

Bush's double standard: protecting corporations, victimizing workers

Patrick Martin
18 November 2002

The Homeland Security bill is a blatant piece of class legislation, combining the destruction of workers' rights with a slew of special provisions awarding tax or liability benefits to favored corporations and industries. These provisions were added to the bill after the November 5 election, when the White House decided to use the revived bill as a vehicle for rewarding some of its most important corporate supporters, such as the drug manufacturers.

The bill as passed by the House of Representatives exempts the new Department of Homeland Security from a recently enacted law requiring the federal government to terminate contracts with corporations that move their headquarters to offshore locations to avoid paying taxes. That measure was adopted by Congress last summer, after the revelations of widespread corporate accounting fraud.

The bill also eliminates or limits the legal liability of many companies that sell antiterrorism goods to the government—from huge baggage inspection machines to vaccines against smallpox and other diseases.

Perhaps the most brazen corporate payoff is the provision protecting the huge drug company Eli Lilly from lawsuits over thimerosal, a mercury-based preservative used in vaccines, which has been linked to autism in children. White House budget director Mitch Daniels was vice president for government affairs at Eli Lilly before joining the Bush administration.

Republican Senator William Frist explained, in remarkably blunt terms, the necessity for restrictions on liability. Without such provisions, he said, drug companies that produced smallpox and other vaccines might refuse to supply the government. As a result, he said, the American people would be at risk from biological weapons attacks.

Thus Frist admitted that the drug monopolies, faced

with possible lawsuits over defective vaccines, would be quite prepared to put their profit interests above the lives of countless thousands of Americans. He never so much as suggested that such behavior would be immoral or unpatriotic. Nor did he feel the need explicitly to defend the right of private corporations to withhold life-saving drugs from the population. As far as he was concerned, such business practice was perfectly understandable and legitimate.

Apparently his views were shared by everybody else in the Senate chamber, from both parties. In the event, no one made an issue of Frist's brief for the drug companies. There was no suggestion from the floor of the Senate that sabotaging the manufacture of vaccines that could save the lives of millions of people would constitute a criminal act, or that any punitive action should be taken against a corporation that withheld critical drugs.

A remarkably different approach prevails, however, when the subject shifts from the conduct of corporations doing business with the Department of Homeland Security to the actions of department employees. When it comes to the workers, the Bush administration insists on a ruthless standard of accountability. Because, the argument goes, America is at war and the American people are at risk, the president must have absolute power to hire and fire workers, award raises or cut pay, or shift workers from position to position, without regard to civil service procedures.

The same cause—the exigencies of the “war on terrorism”—dictates, according to the American political establishment, polar opposite effects for big business and the working class: for the former it means new government protections, for the latter, the destruction of legal protections that have been in force for decades.

Employees of the new department will be compelled to function under quasi-military discipline, although the vast majority will be civilians. Unions may delay changes in work procedures for up to 60 days by appealing to the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service—whose members, like the secretary, are appointed by the president. If this rigged appeal procedure should somehow result in a decision favoring the workers, the secretary may ignore the decision as long as he notifies Congress of his reasons.

Bush will have virtually unlimited authority over the workforce of the new department. He will be able to tear up collective bargaining agreements simply by invoking national security, with the requirement only that he give 10 days' notice and send a written explanation to Congress. A top administration official told the *Washington Post*, "Our view is that the current system is weighted too heavily towards [worker] protection and against performance."

The union-busting power is not brand-new, since presidents since Jimmy Carter have had that authority under legislation passed in 1978. But the provision was always limited in practice to small groups of employees in highly sensitive positions, including the military, intelligence and law enforcement. Now the same measure is to be applied across the board to a large section of the federal workforce.

Only a day after House passage of the Homeland Security bill, the Bush administration signaled that the denial of rights to workers in the new department is only the first stage in a systematic drive to slash the jobs, wages and working conditions of federal workers. The White House published an official notice that it would place as many as 850,000 jobs, nearly half the total federal nonmilitary workforce, up for competition from private contractors over the next several years.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact