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## PROJECT EMPLOYMENT TO JANUARY, 1945

By Inez Mercer ✓

Probably more than most activities in WRA, project employment policies were directly affected by relocation policies. The problem was always to provide sufficient incentive to get the necessary work done within the centers without making project employment compete with outside employment. For most workers the sheer necessity of keeping the project operating plus the boredom that went with unemployment was the strongest incentive for working within the center. I doubt that other incentives promulgated by WRA affected more than a small group of workers.

The original Project Employment Division was responsible for employment both inside and outside the centers, reflecting the earliest program of WRA. In less than a year the Division was in an impossible situation; on the one hand doing everything possible to encourage relocation and on the other hand, trying to recruit workers for jobs with the center. It was necessary and inevitable that the staff spend the major portion of time on relocation. As a result, project employment policies and procedures were general and slow to develop.

The first statement of policy was issued September 1, 1942 as Administrative Notice No. 27. It covered compensation for work, hours of work, the Work Corps and the merit rating board, clothing allowances, fair employment practices, employment in Consumer's Enterprises, unemployment compensation and private employment outside the centers. The



changing or unchanging policies with respect to all these items reflected the course of relocation and public opinion.

The final decision on compensation rates was largely forced by public opinion. At the time of the opening of the centers, service men in the armed forces were receiving \$21 a month. A false report spread in the spring of 1942 that WRA planned to pay the evacuees Work Projects Administration wages aroused public opinion. In April, 1942 a committee composed of Director Eisenhower and two California Congressmen, John Tolan and Leland Ford, fixed WRA evacuee compensation at \$12, \$16 and \$19 a month. Formal announcement of the compensation rates was not made for several weeks. This wage scale was never changed. As wages went up in the world outside the centers, as the pay of service men increased, the bitterness of the evacuees over the wage scale increased. The pay was too small to act as an incentive and the scale so narrow that it failed to act as an incentive for seeking promotion or improving work. In some centers the evacuees adopted methods of increasing the wages of employees vital to the community. In one center a five cent monthly tax was levied on each family and the collection given as a "gift" to the evacuee doctors. In another center block residents banded together and took over the mess halls one day each week to give mess hall workers an extra day of vacation. Evacuees used the small wage scale and lack of increases as an excuse for not taking on more important jobs or increased duties. Where evacuees held approved administrative jobs at evacuee wages the wage differential was a constant source of irritation and friction.

During the spring and summer of 1942 Civil Service employees were required to work 44 hours a week and the same number of hours of



work were prescribed for evacuees. When the work week of the appointed staff increased to 48 hours, evacuee hours remained the same. This was the only area in which evacuee workers had an advantage over appointed staff. Not until late in 1943 was a regular sick leave and vacation leave policy established for evacuee workers. In many centers the 44 hour work week was something of a myth, acknowledged by the administration as well as the evacuees. There was no way the evacuees could increase their pay and many of the appointed staff thought the pay scale grossly unfair. As a result the appointed staff frequently condoned a lowered output that resulted in many instances in a work day actually consisting of four or five hours.

The Work Corps had a short life. Section 7 of the Executive Order No. 9066 creating WRA provided for the establishment within WRA of a Work Corps in which employable evacuees would enlist for the duration of the war with the terms and conditions of work and compensation to be prescribed by WRA. Many of the evacuees felt that the enlistment papers they were asked to sign gave WRA a blank check on the use of their labor for the duration of the war. The merit rating board as described in Administrative Notice No. 27 was to be composed of council members who would recommend to the Project Director evacuees to receive the order of merit for special recognition of their services, develop and install a reporting system covering quality and quantity of work and conduct of the workers, and seek to develop incentives by planning awards. In most centers the merit rating board never functioned, possibly due to lack of interest on the part of the evacuees and in some centers due to the fact that the administration did not see the need for such an



activity. In one center where a merit rating board was set up their primary function came to be passing out orders of merit and within a year of the opening of the center the award had been granted in such numbers that it ceased to have any significance. Both the Work Corps and the merit rating board died a natural death due both to lack of interest and opposition on the part of the appointed staff and the evacuees. In late 1943 and early 1944 when relocation had seriously depleted the ranks of workers some centers organized evacuee committees which had some of the functions originally delegated to the merit rating board. The most successful of these operated at Poston where the committee made an extensive survey of labor requirements and labor supply and made practical recommendation for better utilization of labor.

The amount of the clothing allowance was determined by the Welfare Section. Workers and their dependents were eligible for the monthly clothing allowance. Neither the amount of the allowance nor policy with respect to issuance was ever changed.

Employment in Consumers Enterprises was governed by the same regulations which governed employment elsewhere in the project, and this, too, remained the same.

A Fair Employment Practices Committee made up of elected workers to handle grievances in all matters pertaining to employment except wages, was authorized and was always a part of Washington policy. In practice this was largely a "paper" policy. Few of the evacuees had had experience with workers organization, many of them were not convinced that such a committee would have any real function. In addition



to lack of interest and experience on the part of the evacuees a worker's committee was opposed by many of the center appointed staff. In some cases, it was a fear of a powerful evacuee "union". In some cases it was a genuine belief that a worker's committee had so real function in a center. The formation of active committees depended on one of two things - the presence of evacuees in the centers who had had some experience in unions or knowledge of them and were actively interested in worker's organization or the presence of staff members with similar experience and interests. In one center, in the early days an active and effective Fair Practices Committee was organized largely because of the presence of two Nisei with previous union experience. In some centers where there was no spontaneous evacuee interest an educational campaign was carried on by staff members and committees eventually formed. Committees waxed and ~~waned~~ according to the presence or absence of evacuees or appointed staff who were interested in and believed in such work. There were instances where the community council did not look with favor on an independent committee but preferred to handle labor grievances through a subcommittee of the council.

Although the seasonal leave program in the sugar beet fields went into effect in the summer of 1942 no one at that time conceived of the centers in terms of steadily declining populations. The unfavorable reaction of public officials at the Governors' Conference on April 7, 1942, indicated that in all probability centers would operate at maximum capacity for the duration of the war. WRA believed that it had an obligation to provide employment for all those people who were



willing and able to work. Since they could not be efficiently employed within the relocation centers, it was felt that they were entitled to unemployment compensation. Therefore, all persons who were involuntarily unemployed and their dependents were eligible for unemployment compensation and clothing allowances. The unemployment compensation ranged from \$4.75 a month for an unemployed man, 18 years of age and over, to \$1.50 a month for a dependent child under 13. The first major change in project employment policy came on May 26, 1943 with respect to unemployment compensation. Hereafter only those persons were eligible for unemployment compensation (later called Extended Illness Compensation) who became ill while actually employed and who, after exhausting sick leave, were still unable to return to work. The maximum period for which unemployment compensation could be paid was 90 days, and it was to be paid at 60% of the compensation rate. This major change in policy was due directly to the expanding relocation program. With the increasing opportunities for employment outside the centers and the fact there were now sufficient jobs within the centers for all able-bodied people who wished to work, there was no longer justification for unemployment compensation.

Before the end of the first year of operation, relocation was already beginning to make itself felt in labor turnover within the centers. In December 1942 Granada questioned whether there should be a control on work leaves to keep enough residents in the centers to perform essential services. Throughout the early part of 1943 comments continued to pour in from the centers pointing out that relocation was taking the more skilled and aggressive evacuees and that a labor shortage was developing. Along with the concern over the loss of better trained and



more employable workers was a growing concern over the poor work habits and inefficiency which had developed. When the projects were first opened and WRA felt a responsibility to employ as many people as possible, many of the activities were overstaffed. In spite of the fact that the 44 hour work week had been required from the beginning, a large part of the evacuees and many of the appointed staff paid lip service to this regulation. Among the evacuees it was felt that it was generally unfair to require 44 hours a week for \$12, \$16, and \$19 a month. Many of the appointed staff believed that it was impossible to require a full work week for these wages. As a result of both overstaffing and shortened work week, an excessive portion of the population as compared to normal communities was employed. In the average community about 35% of the community are wage earners. While the centers varied widely in the percentage of residents employed no center ever employed as few as 35% of the population and some centers consistently employed as high as 50%.

A further contribution to inefficient operation was misplacement and poor utilization of skills. Many projects in the opening days tended to let evacuees choose their own jobs except for a few professional people such as doctors and lawyers. Some evacuees felt that it would lower their professional status to work at their usual job for so meager a wage. As a result they often went to work in completely unrelated fields. Accountants and secretaries, for example, chose jobs in the mess halls. This was not serious during the early months of the program, but as relocation progressed, acute shortages developed in certain fields even though the persons with these skills were actually in the projects. It took a great deal of persuasion on the part of the Administration and community pressure to get people to change their jobs.



Still another problem came up for considerable discussion during this period. The Washington office had never spelled out or classified jobs held by evacuees, nor had the Washington office done more than generally describe the jobs which would fall into the three pay classifications. As a result the varied and complex job titles in the centers were bewildering and there was little uniformity in pay classifications between centers. At some centers the breakdown between jobs was minute and a rigid caste system on jobs developed. A janitor would not touch a stove and a fireman would not touch a mop. At other centers, job classifications were broad and general, and the evacuees were expected to do and did, a variety of tasks. For various reasons activities developed unevenly among the centers. In the case of farm programs and construction programs, for example this was to be expected, but in other areas there was a wide discrepancy in programs without obvious reasons. Minidoka, at one time, had 350 people working in a 90 bed hospital. Community Activities, at one center employed 10 people while at a neighboring center 50 to 60 people were employed. By early 1943 the centers and the personnel of the Washington Project Employment Division were advocating uniform job classifications and labor allocations.

All of these things had a bearing on the Administration's decision in May of 1943 to reduce employment at the centers, set an employment ceiling for each center and establish standard job classifications and compensation rates. The primary purposes in this move were to (1) bring about more efficient operation, (2) improve work habits, (3) improve personnel utilization and (4) bring about greater uniformity between



centers. A member of the Washington staff went to Gila River and did an extensive analysis of all activities and jobs, preparing job classifications for each job and assigning compensation rates. It was obvious that due to the differences in size of the centers and differences in operating problems, that no two centers would have exactly the same number of jobs in each classification. On the basis of the study made at Gila it was decided that each center should cut the number employed by about 30% unless they showed good reason why such reduction could not be made. Projects were instructed to cut gradually, cutting a third in July, a third in August and a third in September. At Central Utah the reduction was delayed until September when the total cut was put into effect. This caused a good deal of confusion and hard feeling on the part of the evacuees. At Minidoka disputes over some of the cuts were allowed to drag along and the dispute over cuts in block maintenance staff culminated in the boilermen's strike late in the year. At the other centers, although there was some discontent, the reductions went into effect without seriously impeding the work.

The first instructions that went out from Washington were too rigid and did not leave enough flexibility for the projects. Labor ceilings were set on each activity and for some activities connected with block services, the number of workers per block were prescribed. Gradually this was changed until Washington set a labor ceiling for each project with advisory ceilings for activities but leaving the projects free to shift labor from activity to activity under the project ceiling.

The organization of project employment from the Washington level went through three phases. Originally, there was a Project Employment



Division responsible for policies and procedures affecting employment both within and out of the centers. The staff was small, with not more than three or four people. Even before some of the centers opened the demand for workers in the sugar beet fields required the presence of the whole staff in the field. Leave procedures, and relocation policies were being determined during these periods, and it was only natural that the projects were left very much to themselves in developing evacuee employment programs. The Washington office had little time to analyze, develop and refine the original plans on project employment.

In the late summer and early fall of 1943 a reorganization took place. The Relocation Division was formed taking over all responsibility for relocation. Responsibility for project employment was lodged in a unit of Personnel Management. The staff consisted of a Senior Employment Officer, an assistant and a secretary. The unit was responsible for all policies and a proposed training program. Original responsibility was also lodged in the Project Employment Unit for quarterly allocation of the labor quota and classification of evacuee jobs. However, from January 1944 on this became part of the responsibility of the Classification Unit. For several months the unit was occupied with writing the Manual and Handbook and with making a study of training needs. After the completion of the Manual and Handbook the Project Employment Unit found itself with little to do. With the allocation of labor quotas and job classification in the Classification Unit and with no training program approved the Unit had no real function except to pass on requests for work clothing beyond that specifically authorized and to review the



monthly report of project employment activity. By memorandum and letter the unit advised centers on employment problems and labor relations, encouraged studies of labor turnover, improved personnel utilization and other factors affecting project employment but it had no real function. During the summer of 1944 the Senior Employment Officer and assistant were busy at the Emergency Refugee Shelter but by the autumn there was no activity in the unit. For several months the unit had been advocating changes. Since the policy of WRA was to make evacuee employment as similar as possible to classified Civil Service Employment and since all employment at the centers was handled by the same staff the Project Employment Unit advocated that the Unit as such be abolished and that to the staff of the Personnel Section be added a Labor Relations and Training Officer. Finally, in the fall of 1944 the Unit was abolished and the position of Training Officer created. By this time the early closing of the centers was in sight and the projected training program never materialized.

The idea of one personnel unit responsible for both appointed and evacuee personnel was a sound one as it permitted integration of all personnel policies and made for a more coordinated personnel policy. However, where the employment situation is abnormal for the largest proportion of the employees as was the case in WRA, it is essential that a good part of the departmental personnel staff have a thorough knowledge and understanding of project conditions. After the dissolution of the Project Employment Unit only the Personnel Officer had had any project experience. An example of the trouble which was caused by lack of knowledge and understanding of project conditions and an arbitrary



attitude on the part of the departmental staff was the allocation of Janitors and firemen's jobs in the labor quota for the quarter beginning January 1944. Other factors entered into the strike at Minidoka but the fact that the quota for block janitors for Minidoka was set without taking into account the employment patterns which had grown up as compensation for low wages and the unrelenting attitude toward changing the quota contributed to the strike. Since it was both impossible and impractical for all of the departmental staff to have had center experience one or two people, especially a labor relations officer, with an understanding of the peculiar labor conditions in the centers, with power to review all policy and procedure affecting project employment should have been on the staff spending the major portion of time in the field.

The Project Employment Unit and the Community Analysis Section felt for a long time that the crux of the center difficulties in project employment, labor turnover, poor work habits, substandard performance and numerous evacuee grievances which sometimes flared into strikes, lay in labor relations and specifically in supervisor-employee relations. A Community Analysis report prepared late in 1944 traced most of the labor disturbances in the centers to poor supervisor-employee relations and in many cases to a prejudiced attitude on the part of the supervisors. For many, if not most of the evacuees, their only direct contact with the administration was with the appointed supervisor on the job. Too often this supervisor was skilled in his work but not skilled in handling people and woefully lacking in an understanding of the evacuee and his problems. One of the most common variety of supervisor errors was to react to a worker's grievance with some version of the "quit if you don't



like it" statement. The supervisor did not realize that the worker had little incentive to work and that more often than not, the grievance as verbalized was an expression of other frustrations.

The Project Employment Unit, with the advice of the Community Analysis Section, prepared a manual on labor relations training with specific reference to the background and position of the evacuees. By the time the manual was prepared the lifting of the exclusion order had been announced and the closing of the centers planned. No use was made of the program. I feel that had extensive field work been done earlier on the subject of labor relations and more attention paid to the attitude of the appointed staff through selection and training that many of the difficulties experienced in project employment could have been eliminated or lessened. It is true that rapid turnover due to relocation and the abnormal employment conditions existing in the projects did make a unique and difficult situation, but the fact that in some activities in some centers a high standard of performance, good morale and small turnover, exclusive of relocation, was maintained demonstrates that much could have been done. In every instance where these conditions prevailed the thing which distinguished this operating unit from others in the center or similar ones in other centers was the mutual respect and understanding between the supervisor and the workers.

One of the most interesting projects developed in Project Employment but never put into use was a race attitudes test. At the time of the Tule Lake riot in the fall of 1943 innate prejudices of some of the appointed staff which had hitherto been held in check came to the surface during the time of stress and resulted in unprovoked words and acts of



violence and seriously interfered with efficient and objective performance of duties. Leland Barrows, then Chief of the Administrative Management Division, was concerned over this and suggested that the Project Employment Unit investigate methods of determining the prejudices of applicants. At the invitation of WRA, Dr. Rensis Likert, Dr. Ernest Hilgard, Dr. Allen Edwards and Dr. Jaffe, social psychologists, formed a committee to advise WRA. After a discussion of the problems involved the committee recommended that WRA attempt to build a race attitudes test based on the questionnaire method and a test to measure emotional stability. They felt that the latter was essential since some persons with prejudices could, if emotionally stable, carry out their duties without permitting their prejudices to affect their performance. The Unit was unable to devise a satisfactory test for this purpose. After doing some research in the field of attitudes testing I devised a questionnaire aimed specifically at attempting to determine the degree of prejudice toward Japanese and Japanese-Americans. Since no previous work had been done in this field, it was necessary to build an entirely new test. The test was tried out on a group of students at the University of Maryland and then, after statistical analysis and further refinement, the Washington staff of WRA was asked to take the test. With a few exceptions there was a high degree of cooperation. Statistically the test proved to be good and plans were made for holding seminars with the Washington staff to discuss the test and its possible uses. At this time Mr. Barrows and Mr. Philip Glack, who had been one of the chief sponsors of the project, both left. Due to the changing plans of WRA in anticipation of the closing of the centers and the changing adminis-



tration in Administrative Management the attitudes test was never put to practical use. A confidential report was submitted to the Director, to Mr. Barrows and to Mr. Glick reporting the findings and recommending possible uses. While it might not be possible to use such a test in selecting personnel, it would be extremely valuable in placement and certainly indicate where training and orientation would be required.

The difficulties encountered in project employment might have been lessened with more attention to the attitudes of personnel working directly with the evacuees, with a greater emphasis on evacuee participation and responsibility to offset the lack of normal employment incentives, and more extensive and intensive field work to aid in counterbalancing the ingrown and nonobjective attitude which developed on the part of the appointed staff as a natural result of their own isolation and lack of contact with normal communities.

Like many other activities of WRA there was no established precedent on which to operate project employment, and I hope it will never be necessary to use the experience gained by WRA. Here was an almost completely abnormal employment. Wages were far below normal, there was little opportunity for advancement, there was a wide variety of jobs to be learned but the training received in many of them would be useless after the closing of the centers, the distinction between worker and supervisor was always, at least, one of race, there were community tensions and pressures which existed in no other community. Personal interest in the job, good work habits for future use, approval of and service to the community were the only job incentives. Under these conditions it



is not amazing that there was occasional strikes, work stoppages, poor work habits and inefficiency but that so much was accomplished with so relatively little difficulty. Thousands of evacuees worked faithfully for the community with no reward and it is to them that the residents and administration owe thanks.