

POINT OF VIEW

CIVIL RIGHTS JOURNAL

Welfare, work and wages

By Bernice Powell Jackson

It is ironic that in 1996, the year designated by the United Nations as the International Year for the Eradication of Poverty, the United States Congress and the President of the United States chose to end our nation's 60-year commitment to be the last resort provider of food and shelter for the poor. It is ironic that we Americans have chosen to make more children poorer, sicker and less well fed as the rest of the world re-committed itself to ending poverty.

The welfare "reform" bill passed by Congress and signed by President Clinton is troubling



Bernice Powell Jackson

for several reasons. First, welfare will be turned over to the states as block grants, with only a small contingency fund for times when states experience high joblessness. Medicaid will also be converted to a block grant, ending guaranteed coverage for children and cutting \$72 billion

in medical funding over six years.

Secondly, food programs such as food stamps and child nutrition programs have been cut by \$26 billion over six years. States will be able to choose a food stamp block grant in place of the current program.

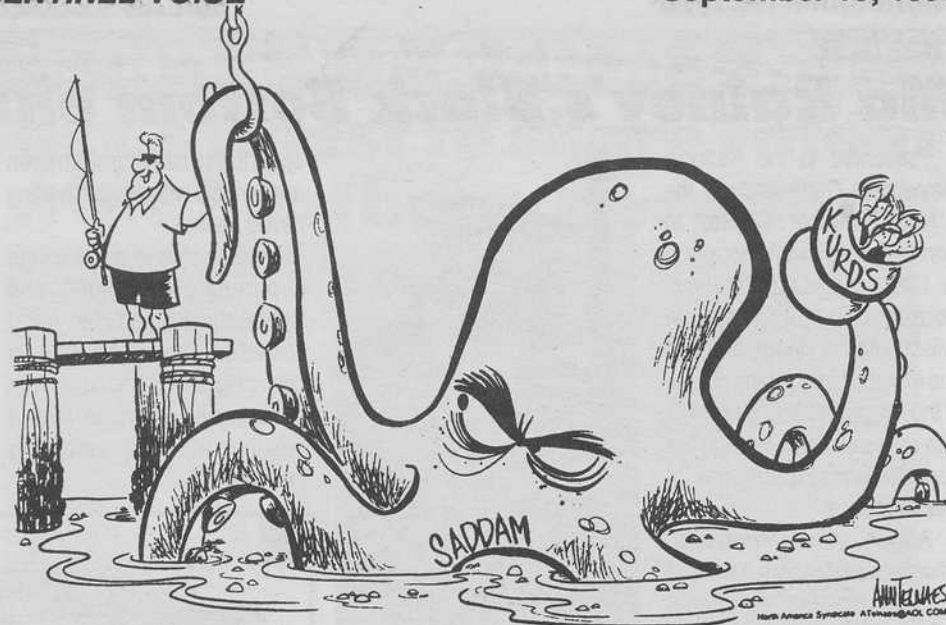
Thirdly, some 300,000 disabled children will no longer receive Supplemental Social Security and some \$8 billion in children's SSI benefits will be cut over six years. Clearly, there will be more poor children in this nation and they will be hungrier and sicker than before.

But while most Americans agree that there need to be massive changes in the welfare system and that generations of families should not be on welfare, many have not realized the connection between welfare and the problem of jobs in this nation. The lack of jobs, the location of jobs and the lack of education and training for jobs are the real problems which we must address.

In a recent article in the Sunday *New York Times Magazine*, economist William Julius Wilson points out that one of the very real problems about work in our nation's inner cities is that the unskilled or semi-skilled jobs once available in inner city communities have either moved out or have disappeared altogether. Left in their place are abandoned factories and warehouses, which often have become toxic waste dumps or rubble-strewn lots. Many of the unemployed workers left behind have no transportation to the jobs now found in the suburbs and no training for the information age jobs now hiring. For many, fast food jobs offering minimum wage and no benefits including health care, are the only nearby job options. A family cannot live on \$4.75 an hour and no medical insurance or child care.

Yet, the welfare reform bill does not address the need for job training for the vast majority of welfare recipients. It does not address the fact that many of these potential workers need intensive training in the most basic of work skills, which most of us take for granted—how to do a resume, how to conduct yourself at an interview, how to dress, how to manage your time and budget. It does not address the fact that many of the unemployed are illiterate or only marginally literate in a world of work which requires not only reading literacy but computer literacy as well.

Moreover, the welfare reform bills and our broader economic policies do not seem to be



TO BE EQUAL

Doing the right thing

By Hugh B. Price  
President

National Urban League

Many of us know all too well the problems which have engulfed many young people and their parents and relatives who are struggling to survive in poor, inner-city neighborhoods. It is a frightening picture, for them and for us as a nation, one which William Julius Wilson, the renowned sociologist, and an Urban League trustee, has examined with fresh urgency in his new book, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor*.

But it is wrong—and harmful—to think that the difficulties of some youth in inner-city neighborhoods describe the plight of them all. In fact, many are striving to better themselves by succeeding in school and contributing to the larger community.

We do them and the larger society a disservice if we don't recognize that: Those youth who are "doing the right thing" can be sources of inspiration to their peers by showing them that even in the face of significant adversity it is possible to do well.

Those are some of the reasons the Urban League of Metropolitan St. Louis and more than one hundred other Urban League affiliates across the country, from Boston to Birmingham to Portland, Oregon, have chosen September 21 to celebrate the youths in their communities who are "doing the right thing."

Parades, proclamations, art displays, talent shows, cookouts, and the awarding of certificates of honor to young people are just some of the ways our local affiliates intend to show young people that we care about their doing well and being well. Our slogan "Our Children=Our Destiny" is not merely a slogan. It is a belief.

This day of celebration, to be held annually from now on, is part of our effort to mobilize all



HUGH B. PRICE

segments of the national black community to exert greater energy at shaping their present and their future.

The response at the national and local level has been invigorating.

Black fraternities and sororities and other communal groups have pledged their financial support, and their members' time and effort, as have churches and community organizations.

And as we had hoped, the response has been most sharply felt at the local level.

For example, in its five-month campaign to establish a youth development fund—to help youth-oriented community programs "put an adult in the life of any African-American youth who needs it"—our St. Louis affiliate has gotten pledges for more than \$115,000.

Nearly one third of that amount was recently pledged by the Evans Place Association, a civic group of black homeowners. (The affiliate has now suspended its fund-raising

until winter in order to not conflict with the local United Way fund-raising campaign which has just gotten under way). Most of the rest has come in small amounts from individuals and groups.

"We've gotten great support," said Pamela Bolden, director of public relations for the St. Louis affiliate. "It shows that people in the community understand the seriousness of the problems and that we have to be more energetic in attacking them ourselves."

Young people in Birmingham, Alabama have been involved in the planning for the September 21 day of celebration right from the beginning, said Laquita S. Bell, the affiliate president. They have planned not only an awards ceremony honoring ten young achievers, they have also established, with the help of local media, a seminar to train them in the techniques of the print and electronic media that will enable them to publish a youth-oriented newsletter and produce a youth-oriented radio show throughout the year.

Support for the national and local effort has come from outside the black community as well: from such corporations as Sears Roebuck & Co. and Merrill Lynch, Inc.; and from such philanthropies as The Monsanto Fund and the Borden

(See Price, Page 13)

Carl Rowan's Commentary

President Clinton is driving my Republican friends and neighbors just plain nuts!

They're almost screaming that by all the old rules of politics and prosecutions, Clinton ought to crawl into the Democratic convention in Chicago in leg-irons and shame, ready to say goodbye to his "flawed presidency." Instead, they see the incumbent going to the Windy City with a political gale at his back, propelling him toward an almost-certain second term.

The announcement that abuse of illicit drugs has increased dramatically during recent years was cited by one Republican friend as "something we can pin on Clinton, who went AWOL from the war on drugs when he cut the drug czar's staff to the bones, the same way he undermined the war in Vietnam."

Bob Dole has been pushing feverishly the theme that Clinton is soft on drug abusers. Conservative newspaper cartoonists highlight Nancy Reagan saying "Just say NO" beside Clinton saying "Just don't inhale."

But these efforts to blame Clinton are backfiring because Americans remember that the GOP convention keynoter, Susan Molinari, and other Republicans have admitted to some youthful experimentation with forbidden substances. Dole can never sell the notion that Democrats are greater abusers of drugs than Republicans, or that Republicans, know better how to stop drug abuse.

One Republican friend (yes, I have more than one) is livid over recent stories about Jack Kemp playing pro football on a damaged shoulder that supposedly was so bad the Army exempted him from military service in Berlin during the crisis days. "You media people will stoop to anything to protect that coward, draft-dodger Clinton," she snorted at me.

Another Republican friend is close to apoplexy when he declares that Clinton seems to get away with thievery everywhere. Look how he's stolen the Republicans' ideas on welfare reform."

One neighbor's wife wants to wager that before we vote in November, Clinton will offer his own tax cut proposal to rival Dole's call for a 15-percent across-the-board reduction in income taxes. No one should be surprised if he does, because there is no political penalty for one-upping the opponent, even with a phony proposal. Dueling hypocrisies on taxes would not be unique.

The Republicans' frustrations arise from the fact that the Democrats convene at a time when most people are fairly satisfied with the economy. Nobody's children or husbands are being dragooned to fight anywhere. Even bad news about drug use and Arkansas politics seems tolerable after a couple of hours of bitching.

That's why Clinton can relax through the convention, watching the Democrats prove unmercifully that they can even outdo the Republicans in producing prime-time boredom.



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