

Study shows New York workfare program is eliminating union jobs

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A welfare rights advocacy organization has issued a 39-page report demonstrating that New York City's Work Experience Program (WEP) has been using welfare workers to do the same work as city workers and other regular employees, and has replaced thousands of unionized workers. The organization, Community Voices Heard, composed of low-income people, interviewed 649 WEP workers at 131 work sites in Manhattan and the Bronx between June 1999 and February 2000.

Under the guise of improving the independence and work habits of those on welfare, the WEP program was greatly expanded by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani in 1995. Previously there were 10,000 welfare workers. Beginning in 1995, at any one time there have been 40,000 welfare recipients enrolled in the program. WEP forces these individuals to work primarily in city agencies, but also for private companies to some extent.

These workers perform a wide variety of tasks. For example, in the Parks Department they rake leaves, sweep, do hedge trimming and perform minor repairs on equipment. For the Department of Citywide Administrative Services they clean bathrooms, replace supplies, vacuum rugs and operate elevators. The clerical workers answer phones, type and process forms. In the New York City Transit Authority they sweep, mop and, when necessary, scrape clean subway cars.

Some of their duties are more complex. About 10 percent reported that they had to supervise other WEPs. Some are responsible for taking care of children or the elderly. A number of welfare workers are responsible for opening and closing their work locations and carrying out safety checks. There are those who work as social services case aides helping resolve domestic violence problems.

Despite these responsibilities, legally they are not considered workers and therefore do not receive Social Security credit, earned income tax credit, unemployment insurance, sick leave or vacations. They have no collective bargaining rights and very little in the way of grievance rights if they should get ill or wish to complain about unsafe or unhealthy conditions. Eighty-six percent of all WEPs surveyed report doing the same work as regular employees.

The number of hours WEPs work is calculated by dividing their total benefits, including food stamps, by the legal minimum wage. Furthermore, due to the fact that most of the welfare benefits are paid for by New York State and the federal government, the city has to pay only \$1.80 an hour for the labor of each welfare recipient. This amounts to paying a welfare worker \$3,600 a year compared to paying an entry level union worker about \$20,000 per year for the same work. This guarantees that a WEP worker will receive an income that places him or her at about 30 percent less than what is needed to be at the official poverty level.

It is for this reason that Mayor Giuliani has been so willing to expand the WEP program. For example, by the fall of 1997, 6,000 WEPs were working in the city's parks. The number of unionized park employees has been reduced from 1,553 in 1990 to 803 in 1999, with the most dramatic drop in employment taking place from about 1995, when Giuliani introduced his initiatives on workfare.

WEP workers who do clerical duties have also displaced thousands of unionized office workers. Furthermore, less than one-fourth of those surveyed reported getting any on-the-job training, and less than one-fifth reported receiving any health and safety training.

The report addresses the fact that the WEP program is

illegal under New York State Social Services Law, which prohibits the use of welfare workers to replace regular employees. From the point of view of Community Voices Heard, this is a key argument for advocating that the program be disbanded. WEP workers should keep their jobs, they say, but at the same wage and benefit scale as the regular employees. Three-quarters of respondents said that they wanted to continue working, but for decent wages and benefits.

However, objective observers who are familiar with the workfare program are well aware of the fact that WEPs have been doing the same work as regular workers who earn better wages. Political authorities simply ignore the law, while denying that WEPs do the same work as regular employees. For example, on June 27, Mayor Giuliani dismissed the report, stating, “The reality is welfare workers in WEP are used for jobs that city workers are not doing. That's been the guideline since the beginning of the program.”

It is significant that the report was funded by a number of institutions such as the Rockefeller Foundation and the University of Michigan. Among certain sections of the political establishment there have been increasing concerns expressed about the popular opposition to the forced labor program and how it has been used to undermine the jobs and living standards of workers.

The report was praised by American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) District Council 37, whose top administrator said, “All New Yorkers should be outraged that this administration has created a two-tiered workforce.” Such statements are cynical given the fact that AFSCME, representing the bulk of the city's public employees, played such a critical role in supporting the Republican mayor and the introduction of workfare.

A copy of the Community Voices Heard report is available at www.cvhaction.org.



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