

RADICAL TRUTH SAYERS: Why we *still* need a Welfare Rights Movement  
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The Welfare Rights Movement is and was one of the most significant social movements of the last third of the twentieth century and into the 21<sup>st</sup>. It is important because it linked the civil rights movement with the women's movement in an effort rare in US history since abolitionist days. Through the welfare rights movement both activist women and activist African Americans were able to broaden their demands for individual rights into a powerful call for a responsible positive democratic state for all.

The Civil Rights Movement demanded justice for all through the process of righting accumulated wrongs against African Americans and preserving opportunities for the survivors of those wrongs – no matter how hurt they were internally by their oppression. The Women's Movement, at its best, demanded an end to gender based inequality and full civic, social and economic possibilities for all women.

And, as these two movements merged together in Martin Luther King's last Poor People's campaign and almost immediately through the National Welfare Rights Organization, they brought a full vision of economic, social and racial justice to a nation starved for expansive vision. King himself knew that by linking poverty, an unjust war and workers' rights he was pushing all the buttons of our hypocritical economic and social systems. But he could not shy away from speaking and acting on the radical truths about all the interlinked oppressions we so needed to face as a nation. He died for his radical truth and the welfare rights movement has been inspired, and threatened, for continuing to hold it.

Because of such roots, members and supporters of the welfare rights movement from its earliest beginnings were never afraid of "calling out" this nation's obligation to address both the long term end to poverty and the daily needs of poor women, men and children, white and black, in cities and in the country. At a time when an emerging capitalist Right was beginning to proclaim the failure of government's contradictory but real commitments to alleviate poverty, the Welfare Rights Movement stood up for welfare, for economic rights, and refused to give up expectations that government could and should help people, with respect and with democratic processes.

This was and is a radical effort, one of the most radical (after full blown abolitionism) in this nation's history. And it was only ever real because an incredibly brave, smart and visionary group of poor women have always insisted on speaking their own radical truths, no matter who was President, no matter what the professionals and defeatist realist politicians tried to tell them.

At its heart, the message of the Welfare Rights Movement, building from its roots, is four-fold and nationwide, at the beginning and still today:

**1. Poverty is an offense against people's intrinsic rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.** Poverty is real and whatever its immediate source for individuals (low wages, disability, abuse, ill-health, family necessity, and societal prejudices just to name a few), it prevent adults and especially mothers from being able to raise their families and live their lives with security, respect, and lack of fear. Poverty is a wrong so frightening that most people in this society refuse to face it and its implications. Over the course of almost forty years since the Welfare Rights Movement began, and despite all the struggles and short term gains, fewer and fewer people are willing to acknowledge the toll poverty takes in the US. We don't even want to talk about poverty. Now the term of choice is "vulnerable populations" or victims of "disparities" in health or education. Poor people are not "job ready," or they face "economic challenges," or are "at risk" of hunger.

And, since the "Welfare Reform" of 1996, and its various state-by-state deformations, the United States is without any national system dedicated to providing public income maintenance to poor families, simply because of economic need. It is now even harder for anti poverty activists even to find poor people, much less inform them that the Constitution of the United States promises a government that will "promote the general welfare." At places like U.Mass Boston we find it next to impossible to convince those few low income mothers who still miraculously find a way to attend college that they should not have to choose between their own hope for economic advance and their children's rights to eat, learn, and hope for a better future. Most are fearful and just want to get through and out of school before the system punishes them yet again.

The Welfare Rights movement has always spoken the radical truth that there is no shame in acknowledging the need for help. The shame is when a rich nation and a frightened populace refuse to provide and insist on

simultaneously charging fraud when anyone tries to help and denying the obvious breadth and depth of poverty.

**2. Democracy is of intrinsic value.** From its earliest origins Welfare Rights organizations across the country walked a walk that built upon the talk that “all people are created equal” and all have voices that need to be heard if society is to progress.. Welfare Rights meetings and conferences, large and small, are still wild and full of passion, members argue with each other and with allies and friends. From the beginning I have loved the rousing commitment to participation that is so basic to welfare rights. The NWRO and its sister and daughter organizations, like the NWRU, are so important exactly because they teach all ready to hear the profound lesson that if society will listen to the organized voices of poor women, of all low income people, we can together create a society more “of the people” and “for the people” than we have had before.

Women in the Welfare Rights movement taught and still teach each other and their allies that a democratic society means responsible public welfare programs where basic income and basic supports are offered without disdain and disregard. Early on they demanded welfare councils and citizen participation to keep the system honest.

Since the earliest leaders and their successors always knew that their demands would never be fully met, their insistence on a present and proud voice in the process of policy making and implementation was an especially great source of power. Unlike so many other movements, they were seldom if ever seduced into defending policy “compromises” that hurt them even if their professional allies felt they should. Indeed it was the liberal compromises of 1988 welfare reform that rejuvenated the later phase of poor women’s organizing. Even though, we must admit, all Americans have been dealt a critical blow with the totality of the 1996 reform.

For all the talk of inclusivity and outreach, few organizations today come anywhere near the participation that happened when welfare rights groups were on the scene, speaking truths that so many are still afraid to hear.

Welfare Rights women activists in full engagement make it hard for anyone to sit on the sidelines

**3. The government is the people’s trust fund.** Welfare, social security and unemployment benefits are the citizenry’s savings accounts. We all contribute to them and know we will need to draw upon at different times of our lives.. And all of us need the security of knowing our trust fund is there when we need it.. Welfare rights activists know this and never stop saying

it, even, when critics redefined their rights and trust funds as “entitlements” and called for nothing but “temporary benefits and personal responsibility.” One of the things I love best about women in the welfare rights movement is that they have never been afraid both to criticize programs meant to serve them AND to demand the benefits they were supposed to provide. They have argued since the beginning that the “stigma” of receiving benefits is a trick, something to be challenged not avoided when one is caring what one needs to care for one family. Welfare rights activists care passionately about both the minute and large aspects of welfare policy because they know both can destroy hope and also must retain the possibility for giving it.. Enormous volumes of repetitive paperwork needed to qualify for assistance is as discouraging as the punitive assumptions behind the programs themselves.

So, through all the years of programs, policies, regulations and punitive “reforms” welfare rights activists kept speaking their truths. They kept trying to make people of almost all incomes believe they should not be made afraid to get what we need. They insisted on asking politicians and policymakers why the government doesn’t do more to help us help each other.

And now in times like these, with the economy tanking and the system of support shrinking ever smaller this radical message that we have the right to “depend” on public assistance seems more needed than ever.

**4. Jobs are not the first, much less the only answer to many if not most of the needs of poor people.** This one has always been an especially hard truth to tell, given how much this capitalist society keeps defining everyone by how much they work in the bad labor market. Welfare rights activists not only defend women’s work in the family as socially valuable work, which is dangerous enough, they also can’t help but raise deeper questions when welfare to work programs present themselves behind a mantra of “any job is a good job.” Working class women, and especially people of color whose education and history denied them the illusion that they can “support themselves” and their families through jobs, always knew something was askew when employment was presented as their only salvation, and if they didn’t the effects of the 1996 reforms should have convinced them. Without any alternative to bad jobs, welfare rights activists kept insisting women would be even worse off, Now activists have tried to make appeals to the “working poor,” to help them see the deep trouble they are in and their deep need for government programs to promote their own general welfare. But

they are hard to find and harder to organize around a truth that has been so suppressed. We all hope it is not too late.

**Each part of the message of Welfare Rights is radical**, and each part calls upon movement members and their allies to say radical truths that challenge how we operate as a society.

*Survival News* tries to do this. The poor people's organizations not afraid to call themselves such still do this. And everyone needs to learn the lessons if anyone is to survive in the new order of global capitalism.

Let's all listen. Let's all find our own ways to support a Welfare Rights Movement devastated by the disastrous ideas and cruel programs of 1996 welfare "reform."

The radical truths of the welfare rights movement may be more necessary, and more radical than ever.

\*My assignment was to write a history of the welfare rights movement. I found this an impossible task because the fundamental assumptions of the movement remain so important and so avoided today that a narrative history somehow seemed to shrink the message. This article is my attempt to say why I think the welfare rights movement is so important regardless of whether it is dire jeopardy as today, or whether it has a wider movement base to build upon as it did in the 1970s, and for a while in the 1990's.