

Building a welfare state

Conceptual framework and practical steps



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The basic components of a welfare state are full employment, a range of universal or comprehensive social services to cover basic needs such as income, security, medical care, education and housing and a set of social assistance services (e.g. family allowances). However, the specific form of the welfare state differs from one national socio-political context to another. For instance, the traditional British welfare state differs from the Swedish one.

The concept of a welfare state emerged in capitalist countries during the post-World War II period as a result of state intervention to protect the working class from the downward spiral of capitalist recession. Under socialism, social welfare is an integral part of the socialist system and centres around the concept of universal services extensively financed by the state.

Welfare as a political tool

In South Africa, a welfare state for whites has been established. The National Party came to power in 1948 as a result of its support base of white workers and so it has to continue securing its support through both extensive social expenditure and

through large scale employment in the civil service. Welfare state policies and programmes have protected white workers from the negative effects of the cyclical dynamics of the market economy.

For blacks, there is a residual concept, which means that social welfare services come to play only when there is some breakdown, when normal needs meeting mechanisms of the individual or family break down or when the market economy is unable to meet the needs of vulnerable groups. This kind of service punishes the person for not being able to cope and, due to stringent eligibility requirements, excludes the majority of the people from its benefits. It is clear that social welfare meets an important political function in that it reinforces racial domination. It therefore plays an important role in the increasing impoverishment of the black majority. This is not the type of welfare system we envisage for a democratic South Africa.

Vision for a post-apartheid society

According to Leila Patel, a South African social worker, social welfare refers broadly to the need for social services to

promote physical, social and emotional well-being in a society. Furthermore, the approach adopted for the purpose of this paper is that the disciplines of health, education and welfare are integral to the social reproduction of a society. Each of these disciplines has a specialised knowledge base and practice skills. This is the most suitable definition of social welfare in our situation.

Mass involvement

The Freedom Charter and the ANC's Constitutional Guidelines set the basis for a welfare state in a post-apartheid South Africa. The people's government will intervene in the economy and in the provision of social security for the people. It will institute a national health service and introduce free and compulsory education for all.

It becomes clear that a people's welfare system can only be established if all the democratic forces engage themselves in all forms of struggle. Our central task in this case is to dismantle the racist welfare system. Fortunately many welfare organisations are moving in this direction, and we need to win them and others over to our side. In the past, social





Unions' programmes and policies are rooted in mass participation. Health and welfare organisations can learn much from the strength of the organised working class.

workers were not addressing themselves to the real causes of the people's problems and suffering. Progressive organisations have ignored social welfare organisations because their services have largely been geared towards the alleviation of the conditions of vulnerable groups and, to all extents and purposes, served to cushion and perpetuate the evil system, thus relegating the affected to beggars for services they deserve as their right.

Social welfare on the political agenda

It has been in response to the declining socio-economic conditions of our people that social welfare issues have begun to receive increasing prominence among progressive organisations. The mass democratic movement and the trade unions are taking up campaigns which have a direct bearing on how the needs of people should be met. Their programmes and policies are rooted in mass participation and are geared towards the mobilisation of the working class to demand services, facilities and benefits. If such a tradition is strengthened and deepened, a genuinely democratic people's welfare

system would emerge in the future. In this future system, people at grassroots level would be able to defend their rights and interests.

It should be noted that these issues have not been taken up because organisations wanted to meet a welfare need as a primary concern. Rather, they have used these issues as a vehicle to mobilise, organise and educate people against an unjust system. Therefore, the social services and programmes of progressive organisations potentially constitute a framework for evolving social welfare policies and programmes in a post-apartheid South Africa. This shows very clearly that social welfare needs to be placed on the agenda of the democratic movement. The MDM should begin to explore more consciously how their programmes and campaigns could include greater social welfare content, as the need for social welfare in our society arises from the destructive effects of capitalism and apartheid.

Within the ranks of our movement, the ANC, social welfare has been seen merely as material and logistical support for the general membership and its other vital aspects have been ignored. We in

the ANC have not only grown in strength inside the country, but we have also grown in numbers out in exile. We are a community and naturally have social problems. The ANC is a product of South Africa and, as a result, carries with it problems which are a product of the system from which we have come. A social welfare committee has been formed to address our social problems. The main tasks of this committee are to design social welfare programmes and services consistent with our organisation's overall policy, and to apply intervention methods which support these policies.

This committee also has the task of developing a theoretical conceptual framework of social work practice in a non-racial, united and democratic South Africa. The Mass Democratic Movement, the trade union movement, welfare organisations and all patriots, together with the African National Congress must work towards the establishment of an alternative welfare system which reflects the revolutionary principles of our struggle!

Amandla! All power to the people! □