

A whiff of fascism from New York City welfare chief

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'Work will make you free' were the words used by the head of New York City's welfare agency to describe his philosophy in regard to the forced-labor 'Work Experience Program' (WEP) into which more than 30,000 of the city's poorest residents have been drafted.

The remark made by Human Resources Administration Commissioner Jason Turner on a public television call-in program provoked protests from some viewers. They pointed out that Turner's phrase was the exact English translation of 'Arbeit macht frei,' the Nazi slogan that appeared on the gates of Auschwitz and other concentration camps, where inmates were forced to perform slave labor before they were killed.

Turner, who came to work for Mayor Rudolph Giuliani in New York City after running the get-tough welfare program instituted by Wisconsin Governor Tommy Thompson, made the statement in response to a question from the program's host about municipal union leader Stanley Hill's recent description of the WEP program as 'slave labor.'

Hill, the Executive Director of District Council 37 of the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees, supported Giuliani's reelection in 1996 and kept silent for years about the city's expanding use of unpaid welfare labor in jobs formerly done by municipal workers.

When the Giuliani administration announced plans last March to lay off hundreds of workers at city hospitals, Hill suddenly 'discovered' that WEP workers were performing labor in the same hospitals. He made an issue out of it, calling them 'slave labor.' In the end, the union's efforts resulted in the hospital employees getting laid off and the WEP workers being pulled out, leaving hospitals that serve the city's poor even more desperately understaffed.

While Turner's remarks were directed against Hill,

the union leader had no intention of taking advantage of the welfare director's revealing gaffe. He told a local newspaper that Turner's remarks were 'so explosive and so terribly unfortunate that I don't even want to comment on it.'

Asked if he still believed that WEP was a form of slave labor, Hill said he was not about to engage in 'explosive rhetoric,' but rather wanted to promote programs 'that will develop real jobs.' He added, 'We need the cooperation of the mayor and people like Jason Turner to realize this goal.'

Turner acknowledged protests over his remark, issuing a written apology in which he disavowed any intention of associating WEP with the Nazi death camps. 'It was my intention to state the view that work can give an individual a greater measure of personal freedom, independence and self-sufficiency in contrast to the dependency of welfare,' Turner said in the statement. 'To the extent that anyone was hurt because my remarks evoked other memories, and since I intended no harm, I am sorry if anyone was offended by my remarks.'

The controversy received scant attention in the New York press. The *New York Times*, the only daily to deal with the matter, did its best to bury the significance of Turner's statement. It treated the question as one of insensitivity to ethnic sensibilities, in this case to Jewish memories of the Holocaust and concerns about anti-Semitism.

Turner's remarks, the *Times* commented, were 'construed by some viewers as anti-Semitic.'

To ally such concerns, the *Times* interviewed the regional director of the Anti-Defamation League, Adam Segall, who affirmed that he saw no anti-Semitic 'intention' behind Turner's words. 'However, it seems clear that he used a term that he had heard previously

that he was not familiar with the context.'

There are several rather obvious unanswered questions. What was the context in which Turner heard this slogan of the Nazis and why did he find himself attracted to it? Moreover, is there any connection between the way the Nazis used these words in relation to people they termed 'subhuman' in Germany of the 1930s and 40s, and its reemergence in connection with impoverished layers of society routinely described as the 'underclass' in 1990s America?

One long-standing observer of New York City politics recalled that 'Arbeit macht frei'--work will make you free--was not an entirely unknown slogan within the Giuliani administration. It seems that in the 1980s, when the mayor was still a federal prosecutor, the team he headed was trying to 'sweat' a suspect into turning state's evidence. As part of the psychological campaign to break him, the words 'Arbeit macht frei' were scrawled on a blackboard in a room in which the potential witness was confined. The individual who had fallen into the clutches of the prosecutors was a survivor of a Nazi concentration camp.

The echo of fascism in a city administration that has dedicated itself to building up police powers, transferring wealth from the poorest to the wealthiest layers of society and repressing all opposition is perhaps not an accidental--or even unconscious--turn of a phrase.

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