

Democrats' 'Citizens Corps': slave labor

by Kathleen Klenetsky

The U.S. Congress has been in session less than a month, and already that body is proposing measures that stink of "fascism with a democratic face."

A case in point is the new "Citizenship and National Service Act of 1989," which Sen. Sam Nunn (D-Ga.), Sen. Chuck Robb (D-Va.), and Sen. Barbara Mikulski (D-Md.) introduced into the Senate Jan. 25. The legislation—which is being sponsored on the House side by Rep. Dave McCurdy (D-Okla.)—will wipe out the federal student loan program, which has enabled millions of needy and middle class youth to obtain college educations, and replace it with a low-paying, forced work program.

This cynical proposal, cooked up by Northwestern University sociology professor Charles Moskos, has been given wide publicity, thanks to the efforts of the Democratic Leadership Council, which Nunn and Robb helped found in the early 1980s to represent "centrist" Democrats. The DLC has held a nationwide series of forums over the past several months to build support for the measure, and is scheduled to hold another in March.

The three legislators have vowed to make the legislation a top agenda item.

Work first, vouchers later

In its present form, the bill will not only deal a deadly blow to the cause of higher education in the United States, but would also establish a dangerous precedent for coerced labor.

Under its provisions, the federal student loan program will be eliminated for 17-25 year olds. It will be replaced by a tuition "voucher" program, which will work like this: If a would-be college student wants to qualify for federal tuition assistance, including loans, Pell grants, etc., he must first "volunteer" to join the military for two years, or to work in a nursing home or other community-service job for one year. At the end of his service, he would be eligible for a voucher (ranging from \$10,000 to \$24,000, according to type and length of service performed) which he could apply to college expenses, a down payment on a house, or vocational training. He would also then be eligible to apply for a student loan.

Stripped of its rhetoric about encouraging more "civic spirit," the net result of the measure will be that millions of

poor and middle-class youth, who had counted on getting a federally backed student loan to finance their college educations, will see their dreams evaporate overnight—unless they are prepared to go to work at subsistence wages.

Proponents of the "Citizens' Corps" measure claim it will build character, and give American youth a sense of responsibility. Interviewed about the measure on NBC's "Today" show Jan. 4, Senator Robb, a strong contender for the 1992 Democratic presidential nomination, bitterly complained that the current federal loan program is "essentially an entitlement program that doesn't have any reciprocal obligation."

House co-sponsor McCurdy claims that the bill's aim is to "reinvigorate citizenship; to reinforce that citizenship is a two-way street; that the benefits of this great country come at a price."

Robb, Nunn, and McCurdy seem to be forgetting that the current student loan program is not a "freebie"; the loans must be paid off, with interest. Moreover, the spiraling cost of college tuition means that all but the wealthiest families must seek assistance to finance their children's education.

The legislation's backers have also apparently forgotten their history. The reason that the federal student loan program was established in the first place, was to help ensure U.S. scientific, military, and economic leadership, by spreading the essential benefits of higher education to as many U.S. citizens as possible. If the program's results seem disappointing, that can be blamed on the decline of educational standards and collapse of the economy.

Cheap labor pool

The "national service" measure isn't the educational program it pretends to be, but is actually a scheme to create a huge pool of cheap labor. To put hundreds of thousands of kids to work in so-called community service jobs at \$100 a week, as the bill proposes, will drive down the wages of those already employed in these jobs, or will put them out of work altogether.

That is underscored by New York City's Volunteer Corps, which Professor Moskos cites as a model for his nationwide proposal. The New York program employs 17- to 20-year-old volunteers to work in various community-service activities—and pays them the royal wage of \$81 per week, followed by \$2,500 cash or a \$5,000 college scholarship after one year.

One of the legislation's specific objectives is to cut defense spending, by lowering the wage levels of enlisted men. According to Representative McCurdy, the national service program will help fill army combat branches at a lower cost, because those participants who opt for military service will be paid less than the current pay-scale allows.

McCurdy spokeswoman Leah Alexander said that the stipends which would be given those who enroll in the Armed Forces under the "national service" bill, will be only one-half to two-thirds of current military pay-scales.