

## ICPE ABSTRACT :

### **How Welfare Rights Activists Used *Optimism of the Will* and *Pessimism of the Intellect* to Maintain Alternative Economic Strategies**

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The paper tells stories of how anti-poverty activists in the US built a movement by committing themselves to the difficult, but for them necessary, struggle for "welfare rights". The stories come from records of interviews conducted by the author over 30 years. It examines tactics and strategies chosen by women struggling to survive and simultaneously to change "the system"--with a focus on how movement activists struggled to "make sense" of their successes and failures.

Welfare rights activists were always aware that they failed to achieve their broadest goals, that their efforts did *not* expand basic economic and social rights. Most were keenly aware of the limited success of all their efforts – even of those campaigns aimed only at blocking new, worse, policies.

Yet, interviewees seldom expressed regret. Instead, most reported pride at "sticking with the struggle", at working with people they "would not have known otherwise," at "giving hope and being good examples," and by "offering real alternatives". Activists thereby exhibited the "optimism of the will" that is one of the dual qualities Antonio Gramsci deemed essential to lifelong activism.

Since the 1980's an undeclared, but powerful, national fusion of Neoconservative and NeoLiberal social politics pushed anti-poverty activists to be increasingly defensive, to focus only on blocking ever more restrictive policies. But even as they did so, many activists incorporated the other side of Gramsci's formulation, the "pessimism of the mind" also vital to organizers. They understood the force of their opposition. But, as one Boston welfare activist declared :

*Of course, the odds are against us, but I don't know how to say 'no' to the fight. We have to speak up publicly for what women and children need even as we lose. What else can we do?*

In the Obama era, with reactionary US Welfare Reform the "new reality," older

anti-poverty activists now meet each other in settings dominated by younger social activists. There, most recognize that “welfare rights” work continues -- in "Occupy" movements, in anti-violence and pro-women's rights initiatives, in fights against "school to prison pipelines," or for expanding immigrant rights. In such settings, welfare rights' veterans say that they still cannot be cynical, or blind to their own failures. Drawing on their optimistic wills, many insist on continuing to bring their critical, pessimistic intelligence into the fight.

Through re-examining over thirty years of interviews, the author hopes to gain insight into how “welfare warriors” made meaning of past defeats -- without yielding to the paralysis of denial, nor the shame associated with what they *know* to be their own, as well others,' failures. The analysis builds from the Slavoj Zizek's 2008 insight that,

*an examination of failures confronts us with the problem of fidelity: how to redeem the emancipatory potential of these failures through avoiding the twin traps of 1) nostalgic attachment to the past, and 2) all-too-slick accommodation to “new circumstances”*

For forty years the author has been more or less engaged in local anti-poverty efforts in Boston Massachusetts. This paper draws from her previous research and will become part of a critically reflective memoir of her experiences.