

FIRST DRAFT

ORGANIZING THE POOR -- HOW IT CAN BE DONE

by

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How to organize the poor to press for relief from poverty is a question on which activists are now foundering. In this article we propose a strategy based on vulnerabilities in the public-welfare system. By organizing the poor to exploit these vulnerabilities, pressure can be exerted on the federal government to enact a guaranteed minimum income plan.

Several points underly the proposed strategy. First, millions of the poor are deprived of public-welfare benefits to which they are entitled by law and regulation: many who are eligible are not on the welfare rolls, and many who are on the rolls do not receive full allowances. Second, public-welfare systems manage to keep people from receiving benefits by failing to inform them of their rights; by intimidating and shaming people so that they are reluctant either to apply or to press claims; and, by making arbitrary and illegal decisions which the poor are not now equipped to contest. Third, a wide-spread campaign to register the eligible poor to the welfare rolls and to help existing recipients to press for full benefits, would produce bureaucratic crises in welfare agencies and fiscal crises in local governments. Fourth, these local disruptions would, we believe, impel federal action on a guaranteed minimum income plan.

The objective of this strategy -- to exert pressure for guaranteed minimum income legislation -- will be questioned by some. Because the ideal of individual social and economic mobility has deep roots, many activists seem reluctant to call for national programs to eliminate poverty by the outright redistribution of income. Instead, programs are demanded to enable the poor to become economically competitive. But such programs are of no use to millions of today's poor. One third of all poor persons, for example, are in families headed by females; these heads-of-family are not going to be

*What is minimum
income plan? How
would it
work?*

aided by job retraining, higher minimum wages, accelerated rates of economic growth, or employment in public-works projects. Nor are the five million aged who are poor. Nor are those whose poverty is the result of the ill health of the wage earner. Programs to enhance individual mobility will chiefly benefit the very young, if not the yet unborn. Without income redistribution, in other words, millions of the existing poor will be abandoned. Individual mobility is no answer to the question of how the massive problems of poverty can be abolished now. *

But is Min. Income an answer?
wouldn't it just force up prices?
or just raise the Poverty level. In Germany in 1930 you could have a truck full of money and still be poor

Nor has it ever been the full answer. If many people in the past have found their way out of poverty by the path of individual mobility, it must also be recognized that many others have taken a different route. Organized labor stands out as one major example. Although many American workers never yielded their dreams of individual achievement, they yielded in practice to the principle that each can benefit only as the status of workers as a whole is elevated. They bargained for collective mobility, not for individual mobility; to promote their fortunes in the aggregate, not to promote the prospects of one worker over another. And if each finally found himself in the same relative economic relationship to his fellows as when he began, it was nevertheless clear that all were infinitely better off than previously. That fact has sustained the labor movement in the face of strains induced by the ideals of individual achievement.

But most of the contemporary poor are not going to rise from poverty by organizing to bargain collectively. Many either are not in the labor force or are in such marginal and dispersed occupations that they are virtually impossible to organize (e.g., domestic servants, tenant farmers). Compared with other groups, then, most of today's poor cannot secure a redistribution of income by organizing within the institution of private

property. A governmental program of income redistribution is required to elevate the poor, en masse, from poverty.

This plan, it should be stressed, is put forward not only as a way to abolish poverty but also as a way to eliminate the public-welfare system as an income-distributing mechanism. By the "means test", public welfare forces people to divest themselves of much of what they own before it raises them to a bare level of subsistence (if it can even be said to do that). By unconstitutional investigatory procedures, it deprives people of their birthright as Americans. By treating recipients as the objects of public charity, it destroys the dignity which is possible only when men know their rights and feel free to assert them. A national guaranteed minimum income program would, at one stroke, eliminate this entire system of barbaric practices by which the poor are condemned to degradation as the toll for receiving assistance.

The public-welfare apparatus in America is now operated in such a way that the poor do not get billions of dollars to which they are entitled by law. But our ~~perceptions~~ perceptions of the welfare system are so conditioned by invidious attitudes toward financial dependency that we are kept unaware of this fact. Thus we notice with horror that nearly 8,000,000 people, half of them Negroes, now subsist on welfare; however, we fail to notice that for every person on the welfare rolls, nearly two more meet existing criteria of eligibility but are not obtaining benefits. In a society which is wholly and self-righteously oriented toward getting people off the welfare rolls, therefore, no one has realized how profound a crisis could be precipitated by a massive drive to recruit the poor onto the rolls.

A strategy to compel direct action against poverty by accelerating the rise of welfare expenditures would begin with large-scale recruitment and extend to mass demonstrations and court actions. The resulting crisis would be especially effective because many cities are already having difficulty financing municipal services.^{*/} Furthermore, such a crisis over revenues would deepen existing divisions between elements in the big-city Democratic coalition -- between the residual white middle-class, white working-class ethnics, and the growing minority poor. To avoid a crisis that would further weaken that historic coalition, a national Democratic administration would be forced to put forward a federal solution to poverty which overrides local welfare failures, local class and racial conflicts, and local revenue revenue dilemmas.

The giving of public assistance has always been a local and state responsibility, a fact which accounts in large part for the abysmal character of welfare practices. Despite the growing involvement of federal agencies in supervisory and reimbursement arrangements, local community attitudes and pressures are still decisive. The poor are most visible and proximate in the local community; antagonism toward them (and toward the agencies in which they are implicated) has always, therefore, been more intense locally than at the federal level. In recent years, local communities have been increasingly characterized by class and ethnic conflicts generated by competition for neighborhoods, for schools, for jobs, and for political power. Under the impact of pressures resulting from these conflicts -- not to speak of the rising costs of public aid -- welfare practice

^{*/}We have focussed in this discussion on the big cities, but it may well be that the strategy would be as effective in rural areas, particularly where there are large concentrations of minority poor.

everywhere has become more restrictive than welfare statute, verging much of the time on lawlessness. Indeed, the development of illegal practices has been one of the chief forms of accommodation by the public welfare system to the local pressures which it confronts. ^{*/}

Enlisting the poor to demand the full benefits to which they are entitled will not only exert pressure on local jurisdictions but will precipitate a crisis in local-state-federal relations as well. Crisis would take form first in the overload imposed on welfare agencies simply by the mass of new welfare applicants and contested claims. The fantastically elaborate, inefficient, and degrading procedures employed to scrutinize new applicants and to assure continuing surveillance of existing recipients would quickly break down. Crisis would also erupt in local conflict, called forth by the dramatic display of poverty which this strategy would produce. The hostility of conservative groups would partly be countered by the indignant support of liberal elements who, until recently, have been comforted by the false notion that the poor are few and in any event receiving the beneficent assistance of public welfare. And the crisis would become acute as welfare rolls continued to mount, and the strains on local budgets became more severe. In New York City, for example, welfare expenditures for direct cash grants already exceed \$500,000,000 annually (second only to the cost of public education.)

OH REALLY?

*/For a discussion of public welfare lawlessness, see Richard A. Cloward and Richard M. Elman, "Poverty, Injustice and the Welfare State," The Nation: Part I, February 28, 1966; Part II, March 7, 1966.

Since aggregate welfare costs are shared about equally by local, state and federal governments, the crisis in the cities would also burden the states.^{*} A sharp increase in costs would, moreover, intensify the struggle over revenues which is chronic in relations between big cities and states. If the past is any predictor of the future, cities will fail to procure relief from this crisis by persuading states to increase their proportionate share of urban welfare costs, for state legislatures have been notoriously unsympathetic to the revenue needs of the city (especially where public welfare and minority groups are concerned). *Reapportionment*

If this crisis took form in a number of cities, therefore, it would take a federal response to produce a solution. In the internal disruption of local bureaucratic practices, in the furor over public-welfare poverty, and in the collapse of current financing arrangements, powerful forces for major policy reforms at the national level are to be found.

Four aspects of the strategy need to be examined more closely: its potential economic impact, how it would be implemented, why poor people would participate, and why the federal government would respond to the resulting crisis. We turn now to a discussion of these questions.

And would they respond in the desired manner?

^{*}/In 1964, \$265 million was spent in New York City in direct cash grants (exclusive of Medical Aid to the Aged), and \$70 million was spent on administrative costs applicable to cash grants. Actual reimbursements on cash grants were: federal, 44 percent; state, 28 percent; and city, 28 percent. Actual reimbursements on administrative costs were: federal, 36 percent; state 31 percent; and city, 33 percent. By 1965, the cost of direct grants and administration had risen to \$440 million, and will exceed \$500 million in 1966.

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How much economic power can be mobilized by this strategy? This question is not easy to answer because few studies have been conducted of people who are not receiving public assistance even though they may be eligible. Since Americans look upon public assistance as a form of charity rather than legal right, few have been led to ask the extent to which the poor are deprived of their rights. But insiders know that the magnitude of deprivation across the nation is very great.

Before an organizing strategy is developed in any jurisdiction, a number of factors would have to be examined: eligibility levels, the distribution of poverty, administrative practices, statutes governing departments, and the like. In some jurisdictions, public assistance functions are divided: the locality (county or municipality) may operate "home relief" programs, but the state may operate all programs which are partially reimbursed by federal funds. Political factors in each jurisdiction would also have to be assessed.

oh?
For the purposes of this presentation, some data have been gathered on New York City. Since practices elsewhere are generally worse than in New York City, the estimates which follow probably provide a conservative picture of the latent power of the strategy being set forth in this article. A few studies are also available on other jurisdictions, and they are noted briefly as well.

Eligible persons not receiving basic assistance for food and rent: The most striking characteristic of public-welfare practice is that a great many people who are eligible for benefits do not receive them. The size of this group in New York City can be estimated roughly by comparing the number of people receiving assistance with the number of people receiving assistance

with the number whose incomes fall below the minimum welfare eligibility levels for food and rent. This comparison is shown in the accompanying table for 1959, the year for which income was reported in the last census.

The discrepancies revealed in this table are startling. The average monthly total of persons receiving assistance in 1959 was 325,771, but 716,000 persons (unrelated or in families) were subsisting on incomes at or below the welfare eligibility levels (column 4). But since persons who were receiving assistance are probably also included in the latter figure, we need to separate them out in order to see what proportion of the population was eligible but not receiving assistance. That can be done as follows: If people are on welfare, they are probably receiving amounts which raise their incomes to the minimum levels shown in column 2. If we estimate the number of persons reporting incomes less than 80 percent of the welfare minimums, that figure should exclude most of those on welfare (at least those receiving assistance continually), leaving those who ought to be on the rolls but are not. Columns 5 and 6 show the result: 539,000 individuals. Thus it appears that for every person on welfare in 1959, there were 1-2/3 more whose individual or combined family income was at least 20 percent below the welfare minimum. And if we estimate those whose annual income was less than half of the welfare minimum, the number is still substantial: approximately 200,000 persons (not shown in the table).

Nor is there any reason to suppose that these ratios have changed a great deal in the years since the last census. The welfare rolls have gone up, to be sure, but so too have the eligibility levels. With each rise in basic eligibility schedules, the number of people made eligible for some degree of assistance also rises. It might also be noted that the economic situation of the impoverished groups in New York City has not

NEW YORK CITY IN 1959 WITH MINIMUM INCOMES
 WELFARE BASIC ELIGIBILITY LEVELS
 (Average monthly rolls)*

(5) (6)
 NO. OF FAMILIES (INCOME LESS THAN 80% ELIG. LEVEL)
 NO. OF PERSONS (INCOME LESS THAN 80% ELIG. LEVEL)

(5) NO. OF FAMILIES (INCOME LESS THAN 80% ELIG. LEVEL)	(6) NO. OF PERSONS (INCOME LESS THAN 80% ELIG. LEVEL)	
101,800	539,000	Notes on Calculations
-----	150,000	* / No breakdown of welfare recipients by family size is available for 1959.
42,000	84,000	** / Source: Department of Welfare Basic Allowances, Effective 1958. These figures are for basic, semi-monthly food and rent grants <u>only</u> . Special grants for clothing and furniture are omitted. Hence the estimates of persons falling below eligibility levels are conservative.
17,000	51,000	
14,000	66,000	
9,000	45,000	
8,000	48,000	*** / Source of population data in columns 3,4,5,6: Unpublished census data compiled for the New York City Planning Department, entitled: "Income in 1959 of families, by size of family." Since census income categories and Welfare eligibility levels are not identical, a number of adjustments were required to arrive at the estimates shown. The statistical bases for these adjustments are available upon request.
1,800	13,000	
2,300	18,000	
3,100	28,000	
4,600	46,000	

appreciably improved in the past few years. Indeed, one study conducted recently on Manhattan's West Side revealed that 11 percent of the entire sample were found to be in "critical" financial need. Of those already on assistance, 24 percent was judged to be in such need; and, more important for the present purposes, 9 percent of those not on the rolls were found to be in such acute need that they would immediately qualify for emergency assistance from welfare. Furthermore, the study showed that a substantial number of additional families not on assistance but not in a "critical" condition would nevertheless qualify for supplemental assistance from welfare. The authors also observe that their study was conducted in an urban renewal area where a disproportionate number of the poorest families had already left; otherwise, they suggest, their figures on eligible persons not receiving assistance would have been significantly higher.(8)

Several studies have shown that these discrepancies arise from a variety of factors. One factor is ignorance, reinforced by the slum folklore regarding public-welfare practices, a situation which the system makes no move to change. (Consider, by contrast, the massive drive now being mounted by the federal government to recruit people to the Medicare rolls.) In 1965, the Community Council of Greater New York conducted a study of impoverished unwed mothers and found that 12 percent of the women were having an extremely difficult time financially but had not applied for assistance because of the belief that they would be found ineligible or would be given so little it would hardly be worth the trouble of applying.(14, p. 109) Another reason is pride, a pride born of America's invidious attitudes toward financial dependency. This was found to be a factor among some of the unwed mothers studied by the Community Council; and it is particularly true of working-class families in which the male

head earns so little that he could qualify for "supplemental assistance" -- that is, for a grant calculated to make up the difference between earned income and the minimum standard established by welfare policy. Despite their need and eligibility, however, many decline to apply.

But ignorance and pride only partially explain why many who are eligible do not get benefits. In New York City, about 40 percent of those who do apply are rejected. What proportion of these rejections is unjust cannot be said with absolute certainty, but the number is not small. Unwed mothers, for example, are often denied relief if they refuse to reveal the name and address of the child's putative father -- information which may be given to a law-enforcement agency. Many other potential recipients, intimidated by the hostility they encounter and the humiliations they are made to endure as they try to establish eligibility, abandon the effort. The Community Council concluded on the basis of its studies that "the current investigative process involved in establishing eligibility appears to deter "people from applying."(14, p. 135)

In 1962, a New York State legislative commission on public welfare (the Moreland Commission) implied that many initial rejections in New York City were unjust. The Commission noted, first of all, that full factual evidence necessary to establish eligibility was collected in 97.4 percent of the accepted cases, but in only 39 percent of the cases denied assistance: "In these cases in which reasons had not been verified, there is some evidence that closings are arbitrary."(6, p.58) Furthermore, the Commission observed that 65 percent of the denials were for reasons other than "sufficient income". At least 60 percent of all denials were for what New York City welfare records showed as "failure to comply with

departmental regulations" or "other reasons." (6, p.58) The tone of the Commission's attitudes toward this finding is revealed in the following statement: "Either the reasons for denial are unreasonable or contrary to policy or there is carelessness or inaccuracy in recording reasons." (6, p.58)

One clear example of illegal rejections is to be found in the administration of New York's "Welfare Abuses Law." This law was passed in 1962 as a compromise between political forces wanting a standard residence law and forces opposing such a statute. It stipulates that a Welfare applicant who has migrated to New York can be denied relief in New York State only if he has entered the state for the express purpose of obtaining relief. It stipulates, further, that the burden of proof regarding the applicant's motive is upon the local department of welfare, and that, pending a determination on the issue of motive, emergency relief must be granted. In practice, however, thousands of families are denied relief presumptively, for the mere crossing of a state line is often taken as evidence of intent to secure welfare benefits.

In 1963, 9,473 families from out-of-state applied for relief in New York City, and in 1964, 10,410 families applied. Forty-two percent and 37%, respectively, were rejected. In 1963, according to departmental records, only 18% of the rejections represented families which already possessed incomes at or above the eligibility level; in 1964, only 6 percent of the rejections possessed such income. The great majority, in short, needed money. Despite this fact, welfare records show that only 12 percent of the rejections in 1963 were made for "residence reasons" -- that is, in only 12 percent of the cases had the department made a determination that the person's motive in entering the state was to

secure relief; in 1964, 10 percent of the rejections were made for this reason. All the rest -- 70 percent in 1963 and 84 percent in 1964 -- were for "other reasons." But if there was clear financial need and no issue of "improper" motive, what does "other reasons" mean? Clearly, many families are being cheated. ^{*}

It is also worth noting that the Department of Welfare did not grant emergency relief, as the law requires, to more than one out of five rejected cases in either year. But if eligible families did not get regular or emergency relief, some got money for transportation back home. The New York City Department of Welfare has increasingly acted to coerce or persuade families to return to their place of origin: in 1963, 2 percent of all applicants were returned; in 1964, 9 percent; and in the first five months of 1965, 16 percent. There is little to be said about these practices except that they are as unjust as they are thrifty.

An unknown number of families are also deprived of relief through the illegal application of "relative responsibility" laws. These laws require that relief be denied if the indigent person has relatives, designated by statute, who can provide assistance. In practice, the intent of these statutes has been enlarged by administrators to include relatives not lawfully designated and even unrelated persons.

Local welfare departments especially resist approving eligibility for persons who do not qualify for a category of assistance which receives partial federal reimbursement, and who would therefore have to be placed

^{*}/During the first five months of 1965 (the latest figures available), the rate of rejections showed a decline, although it is not known why, or even whether this is a stable change. One possible reason may be the pressure of legal actions brought by anti-poverty agencies on behalf of rejected applicants.

on "home relief," with the state and local community footing the whole bill. When people apply for assistance, their circumstances are carefully inspected to see if they can be made to qualify for a federal category; if not, every effort is made to find a way of declaring them ineligible for home relief, or to intimidate them into withdrawing. Two recent studies of homeless and more or less unemployed men in New York City, for example, showed that only 10 percent were receiving cash assistance. Not being eligible for federal categories (although some are now being placed in a new federal category called Aid to the Disabled), they are often sent to the "welfare shelter" for a meal and lodging rather than given cash grants. (1,11) As a result, many such men subsist informally on the federally reimbursed ADC grants given to women in female-headed households. Organizing these individuals to demand home relief would exert enormous economic pressure on the city (and would give the men the dignity of a formal right to income, however minimal the amount).

Getting on welfare is one obstacle; staying on is another. In the Community Council study of female-headed families, only 12 percent of that low-income sample had received assistance continuously for 18 months following the birth of the child. An additional 29 percent had received assistance during part of the 18 months. Of these, 65 percent had had their cases closed and reopened at least once and as many as three times during that period." (14, p. 102) These findings are by no means peculiar to the cases studied by the Community Council. A review of the monthly reports of the Department of Welfare for the one year period beginning October 1, 1964 shows that terminated cases represent about two thirds of the average monthly caseload.

There are several points to be made about this huge volume of terminations. First, part of the discrepancy between persons on welfare and the much larger number in the community who appear to be eligible but not receiving assistance may be explained by turnover. It is impossible to know with certainty because the Department does not differentiate in monthly reports between cases that are "new" versus those that are merely "re-opened." Thus one does not know whether the turnover is made up chiefly of the same people going on and off welfare repeatedly, or is made up of relatively self-sufficient families which go on welfare only very occasionally. However, on the basis of observations to be noted below, much of the turnover appears to be made up of people in more or less continual need who are arbitrarily terminated but soon re-opened.

One reason to suspect that much of the turnover is the same people arises from the fact that half of the terminations do not result because people have not found other sources of income sufficient to meet their needs. Rather, many cases are terminated for such vague, ambiguous and unsubstantiated reasons as "failure to comply with departmental regulations." Lacking income, these families soon return for aid. Having examined some terminations, the Moreland Commission concluded: "Observations in the offices and evaluation of the handling of clients...revealed an attitude of annoyance and disregard of human factors, and in many cases almost an 'adversary' rather than helping relations." (6, p.45)

As a practical matter, many of these terminations are forms of intimidation; some investigators close cases to discipline aggressive families, knowing that the family will ask that it be reopened in a short time. But by then, the family is likely to be more compliant, more cautious about asserting its rights. Other cases are closed because the investigator

may notice a new item of clothing or furniture and may not receive an explanation which he consider satisfactory as to where the money was found to make the purchase. Still other instances represent administrative errors in a system burdened down by the most fantastic kinds of paperwork and haphazard procedures. The Moreland Commission provided the following examples of arbitrary actions:

...there is some evidence that closings are arbitrary. For example, in one case the reason for closing was "refused to comply." According to the former recipient, the welfare department and the hospital had recommended that he enter the hospital for treatment of tuberculosis. When he refused to go to the hospital, the case was abruptly and arbitrarily closed. In another case with the same reason, the record reported that the client failed to keep an appointment with the caseworker. A later notation, however, records that the appointment was not kept because of serious illness: tuberculosis and emphysema. In two other cases in which the reason given was "other", QAA cases were closed because a son who was a recipient in another category, failed to keep a medical appointment... In another case, "secured employment" was given as the reason for stopping assistance. The client earned \$30 a week for himself and his family, much less than the relief budget. At the time the case was closed the recipient, who is Puerto Rican, was told that he could never receive public assistance again until he repaid the last check he received from the department. Even though the income is below the budget and supplementation is necessary, the client fears to return to the department. (6, p. 57)

It is difficult not to conclude from these studies that thousands of families are cut off relief each year in New York City for reasons that are either clearly illegal or open to serious question. The financial implications of these facts are enormous. The average monthly number of persons receiving cash aid in New York City in 1965 was 490,000, at a total annual cost of \$440 million.^{*/} The numbers and costs are going even higher in 1966. Increasing the caseloads by only 25 percent -- by recruiting new applicants,

^{*/}This figure includes: \$360 million for food, rent, furniture and clothing in all public assistance categories except Medical Aid to the Aged; it also includes \$80 million in administrative costs applicable to these cash-grant categories only (that is, administrative costs for other programs -- such as child welfare services -- have been excluded).

retarding the enormous turnover of existing recipients, or both -- would add more than \$100 million to existing costs. Even allowing for partial federal reimbursement, the impact upon state and city budgets would be considerable.

Eligibility for special grants: In addition to basic, semi-monthly grants for food and shelter (including utilities), public-assistance recipients in New York City are entitled to receive "non-recurring" grants for clothing, household equipment, and furniture -- including washing machines, refrigerators, beds and bedding, and tables and chairs. If a family's clothing or household furnishings are inadequate, the welfare department is obligated under law to provide cash grants so that the family may purchase such goods as are required to bring them up to a minimum standard of decency. In New York City, hundreds of millions of dollars are saved because welfare recipients are unaware of these entitlements and are rarely informed of them by the Department of Welfare. As one study of recipients in Central Harlem shows, two thirds of the ADC mothers interviewed literally did not know that they were eligible for special grants for heavy clothing and furniture, nor had this possibility ever been mentioned to them by their investigators. These women, it might be added, were shown to be having great difficulty making ends meet on their semi-monthly food and rent checks. Furthermore, of those who had heard of others getting extra things, "Few realized that the possibility of receiving non-recurring allotments from the Department of Welfare was an alternative built into the system and rightfully theirs rather than a whim or favor from a particular social investigator."(5, p. 74) The report observes that the department fails to inform people of these entitlements: "The

reason is obvious -- if the client does not know that these funds are open to her, she will not ask about them and welfare costs will be kept down."

(5, p. 75) Indeed, the Community Council goes even further in its report, stating that some unwed mothers are given a "hard time" when they find it necessary to ask for special grants.

It should also be noted that families which are not eligible for basic food and rent grants may be eligible for furniture and clothing grants. If family earnings are equal to the scheduled eligibility level, or even a little above it, an application can still be submitted for special grants. The food-rent grant, in short, is not a fully maintaining grant, but is supposed to be supplemented by special allowances. However, few people earning the equivalent of the food-rent schedule know that they are nevertheless eligible for special grants.

In consequence of these circumstances, relatively little money is expended on special grants in New York City. In October 1965, to take a typical month, the Department of Welfare spent only \$2.50 per recipient for heavy clothing and \$1.30 for household furnishings. Taken together, grants of this kind amounted in 1965 to a mere \$40 per person, or \$20 million for the total group on assistance in the entire year. Depriving people of special grants is thus a chief way in which the Department economizes at the expense of recipients. Under the impact of exposure and mass applications, these expenditures for special grants could be multiplied tenfold or more. And that would involve a great many millions of dollars, indeed.

It was noted earlier that one must be cautious about making generalizations with respect to any jurisdiction unless the structure of welfare practices has been examined in some detail. Nevertheless, one or two

studies conducted in other places might be cited here merely to suggest that New York City is by no means an isolated instance. In Detroit, for example, a study of a large sample of households in a low-income district was conducted in 1965. Caseworkers evaluated the circumstances of each household, and found that 54.6 percent were judged to have insufficient income to maintain minimal living standards. Of the total number of households, 35 percent were in need but not receiving any form of public assistance. (9, p. 90)

Although the authors made no strict determination of the eligibility of the families in their sample under the laws of Michigan, they nevertheless believed that "relatively larger numbers of persons were eligible than receiving." (9, p. 39) They also noted that some 672 households or 32 percent of the sample had never sought assistance. Half of these families did not know of public assistance; 13 percent thought that they would probably be deemed ineligible; 10 percent were ashamed or afraid to ask; and the remainder failed to apply for a variety of miscellaneous reasons. (9, p. 97)

Similar deprivations have been shown in nationwide studies. For example, a study was conducted in 1963 based on a national sample of 5,500 families whose benefits under Aid to Dependent Children had been terminated. Thirty-four percent of these cases were officially in need of income at the point of closing: this was true of 30 percent of the white cases and 44 percent of the Negro. (2, p. 56) The study showed that the chief basis for termination given in local departmental records was "other reasons" (i.e., other than improvement in financial condition which would make dependence on welfare unnecessary). Upon closer examination, these "other reasons" turned out to be "unsuitable home" (i.e., the presence of illegitimate children), "failure to comply with departmental regulations," or

refusal to take legal action against a putative father. Negroes were especially singled out for punitive action on the ground that children were not being maintained in a "suitable home." (2, p. 55)

The Bureau of Family Services of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare recently released a report on welfare practices in six cities: Atlanta, Cleveland, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, New Orleans, and Philadelphia. The report contains virtually no statistical data, and is otherwise poorly done in most respects. However, some of the impressionistic observations of urban practices are worth noting. They found, for example, that "applicants were...being required to assume too much responsibility for substantiating their own eligibility." (4, p. 4) Several cities had generated "lists of things the applicant needs to accumulate as records to verify eligibility." (4, p. 21) Lacking these records, applicants were turned away. Thus the report recommended that at least one city alter its procedures to ease the eligibility process: "The high rate of rejections by the agency might also point to the need for more exploration at the point of initial request." (4, p. 17)

The cumbersome procedures entailed by intake policies also resulted in delays in getting money to people. Staff shortages and high personnel turnover were also said to contribute to delays. In the cities studied, intake appointments were being "scheduled for from 3 days to 4 to 6 weeks ahead." One agency was so far behind that half of all applicants whose need was established did not receive checks for over 60 days. (4, p. 25) In two cities, intake was closed "during the day when interviewers' schedules were filled. People coming in after that time were being told to return the next day without appointments." (4, p. 7) And when the pressure of unserved

people built up at intake, agencies sometimes gave "one-time grants" and then closed the cases without finding out whether people had a continuing need for money.

Grants were commonly denied because applicants failed to comply with certain questionable agency policies. Thus, in three cities, "checks were withheld because the agency was not satisfied with efforts the woman was making to locate her husband from whom she was separated or until an applicant located and got the putative father into the office for interview." (4, p. 21)

Practices with respect to emergency grants are also worth noting. Most agencies, according to the report, handled the need for emergency grants more or less well. In one, however, "Reviewers found that receptionists are instructed to ascertain whether emergency need exists by concluding the initial contact with the question, 'Do you have any questions?' or, 'Is there anything you want to ask?' Only if the applicant speaks out of his immediate need is he referred to a caseworker. No inquiry is made of his need." (4, p. 32)

Without knowing the statutes, policies, and practices in each jurisdiction, it is impossible to estimate the degree to which people across the nation are deprived, if not defrauded, of benefits. Despite over-all federal policies and supervision, local practice varies greatly. On the basis of the evidence available, however, it is surely conservative to say that the figure runs into billions of dollars.

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To generate a crisis, the poor must claim benefits which until now they have forfeited. How can obstacles be overcome which have until now inhibited people from asserting claims?

*1.E.
Louisiana
Ref.
Baton Rouge*

If the poor are to act, self-protective features of the welfare system must be offset: its capacity to limit information, to intimidate applicants, to demoralize recipients, and arbitrarily to deny lawful claims. In order to counteract these features -- by wide advertisement of welfare rights, by backing up the claims of recipients with demonstrations and legal sanctions -- organizers and funds will be required. Organizers will also be required to establish a climate of militancy with respect to rights in order to counteract the widespread attitude -- shared by the poor themselves -- that public assistance is charity, an attitude which leads recipients to acquiesce in the face of arbitrary and punitive welfare practices.

Ignorance of welfare rights can be attacked through a massive educational campaign. Brochures describing benefits in simple, clear language and urging people to seek them should be distributed door to door in tenements and public housing projects, and deposited in stores, schools, churches, and civic centers. Advertisements along the same lines should be placed in newspapers and spot announcements made on radio. Various leaders in the slums -- in the social, fraternal, and political clubs, and in the churches -- should also be made aware of the details of entitlements, and encouraged to recruit the eligible to the rolls. The fact that people are being informed of their legal rights under a government program, that this is virtually a civic education drive, will lend the campaign legitimacy.

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Information alone will not suffice. Organizers will have to become advocates in order to deal effectively with improper rejections and terminations. The advocate's task is to appraise the circumstances of each case, to call welfare to argue its merits, to threaten legal action if satisfaction is not given. In some cases, it will be necessary to contest decisions by asking for a "fair hearing" before the appropriate state supervisory agency and, thereafter, by suing in the courts, if necessary. Hearings and court actions will require lawyers, many of whom in cities like New York can be recruited on a voluntary basis, especially under the banner of a movement to end poverty by a strategy of asserting legal rights. Most cases will not require an expert knowledge of law, however, but only of welfare regulations; the rules can be learned by most people, including welfare recipients themselves (who can help to man "information and advocacy" centers). To aid workers in these centers, handbooks can be prepared describing welfare rights, as well as tactics to employ in asserting them.

Advocacy must be supplemented by organized demonstrations, for there are several areas in which group tactics would be especially effective. Protest tactics can help to create channels for collective bargaining, for example, between recipients who are not getting their full entitlements and the system. Protests and demonstrations will also help to form a climate of militancy to overcome the invidious and immobilizing attitudes which many recipients hold toward their own status. In such a climate, many more poor people will become their own advocates and will not need to rely on aid from regular cadres.

*you probably
haven't tried
to find out
what these
Reg. are.*

As the crisis develops, the mass media can be expected to show considerable interest. It will be important to exploit this interest to inform the broader liberal community about the inefficiencies, and injustices of welfare. For example, the system will not be able to process many new applicants because of cumbersome investigatory procedures (which cost twenty cents for every dollar disbursed). As delays mount, the use of affidavits should be demanded, so that the poor may certify to their condition. If the establishment of eligibility becomes more difficult because of intimidation and illegal rejections, the demand should be made that the Department of Health, Education and Welfare dispatch "eligibility registrars" to enforce federal statutes governing local programs. And throughout the crisis, the mass media should be used to advance arguments for federal action on new income-distributing measures to replace the barbaric and archaic system which now exists.

and if the Mass Media does not see fit to let itself be so used?

All of these tactics should be accompanied by an assault in the courts on the statutory framework of welfare practices. Residence laws, which deprive the poorest elements in the population, should be tested on the ground that they violate the constitutional right to cross state boundaries without penalty. Relative-responsibility laws should be attacked under the "equal protection" clause of the Constitution. Striking down these statutes would make millions of additional persons across the nation immediately eligible for benefits now denied to them by law, not by the arbitrary administrative practices described earlier.

Although a basic organization (cadres and funds) would have to be developed to mount this campaign, a variety of conventional resources in the large cities could also be drawn upon. The idea of "welfare rights"

has begun to attract attention in many liberal circles. A number of organizations, partly under the aegis of the "war against poverty," are developing legal programs and other advocacy services for low-income people caught up with the agencies of the welfare state. Some voluntary social agencies are starting "welfare information" services (patterned after the Citizen's Advice Bureau in Britain). It is not likely that these organizations will become expressly affiliated with a civil-rights drive, for obvious political reasons. But whether they affiliate or not, they constitute growing resources to which people can be referred for help in establishing and maintaining entitlements. In the final analysis, it does not matter how a person gets on the rolls or how he secures additional entitlements, as long as he does so.

? — The core cadres would have to come from the civil-rights movement and the Protestant churches. A few student groups and others on the left are even now at work in the ghettos organizing welfare clients to resist encroachments upon their privacy. These groups might well become the vanguard of an expressly political movement designed to flood the welfare system with thousands who now obtain no benefits at all. They should be quick to see the difference between conducting social services and "rights" programs to redress individual grievances, on the one hand, and mounting a large-scale social-action campaign for national reforms in economic policy, on the other.

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Movements which depend on the involvement of masses of poor people have generally failed in America. Why would the proposed strategy to engage the poor succeed? There are three general reasons.

First, this plan promises immediate and continuous economic benefits, a point of some importance because America's poor have not been moved in any number by radical political ideologies, although they have sometimes been moved by their economic interests. Since radical movements in America have rarely been able to provide economic incentives, they have usually failed to secure mass participation of any kind. The conservative "business unionism" of organized labor is explained by this fact, for membership enlarged only as it paid off in material benefits. Union leaders have understood that their strength derives almost entirely from their capacity to provide economic rewards to members. Although leaders have increasingly acted in political spheres, their influence has been directed chiefly to matters of governmental policy affecting the well-being of organized workers. The same point is revealed by the experience of rent strikes in Northern cities. The leaders have often been motivated by radical ideologies, but tenants have been attracted by the promise that improvements would quickly result from rent withholding.

Second, in order for this strategy to succeed, one need not ask anything more of the poor than that they claim their lawful benefits. The plan, in short, has the extraordinary capability of yielding mass influence without mass participation, at least as the term participation is ordinarily understood. Mass influence in this case stems from the cumulative consumption of benefits and does not require that large groups of people be involved in regular organizational roles.

Furthermore, the prospects for mass influence are enhanced because this plan provides a practical basis for coalitions between poor whites and poor Negroes. Advocates of low-income movements have not been able to suggest how poor whites and poor Negroes can be united in an expressly class movement. Despite pleas by some Negro leaders for joint action, poor whites have steadfastly resisted making common cause with poor Negroes. Indeed, strategists calling for coalition tactics have not even been able to show why working-class white ethnics -- especially the rank and file of organized labor -- would be motivated to join with Negroes who are threatening white residential enclaves, white neighborhood schools, and white control of family-based apprenticeship systems. By contrast, the benefits of the present plan are as great for poor whites as for Negroes. It does not seem likely that poor whites, whatever their prejudices against either Negroes or public welfare, will refuse to participate while Negroes aggressively claim benefits which are also unlawfully denied to them. One salutary consequence of public-information campaigns to acquaint Negroes with their rights is that many whites will be made aware of theirs as well. Under the circumstances, whites will probably want equal treatment from welfare authorities, and the possibility of joint action will thereby be afforded. Even if whites prefer to work through their own organizations and leaders, the consequences will be equivalent to joining with Negroes. For if the object is to focus attention on the need for new economic measures by producing a crisis over the dole, anyone who extracts benefits from public welfare is in effect part of a coalition and thus contributes to the cause.

Finally, this plan deals with problems of great immediacy in the lives of the poor and should therefore motivate some to involve themselves in regular organizational roles. Cadres must be recruited to man information and advocacy centers, to participate in mass protests, and to perform other organizational activities. In the past, the civil-rights movement has had to rely heavily on middle-class adherents, not a few of them white. Under this plan, cadres would also have to be drawn from the middle-class. But it seems reasonable to suppose that many poor persons as well could be drawn into active participation, precisely because the stakes are clear, the economic incentives immediate, and the anger toward the welfare system very great. Should this turn out to be true, the civil-rights movement will be brought into direct contact with the poor in ways that have not always been possible in the past.

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The ultimate aim of this strategy is new federal legislation for direct income distribution. What reason is there to expect that the federal government will respond in this way to a crisis in the welfare system?

We ordinarily think of major legislation as taking form through political processes -- as a result of expression of interests through the electoral system. We tend to overlook the force of crisis in precipitating legislative reform, partly because we lack a theoretical framework by which to understand its impact.

By crisis we mean a publicly visible disruption in some institutional sphere. Crisis can occur spontaneously or as the intended result of tactics of demonstration and protest, which either generate institutional disruption or bring unrecognized disruption to public attention. Public trouble is of course a political liability, and crisis calls for some action by political leaders to stabilize the situation.

Political leaders try to respond to crisis with proposals which work to their advantage in the electoral process. Because the disruption it creates or exposes usually entails group conflict, crisis threatens to bring about cleavage in a political consensus. Unless issues are articulated in the crisis which become the terms of group support, politicians will proffer only that modest action required to quell disturbance without risking an existing electoral coalition. Spontaneous disruptions, such as riots, impose no terms at all and draw responses from political leaders designed only to quiet disruption without disturbing other groups in a coalition. Thus, while crisis impels political action, the crisis of itself does not determine the specific action selected.

When, however, a crisis comes to be defined by electoral groups as a matter of clear issues and preferred solutions, terms are imposed on the politicians' bid for electoral support. Whether political leaders will design their proposals to reflect these terms will depend on a twofold calculation. First, what is the impact of the crisis and the issues raised on existing electoral alignments? And second, what gains or losses in support are to be expected from a proposed resolution?

As to existing electoral alignments, exposure to the issues in a crisis may activate new groups, altering the balance of support and opposition on the issues. Exposure to crisis may also polarize group sentiments, altering the terms which must be offered to assure the support of given constituent groups.

Politicians are more responsive to group shifts and are more likely to accommodate to the terms they impose when the electoral coalitions which are threatened by crisis are already uncertain or weakening. In other words, the politician in responding to group demands will calculate potential gains in support against losses, and will measure support not only in numbers but in stability. Political leaders are most responsive to group shifts when the terms of settlement can be framed so as to shore up an existing coalition, or as a basis for the development of new and more stable alignments, without jeopardizing existing support. Then, indeed, the calculation of net gain is most secure.

The legislative reforms of the depression years, for example, were impelled not so much by organized interests exercised through regular electoral processes as by widespread economic crisis. That crisis precipitated the disruption of the regionally based coalitions underlying the

old national parties. During the realignments of 1932, a new Democratic coalition was formed, based heavily on urban working-class groups. Once in power, the national Democratic leadership proceeded to propose and implement the economic reforms of the New Deal. Although these measures were a response to the imperative of economic crisis, the types of measure enacted were designed to secure and stabilize the new Democratic coalition.

The civil-rights movement, to take a recent case, also reveals the interaction of crisis and electoral conditions. The crisis created in the South precipitated legislative reform because of a weakening north-south Democratic coalition! The strains in that coalition were first evident in the Dixiecrat desertion of 1948 and continued through the Eisenhower years as the Republicans gained ground in the southern states. Democratic party leaders at first tried to hold the dissident South by warding off the demands of enlarging Negro constituencies in northern cities. Thus for two decades the national Democratic party campaigned on strongly worded civil-rights planks but enacted only token measures. The crisis engendered by the civil-rights movement forced the Democrats' hand: a crumbling southern partnership was forfeited, and major civil-rights legislation was put forward designed to ensure the support of northern Negroes and liberal elements in the Democratic coalition. That coalition emerged strong from the 1964 election, easily able to overcome the loss of southern states to Goldwater. At the same time, the legislation enacted, particularly the Voting Rights Bill, laid the ground for a new southern coalition of moderate whites and the hitherto untapped reservoir of Negro voters.

The electoral context which made crisis effective in the South is also to be found in the big cities of the nation today. Deep tensions have

developed among groups in the political coalitions of the large cities which have been historic Democratic strongholds. The urban politicians no longer turn in the city vote to national Democratic candidates with unfailing regularity. Defections became marked in the elections of the 1950's and continued until the Johnson landslide of 1964. Two changes account for the weakened urban coalitions.

First, the distinctive mechanism for forging coalitions among competing groups in the city - the political machine - has withered. The political machine converted public resources into private benefits, and dispersed them to voters in return for electoral support. Jobs, contracts, services, and favors, paid for out of municipal coffers, were the cement which held together the heterogeneous groups of the city. But the public resources out of which these benefits were culled are no longer available to political leaders. Successive waves of municipal reform have altered governmental practices, resulting in bureaucratization and professionalization. Most jobs are now covered by civil service and cannot be dispensed at will; procedures for bidding limit the dispensing of contracts; and services are distributed according to bureaucratic rules and professional norms.

Second, massive demographic changes have taken place in the cities. Many of the old constituent groups have drifted to the suburbs, to be replaced by the new minority poor. And, while the urban political apparatus includes representatives of new minority groups, they are by no means represented according to their proportions in the population. Representation in urban politics is won, not only through the polls, but through the activity of organized interests - unions, homeowner associations, business

groups, etc. Minority constituencies are not regular participants in the various institutional spheres in which such organized interest groups develop. The poor, therefore, are not represented by associations which call political leaders to account. The party organizations have become, in consequence, more a channel for the personal advancement of minority leaders than for the expression of minority-group interests.

Big-city mayors are thus caught between antagonistic working-class ethnic groups, the remaining middle class, and the new minority poor. Without the neutralizing benefits of the political machine which in the past were used to placate competing groups, public conflict erupts continually over each new municipal decision on housing, on the schools, and even on transportation. In the struggle to preserve an uneasy coalition, the mayors are immobilized. They flee from decision, and especially from the divisive decisions demanded by ghetto interests.

Many of the legislative reforms of the Great Society can be understood as a national Democratic response to the new ghetto constituencies, bypassing the weakened big-city mayors, who often remain tied to an urban-party apparatus controlled by diminishing working- and middle-class interests. But these reforms have been quite modest (e.g., the war against poverty) and have avoided the risk of offending local party leaders or other class and ethnic groups in the city.

Partly in recognition of the deep divisions in the city, made evident by fierce resistance to attempts to secure reform by protest tactics (e.g., school boycotts and counter boycotts), some civil rights strategists have called for a turn "from protest to politics." (This is also a reflection of the new opportunity for traditional political action in the South provided by voting-rights legislation.) Protest tactics in the cities have

so far been employed to try to impel change in a whole network of educational and economic institutions so that the poor can rise economically by traditional means. But since most established urban groups have deep and entrenched interests in existing institutional arrangements, these objectives of protest have aroused the opposition of huge majorities. In brief, proposed solutions promised greater turmoil than the protests themselves.

To obtain comprehensive institutional reform will therefore require major shifts in urban electoral formations. It will require the massing of ghetto votes, the building of new ghetto organizations and leadership, and the negotiation of new alliances, resulting finally in the development of formidable political influence. And that will be at best a slow and uncertain process.

Although broad social and economic change may have to await fundamental electoral realignments, crisis can nevertheless successfully impel specific reforms in the short run by exploiting weaknesses in current coalitions. This is particularly true if the solutions offered will relieve rather than further aggravate tensions in coalitions. Thus the strategy we are proposing employs crisis to disrupt and expose rifts in the urban political coalition, but it also provides a solution which will afford political leaders strengthened electoral support.

Thus crisis in public welfare would put further pressure on the uneasy urban coalitions, for the public exposure of ghetto poverty would create a furor. The anger toward the poor of working-class ethnic groups would be partly countered by the indignation toward welfare of liberal groups. The allegiance of ghetto constituencies themselves, until now among the most reliable Democratic votes, might even be put in doubt. The financial

impact of accelerated welfare costs, taking form in budgetary dilemmas and prospective tax increases, will further exacerbate present divisions.

But while the welfare crisis will create greater divisions among urban electoral groups and possibly even threaten the urban party apparatus, the terms for resolving the crisis offer considerable political gain. Legislative reform to provide direct income to the poor would permit national Democratic leaders to cultivate the new urban constituencies of the ghettos. But it would not widen differences among existing political groups, as is the case when issues are drawn over schools, housing, or jobs. A direct income program would not only redeem local governments from the immediate crisis but permanently relieve them from the financially and politically onerous burdens of public welfare - a function which generates support nowhere and hostility from many, not least of all welfare recipients.

Finally, unlike local jurisdictions, the federal government has taxing powers which yield substantially increased revenues as an automatic by-product of increases in national income. The new legislation could be staged to draw on such increases and thus avoid politically painful new taxes for local and federal jurisdictions alike.

In this way, national political leaders can respond to the welfare crisis and win the support of ghetto constituents, while at the same time bolstering the local political apparatus and avoiding new antagonisms. And it is because the urban political coalition as it stands today has been weakened by group conflict that the demands of new or disaffected constituents will count so powerfully with political leaders. Thus the conditions are now with us for a new crisis strategy that can call forth substantial federal reform.

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No strategy, however hopeful and confident its advocates may be, is foolproof. But if unforeseen contingencies defeat this plan to bring about new federal legislation in the field of poverty, it should also be noted that there would be gains even in defeat. For one thing, the plight of many poor people would be somewhat eased in the course of an assault upon public welfare: existing recipients would come to know their rights and how to defend them, thus acquiring dignity where none now exists; and billions of dollars in withheld benefits would become available to potential recipients now -- not several generations hence. Such an attack should also be welcome to those currently concerned with programs designed to equip the young to rise out of poverty (e.g., Head Start), for surely children learn more readily when the oppressive burden of financial insecurity is lifted from the shoulders of their parents. And those seeking new ways to engage the Negro politically should remember that the public resources have always been the fuel for low-income urban political organization. If organizers can deliver millions of dollars in cash benefits to the ghetto masses, it seems reasonable to expect that the masses will deliver their loyalties to their benefactors, for it has always been so.