Jobs for All

written by Brian King | April 8, 2011

Recently, George Fish had a piece on the New Politics website entitled Open Programmatic Proposal to the Broad U.S. Left for Directly Dealing with the Present Unemployment Crisis. I urge New Politics readers to read and consider Fish's proposal.

It's refreshing for me to see an American socialist make a suggestion such as this one. Fish urges everyone who considers her/himself a part of the left, to join together and advocate a movement that would revive, in a modern version, The Works Progress Administration (WPA) of the 1930's. This is a great idea, and I'd like to explain why I think so.

The WPA was a government jobs program that had a goal of putting to work everyone who wanted a job during the Depression. This lofty goal was never reached, but millions of jobs were created, making the WPA one of the most successful efforts of Roosevelt's New Deal.

As George pointed out in his essay, the WPA was notable for it's flexibility in determining what jobs people could hold under its' auspices. There were all kinds of cultural workers, writers, artists, and performers earning a wage while working for the WPA at their chosen professions. A very good friend of mine, a Black woman from Kansas, worked as a librarian in her home town. She is over 90 now, and still remembers her WPA job warmly.

This brings up an important point: The WPA always tried to put people to work close to where they lived. Other agencies, like the CCC engaged workers in projects that were far from home. Traveling a thousand miles to work on a dam, or plant trees, might have been exciting for young and unattached people, but not if you had a family and were rooted in a community.

There were serious points of criticism with the WPA. It tended to discriminate against women, largely because it was believed that the government should hire only one person, usually the man, per family. Racial discrimination was a large factor, often due to the market influences of capitalism. In the Mississippi Delta, cotton planters complained that the WPA wages were so high(!), that it had become difficult to find workers to pick cotton at the miserable wages the planters were used to paying. Sadly, the wages were cut.

The WPA never hired everybody who needed a job, but it was a good step in the direction of "Jobs for All," something we could use today, eh? I think Fish is right about getting the left to join together and advocate a new WPA. If we did this, we would develop strong ties to the whole working class in America, something most of us have long hoped for.

I would like to recommend to New Politics readers that they check out the National Jobs for All Coalition. They have a website http://www.njfac.org/, and it has lots of great articles to look over. The "Jobs for All" folks are engaged in an organizing project that they call "First Fridays." On the first Friday of the month, you'll find Jobs for All picket lines in front of federal buildings in several East Coast and Midwest cities, because that's the day of the month when the Bureau of Labor Statistics announces the latest unemployment figures. It would be great to see this campaign grow to include hundreds of American cities, with large picket lines in favor of: "Jobs for All at Decent Wages — Bring back the WPA!"

The jobs issue is vital on its' own account, but there is an important connection to an even more pressing concern

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