

Fashioning a Work-Based Strategy for Welfare Reform Based on International Human Rights Doctrine

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WELFARE reform has been the object of a vigorous and often acrimonious policy debate in the United States ever since poverty emerged as a national political issue in the 1960s. This debate has addressed many programs over the years, but it has mainly focused on just one—Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)—the nation's principal public assistance program for needy families. Fairly or not, AFDC has become a symbol of our country's efforts to combat poverty, and changes in the program's fortunes serve as a kind of barometer of liberal and conservative tendencies in public attitudes towards the poor. During the past two decades these attitudes appear to have hardened. AFDC has grown less generous over that period, and it has come to demand more from its beneficiaries in exchange for the help it offers.

This article argues that a key reason for this trend lies in the failure of liberal social policy advocates to develop alternative models for delivering work-based public assistance to able-bodied adults. Such models are needed, I suggest, not just to counter conservative welfare reform proposals but to fill a gap in liberal social welfare planning. I go on to argue that efforts to fill this policy gap could benefit from an infusion of ideas from international human rights doctrine.

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There are, at present, about 5 million families receiving AFDC benefits in the United States (1, Table 10-1). The vast majority of these families are headed by unmarried, divorced or separated women (1, Table 10-27); so it is a program that mainly serves single-parent households headed by women.

Although states must operate their AFDC program in accord with

federal requirements, many program-design decisions, including the setting of benefit levels, are left to the states. In January 1994, for example, the maximum AFDC benefit for a family of three in Mississippi was only \$120 per month while Connecticut provided \$680 per month (1, Table 10-12).

AFDC caseloads have been fairly stable for the past 20 years, fluctuating between 4 and 5½ percent of total population (1, Table 10-26), while benefit levels have suffered a substantial decline in inflation-adjusted dollars. The median state benefit for a family of three fell by 47 percent in real terms between 1970 and 1994 (1, Table 10-14). At the present time, the program does not come close to providing a poverty-level income to its recipients. The median state AFDC benefit for a family of three in January 1994 was only 38% of the national poverty line. If you include Food Stamps, the combined median state benefit was still only about 70 percent of the national poverty line. Nowhere are benefits generous enough to lift a typical AFDC family out of poverty (1, Table 10-11).

The combination of relatively stable case loads and declining real benefits over the past two decades has meant that the program's overall cost has been declining as a percentage both of national income and of total government expenditures. In 1973, with 5.1 percent of the nation's population receiving AFDC benefits, total program spending equaled a little more than half of one percent of GNP and accounted for 1.6 percent of all federal government expenditures. In 1992, with 5.3 percent of the population receiving benefits, total program spending had declined to four-tenths of one percent of GNP and accounted for only 1 percent of federal expenditures (1, Tables 10-21 & 10-26; 2, Tables 504 & 690).

On its face, a program of this relatively small size and declining fiscal burden would not seem to warrant the intense political scrutiny that AFDC continually receives. But the program is invested with symbolic importance far exceeding any tangible impact its financing could possibly have on United States society. The program is a lightning rod for the public's complex and conflicting feelings about race relations, gender roles, sexual behavior, family structure, poverty, and social obligations with respect to work and child support. It is for this reason, rather than because of the program's cost, that AFDC occupies a pivotal role in social-policy debate in the United States.

Beginning in the 1960s, a more or less continual conceptual war

has been fought over the issue of what kind of program AFDC should be, and, by extension, what kind of social welfare system the United States should have. Time and again, the focus of this struggle has been the question of what, if any, work requirements should be imposed on AFDC recipients. To understand this debate, it is useful to think of it as involving five stages.

The first stage concerned the question of whether the *goal* of the program should be to move adult AFDC recipients into paying jobs or to support them in the work of caring for their children at home. A strong argument can be made in favor of the latter goal. In fact, this was the program's clearly articulated rationale when it was first established in 1935. As the Cabinet-level committee that recommended the program's creation explained,

especial attention must be given to [] children deprived of a father's support usually designated as the objects of mothers' aid or mothers' pension laws, of whom there are now [that is, in 1935] above 700,000 on relief lists. The very phrases "mothers' aid" and "mothers' pensions" place an emphasis equivalent to misconstruction of the intention of these laws. They are not primarily aids to mothers but defense measures for children. They are designed to release from the wage-earning role the person whose natural function is to give her children the physical and affectionate guardianship necessary not alone to keep them from falling into social misfortune, but more affirmatively to rear them into citizens capable of contributing to society. (3, p. 56)

This view of the program still has its advocates, but it is increasingly hard to justify. Almost two-thirds of married women with preschool-aged children in the United States now work outside the home (4, Table 4), along with over half of all single mothers with children under the age of 18 (5, Table 58). Our nation's social welfare system does not provide much financial support for the work—the hard, exhausting, time-consuming work—of parenting. In fact, we increasingly expect all parents—the middle class as well as the poor—to engage in wage employment in addition to their child-rearing responsibilities. In this context, it is hardly surprising that there is little, if any, public support for the idea that poor mothers with children should not be expected to work.

In any case, liberals lost this battle long ago. It is assumed by vir-

tually all participants in the current welfare reform debate that the goal of AFDC should be to move adult program participants into the labor force rather than to provide support for them to stay home and care for their children.

The second issue addressed in the nation's recurring welfare reform debate concerns the question of whether the goal of moving program participants into the labor force should be accomplished by providing incentives that would encourage participants to seek wage employment or by imposing work requirements on them. In other words, should the program use carrots or sticks to move AFDC parents into the work force?

There is still some life in this debate, but liberals have been losing it as well. Both the 1988 reform of AFDC that Senator Patrick Moynihan shepherded through Congress (6) and President Clinton's 1994 welfare reform proposal (7) assume that work should be required rather than merely encouraged, effectively conceding this point to conservative advocates of work requirements. Liberal opposition to this proposition has been reduced to a faint whisper.

The third issue addressed in our continuing debate over the role of work in AFDC has concerned the nature and extent of any conditions to be imposed on the obligation of AFDC recipients to work outside the home—whether in “workfare” programs designed to make welfare recipients earn their benefits or in private sector jobs outside the program. Can welfare recipients be forced to work for less than the minimum wage? Does the government have to provide child care before it can require an AFDC parent to work outside the home? What about health insurance coverage? And how much job training and job search assistance should be offered before imposing work requirements on AFDC parents?

Unlike the first two issues discussed above, there's a lot of life left in this debate, and liberals have fared better in it. Indeed, they have largely succeeded in preventing the imposition of work requirements on AFDC parents in practice by winning approval for legislative requirements that various forms of assistance be provided in AFDC work programs that conservatives have been unwilling to fund.

In 1992, for example, 43 percent of all adult AFDC recipients were subject to mandatory work requirements, but due to funding limitations, only 11 percent were actually enrolled in the required Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) program, and only 7 percent par-

anticipated 20 hours or more per week (1, Table 10-8). It is more expensive to make welfare recipients work than to send them checks, and Congress has not appropriated enough money to provide program slots for everyone subject to mandatory work requirements under existing law. The states have been even more parsimonious, failing to allocate sufficient matching funds to claim all the federal money that is available. In 1993 only about 70 percent of the federal funds made available for the JOBS program was claimed by the states (1, p. 356). Even among actual participants in the JOBS program, the vast majority are assigned to employability assessment, general education, skill training and job search activities rather than being required to work for their benefits. Only 7 percent of all JOBS program participants were actually placed in jobs in 1992, and only another 4 percent were assigned to on-the-job training and other subsidized work activities (1, Table 10-6).

The welfare reform proposal (8) included in the Republicans' so-called Contract with America would require states to impose full-time work requirements on a much larger percentage of program participants while permitting them to do so in work programs stripped of the special services and protections (including minimum wage protection) mandated under the 1988 act (6). Debate over the level of support properly owed to AFDC recipients in order to make it possible for them to work is therefore far from over.

At the same time, however, a fourth issue has now surfaced in the debate, precipitated by Republican proposals to place an absolute time limit on the receipt of AFDC benefits (8,9,10). The question posed is whether it is reasonable to expect all AFDC parents to be able to find work in the regular labor market, thereby ending their reliance on the program, or must the program itself be prepared to provide jobs for participants unable to find work in the private sector. If the program provides the needed jobs, what should they pay, what kind of benefits should they provide, and what kind of work should be expected?

The battle between liberals and conservatives on these issues is in its early stages. Conservatives assume that AFDC parents can find work in the regular labor market (or otherwise fend for themselves), and that any work provided by the program should be both unattractive and subject to strict time limits (8).

What is the liberal position? Surprisingly, neither liberals nor their colleagues to the left have a ready answer to this question. Having

spent the last three decades resisting the imposition of work requirements on AFDC recipients, they haven't spent much time studying either the dimensions of the program's possible job creation need or how to satisfy it.

The first question that should be asked in this debate is whether the regular labor market can be counted on to provide the jobs that will be needed. Conservatives assume it can and liberals have not challenged this assumption, choosing instead to argue that the jobs for which welfare mothers can qualify are not good enough to permit them to achieve real self-sufficiency (see, e.g., 11).

In fact, there is ample reason to doubt that there are enough jobs of any description to go around. The United States does not regularly collect job vacancy data, so we cannot directly compare the number of people seeking work at any point in time with the number of jobs employers are seeking to fill. Ideally what is needed is data on the number of vacant jobs normally available in the economy broken down by geographic area, required skill level, and wage offer. If the number of job vacancies normally equals or exceeds the number of job seekers, then a program designed to move able-bodied welfare recipients into jobs might be able to limit its activities to providing job training and job search assistance, possibly including transportation and/or relocation assistance. But if there are more job seekers than available jobs, the success of such a strategy is more doubtful.

Fortunately, there is some data available indicating the actual state of affairs (12,13,14). Although no regular time series exists, sample data on job vacancy rates has occasionally been collected during the last three decades. What it shows is that in good times as well as bad, there just aren't enough jobs to provide work for everyone who is actively seeking it in the United States, let alone for everyone whom society thinks should be working.

For example, job vacancy surveys conducted in the Milwaukee metropolitan area beginning in 1993 (14) show that even with unemployment rates in the 4–5 percent range, a large job gap remains. In May 1994, for example, there were about 32,000 Milwaukee area residents unemployed and actively looking for work, giving the area an unemployment rate of 4.2 percent (*ibid.*, p. 23). At the same time, however, there were about 23,000 able-bodied welfare recipients in the area who were not counted as unemployed in government figures

(*ibid.*, p. 26). Based on national averages (15, Tables A-22 & A-34), there probably also were about 19,000 involuntary part-time workers in the area—people who were working part-time not by choice but because they couldn't find full-time jobs—and perhaps another 1800 “discouraged” workers—people who wanted jobs, had looked for work in the past year, but had given up looking because of discouragement over their job prospects. Counting all these groups together, there probably were about 75,000 job-needers in the Milwaukee area in May 1994.

At the same time area employers were seeking to fill only about 16,790 full-time and 13,845 part-time vacancies (14, p. 2). Simply stated, there weren't enough jobs to go around, especially full-time jobs. Based on national averages (15, Table A-23), about 25,000 of Milwaukee's officially unemployed workers were probably looking for full-time jobs, and all 19,000 involuntary part-time workers wanted full-time jobs as well. If welfare recipients were required to seek work, another 23,000 individuals would be looking for full-time jobs. Adding these three groups together, a total of about 67,000 full-time job vacancies were needed at a time when only 16,790 were available—giving us a ratio of full-time job needers to full-time job vacancies of about 4 to 1.

For unskilled workers or for residents of depressed neighborhoods, the job shortage is far worse. In the suburbs surrounding Milwaukee, there were more job vacancies than job seekers in May 1994, if you include part-time jobs. Approximately 70 percent of all full-time vacancies and 81 percent of all part-time vacancies were in the suburbs, compared to only 44 percent of the area's officially unemployed work force. In the city of Milwaukee, however, where 18,000 of the area's officially unemployed population lived, along with the vast majority of the 23,000 welfare recipients not counted as officially unemployed, there were only 4837 full-time and 2527 part-time job vacancies (14, pp. 19 & 23).

Job vacancy data occasionally collected over the years from other sources paints a similar picture. Vacancy surveys conducted in the middle 1960s, when the national unemployment rate averaged about 4.5 percent, found that there were approximately 2.5 unemployed persons for every vacant job (12, p. 722). With higher unemployment rates in the 1970s, the ratio of job seekers to available jobs rose. In

the early 1970s there probably were close to 4.0 unemployed persons for every vacant job, and in the late 1970s the ratio probably was 5.0 to 1 or higher (*ibid.*).

Survey data collected in 28 southern and midwestern cities in 1980 and 1982 found a similar imbalance between job-seekers and available jobs. In 1980, when local unemployment rates averaged 7.0 percent, job vacancy rates averaged only 1.5 percent. In 1982, when local unemployment rates averaged 10.1 percent, job vacancy rates averaged only 1.2 percent (13, p. 48, Table 3.8). Based on these figures, it appears there were about 5.0 active job-seekers for every job vacancy in 1980 and about 9.2 active job seekers for every job vacancy in 1982.

Using a simple methodology for estimating total job vacancies based on employment service listings, I have developed estimates of the number of job vacancies in New York City between 1987 and 1994 (16). In 1988, when the city's unemployment rate averaged 4.7 percent, I have estimated there were an average of 2.4 officially unemployed persons for every job vacancy. In the first quarter of 1993, when the city's unemployment rate peaked at about 11.4 percent, I have estimated that there were 11.3 officially unemployed New Yorkers for every job vacancy in the city. During the third quarter of 1994, when the city's unemployment rate averaged 8.2 percent, I have estimated that there were 9.2 officially unemployed job seekers for every job vacancy. If involuntary part-time workers, discouraged workers and able-bodied welfare recipients not included in unemployment statistics were counted as needing work, the odds facing job-seekers would look even worse.

All of this data supports the conclusion that there aren't enough jobs to provide work for everyone who already is seeking it in the United States, let alone for everyone the public thinks should be working. This does not mean that it is impossible for welfare recipients to find work. With enough diligence, patience and help almost all welfare recipients probably could find jobs eventually. But it's foolish to think that welfare dependency would be ended even if all 5 million adult AFDC recipients succeeded in this effort. Unless 5 million new jobs were created, their success would mean that other job-seekers would have to go without work—replenishing the jobless population with a new group of people needing public assistance in some form or another. Given these facts, it is hard to imagine a pro-

gram designed to reduce welfare dependency that would not be required to rely on substantial job creation by the government.

It can be argued, of course, that this fails to take into consideration the additional jobs that would be created if AFDC parents (as well as other jobless individuals) lowered their wage demands. According to this view, the existence of a persistent surplus in the number of people seeking work compared to the number of jobs employers are willing to fill shows that market wages are too high. It is argued that falling wages would induce employers to hire more workers while causing workers to reduce the number of hours they want to work. If wages were permitted to fall low enough, the argument goes, a balance would be achieved between job seekers and job vacancies. Any remaining unemployment would be voluntary.

There are two problems with this argument as a guide to social policy. First, it is based on an unproven theoretical assumption that labor markets would clear if wages fell. Job vacancy data show that we're a long way from achieving a balance between the number of people seeking work at prevailing wages and the number of job vacancies employers are willing to fill. Since empirical studies generally find that neither the supply of labor nor the demand for it are very responsive to wage changes (see, e.g., 17,18), there is ample reason to doubt that falling wages would work as a strategy to close the job gap.

But even if falling wages could close the job gap, there is a second problem with such a strategy. The resulting wage structure might leave us with social problems as serious as the ones that now plague us. How far would wages have to fall to achieve real full employment? Would jobless Americans have to accept minimum wages of \$3 per hour or \$2 or \$1? Would we be better off in such a world even if there were enough jobs to go around? Even now a full-time worker earning the minimum wage of \$4.25 per hour does not make enough to support even a single dependent above the poverty line. This suggests that even if we could rely on the market to create enough jobs for everyone who needs work, large transfer payments still would be needed to maintain minimally adequate living standards. Welfare dependency would not be eliminated. It would simply change forms.

Neither liberals nor conservatives have faced up to the dilemma posed by our job-short economy. It's not just "good" jobs that are in short supply. There aren't enough low-wage jobs either. And there's no reason to believe this is a temporary phenomenon. Measured un-

employment probably would have to fall to the 2 percent range before we could feel confident that the number of jobs available equaled the number of people needing work (19, pp. 11–13). By that measure, we haven't achieved real full employment since the end of World War II. In fact, we have experienced annual unemployment rates of 2 percent or less only 7 times in the past 100 years, and in 4 of those 7 years the country was at war (*ibid.*, pp. 14–15).

I believe the implications of these facts for the currently accepted goal of moving AFDC parents into the employed labor force are profound. The hope that welfare dependency can be ended by forcing AFDC parents into private-sector employment is probably a fantasy. For AFDC parents to become self-sufficient through work, or even partly self-sufficient, a substantial program of government job creation almost surely would be needed.

If this need were faced, a fifth issue in the debate over the role of work in AFDC would open up. This last issue would concern the question of whether government job creation should be limited to providing work for AFDC recipients. If there aren't enough jobs to go around, does it make sense to create jobs for AFDC mothers but not for the unemployed fathers of their children? Does it make sense to create jobs for young AFDC mothers, and perhaps for the fathers of their children, but not for young men and women who "do the right thing" by not having children before they can support them? And does it make sense to provide jobs for any or all of these groups but not for family heads—male and female—who are unemployed but do not receive AFDC?

If we really were to commit ourselves to creating enough jobs to move AFDC parents into paid employment, it would be hard to limit that commitment. Unless the newly created jobs were purposely made very unattractive, other segments of the nation's jobless population could be expected to seek similar treatment. Moreover, for reasons explained below, the rationale for expanding the job creation effort to include other jobless persons would be very strong.

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With the end of World War II in sight, President Franklin D. Roosevelt used his 1944 State of the Union Message to call on Congress to secure a second bill of rights for the American people. The President argued as follows (20):

This Republic had its beginning, and grew to its present strength, under the protection of certain inalienable political rights—among them the right of free speech, free press, free worship, trial by jury, freedom from unreasonable searches and seizures. They were our rights to life and liberty.

As our nation has grown in size and stature, however—as our industrial economy expanded—these political rights proved inadequate to assure us equality in the pursuit of happiness.

We have come to a clear realization of the fact that true individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence. “Necessitous men are not free men.” People who are hungry and out of a job are the stuff of which dictatorships are made.

The items Roosevelt listed in his proposed economic bill of rights included the right to a job; the right to an adequate income; the right to a decent home; the right to adequate medical care; the right to an education; and the right to protection from the economic fears associated with old age, ill health, and unemployment.

As the above quotation shows, Roosevelt did not justify his proposal on utilitarian grounds alone. He grounded his appeal on the inalienable rights proclaimed in the United States Declaration of Independence, suggesting that the entitlements he was proposing were actually human rights.

International human rights agreements support Roosevelt’s claim. In fact, his speech was a forerunner of the recognition that has come to be accorded economic and social human rights in various international human rights documents since the end of World War II. This is not to suggest that these rights have been secured—far from it—only that they have received authoritative recognition as human rights.

The United Nations Charter, drafted in 1945, contains pledges in Articles 55 and 56 that each member nation will take both joint and separate action to promote human rights. Although the Charter does not specify the human rights member nations have an obligation to promote, one of the first items of business taken up by the fledgling organization was the specification of just such a list (21, pp. 85–112).

The task of drafting an international bill of rights was assigned to the U.N.’s newly established Commission on Human Rights headed by Eleanor Roosevelt. The document they produced under her lead-

ership lists many more civil and political rights than it does economic and social rights, but the latter are included. And on December 10, 1948, after long debate and further revisions, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations by a vote of 48 to 0 with 8 abstentions (21).

The Universal Declaration can be viewed as a statement of the human rights that members of the United Nations have an obligation to promote. But irrespective of the legal status of this obligation, the document embodies a vision of the social contract that carries both enormous moral weight and exceptionally broad popular appeal. It was a carefully negotiated document reflecting something approaching a consensus of world public opinion concerning the kind of societies that governments should strive to build.

The economic and social rights proclaimed in the Universal Declaration include the right of all persons to remunerative employment paying wages capable of supporting a dignified existence (22, Art. 23). Can this right really be secured? More precisely, can it be secured in a market economy like our own? In a 1989 book (19), I explored what it might cost to do so. The principle underlying the hypothetical program I considered was that the government would substitute a guarantee of work at market wages for all other forms of anti-poverty and unemployment assistance currently provided able-bodied persons of working age and their dependents (with an offer of paid job training followed by guaranteed placement in a well-paying job for persons unable, in the first instance, to qualify for a job paying enough to generate an income above the poverty line). This model was borrowed from New Deal social welfare planners with the intention of seeing what it would cost to implement today.

An estimate of such a program's cost was developed for the 10-year period from 1977 through 1986 (*ibid.*, Chap. 2). This was a period of exceptionally high unemployment in the United States. The average unemployment rate for the entire 10-year period was 7.5 percent, higher than the national unemployment rate at any time during our most recent recession. In fact, there have been only two other 10-year periods in the past century when the nation's unemployment rate was higher—the 1930s and the 1890s. If we could have afforded to provide jobs for everyone who was out of work between 1977 and 1986, we should be able to afford it generally.

For that ten-year period, the annual price tag for the program I

have described would have ranged from a low of \$53 billion in 1978 to a high of \$139 billion in 1983 in current dollars. That's a lot of money, but a little over 20 percent of the total would have been immediately returned to the government—federal, state, and local—in the form of increased income tax collections. This is because program wages would be taxable, unlike most of the income maintenance benefits they would replace. Another 60 percent of the program's total cost would have been covered by savings in income maintenance benefits eliminated in favor of the promise of a real job paying real wages. The bottom line is that the actual funding deficit for the program after taking these savings into consideration would have averaged only about \$20 billion a year—and that does not take into consideration several other factors likely to reduce the program's real cost.

First, it assumes that everything the program produced would be given away free. If anything at all were charged for the goods and services produced by the program—the child care it provided or the housing it built—the program's net cost would be reduced. Second, the estimate also fails to take into consideration the indirect savings governments would enjoy as a result of reduced joblessness. Social and medical problems associated with unemployment cost governments money. Achieving true full employment would not eliminate any of these problems, but it almost certainly would lessen them, thereby saving governments money. None of these savings are taken into consideration in estimating the program's net cost. Finally, the estimate fails to take into consideration the counter-cyclical effect of a guaranteed employment policy. It would be a powerful automatic stabilizer, increasing and reducing government spending as unemployment grew or shrank, and precisely targeting those communities where the changes were occurring. Approximately half of the program's estimated 10-year deficit between 1977 and 1986 was attributable to the recession of the early 1980s. If a guaranteed job program would have lessened the severity of that recession—and it almost surely would have—the program would have cost less than estimated. If all of these factors were accounted for, such a program might easily save the public money rather than costing it. Certainly such an initiative is not beyond our fiscal reach.

Consideration must also be given, of course, to such a program's likely economic side effects. No policy is problem free, including a policy of doing nothing. The appropriate question to ask is whether

the problems associated with a guaranteed employment policy would be more severe than the problems it solved. Because of space limitations, I don't propose to discuss the program's likely side effects here, but in my book I argue that they would be manageable, indeed beneficial on balance (19, Chaps. 3–5).

When compared with existing policies, a public employment program modeled along the lines I have described looks like a clear winner. It would dramatically increase public assistance to those in need while at the same time saving the public money. And it would deliver this increased public assistance in a form that both the recipients of the assistance and the public at large appear to prefer—the offer of a job rather than a handout. It also would return tangible benefits to the community in the form of additional goods and services. In other words, such a policy makes good sense in terms of the conventional concerns of public policy—how to make the most people happy at least cost. But such a policy would do more than that. It also would honor obligations proposed by President Roosevelt in his 1944 State of the Union Message and proclaimed by the United Nations in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The implications of this line of analysis for welfare reform is obvious. Realization of the right to employment in the manner I have described would make it possible to fulfill the public's desire to “end welfare as we know it” without kicking welfare recipients into a Dickensian abyss. It also would end any special treatment for welfare recipients by substituting a universal entitlement for a means-tested one.

No one in Congress is thinking about a programmatic initiative along these lines at present. Nevertheless, if I am correct that the goal of transforming AFDC into a transition-to-work program cannot be achieved without a large-scale, permanent, job-creation program, and that the pressure to extend such a program to other jobless individuals would be hard to resist, then at some point in time welfare reform advocates are going to have to consider program initiatives such as the one I have outlined.

At the same time, supporters of more generous social welfare entitlements could gain a great deal by embracing the human rights doctrines I have described. The idea that governments have a duty to respect and protect certain fundamental rights is almost universally acknowledged. This deference is comprised of very large measures of

lip service combined with a very spotty record of actual compliance. Still, rights-based claims have real bite. They are paid lip service precisely because of their potential power in real-world political struggles.

Consider how the issue of welfare reform would look if it were viewed from the perspective of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or of President Roosevelt's proposed economic bill of rights. The question of whether AFDC parents should be required to work would be turned on its head and directed back at society. Has society met *its* obligation to ensure the availability of jobs, making it possible for *all* parents to support themselves and their children in dignity? Imagine a welfare reform movement that blazoned the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on one side of its banner and the current ratio of active job seekers to available jobs on the other—a movement that demanded work *instead* of welfare as a matter of right.

My analysis of the feasibility of using government job creation to secure the right to employment also suggests that a broadening of the welfare reform debate could actually reduce the difficulty of achieving the stated goals of the reform effort. The approach I have outlined recognizes that direct job creation by government is needed as a permanent feature of our social policy if we really want to make it possible for all able-bodied adults to become self-supporting. It recognizes that deliberately created jobs can pay the same wages, require the same skills, and impose the same discipline as the economy's existing employment opportunities while increasing our national income. It thereby avoids the stigmatization that almost always attaches to programs—including employment programs—that serve only the poor. It solves the problem of financing support services for workers with special needs, because the jobs program itself can provide those services at no additional cost. Finally, and most surprising, it makes the whole effort more affordable. Like national health insurance, national employment assurance would probably save us money rather than costing us money.

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ABSTRACT

The role of work in debates over welfare reform in the United States is analyzed. Five issues are identified and discussed under this heading, with special emphasis on the question of whether enough jobs exist to make it possible for all able-bodied welfare recipients to find paid employment in the regular labor market. It is argued that there are not enough jobs available—not even low-wage jobs—to make this a reasonable goal, and that neither conservatives nor liberals have faced up to the dilemma posed by this job shortage. International human rights doctrine concerning the availability of work at decent wages is cited in support of the proposition that the government should be held accountable for filling this job gap, not only for welfare recipients but for all other job-seekers as well. The costs of a hypothetical jobs program capable of achieving this goal are assessed, with the surprising result that it might actually save the public money. It is suggested that such a program could constitute an effective alternative to current welfare reform proposals.