

Civil Rights and Economic Rights

Presented by Ethan Ellis at a CAU Local Ownership Meeting
on October 16, 2006

Our civil rights were first recognized in Title V, including Section 504, of the Rehabilitation Act of 1974.

Title V prohibited various forms of discrimination in federally operated or funded activities.

The Carter Administration refused to sign 504 regs. Then people with disabilities staged a month-long sit-in in the San Francisco federal building and others in Washington dogged Joseph Califano, Secretary of HEW, with picket signs every time he showed his face in public until he signed them.

Most provider and parent organizations sat on their hands during that struggle. They did not want to be associated with our 'extreme' tactics.

The American with Disabilities Act was drafted by Bob Bergdorf, a lawyer with a disability.

Justin Dart, son of a wealthy family, who had polio, visited all 50 states to rally people with disabilities to support it. He also led a steering committee that coordinated efforts, both among the provider lobbyists in Washington, DC, and disability groups around the country to get the bill passed.

However, the ADA was not passed until people with disabilities took direct action.

Members of ADAPT, who used wheelchairs, dragged themselves up the steps of the Capitol on their hands and knees in front of TV cameras until Congress passed it.

When George Bush would not sign it, two hundred of us, led by Dart, marched on the White House and held a candle-light vigil in the rain until Bush agreed to sign the bill.

I was there and I don't remember seeing any provider lobbyists. However, they were all over the White House lawn, invited, like several thousand of us, to celebrate the signing of the ADA.

Many of us thought the act would be our passport to freedom. We thought it would make us equal to everyone else.

That didn't happen. Today we are worse off than when the ADA was passed by any way you want to measure it:

- › We are poorer; our average income is less than \$20,000 and 80% of us live below the poverty line;
- › Less of us have jobs; only 13% of us work full-time all year and we earn less than \$12,000 for that work
- › More of us die from diseases that don't kill people who are better off, diseases that can be easily prevented or cured. We die because we can't get the health care or the health insurance that would keep us alive;
- › More of us live in places that are unhealthy and unsafe; they make us sicker and kill us quicker. We are abused and attacked by violent people more than any other

group because of where we are forced to live and because our disabilities make us easier targets.

Why?

We won our civil rights but we didn't win the economic rights to make them real.

What are economic rights?

- › The right to a job that pays a living wage.
- › The right to good health care.
- › The right to decent, accessible, affordable housing.
- › The right to a decent income if or when we can't work.

Why don't civil rights mean much without economic rights>

- › It doesn't matter if the restaurant is accessible if you can't pay to eat there.
- › It doesn't matter if you have the right to an education if no one will offer you a job.
- › It doesn't matter if you find the doctor you need if he/she won't take Medicaid.
- › It doesn't matter if you have the right to vote if you just dies of a disease that could have been prevented.

Right now, you may be looking at me saying to yourself, "What's that crip in the nice clothes and fancy tie talking about? He's not poor."

You're right, of course.

But I am what I call the 'escapees'. My life turned out better than most people like me.

Maybe it was because my family fought for me. Maybe I saw an opportunity that my brothers and sisters missed. Maybe I was just lucky.

For whatever reason, I got out of the horrible hole that most people with disabilities are still stuck in...and more of them are stuck in that hole now than in 1990.

Other groups face many of the same problems that we do. They struggle to win their civil rights but didn't get the economic rights to make those civil rights meaningful.

African-Americans won their civil rights in 1964 but most of them are worse off today than they were then. They are poorer, have less jobs, worse housing, suffer more violence and die more often from preventable diseases than they did 42 years ago.

The same is true for women and other minority groups that society doesn't value.

There are complicated reasons most of those people are still without economic rights. We need to know about those reasons. If we have time, we'll talk about that later.

We need to understand why most people with disabilities are still denied their economic rights.

In the 21st century, we are still being treated as objects rather than human beings. We still deal with the same prejudices that we have for thousands of years – since the beginning of recorded history.

Today we are treated as objects for another reason. We are the products of a gigantic human services industry that makes a trillion dollars a year providing us with services.

The services most of them provide us with make us more dependent than we need to be.

In 1985, Monroe Berkowitz, a Rutgers economics professor, added up all the money that was spent on people with disabilities. Then he analyzed what the money really did for and to us.

98.5% of all money spent on us made us more dependent on other people and programs. Only 1.5% of the total enabled us to be more independent.

That was before SSI, SSDI, Medicaid and Medicare. Those programs make us even more dependent.

Those programs and others like them keep most of us from earning a living. Without money in our pockets, we can't meet our most basic needs. We can't pay for housing, food, transportation, even recreation – the things that most people buy with the money they earn.

Instead, the disability industry provides us with those basics as services. It gets the money to provide those services from the government.

It convinces government that we need those services because we are too dependent to buy them on our own.

That industry depends on our dependency. If we weren't dependent on its services, it would go out of business and so would the hundreds of thousands of people it employs.

In Washington, that industry is represented by the Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities, a coalition of more than 120 national organizations.

Only a dozen of them are advocates for people with disabilities. Less than a handful is led by people with disabilities.

The rest, the vast majority, are actually trade associations of service providers whose main function is to lobby for the interests of those providers.

The people who represent us to the powerful in our nation's capital don't look like us, walk or roll or talk or think like us. We do not own our own movement.

The faces that Presidents, Senators, Congress-people, bureaucrats and other policy-makers see are not our faces. They are the faces of paid lobbyists without disabilities, often with little knowledge of our interests.

The things they say we want are not what we really want. Those are things that other people think we want or things that they really want for themselves but are using us to get.

And what is it they really want? In good times they want more money for services and in bad times they want to hold on to the service money they already have: Money for SSI and SSDI,

money for Medicaid and Medicare, money for nursing homes, group homes and other institutions, money for special education, special transportation, special housing, special vocational services and sheltered workshops.

In short, they want money to continue and expand those service programs for people with disabilities that provide a living for their members.

At first blush, it might appear that that is what people with disabilities want too. SSI and SSDI don't provide enough money to live on. Medicaid and Medicare barely meet our health needs. Despite education and vocational rehabilitation, less than a third of us have jobs.

Look again and ask: is more of the same what we really want? I think not.

The simplest way off the disability dependency treadmill is to make healthcare and jobs basic economic rights, available to everyone. However, that option is not available in this hyper-materialistic society that values profits over people.

Another way off the disability dependency treadmill is to de-couple federal health insurance from SSI and SSDI. That would permit those of us who can't get private health insurance but can go to work to do so without risking medical conditions or medical bills that could kill us.

It would also continue to provide income maintenance and public health insurance for those who really can't work as society constructs work now.

The public benefits from doing that are enormous and compelling. Millions of people with disabilities would go to work and pay taxes, instead of draining the treasury by collecting benefits.

Their medical expenses would decrease as their standard of living grew. They would fill a hole in the lower end of the labor market that we now recruit illegal immigrants to fill.

In its 30 years of existence, the Consortium has never made a serious attempt to get such legislation passed. It would put its members out of business.

Opposition to civil rights and economic rights legislation on economic grounds in this country is not unique to people with disabilities. It has been universal.

Other minority groups have been denied those same rights because they were more valuable as labor than as people. That's still true of immigrants today.

In this hyper-materialistic society, the most effective argument against the inclusion of any devalued group has been the fear that those already included will lose something by it.

Today we face the most dangerous threat of the last 50 years. The current administration is determined to cut off publicly funded services to all poor groups, including people with disabilities. We think those cuts are aimed at us and other poor people.

They are not. This administration has never thought of us and others as real people. In their eyes, we never counted.

Those cuts are really directed at the people who serve us. They are designed to put the disability industry and the other poverty industries out of business. They are aimed at the further destruction of the middle class in favor of the ultra-rich.

If we can find a way to join with the most progressive elements of those industries on a new basis of equality, we have a chance to overcome that threat.

That is the challenge. Will we take it?

Fully understanding it is not easy. It will require us to master the economics of disability and of other groups that have been marginalized. To do so, we will have to understand how the economics of these domestic oppressions fit into an even bigger picture.

We will have to understand how the disability industry is connected to even larger economic interests that now exert control over huge chunks of the rest of the world through the imperial power that our own country now wields practically without significant challenge.

Only when we do, will we understand in sufficient detail the enormity of the struggle we face to be fully accepted in American society as other, more privileged groups are.