National Service Act: indentured servitude for youth

By the Young Communist League, USA

The rightwing and the military industrial complex have hatched a new plot to eliminate college grants and loans and impose a disguised military draft on the nation's youth. Legislation has been introduced into the House and Senate called the Citizenship and National Service Act of 1989 (S.3). It would ask youth to "voluntarily" engage in community and military service in exchange for educational and housing benefits.

The legislation was originally conceived by the Democratic Leadership Council, a conservative grouping in the Democratic Party, and introduced by Senator Sam Nunn. Anytime the DLC puts something forward, our senses go on full alert.

By working in the community for 40 hours a week at $100, or the military at 66 percent of military pay, a young person will earn vouchers that would then be traded for college education and/or housing. One year of community work is worth $10,000, two years in the military $24,000 in vouchers.

Economic subsistence for youth

S.3 is cast for a young generation on the economic decline. It will force the idea of "economic subsistence" on youth. It is a program for a militarized economy and one that expands the national guard and reserves during a time of greater international relaxation of tensions.

"The Citizens Corps is based on a very simple but profound principle that those who take from the common good should give something back," said Sen. Nunn. Well isn't that special, Sen. Nunn! What have the military corporations, S&Ls and big banks given back to the "common good" for the hundreds of billions of dollars they have ripped off from the "common good"?

Destroying entitlement programs

S.3 would be the final hammer blow against educational entitlement programs. It is a smokescreen obscuring the wreckage of the Reagan "revolution" in education, job and job-training programs. Instead of reversing the cuts, it becomes a diversion from restoring the Reagan cuts and even a phillsophical justification for those cuts. It is an application of the concept of workfare to education. S. 3 is big business's answer to the crisis they have created in their drive for maximum profits: generational unemployment, low and subminimum wages, and an out of control drug epidemic.

Behind the noble idea of voluntary service to one's country, youth become a battering ram against remaining entitlement programs. It's the same rotten Reagan idea: the people are entitled to nothing, not even to buy services with their own taxes! You must work double for social programs that you provide yourself. S. 3 takes the government off the hook for any responsiblity in providing for the education of the nation's youth.

In place of the entitlement programs, the right wing wants to promote "voluntarism" to solve the nation's ills. S. 3 brings to life the "thousand points of light" concept. But in reality it is a "thousand band-aids" covering the destruction of social programs.

"Voluntary service" equals forced service

The premise for a voluntary program would be that the grant and loan system was maintained and expanded. Without them millions of working-class, and especiailly African-American and other minority youth, would be forced into the "voluntary service."

Community service vouchers won't match the high cost of tuition. The estimated cost of attending a private university in 1987-88 was $13,300; a public university, $4,760 and a public two-year school, $3,230. Private universities would be out of reach of the working-class and minority students. Most would be forced into the military component, where the benefits are higher.

It ignores the reality that large numbers of young workers have returned to school for retraining. Many have families that they would be unable to support on a subsistence wage. It effectively eliminates the possibility for young workers to get grant assistance.

Consequently there's nothing national about this service. It would not "spread the responsibilities of citizenship more equitably." Instead it would establish a track system of forced peonage for working class youth while the children of the rich are effectively exempt from service.

The youth would also become a low wage battering ram. In civilian service the indiviual would serve in some job in the "educational, human, conservation and public safety service or other existing national programs." Millions of young workers would be doing jobs at $2.50 per hour that should carry union wages. It is an extension of the subminimum training wage.

While youth and students have been developing closer relations with labor in recent years, this legislation, if enacted, would force youth and students on a collision course with organized labor.