

Gingrich bill is slave-labor scheme

by Kathleen Klenetsky

Along with mushrooming rates of joblessness, homelessness, and drug use, the economic depression gnawing at the United States is producing a frightening trend toward barbarism in law enforcement and judicial practice. Demands are rising for tougher penalties against offenders; legislation to make the death penalty mandatory for a widening range of criminal actions is on the rise on the state and federal levels, and the Supreme Court, via its recent rulings permitting the execution of the retarded and minors, is encouraging this trend.

Americans' frustration and anger over government failures to fight a real war on drugs is being used as a convenient pretext for implementing a host of new laws, smacking of police-state controls, that are being concocted to hold the lid down on the social explosions that will overtake the U.S. as the depression deepens.

Symptomatic is the National Drug and Crime Emergency Act (HR 4079), recently introduced into Congress by Rep. Newt Gingrich, the yuppie Georgia Republican who heads the "conservative New Age" outfit, the Conservative Opportunity Society, or COPS.

Co-sponsored by more than 50 Democratic and Republican congressmen, with many more expected to hop aboard over the next few months, the bill mandates Congress to declare a five-year national drug and crime emergency, under which, Gingrich hopes, untold numbers of Americans will be herded into prison, and turned into a gargantuan pool of slave-labor.

The bill calls for handing out a mandatory minimum five-year term to every person convicted in a federal court of a crime of violence against a person or a drug trafficking felony other than simple possession, with no chance of early release. The bill defines "violent crime" very broadly, to include crimes that have "as an element, the use, attempted use, or *threatened use* of physical force against the person or property of another; or that by its nature, involves a *substantial risk* that physical force against the person or property of another may be used in the course of committing the offense" (emphasis added).

Since U.S. prison facilities can barely accommodate those currently incarcerated, the bill proposes several measures to deal with the waves of new prisoners it will produce, including a provision that, during the five-year emergency,

the federal courts "shall not hold prison or jail crowding unconstitutional under the Eighth Amendment," unless "crowding itself is inflicting cruel and unusual punishment on individual prisoners."

It is beyond dispute that the overcrowding that is endemic in most of the country's prisons, especially those in urban areas, contributes to riots, homosexual abuse, the spread of AIDS, and other phenomena hardly conducive to rehabilitating prisoners. But Gingrich's call for suspending Eighth Amendment protections against such overcrowding can only exacerbate these problems.

In the event that jam-packing prisoners into existing facilities is insufficient, the bill proposes housing prisoners in tents, and converting military bases abandoned under the defense cost-cutting drive to prison facilities—a sickening variant on the "peace dividend."

Back to the chain gang

But Gingrich's bill is not simply a blueprint for creating thousands upon thousands of new prisoners. It is also a slave-labor scheme, a 20th-century version of debtors' prison.

One entire section of the legislation is devoted to mandatory work requirements for prisoners. The bill mandates that all prisoners, except those who are 100% disabled, or who pose security or disciplinary risks, be put to work. Such labor "may include, but not be limited to (a) local public works projects and infrastructure repair; (b) construction of new prisons and other detention facilities; (c) prison industries; and (d) other appropriate labor."

The bill states that the U.S. Attorney General may "enter into contracts with private businesses for the use of inmate skills that may be of commercial use to such businesses," and also encourages "greater private sector participation in prison industries."

Prisoners' earnings would be used to pay for prison construction and operating expenses, or for payment of compensation judgments.

The legislation, and the mentality behind it, represent what is wrong with the U.S. government's approach to its domestic problems. Rather than attacking the drug traffic at its source, which would entail the politically "forbidden" decision to go after the bankers and other "men above suspicion" who launder the drug money and pocket much of the profit, the bill simply proposes to get as many small-time drug dealers and users off the streets and behind bars. The fact that this will not solve the larger problem, seems to be irrelevant to the bill's sponsors.

The same holds true for the economic factors behind the rise in criminal activity. Clearly, robbery and related crimes will continue to skyrocket, as more and more people find themselves without any means of supporting themselves and their families. But again, it's a lot easier for congressmen to play the anti-crime demagogue, than to take on a job of solving the country's underlying economic problems.