

.....

## Kick 'Em Again: Welfare/Poverty

By Judy Rebick

Poor bashing is becoming a national sport in this country, with politicians outdoing each other in blaming welfare recipients for their own poverty. Ontario premier Mike Harris went further than most this spring when he cut the prenatal benefit to pregnant women on welfare, saying that he didn't want them to spend it on beer. Prime Minister Jean Chretien has also equated those who do not have paid work with drunks. "In my judgment," he told a black-tie audience in 1994, "it is better to have them at 50 per cent productivity than to be sitting at home, drinking beer, at zero per cent productivity." Even NDPers have joined in. Former premier Mike Harcourt announced his welfare reforms in September 1993 by explaining: "We want to clean the cheats and deadbeats off the welfare rolls...Where there is work and where there are training programs, people who are able to work who won't take those training programs, who re taking advantage of the goodwill of British Columbians, who refuse to get into the workforce--those people will be cut off of welfare."

What's the reality of people on welfare? The highest welfare fraud figure I have seen is 6.8%. There is more fraud going on in Toronto's SkyDome on any given Saturday when businessmen take their families to tax-deductible boxes that are supposed to be for business associates than in all the welfare offices across the country.

This spring, the National Council of Welfare produced an important document entitled: *Profiles of Welfare: Myths and Realities*. Contrary to the notion that most welfare recipients are lazy good-for-nothing young people looking for a free ride, people under 20 living on their own account for only 4 % of welfare recipients and only another 12 % are between 20 and 25. Another powerful myth is that teenage women get pregnant to qualify for welfare. In fact, only three per cent of single parents on welfare are under the age of 20 and nearly half of all single-parent families on welfare have only one child; another 31% have only two children.

Jean Swanson, former president of the National Anti-Poverty Organization, now with End Legislated Poverty in Vancouver

says that poor bashing goes beyond the crass comments of politicians and media pundits. "Even the questions we ask about the poor show our prejudice," she says. "We ask: How can we help the poor? How can we get people off welfare and on to work? What we should be asking is: How can we reduce poverty? How can we get the rich to share? How can we get jobs with adequate incomes?"

Swanson points out that all the welfare-to-work experiments are simply moving people from one form of poverty to another, because the decreasing value of minimum wage and difficulty in finding full-time work mean staying well below the poverty-line even with a job. "Poor people have as much control over these experiments as a lab rat," she says.

Meanwhile, social assistance is disappearing as a public issue. A CBC/Environics poll in February listed a series of public policy issues and asked people to prioritize their concerns. The "welfare poor" is not even on the list, even though every person I know who lives in a big city is more and more disturbed by the extent of homelessness and despair.

A new book called *Confronting the Cuts: A Sourcebook for Women in Ontario* edited by Luciana Ricciutelli, June Larkin, and Eimear O'Neill, describes some of the impact of Mike Harris's Ontario on women and children. After the 21.6 per cent cut to welfare when Harris came into office, a mother of two now receives \$1,239 a month. when you consider that the cost of a two-bedroom basement apartment in Toronto is about \$800 a month, that means struggling to survive on \$4.88 a day for each person in the family. In a recent Health Canada study, 80 per cent of mothers reported cutting down on their own meals and 20 per cent said they went hungry for an entire day. Over half had to give up the telephone or other basic services in order to have money for food. According to the Daily Bread Food Bank in Toronto, 29 per cent of mothers report that their children go without food at least once a week. A Thunder Bay study revealed that a couple with two small children now have to make do with \$43 a week for food after other expenses are paid. Before the cuts, they had \$104 a week. How can anyone live on \$43 a week for food for four people? And this is in the province where the economy is supposed to be booming.

In 1997 Robert Gratton, the CEO of Power Financial Corporation, earned more than \$27 million. Six other CEOs made more than \$10 million each. How can a society call itself democratic when some people can't afford to put food on the table and other make so much money they couldn't spend it in ten lifetimes?

(Judy Rebick is the host of CBC's Newsworld's *Straight from the Hip*. This article appeared in Elm Street, September 1998.)