

TOWARDS SOCIALIST WELFARE WORK

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The four authors of this book set out to explore the limits and possibilities for socialists of 'progressive' work within the welfare state, and to offer practical suggestions to social workers on how to develop a socialist perspective within their work. These ideas are developed through a detailed consideration of major issues in contemporary social work — the implementation of the Seebohm Report, child care decisions and community work. In particular, the concepts of contradiction, democratisation and collective work are central to the authors' discussion of each of these.

Books which address the relationship between theory and practice in Marxism run into formidable difficulties; but there is much to be said in favour of the approach adopted here. The authors develop their arguments with a refreshing openness and lack of dogma. Marxism is not treated as a body of truths which yield definitive answers, and the problems raised by the book are clearly left open for further discussion.

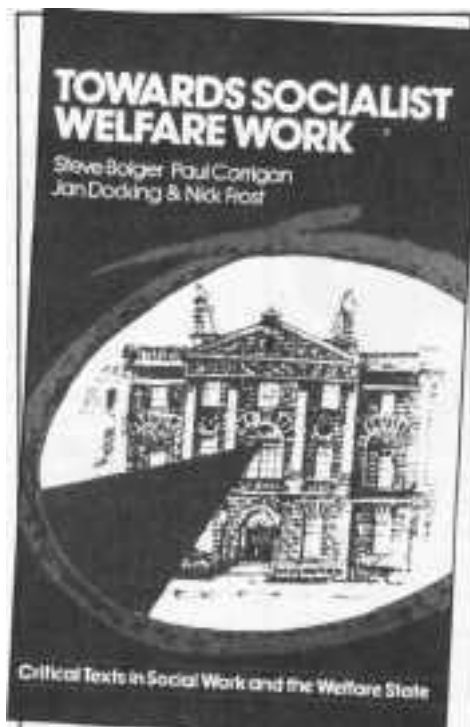
The book continues and develops recent debates on the Left about 'Thatcherism', and the political and ideological conditions which gave rise to it. Three 'ideologies of welfare' are distinguished — Thatcherism, social democracy and democratic socialism. The authors argue that welfare services, despite the onset of Thatcherism, still remain overwhelmingly the terrain of social democracy: it is this which makes the welfare state a particularly important arena of struggle for socialists. Social democratic institutions are caught within a contradiction — the need to provide services based on *needs*, without challenging the limits or requirements of capitalism. They offer 'room to manoeuvre' to socialists — a political space to be defended and utilised.

The book also predicts that welfare services will remain social democratic territory for the foreseeable future because people 'still expect some major welfare interventions in their lives.' Perhaps; but there is no room for complacency, particularly in the personal social services. It is an argument which sits uneasily alongside the failure of many campaigns to defend public services. The private and voluntary sectors are already seen by many as efficient providers of welfare.

The case studies of social work practice are interesting and thoughtful, and strike a

reasonable balance between particular experiences and the more general implications which may be drawn out of them. The discussion of child-care decisions is perhaps the least satisfactory, but also the most challenging, since it tackles a subject about which socialists have had very little to say. The contradiction between the 'care' and 'control' functions of the social worker is explored, as is the absence of any real involvement of children in decisions about their own future. Social workers are urged to forge links with organisations representing children, and to encourage young people to organise collectively in their own interests. These proposals seem less convincing and less practical than those offered elsewhere in the book, but clearly the statutory duties under which the social worker operates in the field of child care are far more limiting than those in (for example) community work. For this reason alone it may be difficult to generate a practical yet imaginative socialist practice.

The theoretical framework of the book is a familiar overview of Britain's economic crisis and the restructuring of the state, in which



the link with actual social work practice is often made only tenuously. The 'room for manoeuvre' which the welfare state offers to socialists is primarily an effect of social democratic ideology and the relationship of this to economic problems remains unclear. On the other hand, if an overview of the economic context is indispensable for understanding the potential of social work, it would be interesting to consider what (if any) are the economic preconditions of *socialist*

welfare work. At no point do the authors consider to what extent their proposals depend upon the implementation of an alternative economic strategy, or whether they need to be developed as part of an 'alternative social policy'. Nevertheless, the chapters on social work are still of considerable value in their own right.

A central theme of this book is the need for democratisation, and the belief that socialist welfare work requires greater community involvement in the control and administration of services. Socialists in welfare must forge links with the community, with trades unions, and with other organisations, and develop collective styles of work which displace individuals and families as the source of social problems. Experiences drawn from the 1978-9 social workers' strike and the Community Development Projects are used to support this view. At present, whilst the *content* of welfare services is often seen as desirable and necessary, the *form* in which they are administered is experienced by clients as bureaucratic and oppressive.

Clearly these arguments have some force: struggles over the *form* in which services are delivered may well become crucial in a period when instinctive demands to 'restore the cuts' often seem unrealistic. However, much recent discussion of democracy has rested on an assumption that the democratisation of (for example) welfare services is the 'key' to regaining popular support for social provision, to winning people to the defence of public services, and to rolling back the tide of Thatcherism. Similarly, in this book, the authors see democratisation as the central thrust of socialist welfare work.

Undoubtedly some form of democratic control would be essential to socialist welfare services; but there is no guarantee that moves to democratise services are themselves synonymous with progressive social policies. It is this relationship between democracy and socialism which the authors fail to explore. They claim that social democrats do not believe that working class communities are capable of running their own services, and that this reflects 'a more fundamental fear that the working class is racist, sexist and individualist and does not actually want the services that are being imposed on it!' However, the authors have less to say about the possible effects of racism, sexism and individualism within more *democratically* administered services. Perhaps the problems with away?

The book is at pains to point out that the involvement of public sector trade unions in the defence of social services will not lead automatically to progressive welfare policies. However, this argument needs to be pushed

much further. Socialist politics will not necessarily emerge from *any* particular organisational form. The struggle for progressive social policies is one which must be won *in addition to* the fight for democratic control. A renewed concern for the form which services take ought not to lead us to

disregard their content, nor to see the latter as a simple effect of the former. As the authors themselves observe, in their discussion of the 1969 Children & Young Persons Act, 'progressive' legislation has not always had its roots in democratic struggle. This complex and contingent relationship between demo-

cratic structures and democratic socialism needs to be explored far more carefully. Greater democracy alone will not win all the ideological battles: at best, it will offer a more encouraging arena in which to struggle for socialist ideas.

Mike Potter