

By David Moberg

Welfare bill: another patch-up job

LIBERALS AND CONSERVATIVES ON CAPITOL Hill seemed headed toward a consensus on welfare reform earlier this year. Liberals agreed to emphasize work and family responsibilities for welfare recipients, and conservatives supposedly agreed to provide some federal assistance to make it easier for welfare mothers to find and hold jobs.

But as welfare reform legislation came before the House last week, it was obvious that conservatives were interested simply in clearing the rolls of welfare families quickly and cheaply.

Wrong focus: Yet even the House Democratic reform, the most humane alternative under serious consideration, suffers from the constraints of this new consensus. By focusing on the behavior of the poor rather than poverty and its causes, the consensus provides a looking-glass-world inversion of society that misconstrues both welfare and poverty. The House bill, which was approved last week, would cost over five years an estimated \$4.3 billion to \$5.8 billion, down \$500 million after an amendment by budget-conscious Democrats. The bill would provide increased employment training for the small percentage of welfare recipients who have been on the rolls more than two years; this group makes up the majority of active cases at any given time. It eases the transition to work by providing Medicaid for up to two years and mandating skimpy state-funded child-care aid for up to 12 months. In addition, the current House version revises reductions in aid to working welfare recipients so that they do not lose more in benefits than they make by working—as is now often the case.

Although the bill does not set federal minimum standards or directly raise benefits (which have fallen in real terms by one-third since the early '70s), it makes two-parent families eligible for Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) in 24 states that now bar such aid, and provides some incentive for states to raise payments. It also takes a new stab at collecting child support from absent fathers, by requiring states immediately to begin withholding child support from absent fathers' paychecks, even if they are not behind in payments.

The bill requires women with children over three years old to take part in job training and search programs. This is stiffer than current standards but looser than the Republican alternative of exempting only mothers with children under six months of age. Under the bill women can refuse jobs that pay less than normal wages for the type of work they are offered (unlike an alternative Republican measure). While providing for state experiments, it avoids the Republican option of letting states ignore federal standards on poverty programs under the guise of flexibility and innovation.

The House Democratic bill is far from generous, yet it offers modest reforms. The Republican option would simply have increased pressure to drive women off welfare.

The leading legislation in the Senate, introduced by Sen. Daniel Moynihan (D-NY) and co-sponsored already by 57 senators, is more like the House GOP alternative in that it provides for greater state flexibility, less child care and other assistance, and no benefit-level increase. Moynihan's bill focuses

primarily on collecting child-support payments. Indeed, AFDC would be renamed "child-support supplements."

Liberal lobbying groups supported the House Democratic bill for its modest gains, not because they thought it addressed major problems. "Is this going to eliminate poverty or dramatically change the welfare situation?" Robert Greenstein, a welfare lobbyist, said. "Of course not." Even so, Moynihan's bill passes and many of the House provisions survive a House-Senate conference. President Reagan undoubtedly will veto it. But the House bill at least provides a minimal liberal rallying standard, Greenstein argued.

Flawed debate: This points to the fundamental flaw in the entire debate. In recent years conservative critics have attacked welfare for causing poverty, destroying families and discouraging work. Reagan's initial welfare reform proposals last year set the tone: the goal was to get people off welfare.

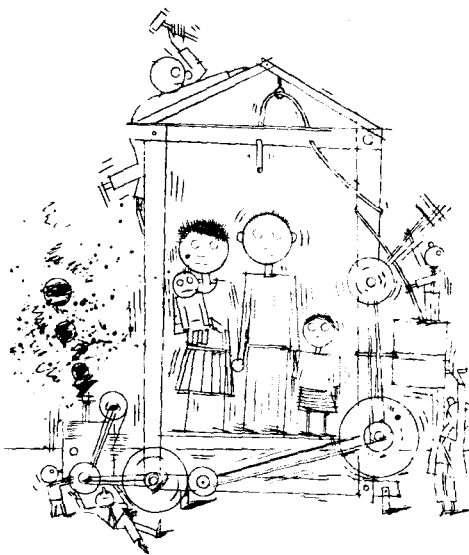
The issue became welfare itself, which, for many different reasons, nobody likes. That is the first great inversion, which might be called the "welfare fetish." What is really a question of relations among people is seen instead as a relationship among things in the market.

Welfare—a shorthand term for AFDC, although the analysis could be extended to other programs—exists because there is poverty. But, as Michael Katz argues in his history, *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse*, the goal of welfare has only minimally been to provide relief; its larger underlying motivations have been to promote social order, discipline the poor and regulate labor markets. American public welfare has a distinctive cast compared to Western European models: It is far less comprehensive, more reliant on private delivery systems and much more geographically varied. Most important, public assistance is "means-tested" and separated from broad social insurance programs, like Social Security and unemployment compensation. That means it is stigmatized and vulnerable. The current welfare reform proposals, even the more generous ones, do not depart from this sad history.

Congress did not ask what it could do to eliminate poverty. It focused not on the economic factors that make people poor, but on the behavior of poor people. Recent poverty trends offer distressing evidence: After declining since the '60s, poverty began increasing in the late '70s and '80. Increasingly, the poor are young women and children (one-fifth of all children—and 43 percent of black children—are poor). More than 40 percent of all poor people over the age of 14 worked last year, but most of them in the low-wage, part-time jobs that have been the major source of new jobs in the '80s.

There is a tendency for many people to conflate "the poor" and "welfare." But the vast majority of women remain on welfare only temporarily before they manage to return to the burgeoning ranks of the working poor. Even more tragic, the poor and welfare tend further to be identified with unwed black mothers in big city ghettos.

Social isolation: The ghetto underclass—conforming to the age-old images of the undeserving, dangerous poor—has indeed grown. As sociologist William Julius



Wilson points out in his new work, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass and Public Policy*, the percentage of poor black families headed by women more than doubled to 74 percent in the two decades since 1960; the proportion of black teen-age births out of wedlock also doubled to 89 percent in the same period. These families are most likely to be long-term AFDC recipients. The communities in which they live are more likely to be wracked by crime and to lack job opportunities. They have lost many traditional "social buffers" that provide discipline or inspiration, such as churches, community groups or small businesses—in part because better-educated blacks have benefitted from a decline in racial barriers and moved out of the poor neighborhoods. The result is a kind of social isolation of the poor that yields what Wilson calls "concentration effects," worsening an already bad lot.

Conservatives argue that these poor families were formed because women were enticed by generous welfare payments to have illegitimate children and live off the public rather than get a job. The new welfare reform is intended alternatively to help or whip them out of this dependency, which conservatives claim hurts them far more than the pain of

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being forced to depend on low-wage, part-time jobs.

Throughout recent centuries politicians, preachers and businessmen have chorused that welfare is bad for the poor, as Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward note in *The Mean Season: The Attack on the Welfare State*. Most employers disliked relief not just because of the cost but more because it subverted the ideology of the marketplace and changed the balance of power between workers and their employers. "Efforts to shape relief arrangements so they would not intrude on market relations virtually define the history of social welfare," Piven and Cloward conclude. Relief conflicts thus have al-

ways been at the heart of broader class conflicts—and are again now.

Welfare, unemployment compensation, Social Security or other measures give workers a way of surviving without having to subject themselves to every employer demand. It strengthens workers' bargaining power on the job; they have a "safety net" and do not have to compete with desperately poor workers. As a result, there has been steady pressure to make relief as unattractive as possible in order to make people totally dependent on market vagaries.

Welfare myths: Wilson as well as Piven and Cloward review the voluminous recent literature on the behavior of the poor, and they find that the conservative charges simply are not supported. Welfare does not induce illegitimacy. It may, however, lead young women to form independent households rather than live with their parents, which is probably the main reason for the explosion in AFDC families in the '60s.

The great variation in levels of state payments has, in a sense, been a brutal experiment with the conservative thesis. Harvard poverty researchers Mary Jo Bane and Richard Elwood say. The result: low benefits don't reduce out-of-wedlock births or retard formation of female-headed families. They just make families and children poorer.

The economic incentives of welfare rarely work the way conservatives or liberals predict. Despite significantly declining welfare payments, welfare rolls rose in the '70s. Despite disincentives to work created by Reagan policy changes in the early '80s, few women gave up their jobs for welfare.

Piven and Cloward argue that welfare should provide disincentives to work if it is going to change the balance of power; but they, like Wilson, find that numerous studies show it provides only slight disincentive to work. That is partly because people want to work to participate in society and to give themselves a sense of identity. Also, it is partly because welfare payments are so low: the average annual grant is about \$4,200, roughly half the poverty level for a family of three.

If welfare damages self-esteem and hurts poor people, Piven said, "it's not welfare that's the problem, it's low welfare grants, constricted job opportunities and harassment that are the problems."

Male unemployment: If welfare isn't the cause of increased poverty and social pathology, especially in inner-city black ghettos, what is? Wilson argues that one of the major reasons for the rise in black households headed by women is a dramatic decline in the availability of young black men who avoid being killed or jailed and have jobs—"the marriageable pool." Male joblessness, not welfare, explains the rise in out-of-wedlock births, divorce and comparative failure of black women to remarry. Wilson concludes.

Following his argument, the answer to the problems that have caused so much hand-wringing about welfare is not welfare reform. It is creating more jobs for black men—and women. But the problems of poor black men are not addressed at all in the new consensus, since few are covered by welfare.

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IN SHORT

By Joel Bleifuss

Mag "The Gag" Thatcher

With an acquiescent court system at her disposal, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher has taken government censorship to limits not seen in the "civilized world" since the '40s. Earlier this month the Thatcher administration got a court injunction to stop BBC radio from broadcasting a discussion titled "My Country, Right or Wrong." The show was to have been a debate on the role and accountability of MI5 and MI6, the British secret services. According to *Manchester Guardian Weekly* columnist James Lewis, "Nobody [in the government] pretended that [the program] posed a threat to national security. The gag merely reflected the government's decision that the security services are no longer a subject for legitimate journalistic inquiry." This gag order is a continuance of the repression that began earlier this year when Thatcher, through a court injunction, succeeded in preventing the *Guardian*, the *Sunday Times* and the *Observer* from printing excerpts from *Spycatcher*, the bestselling expose by former MI5 agent Peter Wright that is banned in Britain (see *In These Times*, April 8). As an editorial in Rupert Murdoch's pro-Thatcher *Sunday Times* commented at the time, "We stand gagged and bound hand and foot by restrictions unprecedented in peacetime Britain. We are dealing with a mixture of Whitehall farce and George Orwell's 1984."

MacNews

Who knows but that the dominant press here in the U.S. would be facing similar restrictions were it not for the fact that lap dogs rarely need a muzzle. Take *USA Today*. The nation's colorful daily—flush from this year's Pulitzer for "best paragraph"—is planning to do to TV news what it did to print journalism. Marina Hirsh writes in *Propaganda Review*, a new quarterly that critiques the information industry, that the Gannett Corporation—which for the record is pronounced just like the carrion-eating sea bird—will beam in next fall with a half-hour daily news show that is to fill the gap between *Entertainment Tonight* and the *CBS Evening News*. It promises to be a tight fit.

The right has its eyes on you

A network of "private spies" is at this moment busy investigating people with left-wing views and passing the information they gather to the Justice Department, the FBI and the White House. In a chilling, but ignored three-part expose, Sylvia Chase of San Francisco's KRON-TV reported last month that these spies photographed demonstrations, infiltrate meetings using aliases, and glean names by rummaging around in trash cans. They work for a network of groups that are closely tied to the Reagan administration, groups like the Young America's Foundation, the Council for Inter-American Security, Capital Research Center and the Institute for Contemporary Studies. As Michael Boos, director of Young America's Foundation, explains, the curbs Congress put on domestic surveillance in the '70s crippled the government's ability to monitor the left. So, to compensate for this disability, and at the same time keep within the letter of the law, a privatized network of right-wing spies was pressed into service.

Institute for Contemporary Studies digs trash: Stephen Schwartz, a former member of International Socialists, now works for the Institute for Contemporary Studies (ICT), one of the groups in what he characterizes as a "commie-watching network." ICT was founded by, among other Reagan associates, Attorney General Edwin Meese. Schwartz told KRON-TV's Sylvia Chase that he is in close contact with the National Security Council, that he has briefed a White House audience that included Oliver North and that he had met with the late CIA Director William Casey. Schwartz described the work his group does this way to Chase: "When a left-wing group publishes, say, a list of its state committee and throws it in the garbage and somebody finds it in the garbage and brings it to me, then I know the names of all those people, and sometimes there will be more information." Although Schwartz admits it does happen, he says he does not "believe in" thievery. "That's not fair," he says. What is fair is open perusal. "If any leftist group has an open office where there are a lot of people around, you know you can walk in, and if there is something lying on a desk, you don't have to filch it. You might just write down what's on it—see a list of names or something like that." Schwartz says that there are other people like him who are

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Stick 'em up: The War Resisters League (WRL), as a quiet form of civil disobedience, is urging people to visit toy stores armed with stickers like those shown above. (You can get 40 for \$1 or 1,000 for \$20 from WRL, Box 188, Hampton, CN 06247.) This year WRL has targeted GI Joe by Hasbro with both the stickers and a boycott. But a Hasbro spokesman dismisses the group's actions. "Today's action figures provide a modern extension of the role of toys in enhancing children's play experience.... The reality is that children have played fantasy games of the triumph of good over evil for centuries." As have their leaders.

The ANC kidnap plot—was Britain involved?

When the British government earlier this year arrested—then released—four men who had allegedly plotted to kidnap African National Congress (ANC) leaders in London, the story was given strong play in the European and South African media. But the incident went virtually unreported in the U.S.—an especially surprising fact given allegations that the British government was involved in the plot. In fact, when British officials announced in October that the four were being released for reasons of "insufficient evidence" and "national security," attorneys for the defense were reportedly ready to produce documents that would embarrass the government of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

The alleged kidnap plan bears all the markings of South Africa's secret service and was being carried out, it appears, with the knowledge—if not the cooperation—of British intelligence. Using an elaborate cover that involved a purported plot to overthrow the leftist government of the Seychelles, an island nation in the Indian Ocean, the conspirators hoped to recruit members of London's exiled Seychellois community. Targets included Solly Smith, the ANC's chief representative in London, and Joe Slovo, formerly second-in-command of the military wing of the ANC.

British intelligence agencies, with longstanding ties to their South African counterparts, have routinely ig-

nored Pretoria's activities in England. In 1982 South African agents were implicated in the firebombing of the ANC's London offices. The following year four of Pretoria's officials were charged with illegal arms trafficking. After being unexpectedly released on bail, the officials flew back to South Africa and the case was dropped.

This latest plot was inadvertently discovered in July when London police, on a stake-out for "homosexual misbehavior," arrested a man calling himself Frank Larsen in a hotel restroom. Larsen, upon being accused of soliciting, produced a Ministry of Defense police identification card, later found to be forged. British officials later determined Larsen was Viggo Oerbak, a Norwegian mercenary who had worked for the Rhodesian army.

A subsequent search of Larsen's home turned up a haul of documents, including a list of ANC members to be kidnapped and their British home addresses. Police also uncovered Foreign Office documents and manuals and Ministry of Defense identification documents. It is still unclear if all of these materials were forged, as the British government has claimed.

This evidence and information obtained from Larsen during police questioning led to the arrests of three other men: John Larsen, who claimed to be Frank's son but was in fact Hans Christian Dahl of Norway; Jonathan Wheatley, a former paratrooper who served in the Falklands; and Evan Dennis Evans, a former RAF officer who served in Rhodesia and worked for South Afri-

can special forces.

Details of the kidnap plan are still sketchy, but according to British press reports it appears that the four were directed by a South African businessman, Johann Niemoller, who allegedly associates with members of Pretoria's intelligence community. He visited England in late 1986 and met with three of the conspirators. Niemoller has told South African newspapers that plots against the ANC were discussed but that he refused to help.

Further implicating the South Africans was the hasty departure of Pretoria's military attache in London, Col. Robert Crowpher, who left after the case was exposed. Crowpher cannot be replaced, as European Community guidelines call for the phased elimination of military ties with Pretoria, and it's a safe bet that he would have been withdrawn only under the most extraordinary circumstances.

The British security services claim no knowledge of any of the accused, however several British papers have reported that Frank Larsen has associated for the past five years with political and military figures, frequently wearing a British military uniform. The British press has revealed that he was also introduced to retired U.S. Gen. John Singlaub, head of the World Anti-Communist League and one of the key players in the Iran-contra affair.

This, and other evidence, has bolstered suspicions that British intelligence was at least aware that South African agents were planning actions in England and did nothing.