

Peace and Social Justice

BACKGROUND

The terrorist events on U.S. soil on September 11, 2001, have led to a multidimensional paradigm shift in public thinking, which relates in important ways to any policy about peace and social justice. Although the version of this policy approved by the NASW Delegate Assembly in August 1993 focused on the end of the cold war, consideration must now be given to a new type of war on U.S. soil, fought by the United States and others around the world.

The Role of the Military and a "New Kind of War"

Between 1989 and 2001 the U.S. government cut defense spending by closing bases; cutting troop strength; and eliminating numbers of planes, missiles, and ships (Cooper, 2001). Even so, in 1995 military expenses continued to represent 35 percent of this country's total expenditures (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000) during the same year that social welfare expenditures under public programs accounted for only 20.9 percent of the gross domestic product (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). Furthermore, in 2001, before the September terrorist attacks, President Bush was focusing future military spending on his request for \$8.3 billion in 2002 alone to fund a missile defense program (Cooper, 2001). After September 11 the military budget obviously soared in new ways not experienced since the Gulf War of 1991.

Economic Struggles and Justice

The United States plays a huge part in economic policy around the world. As the major player in global capitalism—through our dom-

inant role in the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization—we must bear responsibility for the social justice travesties that our policies create. Our corporate practices clearly disrupt rather than support justice in some emerging economies, and "there's no point denying that multinationals have contributed to labor, environmental, and human-rights abuses" (Danaher, 2001, p. 14). Many countries spend more on repaying foreign debt than on health care and other basic needs. For example, social services represent only 34.5 percent of Brazil's government expenditures in contrast to debt repayments that consumed 75.6 percent of the government's revenue. In India social services are only 11.9 percent of government expenditures, but India pays 33.6 percent of revenues in debt repayment (CQ Researcher, 2001).

Other countries with different types of government and economies need to be supported to find their own ways rather than necessarily conforming to ours. This can be encouraged by equitable negotiations about debt relief and programs that support appropriate, more localized responses to economic problems. "Foreign countries with entirely different legal, economic, and political systems do not need the International Monetary Fund to forcibly impose on them what is a dubious form of capitalism even in the United States" (Johnson, 2000, p. 225).

The Use of Violence

The United States continues to be one of the most violent nations in the world. We have much disagreement about the role of guns in our society, with the percentage of people feel-

ing it is more important to control gun ownership growing from 57 percent in 1993 to 65 percent in 1999. At the same time among others in the same study, those feeling it is most important, instead, to protect the rights of gun owners decreased from 34 percent in 1993 to 30 percent in 1999 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1999). When participants were asked about the primary causes of gun violence in the United States in a 2000 study, there was a distinct gender difference. Only 18 percent of men laid blame on the availability of guns compared with 24 percent of women. The way that parents raise children was seen as the cause of gun violence by 51 percent of the men but only 38 percent of the women, and the influence of popular culture was identified as the reason for gun violence by 23 percent of men and 29 percent of women.

In contrast with much of the rest of the world, a majority of Americans (71 percent) in 1999 believed in the death penalty. Again this varies by gender and race: 66 percent of women favor this punishment compared with 75 percent of men, whereas a more dramatic 39 percent of black people were in agreement compared with 77 percent of white people (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1999). A more even split exists between those who feel that using the death penalty for those who have committed murder will deter others from the same crime: 47 percent opt for deterring and 49 percent feel that it does not have much effect (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1999).

The number of prisoners executed in the United States grew steadily from 23 in 1990 to 56 in 1995; there was a large jump in 1999 to 98 individuals (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). Some of our violence is explicitly directed toward children, women, immigrants, and, after September 11, Muslims and people from the Middle East. Clearly, both terrorism and state-supported violence affect people worldwide in negative ways that perpetuate the opposite of peace and social justice.

International Cooperation

Although the terrorist attacks of September 11 have led to unprecedented outreach for international cooperation, this has not been

done primarily through the United Nations, which represents the most appropriate format.

Poverty, violence, racism, sexism, homophobia, and environmental degradation are problems throughout the world. Patterns of consumption in the United States directly relate to many of these problems, and, as a country, we need to take responsibility for the results of our lifestyle. We must accept "the fact that the economic situation we enjoy and the privileges it gives us are at the expense of two-thirds of the people of the world. Our world has finite resources, and what we have is related to the fact that the majority of people do not have enough" (Isasi-Diaz, 1999, p. 220).

ISSUE STATEMENT

Beyond the destruction and trauma of war is the continual drain on human and material resources—the diversion of energies and goods and services to meet military needs while the social welfare of millions of people in the United States and abroad goes unmet. Wars also sap the nation's resources, resulting in the pollution of the earth and the atmosphere and posing a threat to the world's public health. Already we are faced with epidemic-scale international health threats associated with AIDS and starvation. Groups at high risk of threats to health and survival, such as children, elderly people, people with disabilities, and women, inevitably suffer most from war and violence. In addition to the physical, social, and economic consequences, the arms race, the introduction of chemical and biological warfare, and the threat of nuclear war pose unique psychological consequences worldwide.

In a world economy with a single nation more powerful than all the others, military approaches predictably run the risk of increasing violence rather than paving the way for peace. Although the strengths and weaknesses of U.S. culture are highly visible and broadcast around the world, resentments inevitably are created by the wide discrepancies in basic needs such as food, shelter, and a livable wage. This, in turn, creates a dramatic risk for all of us, regardless of ideology or politics. "Given its wealth and power, the United States will be a prime recipient in the foreseeable future of all

of the more expectable forms of blowback, particularly terrorist attacks against Americans in and out of the armed forces anywhere on earth, including within the United States" (Johnson, 2000, p. 223). Of course responding to terrorism, especially against civilians and on our own shores, in ways that do not maim and kill is a tremendous challenge, but it appears to be a vital step for establishing and maintaining peace.

Issues of social justice have special meaning for women, particularly in a world in which education, the vote, work outside the home, and rights within marriage and the family are not assured for significant numbers of women. Women in many countries, though, including those countries in which the roles of women are strictly limited, tend to have a strong interest in working for peace, especially through nonviolent strategies, because of their "concern for human life, especially for children, but also for themselves and other women" (Brock-Utne, 1985, p. 37). It is imperative that the United States ratify the Convention to End Discrimination of All Women (CEDAW). Because social work historically has been a female-dominated profession, in terms of the majority of both workers and clients, it is not surprising that members of this profession feel passionately about peace and social justice.

Racism, negative attitudes toward immigrants, and generalizations about members of certain ethnic and religious groups are not new to the United States. Indigenous people within the United States and Africans who were brought here under slavery also suffered immensely. Violence, persecution, and discrimination, both historic and present, are realities experienced by gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender populations, as well as by women, children, and other disenfranchised populations. Chinese people were excluded from our shores for many years, people of Japanese descent were put in internment camps at the beginning of World War II, European Jews were denied entry as refugees from fascism, and Haitian refugees were accepted and then sent back during the 1970s and 1980s. The events of September 11 have opened up a new and similarly intolerable series of acts against Muslims and people of Middle Eastern descent

that require diligence and determination to bring to an end. True peace and social justice can never be attained for one group without applying it to everyone.

POLICY STATEMENT

In spite of the challenges of terrorism, we need to reduce the use of violence in our language and as a solution to domestic and international problems. Waging "drug wars" that do not include real treatment and carrying out the "war on crime" with its increased and inequitable use of lengthy incarceration and increased capital punishment—which have not been shown to reduce crime and are meted out disproportionately against certain racial and ethnic groups—are both counterproductive to peace and social justice.

Economic and Military Issues

Although we have recently gone through a new military buildup and actions against terrorist groups and the countries that harbor them, the United States needs to emphasize economic support rather than Western dominance in its foreign policy language and actions. The welfare of all people and the balanced economic and social development of nations should be the goals of U.S. foreign policy.

Whenever possible, the United States must foster cooperation in its foreign policy rather than unilateral military action. A long-range goal should be reduction of military spending and diversion of the subsequent savings to social needs. At such a time, it will be important that the government support economic conversion from war production to peaceful pursuits, with special assistance for personnel moving from military to civilian life.

In addition, the United States should work through peaceful efforts for the abolition of nuclear testing by all nations and the eventual elimination of nuclear weapons worldwide. Similarly, this country needs to support the abolition of all chemical and biological warfare, urge all countries to cease production of such compounds and to destroy any existing stockpiles, and support a U.N.-sponsored multinational treaty calling for strong sanc-

tions against any countries that possess biochemical weapons.

International Cooperation

Even in the face of overt terrorist attacks on the United States, it is still vital that we work in creative ways with other nations and international organizations to reduce violence against innocent civilians. Indeed, finding constructive and nonviolent means to deal with international conflicts must be a priority.

Full participation with such organizations as the United Nations, the World Health Organization, and the World Court are critical first steps in such an effort. In addition, the United States should endeavor to decrease the numbers of refugees by providing economic and social assistance rather than military shipments to other nations. Refugees must be granted asylum if they are faced with violence and death.

By recognizing the equal worth of all humans and the equal loss in terms of the death of any innocent person, concepts such as asylum should not be based on race, ethnicity, or country of origin. The United States should ratify and support implementation of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related U.N. treaties. This declaration states that each person has the right to a standard of living that is adequate for his or her health and well-being. "Human rights principles hold up the vision of a free, just, and peaceful world and set minimum standards for how individuals and institutions everywhere should treat people" (Mittal & Rosset, 1999, p. 164).

The United States should support each country's right to political and economic self-determination, in compliance with international law and U.N. conventions on human rights; to non-intervention; and to control over its own natural resources. In considering the tragic and growing phenomena of world poverty and hunger, internationally coordinated efforts must include redistribution of global resources (such as technology transfer, reduction of Third World debt burden, and reduction of overconsumption patterns of the West), improvement of women's status, and population stabilization.

The United States needs to stimulate and support the use of government funds, free of

military or political purposes, to promote social and economic development and protection of the environment and to meet basic human needs in education, housing, health, and welfare services. Whenever possible such programs should be funded and coordinated through the United Nations and emphasize human values and their contribution to human welfare.

Social Work's Role

Social workers have consistently advocated for a just and peaceful world. Social justice is central to the profession's values and specifically emphasized in its *Code of Ethics* as social work professionals are instructed to "promote policies that safeguard the rights of and confirm equity and social justice for all people" (NASW, 1999, p. 7). Social workers similarly are encouraged to learn other languages, become informed about all aspects of other cultures, and apply the profession's values to work with clients of all races, ethnicities, and sexual orientations.

On more macro levels, social workers frequently work with existing organizations with a world focus, such as the United Nations, as well as participate in grassroots organizations that address peace, human rights, freedom, environmental issues, participation, human diversity, and the special needs of children and women. Furthermore, as a global profession, social work promotes internships, travel, and international work opportunities that allow practitioners to join with others in the struggle for a more peaceful and equitable world. It is critical for social workers to hold social welfare positions in multilateral and bilateral programs of technical assistance such as community development. Additional training needs to be provided to prepare qualified social workers for international service. NASW's International Committee should be strong and active, and NASW should build strong connections with the International Federation of Social Workers.

The United States needs to continue using qualified professional social workers to serve the armed forces and military dependents to ensure that a high priority is given to human

values and social welfare needs in those settings. The profession's domestic peace and justice agenda needs to include gun control legislation and the stopping of illegal weapons trade. To prevent violence that turns U.S. communities into war zones, social workers must promote early and ongoing intervention through economic revitalization and educational and employment opportunities to give young people hope and direction. In addition, social workers need to address the role of the media and other institutions in the glorification of violence and the use of weapons.

Finally, it is appropriate for the issue of peace and world justice to permeate social work education on all levels. Teaching the connections between direct client services and the larger sociopolitical context and providing avenues for students to learn and practice social action skills will bring social work back to its roots. Building on the profession's activist tradition is one of the most powerful ways to carry the message of peace and social justice and help make it a reality.

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