

Eye on Washington by Judy Hodgkiss

Making the District a 'horrible example'

Gingrich's Conservative Revolution crowd is sharpening the knife to dismantle the city.

Under the gun of the "Conservative Revolution" of House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) and his "Contract on America," Washington, D.C. Mayor Marion Barry and the city's 10-member City Council have begun a budget-slashing process that aims at balancing the city's budget by cutting into the flesh and bone of the city's poor and elderly.

Because the U.S. Congress has direct oversight of the District of Columbia's finances, Gingrich's gang has the opportunity to supervise the dismantling of the city's "safety net" for the poor, thereby making the city a bloody example for the rest of the nation. The City Council has announced a preliminary outline of \$230 million in cuts to go into effect immediately, with the goal of detailing another \$300 million in cuts within the next few months, all of which comes out of a total budget of only \$3.2 billion.

An initial \$22 million is now being cut out of this year's \$900 million budget for general welfare benefits, which will eliminate a variety of programs for the homeless, pregnant women, Medicaid recipients, and those who need assistance for rent and utility payments. Even larger cuts have been mandated by Congress in welfare, and are now being debated by the City Council.

The Metro transportation system for the District is being slashed in a way which hits the poorest the hardest. While the subway, which services primarily Virginia and Maryland commuters, remains intact, 20 of the inner-city bus lines are being eli-

minated, and fares for elderly and handicapped bus passes are being doubled.

A cut of \$32 million has been mandated for the city's school system, at a time when the School Board had just made an emergency request to the City Council for a special grant of an additional \$200 million which is needed to meet a fire and safety code upgrading required to keep several schools open past a March deadline. Several members of the School Board have made such a show of resistance to any cuts in their budget, that a mayoral "transition team" task force came up with a proposal, released on Jan. 20, recommending that the entire elected school board be eliminated and replaced with an appointed commission under the jurisdiction of the office of the mayor.

This proposal, of course, echoes the threats coming from the new Republican-controlled House Appropriations Subcommittee for the District, against the D.C. government itself, which proposes to take away the city's 20-year-old "Home Rule" agreement that has allowed it to have an elected mayor and city council, and instead return the District to the jurisdiction of a commission appointed by Congress. If Barry and the City Council do not slice the budget according to Congress' satisfaction, there may well be no more mayor or city council to further debate the subject.

Perhaps the area of budget-cutting which will most immediately result in loss of life in the District is that aimed at D.C. General Hospital and the city's system of clinics. The city's

population is highly dependent on the government for medical help, with approximately 120,000 of its 570,000 residents currently on Medicaid, and 100,000 uninsured.

Five of the District's 15 neighborhood clinics are scheduled to be shut down by mid-February, provoking protests. One doctor servicing one of the clinics in the poorest area of northeast Washington, for example, is working with clergy in the area to try to keep the clinic open. Leaflets are being handed out at church services and elsewhere.

"We serve a lot of elderly people who don't have access to transportation," the doctor told *EIR*. "They are forced to go to far southeast or far northeast for treatment. . . . A lot of people just won't go."

D.C. General Hospital will be forced to lay off one-third of its doctors by April 1, and will eliminate 250 of its 750 beds. This comes on top of the elimination of 250 beds over the last year. Also, Howard University Hospital, which in the past has shared the burden with D.C. General in serving poor and uninsured patients, has suffered its first major cutbacks functioning since its establishment 100 years ago as America's premier African-American medical school.

While Gingrich has expressed his concern that Mayor Barry and the City Council seem to be stalling on the budget cutting, he has nothing but praise for D.C.'s "shadow" representative to Congress, Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton. Norton insists that D.C. politicians must stay ahead of Congress in their zeal to balance budgets, and when the Republicans voted to strip her of even the nominal vote granted to her in House committee sessions, she responded by saying, "What's more important than my vote, is Newt's attitude toward the District. He is cool. He is cool."