

Bush welfare plan: a draconian attack on the poor

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The Bush administration's welfare plan, announced last month, is a vicious attack against the poorest sections of society and promotes the "family values" agenda of the right wing. Its aim is to further destroy what little remains of the social safety net and compel millions more people to work as cheap labor. At the same time it threatens low-wage workers with destitution if they lose their jobs.

Nearly 2,000 protesters marched on Washington March 5 against Bush's proposals to overhaul the 1996 welfare law. The marchers also denounced Democratic politicians—including Representative Charles B. Rangel of Harlem, who attempted to speak at the rally—for joining in the victimization of the poor.

At the heart of the plan are provisions that vastly increase work requirements already part of the welfare system. It would raise the percentage of welfare clients who must hold jobs from 50 percent to 70 percent and increase their workweek from 30 hours to 40 hours.

Bush's proposal, presented on February 26, continues Bill Clinton's 1996 welfare "reform" measures, which ended welfare as a federal entitlement and set strict work requirements and time limits for recipients. That program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), is set to expire in September.

In addition to the increased work requirement, the Bush proposal maintains the five-year lifetime limit, prevents millions of immigrants from receiving welfare or food stamps for five years and freezes funding at \$16.6 billion, what it has been since 1996.

The new work requirement will be almost impossible for both recipients and state welfare agencies to meet. Bush's proposal requires welfare recipients to work 40 hours a week in order to receive any benefits. Of the 40 hours, 24 must be in direct work while the other 16 hours can be work-related activities, such as education or job training programs.

Recipients will no longer be allowed to count full-time vocational training as fulfilling their work requirements. The 1996 TANF bill eliminated college as an option for welfare recipients. Without additional education or training, most welfare recipients at best can only hope to find the most menial, dead-end jobs.

Single parents with children, the majority of people on

welfare, will find the 40-hour work requirement especially hard to meet because they will have to send their children to either full-time daycare or pre- and after- school programs. Currently, less than one quarter of low-income families have access to childcare subsidies. Most low-wage workers cannot afford the \$500 or more that quality childcare costs each month. Bush's proposal maintains childcare aid at the current level.

In addition, most entry-level jobs, especially in the retail and service areas, involve working evenings, weekends and nights, times when traditional childcare is not available. Moreover, studies show the absence of parents from the home has detrimental effects on older children, who are forced to take care of younger siblings and unable to do their school work.

Teenage mothers will be required to work the same 40-hour week unless they stay in school. However, most schools do not have programs or facilities to handle the needs of young mothers.

Welfare officials in many states have argued these goals cannot be met and would force a costly overhaul of state programs. In Massachusetts, for example, where 50,000 people have left welfare for jobs since 1995, currently 91 percent of the adults remaining in the welfare caseload—almost 34,000 recipients—are exempt from work requirements. This high percentage reflects the fact that the rolls are down dramatically from 1995, leaving on welfare the neediest and hardest to employ, i.e., those with very low education levels, mental and physical health problems, very young children, criminal records or drug or alcohol addictions.

Claire McIntire, commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance, said it would be impossible for the state to meet the proposed requirements without moving funds out of existing transportation, education and training programs.

In a nod to his right-wing supporters, Bush is also proposing a \$300 million program to encourage single mothers to marry and stop what he calls the "problem of non-material births." According to Bush "several of the nation's leading domestic problems," including violence and childhood poverty, are caused by single mothers having children—not by low wages, poor hours, lack of affordable quality childcare and youth programs, or the lack of transportation, job training and

continuing education. Bush's bill further criminalizes poor fathers by adding stiffer provisions for the collection of child support.

The plan also includes \$135 million for abstinence education. "Abstinence is the surest way and the only completely effective way to prevent unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases," Bush said. "When our children face a choice between self-restraint and self-destruction, government should not be neutral."

Other provisions of Bush's bill will maintain the vindictive policy which bars anyone convicted of a drug offense from obtaining welfare. 92,000 women and 132,000 children are prevented from receiving any assistance because of this policy.

The bill will also grant states more freedom in using TANF block grants for other social programs besides those for the poor. In effect, this allows TANF money to replace general fund money so that states can grant further tax cuts for businesses and the wealthy.

The Bush plan does not lift the five-year lifetime limit for welfare benefits imposed in 1996. One study conducted by the National Campaign for Jobs and Income Support found that 150,000 families have already had their benefits reduced or permanently terminated as a result of the five-year limit.

Bush rejected several proposals that would have allowed states to "stop the clock" for recipients who are working but because of their low wages still receive some welfare benefits.

Currently states are allowed to exempt only 20 percent of their caseloads from the five-year time limit, although some states, such as Connecticut and Ohio, have made it very difficult for people to continue receiving any benefits past the deadline. Most experts believe that within two years the 20 percent limit will be reached and a large number of people will be permanently cut off benefits.

Even the National Governors Association—which helped draft the 1996 welfare law and is dominated by Republicans—called for a relaxation of time limits because of growing unemployment during the recession.

The Bush proposal also contains a specific provision aimed at denying welfare recipients legal protection accorded most workers. Bush's bill states that welfare payments are not considered wages for recipients who are working in workfare programs; that is, working for their welfare checks. Thus welfare recipients who might be doing any number of jobs alongside regular city, county or state employees are not covered by such protections as health and safety regulations, or workers compensation if they are hurt on the job.

Administration officials initially said welfare recipients doing community service, including tasks like cleaning up parks and helping out in offices, would not be covered under the Fair Labor Standards Act, which sets the national minimum wage at \$5.15 an hour. "It's intended to give them some work experience and give them an understanding of work," said Andrew Bush, a welfare official in the US Department of

Health and Human Services. "That is not something that should be subject to minimum wage laws."

After this proposal provoked criticism, government officials quickly reversed themselves, with Tommy G. Thompson, secretary of health and human services, saying the Bush administration was committed to guaranteeing that welfare recipients received the minimum wage for the hours they worked. A spokesman attributed reports to the contrary to "staff misunderstandings." Thompson said that to ensure compliance with minimum wage requirements, the hours recipients would be required to work would be limited by the amount of their welfare grant and food stamps.

The Democratic Party has, at most, made muted criticisms of the Bush plan. They have floated a few proposals that would tie funding to inflation, increase childcare spending, and stop the clock for recipients who are working. However, it is unlikely that any of these proposals will be considered in the final bill.

By and large, politicians from both parties agree with the Bush administration assessment that the 1996 overhaul of the nation's welfare laws—which has cut the number of families receiving welfare in more than half, from 4.4 million families to 2.1 million—was a great success.

Even the figures presented by Bush refute these claims. According to the administration, only 60 percent of former welfare recipients are working at any given time. Four out of ten former recipients are not working at all and 20 percent of former recipients have not held jobs over an extended period. Other independent studies have shown even higher rates of unemployment for former recipients.

For those who have found jobs, living standards are not much better and, in many cases, worse than when they were on welfare. According to a study conducted by the Urban Institute, the majority of those who were forced off welfare only earn an average of \$7.15 an hour, and most work less than 40 hours a week.

Furthermore, since most former welfare recipients worked in entry-level jobs, they have been the first to be laid off during the current recession. The vast majority will not be eligible for unemployment benefits because they did not earn enough to qualify.

Since the onset of the recession welfare rolls have increased in 33 states. The fact that they have not gone up as quickly as in past downturns is not because people are not in need, but because time limits and other state regulations prevent them from returning to welfare after losing a job.



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