

On “State scapegoats parents, workers in New Jersey child welfare scandal”

26 November 2003

To the editorial board,

The article posted November 18 on the apparent starvation of four New Jersey boys placed in foster care, “US: State scapegoats parents, workers in New Jersey child welfare scandal”, has many errors, both of fact and analysis, and represents an unsuccessful attempt to probe more deeply into the social causes of this tragedy.

The use of the word “scapegoat” in the headline is particularly unfortunate, since it suggests a judgment that little or no responsibility for the appalling condition of the boys falls on the foster parents and state welfare workers involved in the case.

Of course, the state officials are hypocritical and trying to fob off all responsibility on the parents and the caseworker. But that does not mean that the WSWWS is called upon to defend the Jacksons in some reflexive way. Nor should the Jacksons be equated necessarily with past cases of parents scapegoated for family tragedies, like the Mack Avenue fire in Detroit, or the recent case of a woman in Brooklyn whose children died in a fire while she was at work. It is quite likely that there was intentional abuse by the parents and negligence or indifference on the part of the caseworker: certainly the possibility can’t just be dismissed out of hand.

The article says: “Despite the media vilification of the Jackson parents, the state’s case against them is by no means firmly established.... There are indications that the parents may merely have been incapable of dealing with the boys’ medical conditions.” What does “incapable” mean? The most telling fact in the case is that, despite claims that the boys’ emaciated condition was due to complex medical problems, none of them had been taken to a doctor in the last five years. The parents had access to free health care services for their children under Medicaid, and had used those services for their three adopted daughters, but not for the four sons. The girls were apparently well-nourished and healthy, so lack of resources does not explain the condition of the boys either.

The article attributes the failure of the caseworkers involved to report the condition of the boys to overwork and inexperience. This is no doubt a major factor, and the new

child advocate for the New Jersey state government, Kevin Ryan, has highlighted overwork and lack of resources in his comments on the case, which have been far more insightful than those of Governor McGreevey. He is quoted in one interview noting the contrast between the Jackson girls and boys: “I don’t think any of us can know what was in Mr. or Mrs. Jackson’s heart. It’s hard to reconcile the boys’ condition as the girls flourished.”

However, it is more than a question of resources. The whole character of the child welfare system has changed over the past three decades, from a focus on social work and providing a safety net, however limited and inadequate, to a focus on punitive measures and cost-cutting. The shift in public policy has had a definite effect on the type of people recruited into the agencies and their performance on the job. Agencies like DYFS in New Jersey and FIA in Michigan cultivate an attitude of hostility and suspicion towards anyone seeking state support, and of callousness towards the real-life consequences of government policies. It is not just that the caseworker who visited the Jacksons may have been so overworked that she paid no attention—or didn’t actually make the visits—it’s that caseworkers have been trained and selected to look the other way, to *be* indifferent.

There are a number of factual errors and distortions in the article: (1) The father’s name is Raymond Jackson, not Bruce (both are used, but Bruce is the oldest son). (2) The refrigerator in the home was not locked. The entire kitchen was locked. Locking the refrigerator would make no sense, since the home had no electricity. (3) The article says 38 visits were logged to the home. State officials now say most of these visits did not actually take place—the logs were falsified. (4) The article says none of the boys attended public schools (leaving open the possibility they might have attended private schools). Actually they were all supposedly home-schooled.

A larger omission is the complete failure to investigate the religious views of the Jacksons, their membership in a Christian fundamentalist church and that church’s role in whitewashing the abuse of the children. Instead, the pastor of the church is cited as a witness on behalf of the Jacksons!

The article says: “The pastor of the New Testament church that the Jackson family attended said that the children regularly participated in church activities and appeared energetic. He has also seconded the Jacksons’ claim that the boys had complicated medical conditions.” To report this uncritically is absolutely unacceptable for a socialist publication.

The Come Alive New Testament Church is a Christian fundamentalist church in suburban Medford, about 30 miles from the Jacksons’ home in Collingswood, with a predominantly white congregation. It is headed by Rev. Harry L. Thomas, a minister who has previously run a Christian record label. While the church has a relatively small congregation, about 350 people, it operates foreign missions in Haiti and Africa. Its web site—well-designed and undoubtedly expensive—says that the church believes in speaking in tongues, as well as that “because of the believers’ relationship to God their values and lifestyle will often be at odds with society.” According to one news account, Thomas and Tim Landis, who acted as spokesman for the Jackson parents, “are successful Christian concert promoters who run separate businesses but team every year to produce CreationFest, a music festival that draws nearly 100,000 people in Pennsylvania.”

Raymond Jackson led a Bible study class, sang in the choir, and brought his family to many church events. (Based on press accounts, he made the 30-mile trip to the church with the four boys on more than 60 occasions in the last two years, while never taking any of the boys to see a doctor or dentist.) The minister was quite familiar with the Jackson family’s circumstances. Recently the landlord contacted the minister because the Jacksons had fallen behind in their rent, and the church paid \$1,900 to get their electricity turned back on and committed to \$500 a month towards the back rent of \$9,000. Thomas, Raymond Jackson and the landlord met at the church to discuss the family’s finances two days before the police removed the children from the home. Thomas raised the \$20,000 bond for the Jacksons, who then made an appearance at the church after their release and attended services there.

Thomas appeared before the House subcommittee in Washington to vociferously defend the Jackson parents. He criticized the boys, calling Bruce a “liar” and a “project,” comments for which he later issued a public apology. He claimed that the Jacksons began home schooling for Bruce because his eating disorder got him kicked out of four public schools, stating, “The police theory, though, is that they are using home schooling as a way to avoid detection of their abuse of these children. This is silly.” According to state officials, 11 of the 12 Jackson children were home-schooled. Bruce Jackson was pulled out of public school in 1996 after

a school nurse reported bruises on his body. The state of New Jersey does not require home-schooling parents to file any reports documenting that their children are actually being educated. Christian fundamentalist groups are quite concerned that the Jackson case will lead to a crackdown on homeschooling, such as a requirement of regular health checkups or educational progress reports.

Without going overboard on the role of Christian fundamentalism, or asserting that it was the sole cause of the abuse of the Jackson children, the article should have explored the connection, as the WSWS did in the case of Andrea Yates, the Houston woman who drowned her children. Were there, for instance, religious reasons for treating the girls and boys differently? Were the boys being punished for some infraction, or was their medical condition believed to be a manifestation of “evil” or Satanic influence? These questions are not being raised in the media, largely because of the fear of conflict with the religious right.

Overall, the authors of this article adopt a much too mechanical either/or approach. They seem to believe that an exploration of the underlying social issues means simply dismissing the actual circumstances of the case—four boys, ages 9 to 19, each weighing less than 50 pounds, visibly malnourished and perhaps permanently damaged. Instead of explaining how the deeper causes find expression in the concrete circumstances—uncovering the real content of the concrete—we get empty abstractions which tell us very little, and end up obscuring rather than clarifying what took place.

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