

Unemployment: A Jewish Issue?

Congressman Gus Hawkins was in San Francisco a few days ago talking to an "old-fashioned" leadership group about the subject of unemployment.

The group had an "old-fashioned" appearance because it had a kind of composite quality one rarely sees these days: white, black, Asian, Latino, young and old; labor union and professional; Catholic, Protestant and Jewish. That's the kind of composite that used to move things in America.

They had been brought together by a subject whose time is coming; a subject which has strong self-interest for all the groups mentioned, often for slightly different reasons.

Jewish organizations, for example, have a political self-interest in the problem of unemployment, as well as other interests. The curve of organized anti-semitism follows the curve of unemployment as surely as a train follows the track. In the United States, in Germany, wherever: When unemployment soared so did the growth of anti-semitic movements. Two-bit anti-semites like Agnew are always around, like fungus. But unless they find a vulnerable host, they will do little damage. And nothing creates more vulnerability to political extremism and anti-semitism than widespread unemployment. Indeed, according to our Congressmen, widespread unemployment in this century is the greatest single threat to the continuance of adequate and critical American support for Israel.

Those are just some of the reasons why the San Francisco Jewish community was represented at the Gus Hawkins gathering. They are also some of the reasons why so many national Jewish organizations, including the American Jewish Congress and the Jewish Labor Committee have testified on behalf of the

Hawkins-Humphrey Full Employment Bill. (S. 50).

One of the problems, of course, is that there is a difference between supporting the fight against unemployment and supporting a specific remedy such as the Hawkins-Humphrey Bill. Jewish history gives us a special reason to fight unemployment; it does not give us any special expertise in the specific way to do so.

Basically, the Humphrey-Hawkins Bill is an extension of a law already on the books: the 1946 Employment Act "to establish a national policy and program for assuring continuing full employment in a free competitive society." The purpose of this current bill is to set up machinery to actually implement that law.

In brief, the goal is to bring the adult unemployment rate down to 3 per cent in 4 years. It is essentially a planning device, having to do with stimulating the private economy, and arranging the monetary interest policy, so that jobs will be created and inflation will be controlled. The government is designated as the "employer of last resort", if those measures fail, to provide public service employment for everyone needing it.

There are questions, of course. Do the economists really know how to do that kind of planning? Is the public service employment feature really a "last resort", or is it the heart of the bill, with all else being rhetoric? And what does that mean for bureaucracy and inflation?

On the other hand, Gus Hawkins complains that if we just sit back and point to the hazards, nothing will ever get done -- and someday the bottom may fall out. He and Hubert Humphrey are tired of people who say that they are for full adult employment "in principle"; but who fail to support their bill, even with amendments.

All of next year's Congressmen, not to mention President, will be elected this November. Between now and then, it will be critical to let these public officials know what the citizenry wants done in the matter of full employment. But citizens and citizen's organizations will first have to decide themselves what they want - in a somewhat more precise form than "in principle". Informational material is available locally through Jerry Klein of the Jewish Labor Committee (441-2500).

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