Open Programmatic Proposal to the Broad U.S. Left for Directly Dealing with the Present Unemployment Crisis

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Carl Davidson, organizer for CCDS [Committees of Correspondence for Democracy and Socialism] and one of its four National Co-chairs, recently e-mailed me on what it was doing in terms of addressing the unemployment crisis in the U.S. today, that direct and nasty continuing fallout from the still-current recession. He wrote:

"We have a campaign for jobs, George. We put out a theoretical booklet on the topic, by Randy Shannon, to guide the work. [The CCDS pamphlet, *It's Time to Fight for Full Employment*] We're working with John Conyers's staff to shape and then fight for HR 5204 [the number of the bill was originally given incorrectly], the Full Employment' Bill, and we have organized a national phone conference through PDA's [Progressive Democrats of America] Economic Justice Issue Organizing Team, a list of some 1200 people nationwide, to prepare for town meetings around it, as well as organizing unemployed councils. There's one off the ground in Chicago already."

While all of this is fine and worthy of doing, it's also *insufficient, woefully insufficient*. If there is to be any hope of ending the continuing devastation of U.S workers by the still-continuing recession, it's an advocacy program that addresses the vital need for good jobs now. Providing good jobs *now* is the necessity that's been pointed out time and again by progressive economists Paul Krugman, Joseph Stiglitz, Robert Reich, the Economic Policy Institute, and many others, but has yet to be formulated as an active programmatic proposal in any major way by the U.S. left as a whole. It needs to be done and done *now*, not only for the sake of devastated workers, but also as a display to the working class itself that the left is serious about fighting for it and its needs.

That is why I offer what I do below. I also point out that such a program is not something novel; it's been tried, and it worked: it was the WPA [Works Progress Administration], which was successfully put into practice during the New Deal.

The WPA not only put millions of ordinary workers into productive jobs that benefitted the vast majority, it also enhanced our cultural life through the Federal Writers' Project and other programs that put unemployed cultural and intellectual workers to work, e.g., writing journalism and documentaries, short stories and novels; writing and producing plays; painting murals; and creating recorded archives of American folk music through the Library of Congress, an invaluable preservation of people's culture that would've otherwise been irretrievably lost. Further, it boosted both tax revenues and consumption, creating more employment. The WPA was an all-round benefit, economically, culturally, and in restoring hope and dignity to ordinary people. It worked then; a new WPA would work now, and is sorely needed.

Fighting for a new WPA would also be a positive, direct, organizing tool for building the "unemployed councils" Davidson mentions. To date, and quite unlike during the time of the Great Depression, organizing the unemployed (which should extend to organizing the underemployed also) has been given only lip service, and what's been done so far has attempted little more than to turn the unemployed into a voting bloc. Clearly inadequate, and even a disservice to the unemployed. It's also failed to organize the unemployed in any meaningful way, unlike the Unemployed Councils of

the 1930s.

As for Green Jobs—yes, they're needed, but they won't appear in large numbers now, only in the future. Further, Green Technology is far more advanced in Europe, Japan, even China, than it is here, which would likely mean more Green Technology *imports* into the U.S., not new Green Technology-production jobs in the U.S., at least in the short run. Also, as related in the January 14, 2011 *New York Times*, Green Jobs can be shipped overseas, as government-subsidized Evergreen Solar of Massachusetts did when it shut its U.S. plant and moved production to China.

As for "full employment" legislation such as Rep. Conyers's new HR 5204, we've also had that proposed before, and even signed into law. There was the Humphrey-Hawkins "Full Employment and Balanced Growth Act" of 1978, and before that, the Employment Act of 1946. They're both on the books, and both dead letters, as the actual federal response to the present, still-continuing economic crisis has shown. Rep. Conyers and others have also proposed other good legislation, all of it dead letters as well, at least for the time being: Conyers's own previous HR 676, the "Expanded and Improved Medicare for All" Act, and the Employee Free Choice Act come readily to mind. Not that proposing and even working to enact progressive legislation is a bad idea; it's just not a panacea, and merely being on the books does not ensure the measures legislated will be put into practice.

The pundits and politicians will never tire of telling us that even proposing legislation such as the new HR 676 is "unrealistic," especially given the present political climate. And yes it is, because the Republicans will certainly oppose it, and the Democrats (except for a handful) won't fight for it, now or even later. Which means we won't get it anyway. That's why it's long overdue for the left to be bolder and more intransigently "unrealistic," to call for a new WPA instead—because it's more desirable, it's more needed and beneficial, and because what's "unrealistic" is also what's transformative. This has been noted by thinkers and activists from Max Weber to Martin Luther King; and King, too, was chided as being "unrealistic," as asking for more than was "possible." But nothing worthwhile ever gets simply handed down by the powers-that-be; it's fought for, it's demanded, and people go into the streets and demonstrate for it. A new WPA is just as "unrealistic" as any more tepid "full employment" legislation, but which would be the greater benefit? And when has "realism" usually not been a euphemism for sellout? We of the left should certainly know by now that the Democrats, and certainly the Republicans, are not going to hand us full employment; that's not on their agenda. But unless we fight for the "unrealistic," continuing high unemployment is what we're going to get, simply by default—and I'd like the left to try and sell *that* to the unemployed and underemployed workers in the name of "realism"!

Ironically, both Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama like to tell the story of FDR saying to progressive and labor groups, "I agree with you. Now make me do it." Well, let's, by organizing around something that will galvanize and excite even if (or precisely because) it's "unrealistic;" just as "unrealistically" trying to end racial segregation did fifty years ago.

Now to the concrete measures of what I propose. I propose that the broad U.S. left adopt as a programmatic proposal and organizing priority the establishment of a direct employment program by the federal government (something that could be put largely in place already by Executive Order, should Obama wish, or be pushed into doing) that would put the unemployed and underemployed to working full-time rebuilding our shattered infrastructure and performing other socially necessary and valuable tasks, providing workers "on loan" to state and municipal governments so that vital services don't have to be cut or eliminated, and even provide interns to non-profit and community groups (who would be paid interns, of course; receiving wages from this federal jobs program) so that they can carry on their work and also provide usable vocational skills to the interns. The program would be open to any unemployed or underemployed person age 18 or over who desires

full-time work, and is available for such work. A decent hourly wage would be paid, at least the $11.50/hour that the 2010 Census paid its workers, and serious attempts would be made to match potential workers to jobs properly utilizing their skills and education, but would provide work anyway if no such jobs were available. That's because paying a Living Wage for work, and providing work that really pays, would be integral to the program.

Needless to say, all antidiscrimination measures would apply and be fully enforced, and free day care provided for those wishing to work but having children. Discrimination on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation, age, lack of previous work experience, previous criminal conviction if now rehabilitated, or physical or mental handicap for which "reasonable accommodation" according to law could be provided, would be illegal. There would also be positive provision for attaining legal immigration status, along such lines as those called for by the DREAM Act; i.e., one could successfully work or study to move from "illegal" to "legal" status. Speaking personally for myself and my fellow "overqualified" but grossly underemployed college graduate co-workers, discriminating against a worker due to "too much" education would also be prohibited, but jobs made available would not simply be unskilled or semi-skilled manual labor jobs. In other words, meaningful employment for intellectual and cultural workers would also be provided, as it was in the original WPA.

There would also be provision in this program for providing part-time employment to youth under 18 but legally old enough to work, and who are high school students. For those who have not finished high school, it would be a requirement of any employment through this program to re-enroll and seriously pursue and attain either a high school diploma, if of high school age; or if older, a G.E.D.

Not speaking English, or having only limited English capability, would also not be a barrier to employment in this new WPA. In fact, as I am a great proponent of bilingualism, among the jobs to be created would be those that taught English to non-English speakers, as well as those that taught foreign languages to English and other speakers. (Why not have jobs that might, for example, teach Chinese to Portuguese speakers! That would also be a positive social benefit.) Provision would also be made to advance adult education in this new WPA, and that itself could be a source of jobs.

The original WPA, as did so much of positive New Deal legislation, had to make (according to the "political realism" of the time) rotten compromises to pass muster with the likes of Southern Democrats, who opposed benefitting African Americans and other racial minorities. However, the political climate has changed far to the better on this due to the vigorous struggle of the civil rights movement, and the same has also happened for women and gays because of their struggles. But as I indicated above, this new WPA would be vigorously anti-discrimination, and would enforce all anti-discrimination measures; thus becoming *de facto* an affirmative action and equality-enhancement-and-promotion program.

While my proposal does not address Green Jobs specifically, it does so implicitly; how could a job that's socially necessary and valuable not be a Green job at the present time? Further, I see no reason whatsoever why the workers in this new WPA should not be unionized, and suggest that organizing them be a goal of the AFL-CIO, Change to Win, or independent union organizations.

Such is my "unrealistic" proposal, which is every bit as "realistic," *and* every bit as "unrealistic," as proposals that settle for much less; but settling for much less is only the "realism" of betrayal of the people's real needs. So shoot for the top, and remember the words of Eugene V. Debs: "Better to vote for what you want, and not to get it, than to vote for what you don't want, and to get it." Same goes for organizing and agitating.

George Fish is a socialist writer and underemployed worker in Indianapolis, Indiana. He may be contacted at georgefish666@yahoo.com

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