

The politics of community service in the US

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“Under Socialism all this will, of course, be altered. There will be no people living in fetid dens and fetid rags, and bringing up unhealthy, hunger-pinched children in the midst of impossible and absolutely repulsive surroundings. ... Socialism, Communism, or whatever one chooses to call it, by converting private property into public wealth, and substituting co-operation for competition, will restore society to its proper condition of a thoroughly healthy organism, and ensure the material well-being of each member of the community....” (Oscar Wilde, The Soul of Man Under Socialism)

Americans live in increasingly troubled times. Hunger, foreclosures and poverty are all around. Begging on city streets, a phenomenon that became much less common in the 1990s, is again becoming ubiquitous in urban centers. Not since the Great Depression has the gap between the rich and the poor been so visible and extreme.

The growing poverty and inequality has been fueled in part by the decay and virtual collapse of the labor movement, which has left working people almost powerless in the face of the onslaught on living standards and social conditions.

Social and political stability requires that the political establishment at least feign concern with these social problems, however. The mass media, schools and other institutions have campaigned for increased charitable giving and volunteer efforts to help the growing number of “disadvantaged.”

Young people in particular have been targeted for enlistment in volunteerism. With little or no political experience or historical frame of reference, they are told that they can make a difference one good deed at a time. To further encourage this outlook, community service has in many cases become a requirement for high school graduation, while many colleges and universities give substantial weight to hours of service in their decisions on admissions. Community service centers have been added to university student affairs divisions to meet the demand for placement, and many graduates, unable to find jobs, sign up for a year or two of government-sponsored volunteer work.

Current polls show that over 50 percent of high school and college-age youth performed community service within the past year, with nearly 6 in 10 volunteering at least once a month. About 61 million people volunteered last year, about 26% of the US population, for an estimated total of 8.1 billion hours valued at \$152 billion. [1]

There is of course a vast difference between the sincere desire, especially of working people and youth, to seek to help those suffering from poverty or homelessness, and the cynical political calculations of those who have benefited from the huge transfer of wealth from the working population to the corporate and financial elite. The elder George Bush became a symbol of these hypocrites when, after having served as the two-term vice president under Ronald Reagan’s decimation of social programs, he discovered “compassionate conservatism” and delivered his 1988 Republican Convention speech as the presidential candidate, calling for a “thousand points of light” to deal with the devastation for which he and the plutocrats he represented were responsible.

Bush did not invent community service, of course. It has a long history and political significance. Rather than some personal and nonpolitical

decision, just the “right thing to do,” community service serves definite class interests.

Charity has always played the role of a safety valve in modern class society, a way to cover up the most festering sores of class oppression and an attempt to staunch revolt. While it is not possible to provide an exhaustive history here, a few highlights demonstrate its long and reactionary history, especially since the rise of modern capitalism.

It is not surprising that Britain, the first major capitalist power, was also where charitable institutions and the issue of public aid for the poor got their most important support. Charity evolved in tandem with the threat of the rising British working class. The New Poor Law of 1834, for example, setting up “assistance” in the form of grim and punitive workhouses throughout the country, was passed shortly after the “Swing Riots” of 1830 throughout the south and east of the country, and paralleled the Luddite movement within the cities beginning in 1811.

By the 1880s, charity was reworked into a “scientific” system, in tune with the times. Historian and social philosopher Arnold Toynbee, whose nephew by the same name later became a well known bourgeois historian in the next century, played a pivotal role, calling for the working classes to devote their lives to the service of the poor and helping establish the settlement movement. Toynbee died prematurely in the early 1880s, but his ideas led to the program of “settling” students in urban areas to provide social services to the poor. This idea would later gain prominence in the US with Jane Addams and the Hull House.

These policies were encouraged by the ruling class out of a well-founded fear of revolution. As Toynbee was developing settlement projects, Frederick Engels was writing “Socialism: Utopian and Scientific,” summarizing Karl Marx’s historical materialism and demonstrating the revolutionary role of the working class as the bearer of new and higher property relations. The European revolutions of 1848, though defeated, had signaled the rise of an insurgent working class across the continent. The International Workingmen’s Association, the First International, was founded in 1864 and was followed by the Paris Commune of 1871. Truly, as Marx had written in the *Communist Manifesto*, “a spectre was haunting Europe.”

Marx and Engels insisted that the key to historical progress was not the utopian conceptions of the middle class, but the necessity of the producing class, the proletariat, abolishing the profit system. The schemes of the middle class liberals could be and were used to mislead workers and hold back the development of socialist consciousness. The working class was not the simply the “object” of history, the oppressed in need of pity and mercy. It was the *subject* of history, the class whose future was bound up with surmounting the insoluble contradictions of capitalism.

From this class standpoint, Engels heaped scorn on bourgeois philanthropy in his earlier work, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*:

“Let no one believe, however, that the ‘cultivated’ Englishman openly brags with his egotism. On the contrary, he conceals it under the vilest hypocrisy. What? The wealthy English fail to remember the poor? They who have founded philanthropic institutions, such as no other country can boast of! Philanthropic institutions forsooth! As though you rendered the

proletarians a service in first sucking out their very life-blood and then practicing your self-complacent, Pharisaic philanthropy upon them, placing yourselves before the world as mighty benefactors of humanity when you give back to the plundered victims the hundredth part of what belongs to them! Charity which degrades him who gives more than him who takes; charity which treads the downtrodden still deeper in the dust, which demands that the degraded, the pariah cast out by society, shall first surrender the last that remains to him, his very claim to manhood, shall first beg for mercy before your mercy deigns to press, in the shape of an alms, the brand of degradation upon his brow.” [2]

Alongside the expansion of industrial capitalism, its attendant ills and its increasingly organized working class, charity work was promoted internationally at the end of the eighteenth century and beginning of the nineteenth. An umbrella group, the Charity Organization Society, originated in Germany and England and spread to the US, serving to coordinate the activities of hundreds of private philanthropies.

This organization was the progenitor of twentieth and twenty-first century philanthropic organizations. Its premise, continued from the British Poor Laws, was the importance of distinguishing the “deserving poor” from the “undeserving,” the irresolute, lazy and immoral. The Denver, Colorado chapter of the COS was eventually to become the United Way, the large umbrella group of organized charities. The Salvation Army, meanwhile, worked along similar lines, merging the work of charity with that of religion.

Connecting all these organizations was a deeply reactionary outlook that counterposed piety, passivity and political obedience to class consciousness.

It is no different today. In the course of the twentieth century, however, charity work had to be updated. The image of class arrogance would not do. Secular organizations were also needed, alongside religious charities. A repackaged “community service,” with its reactionary and demeaning characteristics somewhat disguised, became part of a new political correctness in recent decades.

The Peace Corps, inaugurated during the administration of President John F. Kennedy, played a role in this process. This initiative was useful both in attempting to refurbish America’s image abroad, supposedly combating poverty, and in engaging young people who were appalled at conditions in “Third World” countries. The Peace Corps was prompted primarily by fears of revolution in countries where the US had very little credible presence and where it feared growing Soviet influence.

Kennedy’s emphasis on the universal rights of man and the need to “abolish all forms of human poverty” nevertheless had a different ring than current US policies. The US government committed limited resources to social reform. It turned out to be the last gasp of social reform both in foreign and domestic policy.

In the aftermath of the Kennedy assassination, Lyndon Johnson introduced the legislation that would go under the name of the Great Society. Among the programs inaugurated in 1964 were VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America), a National Teacher Corps, the Job Corps and the University Year in Action.

These measures were Johnson’s reaction to the deepening social unrest expressed in the upsurge of the American civil rights movement. They followed the early civil rights struggles, including the sit-in movement and the Freedom Rides of the early 1960s. They accompanied the beginning of the urban riots that raged for five straight summers. And they anticipated the massive anti-Vietnam War movement and the growth of working class militancy later in that decade.

Even the War on Poverty on a shoestring could not be maintained under conditions of the Vietnam War and the deepening economic crisis. This was the handwriting on the wall for American capitalism, and set the stage for the subsequent sharp shift to the right by American policy.

To understand the current incarnation of “community service,” it is

necessary to grasp the fact that by the late 1970s, the financial position of the United States had profoundly changed. The Keynesian reformist program of the post-war period was scrapped and replaced with deregulation and ruthless class war, implemented by President Jimmy Carter and his Chairman of the Federal Reserve Paul Volcker. High interest rates were imposed to shut down unprofitable sectors of the economy and squeeze the working class.

The dead-end of New Deal reformism and its successors laid the basis for the election of President Ronald Reagan, who began a two-pronged assault on the American working class: union-busting, beginning with the firing of the air traffic controllers union; and a slash-and-burn campaign against the social safety net.

Reagan’s administration removed virtually all legal restraint on the accumulation of wealth, while gutting every anti-poverty program. The tax rate for the rich dropped from 70 percent to 28 percent, while ketchup was redefined as a “vegetable” so that school lunches could be reduced to pennies in cost. These and other policies set into motion a massive redistribution of wealth, a redistribution that has continued and deepened in the last quarter century.

Ideologically, the destruction of social welfare was popularized in this period through the promotion of individualism and “personal responsibility.” This was the context for George H.W. Bush’s abovementioned convention speech. Calling for “duty, sacrifice, commitment, and a patriotism that finds its expression in taking part and pitching in,” in 1990 he created the Office of National Service, the forerunner of the agency that now sponsors national volunteer programs.

This volunteering “movement” was not a grass-roots altruistic response to social conditions, but a carefully cultivated and manipulated policy choice.

“The old solution, the old way, was to think that public money alone could end these problems,” Bush said, in justifying the elimination of public funding for education, jobs, the disabled and poor. He went on in the phony language of “compassion” that was his trademark: “We have more will than wallet; but will is what we need. We will make the hard choices...”

The volunteer crusade served several political purposes. It helped supply free labor to cover up the elimination of government programs. From health care to child care to education, essential services were cut, made “volunteer” (preferably “faith-based”), and drastically reduced. Volunteer agencies were made institutionalized subcontractors.

Additionally, volunteerism was part of an ideological campaign to undermine social consciousness by transferring responsibility for alleviating poverty from the government to the individual. In this mindset, poverty is not an official outrage, but an unpleasant (but unavoidable) circumstance and even a personal choice. Americans were being conditioned to understand that they were no longer “entitled” to jobs, housing and a decent standard of living. This was the repudiation of even the limited programs of the Great Society, and the ruling elite made no effort to disguise this.

On the web page of the official government agency coordinating volunteer efforts, the Corporation for National and Community Service states, “The Corporation believes that volunteering is not just nice to do, but a necessary aspect of meeting the most pressing needs facing our nation, including poverty, illiteracy, care for the elderly, disaster response, and youth in need of mentors to help them succeed in life.” [3]

In other words, the most pressing social obligations in America must be left to the off-hours of an already overworked, underpaid and stressed-out population!

What Bush articulated with his “thousand points of light” was the bipartisan policy of both parties. A brief look at the growth of community service since the Bush initiative in 1990 indicates how thoroughly the government has embraced it for all of these practical and ideological

reasons. Step by step, as volunteerism was promoted, the tattered remnants of the social safety net were slashed.

In 1992, the Maryland State Board of Education adopted mandatory service requirements for high school graduation, a nearly universal policy by 2008.

In 1993, President Bill Clinton signed the National and Community Service Trust Act creating AmeriCorps and a series of programs under the Corporation for National and Community Service. AmeriCorps was established to do a whole myriad of essential jobs that would no longer be funded. “Volunteers” were expected to live on a bare minimum stipend and food stamps, meanwhile engaged in tutoring and mentoring youth, building affordable housing, teaching computer skills, cleaning parks and streams, running after-school programs, and helping communities respond to disasters.

In 1996, Clinton signed into law the welfare reform bill, which reversed decades of federal policy, ended the guarantee of cash assistance to the poor and cut \$56 billion in federal spending.

Every year new initiatives were developed by both Democrats and Republicans to promote volunteerism while cutting social programs. These include naming the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday a day of national service; General Colin Powell establishing the President’s Summit for America’s Future to encourage volunteerism; and Clinton resuming Bush Sr.’s “Daily Points of Light Award.” In 2001 President George W. Bush went even further, launching his faith-based community initiatives.

Poverty, as a policy, has never been pursued so aggressively (and successfully) as today. Those who are responsible for these policy decisions—tax cuts for the rich, shredding the social safety net, destruction of public education, etc.—tell the working class to volunteer!

After the September 11, 2001 attacks, the content of the government’s community service efforts took on even more ominous and militaristic implications.

In 2002 President Bush called for 4,000 hours of volunteer service by all Americans and created USA Freedom Corps, a White House office. Proposed in the president’s State of the Union address, USA Freedom Corps was to include Operation TIPS—the Terrorism Information and Prevention System—“a nationwide program giving millions of American truckers, letters carriers, train conductors, ship captains, utility employees, and others a formal way to report suspicious terrorist activity.”

This attempt to turn volunteerism into a direct tool for spying on citizens was followed up by the decision to give the Department of Homeland Security a granting agency for “citizen involvement [volunteerism] in public health, public safety and disaster relief.”

Barack Obama has now called for universal voluntary public service and has pointedly included military service under this rubric. In fact, his plan for the increasing the military is contained in his “service” policy statement, alongside the expansion of AmeriCorps and the creation of a Classroom Corps, a Health Corps, a Clean Energy Corps and a Veterans Corps.

Obama’s position has considerable support. Last year *Time* magazine profiled the calls of a number of prominent Democrats in a cover story, “The Case for National Service,” supporting a plan to mandate universal service and establishing a cabinet-level Department of National Service. The plan envisioned 419,000 jobs annually for young people between the ages of 18-25 doing one year of “national or military service.”

The reactionary content of “volunteerism” is more and more transparent. Today, however, the decades in which the ruling class has tried to pass it off as being a matter of the majority of Americans helping the “disadvantaged” minority are rapidly drawing to a close. As millions lose their homes to foreclosure and the vast majority of workers struggle to meet the rising costs of basic necessities as unemployment climbs, the fraud of capitalist charity has become clear to many.

This concrete context helps young people to see the truth behind the

well-oiled propaganda of an “apolitical” community service. From the standpoint of the ruling class, community service is the antidote to revolutionary politics. Promoting the illusion that one’s limited help “concretely” ameliorates suffering, it diverts young people from the real issues.

Of course there is much that a resurgent working class movement can and will do to alleviate suffering. The task of emancipation is the task of the working class itself, however.

It is necessary for students and youth to turn to the working class and to the theoretical and political challenge of preparing the revolutionary leadership necessary to put an end to capitalism.

Notes:

1. Corporation for National and Community Service, July 2007 report “Middle American Cities Lead US in Volunteering”
2. Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, p. 315
3. www.nationalservice.gov. Issue Brief, Volunteering in America, An Overview of Corporation Research



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