great majority of the people in all communities is usually on the side of the underdog and favors social progress, provided it does not run counter to its particular interest. This fact is one of the really hopeful conditions for long-range social progress. Because this condition does exist it is possible for organized social action by social agencies to be effective. By carefully selecting the area in which the social agency possesses first-hand knowledge and by setting up methods for properly bringing that knowledge to bear upon the key people or groups whose position can make progressive social legislation possible, the profession of social work can make social action effective. The answer to the second question, therefore, is: Assuming the area of the action is within the competence of the agency and given the right conditions, yes.

We have now argued that social action by social agencies is desirable and further that it can be effective. A third question arises: Is it feasible? The answer to this is a bit more complex than we might at first suspect. It requires some analysis, first of all as to who is a

social agency. Is it the professional staff? Is it the Executive? Is it the Board of Directors? Is it the membership? Is it the client body served by the agency? Is it any combination of these or all of them? Except within clearly defined limits set by the function or the expressed administrative authority, the members of the staff cannot speak authoritatively for the agency. Only the Board of Directors by majority vote may do that. In a social agency it is the Board of Directors which in the last analysis must take any social action in the name of the agency. The staff may, indeed must, bring to the attention of the Board its first-hand knowledge of social conditions. But the staff's activity in effective social action is limited within the agency structure. It can supply first-hand information, it can call attention of its Board to conditions which are connected with the social problems the agency deals with and it can to some degree stimulate action by its Board membership. But if the Board chooses not to take action, then staff members who wish to pursue the desired action further must turn to other channels. One other channel for such action by staff members may be the social workers union, perhaps organized in the agency itself. On that subject Mr. Levy may have something to say. A second possible channel is the membership organization of professional practitioners such as the American Association of Social Workers or the Association of Jewish Center Workers. These and others like them are becoming increasingly active and effective in social action. A third possible channel is through independent special cause organizations which a social worker as a citizen may wish to join.

But the only group in social agencies authorized to speak in the name of the

agency is the Board of Directors, unless the Board chooses to delegate some portion of that authority. Theoretically, the Board is made up of representatives from the entire community and, as such, is vested with authority to speak for the agency. Actually, we know that a Board does not always represent the entire community and that it is often heavily weighted on the side of the large contributors, or of individuals long associated with the work of the agency. Nevertheless, it is the instrument which has both the authority and the acceptance by the community as the one group which can act as the spokesman for the agency.

The problem is not so much identifying the authority which can speak in the name of the agency; it is how to set up a method to make possible social action in a way which will insure accuracy of fact, legitimacy of recommendation based upon the facts and effectiveness of the action taken in the name of the agency. It would be unrealistic indeed for a Board of Directors to take social action in the name of its agency if it is concerned with a subject not related to the work of the agency or conditions with which the workers, the clientele or the membership of the agency are not continually in contact. It is the height of logic for the Board of a casework agency to take social action upon legislation or administrative decision concerned with the adequacy of assistance or pensions, for the area in which such an action is taken bears directly upon the work of the agency. The Board, through the staff, acquires first-hand knowledge of the situation and a basis upon which to arrive at sound judgment about it. It follows, therefore, that agency procedure and social action involves both the staff and Board; the one to provide the in-

formation and stimulation, the other to provide the authority for action and the channel for making it effective.

There are some further complications in group work agencies about the place of the membership in social action. A question raised by group work agencies concerns the place of its clubs and its enrolled membership in the social action process of that agency. It is certainly possible and desirable for a club of a group work agency to participate in social action in its own name. Thus, there is no reason why a Youth Council or a similar group should not take action in its own name, regardless of the agency auspices with which it is connected. But, as in casework agencies, the Board of Directors selected as it is from the community and vested with the authority to speak for the agency, is the only body which can speak in the name of the group work agency. But, it would be the height of folly for the Board of such an agency to take any social action independent of the wishes of its staff and its enrolled membership. As a matter of fact social action among some group work agencies is now becoming more and more common; but it is practically always related to the expressed feeling of the membership and the staff associated with the agency. And here again, I would suggest that in order to make effective social action by the Board of a group work agency, it is necessary that a procedure be set up whereby the staff provides the first-hand information and the stimulus while the Board provides the authority and the channel for effective application. That is not to say that the membership is to be ignored in the group work agency; the staff must inevitably test out through its contacts with the membership both the knowledge and the at-

titudes of the membership concerning the area and the direction of the social action.

There then arises another question: What is the place of the Jewish social agency in social action? Up to this point we have been discussing social action by the social agency without regard to whether it was sectarian or non-sectarian. Well, what is the place of the Jewish social agency in this picture? Is it any different from that of the non-sectarian agency? Broadly speaking, I would say that the primary place of the Jewish social agency is not different from that of any other in the field of social action. The Jewish casework agency is certainly concerned with and aware of poor housing, unemployment, inadequate assistance and the like. And who is to say that because the agency is Jewish that it should not concern itself with such general social conditions. Similarly, in group work, the agency is certainly concerned with lack of leisure time facilities in the community, inadequate health provisions for the children with which it is concerned and other community conditions affecting its membership. Are we to say that the Jewish Center is not to concern itself with these conditions because they are of general rather than strictly Jewish interest? No, I think that the Jewish agency has a responsibility equal to that of any other agency for social action in areas where it has a first-hand knowledge and a direct concern.

But does the Jewish agency also have an added responsibility for those conditions which affect Jews? Because the agency operates in the Jewish community, it is concerned with some of the problems of the Jewish community or at least some of the problems which affect selected members of the Jewish com-

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munity. It is, therefore, a legitimate area of concern for the Jewish casework agency which deals with the adjustment of newly arrived immigrants to participate in social action on immigration legislation. But that the Jewish social work agency as such should take social action on issues affecting Jews in general but not directly related to the work of the agency seems to me highly questionable. It is entirely appropriate for a national organization like CJFWF to take action at its General Assembly on matters affecting overseas Jewry. I think it would be highly questionable for a local Jewish casework agency to take such action in the name of the agency. Social action on matters of Jewish concern not related to the work of the agency, may be desired and may be taken, but through other channels than the agency itself. There is great question as to the effectiveness of the agency taking any action unless it carries the weight of its

special knowledge and its direct connection. The principle to be followed is that the area in which the action is taken must be related to the work for which the agency is established. In that way only can the weight of the agency's knowledge and skills be brought to bear through social action.

We thus have three guiding principles for social action by social agencies: First, because of special knowledge of social conditions and concern with social progress, it is desirable for social agencies, including Jewish agencies, to engage in social action. Second, the areas in which that action is taken should be related to the function of the agency. Third, the authority and the channel for social action by a social agency is its Board of Directors but the selection of issues and the taking of action must be the end result of a process in which the staff and the membership bring to bear their knowledge and concern.

JEWISH SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC TRENDS

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AS a labor leader with a background of experience in Jewish social work, I should like to show how the positive features of Jewish social work are threatened by current social and economic developments.

The following seem to me to be some of the positive characteristics which make Jewish social work so meaningful to the Jewish people, and so important a component of our country's democracy:

1. Jewish social work is highly developed. Its professional standards are on the whole exceptionally high.
2. The Jewish population sincerely supports Jewish social work, and increasingly considers that Jewish social work belongs to the Jewish community as a whole.
3. Jewish community agencies reach very wide sections of the population with their services. They play a useful and important role in Jewish cultural life.
4. Jewish social work helps to unite the Jewish people to meet their problems as Jews, both at home and internationally.
5. By and large, Jewish social workers, including those associated with management, are progressive in their social outlook and seek to advance progressive social movements.

6. Last, but not least, the great majority of Jewish social workers are unionized. They are members of the United Office and Professional Workers of America, CIO, and in many cities work under union agreements.

We need to understand how the progressive character of Jewish social work will be affected by unfavorable social and economic trends now predominant in the nation, including the danger of a depression, the reactionary political situation, the new and dangerous foreign policy of our government, and the attacks on organized labor and on minority groups.

While a full discussion of this problem would require an examination of each of these trends, I am going to confine myself to the Taft-Hartley bill which is now pending in Congress, and which will become law unless it is vetoed by President Truman and unless his veto is upheld.

President Philip Murray of the CIO has called the Taft-Hartley bill "the first real step toward fascism in the United States." Philip Murray is not an alarmist. He is cautious in his use of the term "fascism," and if the above is his conclusion, all who are opposed to fascism should sit up sharply and take notice, and should get busy doing something about it. It is not necessary