

Social Work - An Institution of the Western Capitalist Empire

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Global Research, December 02, 2013

[Dissident Voice](#) 29 November 2013

Theme: [Global Economy](#), [History](#), [Poverty](#)
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I am a graduate of Skidmore College. I majored in social work. I chose to major in social work because there was little else offered that I could relate to personally and politically. Most courses and majors prepared students ideologically and professionally to manage the affairs of US imperialism. By the time I had to declare a major, I was more interested in plotting and planning how to destroy this system rather than learning how to manage its affairs. It did not take very long in the social work program for me to realize social work's historical and political function within the US imperialist system.

Social work is an institution of Western empire. The social work profession is in charge of administering the minimal resources provided by the state to smooth over the sharpest edges of European capitalism. Profit maximization is *the* fundamental principle of capitalism. Social work operates within the dictates of a ruling class who sees the protection and expansion of profit, and thus the exploitation of humanity, as *the* primary objective.

Capitalist development forges a working class out of conditions of suffering and deprivation. Homelessness, poverty, mental illness, hunger, and other social ills are inevitable machinations of the capitalist system. Social workers are hired by the state and/or 'non-profit' private enterprises to stabilize capitalist exploitation. Capital employs social workers to provide mental health, addiction counseling, and case management services. These services address the social ills of capitalism without challenging the profit motive or the entrenched principle of private property that creates inequality in the first place. Social workers work toward the "stabilization" of client populations rather than the "liberation" of masses of people from the exploitation of man by man.

The contradictions of social work are sharpening daily under US capitalist empire. The USA, as the Black Panther Party explained, is an imperialist society ruled by racism and capitalism. Social work under this system has presided over the distribution of racist social policy. Social policy, or as George Jackson called it "fascist reform", has always come as a response by the US imperialist state to radical political movements. The great workers struggles of the 1930's and 40's brought Social Security and labor law reform. Often deemed "the New Deal", these governmental reforms excluded working class people of color. The National Labor Relations Act and the Social Security Act, the two largest victories of the period, capitulated to white supremacy and capitalism by legislating the exclusion of domestic and agricultural labor, employment primarily occupied by Blacks and people of color. Such exclusion ensured a stratified and impoverished sector of society and thus the need for social work to maintain, or "stabilize", its existence.

US capitalism economically peaked after World War II. The enormous profits acquired from the former colonial powers and their colonial possessions were partially used to create a mostly white middle class and privileged sector of the working class. Black America, deprived of the benefits of US imperialist expansion, waged a struggle that influenced the Johnson Administration-sponsored War on Poverty. The War on Poverty primarily used non-profits and foundations backed by the finance and industrial capitalists to administer housing programs, job training programs, and veterans benefits to the “invisible” America, a euphemism at the time for Black ghettos.

The inability of The War on Poverty to meet the needs of the Black community was one of the primary reasons the Black Panther Party organized “survival programs.” But Black Panther Free Breakfast programs, medical clinics, bus-to-prison programs, and liberation schools were seen as a threat to national security and frequently raided by the FBI and local police departments. The Black Panther Party’s demise at the hands of US capitalist empire was a clear message that any legitimate movement that challenged capitalism and racism was not tenable to the rulers of US capitalist empire or any of its institutions, including social work.

The Black Panther Party’s influence prompted the US government to fund inadequate health clinics, free and reduced lunches in public schools, and WIC (Women, Infants and Children). The state co-opted the Black Panther Party’s true objective of using service to prepare people for revolutionary struggle by institutionalizing “survival programs” under the administration of US empire. Doing so placed what once were grassroots, revolutionary programs into the machinery of US Capital. This expanded the need for social workers to “stabilize” the lives of poor people utilizing both new and old government programs and ensure no further organized rebellion against US capitalism.

Over the last 30 or so years, social work’s very legitimacy has been challenged in the midst of the fierce austerity induced by the wreckage of US capitalism. The finance capitalist class has targeted social services as a means to subsidize its ongoing crisis. The Reagan era’s anti-Black racism paved the way for Bill Clinton’s historic elimination of “welfare as we know it” in 1996. Now, the US capitalist class is privatizing services like public education and foaming at the mouth to do the same to Social Security, and Medicare. Head Start and SNAP are perpetually losing funds. Austerity cuts make social workers prime targets for de-unionization (where unions exist) and de-professionalization in general. Low-paid case management positions are emerging to distribute services that are less effective and more streamlined. The standards of living for social workers, although never handsome, are becoming more oppressive as large portions of income and wealth continues to be transferred to the rich.

In these conditions, social workers find themselves struggling with bourgeois professionalism and the actual conditions of oppressed people. The dictates of social work professionalism limit the ability for social workers to wage a legitimate challenge to US imperialism and hold them back from challenging their own sub-human working conditions. Agencies and employers use the people social worker’s serve, “clients”, to justify the exploitation of workers in the profession. During my field seminar, I often lamented that social work values such as self-determination, empowerment, and dignity are empty rhetoric in the midst of a capitalist political economy that plunders the world at the enrichment of the few. Austerity and US imperial decline threatens all of humanity. It makes a mockery of what social workers claim they stand for. But because social workers manage exploitation rather than challenge it, the profession is entangled in a middle class identity

crisis and thus unprepared to tackle the real problems of the people. Social workers who realize the reality of the profession need to do whatever they can to break the will and power of US empire. If we sit back, social work will remain what it always has been: a tool of US empire. And this tool will become increasingly scarce if the hungry stomachs of the finance capitalist class are the primary force dictating the future of humanity.

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