

BCR REPORTS

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PASS THE AMMUNITION

By Ann Withorn

Helping ourselves to "Practice as Progressives" was the overall goal of the fourth Bertha Capen Reynolds Society Conference held in San Francisco on July 6th and 7th. The major themes of the conference emerged during the first day's institutes and plenary, and then were refined during the Saturday workshops and closing session.

In brief, the Mayor of Berkeley, Loni Hancock, reminded us of the social costs of the last decade, of how tired many liberals are and how desperate many activists have become over the past ten years of Republican ascendancy. She spoke of how the calls for compassion for the needy increasingly fall on deaf ears, and of how we have to reframe demands more universally — building on broadest concerns for family security and an ecologically sound society — if we are to revive hopes for positive federal government action in the area of social justice.

Economist and writer Julianne Malveaux picked up on the Mayor's themes by documenting the depth of the problems facing people of color and the poor. She also spoke of the need for broad coalitions around issues of concern to everyone, because the breadth of popular support for the poorest people may have eroded as the extent of economic insecurity for all has grown. Neither the plenary speakers nor the audience were wildly opti-

mistic about a rebirth of militant politics, but both saw some hope in the increase in organizing of the homeless, people with AIDS, welfare recipients and other direct victims of the systems of oppression.

The Institute and workshops gave specificity to such general directions. The more than 75 participants attended Institutes with topics ranging from progressive teaching, unionism and direct service while the workshops focused on issues such as abortion, AIDS, immigration, welfare rights, health care and cultural diversity. In all sessions, participants tried to grapple with the reality that social workers today are asked to play ever more oppressive roles within an increasingly public sector. In many of the workshops it became obvious that, now as never before, progressive social work means challenging the systems of authority that govern us as workers and the citizens we serve. We talked of the critical need for more information sharing, for more support when social workers have to stand up for clients and themselves, and for a more developed analysis that will help progressive social workers engage in the real, threatening struggles that are thrust upon us in these frightening times.

The Closing Plenary concluded with renewed calls for solidarity against the increasing repression aimed at all poor people, and at those who seek to

work supportively with them. The words of activist Ethel Long Scott from the welfare rights workshop were recalled as a closing message:

"We can fight for ourselves; we need you to 'pass the ammunition' of information, strategies, skills and money. Don't try to control our movement. Help us respectfully in the ways we ask. Just 'pass the ammunition'."

The final event of the conference was an evening of international culture with music from the Vukani Mawethu Choir and Enrique Ramirez. The fine entertainment and update on Central America was coordinated by Arline Prigoff. Special thanks for an exceptional job of coordinating the conference goes to BCRS steering committee member Ken Grossinger and to the planning group: Michael Reisch, Arline Prigoff, Lee Schore and Amy Reisch. The San Francisco State College's Social Work Program and SEIU Local 535 co-sponsored the event, providing many of the speakers and participants and energy that gave it success. Amy Reisch and the San Francisco YWCA offered important assistance as well as help in obtaining space at the Sheehan Hotel.

In addition to its intrinsic merit, the conference also gave us a good model of how to use a national conference to help build local chapters of the BCRS. Since

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