The Common Welfare

Social Workers—1940

THE National Conference of Social Work, at its meeting in Grand Rapids late this month, will put into the record what American social workers are thinking and talking about when forces are loose in the world which negate much of their philosophy and deny their faith. What will students of 1950 find as they turn the pages of the 1940 proceedings? Certainly they will not find futility. On the contrary, they will find in word and implication an affirmation of faith in democracy, and of the will to make it work here at home.

This conference of 1940, as its preliminary program shows, does not ignore the challenge to democracy in these times, but accepts it and examines its component parts in terms of American life. Social workers believe that the success of democracy depends on its practice. Their concern is with strengthening its institutions, and as a part of that process they realistically face its weaknesses. Hence their preoccupation, clearly evident in the program of the Grand Rapids meeting, with such matters as continuing unemployment, inadequate relief, the problem of the migrant workers, the dilemma of youth.

But social workers, the conference program abundantly indicates, are mindful that the cataclysm in Europe has far reaching implications here. What these implications are, where their impact will fall heaviest, is another area on which conference discussion will turn. Thus, a special conference committee on refugees will hold two meetings; and an evening session on "The Outlook for America" will be matched by one on "The Implications of the European Situation."

Nonetheless, the Grand Rapids conference will focus on the United States. Its discussions will register the depth and breadth of the concerns of social workers at a crucial moment in history.

Eight Months or Twelve

PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT has given up the idea, if he ever had it, that the $985,000,000 proposed by the Bureau of the Budget will be adequate for WPA for the fiscal year beginning July 1. Averse to asking outright for a larger sum—after all this is an election year—he now proposes to the House Appropriation Committee, where the bill is taking its tortuous course, that he be given "discretionary authority" to expend the entire amount during the first eight months of the fiscal period if it becomes "absolutely necessary to avoid suffering and hardship." The new Congress could then "deal with the question of the need of providing funds for the last four months of the fiscal year, if such need is then apparent."

The President's proposal would not remove from the appropriation bill the "principle of apportionment" which was written into the current act by the Woodrum amendment. It would merely spread the $985,000,000 over eight months, if "absolutely necessary," instead of twelve. This would provide jobs for an average of some two million people, about the number now enrolled on WPA; whereas a twelve-month spread, as the economy bloc demands, would mean cutting the rolls to an average of 1,350,000 persons. The eight months provision would be a gain but not by any means an answer to the persisting need of the unemployed. Neither proposal takes any account of the overhang of probably a million workers certified as eligible for WPA for whom no projects exist, nor of the unknown number whose need is equally great but who, for technical reasons, "fall out of the category."

Col. F. C. Harrington, WPA commissioner, said in late April that a million and a quarter men had left WPA in twelve months, "presumably to return to private employment." Many, he added, had been forced to return to the rolls. Heartening as the million and a quarter figure sounds, the fact remains that for every man who left WPA, another and another and another was waiting for his place. The rolls have not dropped except by the drastic process of slashing. There is small reason to believe that the need during the coming year will be any less.

Follow-up

LAST January when social workers, educators, physicians, laymen met together at the fourth White House Conference to discuss the needs of children in a democracy, they stressed not only their belief that the future of democracy itself depends upon the welfare of children—but that the welfare of the child depends upon the security of his family life. [See *Survey Midmonthly,* February 1940.] To anyone who might feel that such an obvious theory scarcely needs to be demonstrated the recent action of New York City's Board of Child Welfare, the local administrative agency for aid to dependent children, is a reminder that the habit of adding two and two and getting three is not confined to backward sections of the country. A few weeks ago the board voluntarily lowered its budget $75,000 a month from the usual $1,250,000, in order to "equalize" its allowances with those of the home relief program. The result was a 40 percent reduction in grants for clothing and personal incidentals to 46,000 dependent children and 26,000 mothers.

By its action the board showed that it had little understanding of the philosophy behind the aid to dependent children program—supposedly adopted not just to relieve the monotony of administering home relief, but to enable widowed or otherwise stranded mothers to keep their homes together so that their children might grow up in a normal family atmosphere. The value of such a program is lost if the home is to be haunted continually by the shadow of want and insecurity. Granted that the homes of all those on home relief are darkened by that same shadow, since when have we in this country subscribed to the theory that two wrongs can make a right?

Southerners Confer

THE second Southern Conference for Human Welfare which met in Chattanooga, Tenn., in mid-April was a notable advance over the first meeting, held in Birmingham a little over a year ago. [See "Southerners Write Their Own Prescription," by George C. Stoney, *Survey Graph-*

ic, January 1939.] In Birmingham the police invoked a city ordinance to keep white and Negro delegates segregated, and the racial issue captured the headlines. In Chattanooga a stipulation that the conference was to have full freedom in seating its delegates was included in the contract for the use of the city's auditorium. Accordingly, five hundred white people and about half as many Negroes sat down together at the opening session. Before committee work began, free association was taken as a matter of course. By the end of the meeting, few conference members seemed conscious that anything "different" was taking place.

The chief line of effort laid down by the Birmingham meeting was the elimination of the poll tax. Chattanooga added a second specific objective—the elimination of the discriminatory freight rates charged by railroads on goods coming from the South and Southwest and moving into the North and East. Conference speakers demonstrated to the delegates that when as much as 25 percent of the cost of an article has to be spent to ship it to market, with most of this excessive charge being taken out of wages, the issue has wide implications.

Many participants in the Chattanooga meeting felt that as rapidly as possible the membership should be broadened. The Negro members represent many groups and interests. The white membership mainly represents southern organized labor, with a sprinkling of campus progressives and small town liberals. Clearly the goal of the conference, organized to seek an answer to "the nation's number one economic problem," calls for the cooperation of the churches, civic groups, welfare workers, county farm agents, journalists, and many others who have special knowledge of southern conditions.

Refugee Children

SOMEWHERE in a congressional pigeonhole the Wagner-Rogers bill to admit 20,000 non-quota refugee children into this country is gathering dust. [See *Survey Midmonthly,* March 1939, page 81.] In the meantime, the European war expands the world refugee problem immeasurably in breadth and poignancy. Realizing that "half a loaf is better than no loaf," a group of social workers and other interested persons have been laying plans for the care of those children who are fortunate enough to receive quota numbers for entry into the United States. Last month those plans culminated in the formation of the Non-Sectarian Foundation for Refugee Children: president, Clarence E. Pickett of the American Friends Service Committee; vice president, Marion E. Kenworthy of the New York School of Social Work; executive director, Owen R. Lovejoy. The organization, which will have no agents of its own abroad, will coordinate the services for children offered by groups assisting refugees who are able to come to the United States. Thus it will cooperate with the American Friends Service Committee and other organizations in Europe in helping children obtain quota numbers and enabling them to take advantage of their numbers when they come up. Its concern will be solely with refugee children who have been separated from their parents by reason of death, concentration camps, or wartime conditions.

In this country the foundation will work with child-caring agencies all over the land in an effort to make suitable placements. Only those children's agencies with the highest social standards will be called upon to investigate proposed homes. No difficulty is anticipated in securing sufficient applications from prospective foster parents, as these pour in to all sorts of agencies with every spurt of refugee publicity, such as the recent Children's Crusade. The new organization, which already has opened headquarters at 215 Fourth Avenue, New York, receives its support from interested individuals and philanthropic foundations. It has already enough money to care for a year's administrative expenses so that it can promise that any money received from now on will go directly to the children's aid.

Gertrude Seymour

A SCORE of laymen—perhaps twice that many—have written with rare distinction on the borderland of medicine and the general welfare. Death has come to one of them—Gertrude Seymour. It was in 1913 that Miss Seymour became an associate editor of *The Survey,* coming to us from the staff of the American Medical Association. Earlier our pages had been enriched by Dr. Alice Hamilton as contributing editor. From 1913 to 1918, Miss Seymour laid the framework of our staff operations in the field of health, which were to be carried to new stages by Mary Ross. For five years Miss Seymour's monthly departments covered a wide span of activities; her original articles combined scientific precision with sheer clarity and interest. Especially to be remembered are her early series (in conjunction with Dr. Hamilton) on "The New Public Health," and a later wartime series on "Health and the Citizen." The conscientiousness of her work, the tensions that sprang from it, and her compelling concern were qualities kindred to missionary zeal. This manifested itself in one of her most venturesome and successful commissions—a firsthand appraisal of gaps and inefficiencies in American quarantine. ["On Guard at the Port of New York," January 1916.] This won instant recognition among health experts and public officials who had long kicked against the pricks of governmental anachronism, and was a direct influence in making for change. Subsequently at Geneva, Miss Seymour carried on extensive research under the Pierce Foundation and became a militant authority on the international control of narcotics. A mantle of friendliness sheltered the last years of invalidism of this rare interpreter.

And So On

THROUGH its department of education, the New York World's Fair offers a series of leaflets designed for parents and teachers bringing children or young people to the 1940 Fair. The leaflets describe exhibits which have special values for young visitors of various ages and interests. • • Under the direction of Alfred W. Pecsok, supervisor of social service, Cincinnati is taking its eleventh annual census, a sampling which includes about 170,000 residents and provides the city with an invaluable factual basis for intelligent public planning and effort. • • In opinions written by Justice Frank Murphy, the Supreme Court of the United States on April 22 declared unconstitutional the anti-picketing laws enacted in California and Alabama. Both were held to violate the guarantees of free speech. • • The thirtieth annual meeting of the National Council of the Boy Scouts of America in Oklahoma City, May 9 and 10, brought together delegates from 540 local councils to review the activities of three decades of constructive youth leadership and to plan for the future. During the last thirty years, 8,999,123 men and boys have at some time been members of the Boy Scouts of America.

The Social Front

The Insurances

DURING the first quarter of 1940, claims for old age and survivors insurance payments exceeded estimates. In this period, more than 100,000 claims were filed and about $3,000,000 paid, as against an estimate of 95,000 claims for the first three months of benefit payments. John J. Corson, director of the Bureau of Old Age and Survivors Insurance, states that the average retired worker who applied for benefits during the first quarter received about $25 a month.

Warning—Workers in many states have been warned to beware of persons who seek to collect a fee for ascertaining or "protecting" the employe's social security status. The warnings against these practices point out that any worker who wants to find out whether his or her employer has kept up social security payments can ask for and receive this information from the Washington office or from any of the local offices of the Social Security Board.

Merit Rating—For the second successive year, Governor Herbert Lehman of New York vetoed a bill providing for merit rating in unemployment compensation. The Young-Wadsworth bill would have replaced the present flat tax with a sliding scale ranging from .5 percent to 3 percent, according to the employer's record in providing steady work. In vetoing the measure, the governor stated: "It is my belief that the subject should be given more study and consideration. It is too difficult and too important a matter for the state to adopt at this time." The bill had wide backing from employer organizations.

"Fund Riding"—Pennsylvania state officials are making studies in connection with "riding the fund," the current description of the synchronization of part time work with unemployment compensation payments, so that eligible workers receive wages and benefits in alternate periods. The *Pittsburgh Press* reports that employers sometimes call men for work whose unemployment compensation status will not be affected by wage earning, and pass over men who are due to draw benefits. Some state officials question whether it would be advisable to attempt to block this practice, the present legality of which is not questioned, since it provides a "cushion" for the worker, particularly in seasonal industries like coal and steel, and helps prevent exhaustion of his resources. At the same time, this commentator points out, the employer is benefited by the practice because his working force is kept together in slack times, and on call for full time work.

Tax Rate Cut—Governor Lehman signed the Washburn bill, which reduces the rate of employer contributions to the New York State unemployment insurance fund from 3 percent to 2.7 percent on all wages paid on or after January 1, 1940. The amendment will effect a substantial saving to employers and at the same time slow up the rate of increase in the state's account in the unemployment trust fund which, as of December 31, 1939, had a balance of nearly $175 million. The amendment runs counter to the recommendations of many authorities on social insurance who are urging liberalization of benefits rather than a reduction in contributions.

Negro Problems—Kentucky has instituted a study of traditional vocations which have been lost to Negroes and of the resulting problems of occupational guidance and retraining which Negro workers need help in meeting. Governor Keen Johnson has appointed a committee of nine members, and the present plan is for a continuing inquiry, in which the committee will have the cooperation of L. A. Oxley of the Bureau of Employment Security of the Social Security Board.

Security Conference—A complete revision of the unemployment insurance set-up in this country and the launching of a national health insurance plan were the chief recommendations for improving this country's social security program made by the thirteenth annual conference of the American Association for Social Security, held in New York City late in March. Delegates were present from twenty-five states. Prof. Herman A. Gray of New York University, who is also chairman of the New York State Unemployment Insurance Advisory Council, was a leading exponent of sweeping revision of existing laws, and of the introduction of a single federal tax system to finance grants to states for unemployment insurance. His plan, which was enthusiastically received by the conference, called for a cut in the tax rate from 3 to 2 percent; simplified record keeping; uniform benefit standards. Arthur J. Altmeyer, chairman of the Social Security Board, predicted that social insurance in this country will be extended "to cover more hazards and protect a greater proportion of the population." Abraham Epstein, secretary of the association, hailed the gains in old age and survivors insurance under the 1939 amendments, and underscored the need for a comparable revision of the unemployment insurance system, which he described as "unwieldy" and "inadequate." The conference recommendation of a health insurance program was based on proposals put forward by U.S. Senator James E. Murray of Montana and Dr. Bertram M. Bernheim of the Johns Hopkins Medical School.

Among the States

FINANCING has been the main concern of this year's state legislatures as far as public welfare is concerned, according to the Public Administration Clearing House. Most of the laws enacted up to this time have to do with furnishing funds for relief, either through bond issues, new taxes, or the extension of existing levies. Amendments to old age assistance laws also have been numerous, many of them easing or abolishing requirements for liens on recipients' property. Among the states to lift lien requirements were California, Kentucky, and Nebraska.

Heaviest load of proposed legislation still to be considered is made up of bills to amend unemployment compensation laws. Many concern merit rating credits for employers; others would shorten waiting periods or enlarge coverage.

Proportions—Over 8 percent of the population in the state of Washington received some kind of aid from the state's Social Security Department during January of this year. The department spent $1,679,439 on 134,591 persons, 52 percent of the money going to old age assistance.

For Rhode Island—Decentralization is the theme of a proposed welfare bill for the state of Rhode Island, drafted by the governor's commission to study public assistance. The commission submitted the legislative proposal to the governor, together with the report of the study it has been making since last August. First among the recommendations is the integration of all types of public assistance, within the towns and cities, into local welfare departments and the elimination of the state investigating facilities. The bill would also turn back to the localities the administration of work pro-