

# Gingrich gang attacks food stamp program

by H. Graham Lowry

The Gramm-Gingrich gang is still storming about the halls of the U.S. Capitol, waging a merciless war against the poor. Despite the Senate's defeat of the Balanced Budget Amendment, the glassy-eyed shocktroops led by House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) and Sen. Phil Gramm (R-Tex.) continue to push their fascist program, best known as the "Contract on America." Among their latest atrocities is a scheme to deprive the destitute of heating assistance, if they expect even a minimal amount to eat.

The American people are being asked to accept such measures in the name of "deficit reduction" and "freeing" the poor from "dependency." President Clinton hit the snake on the head on March 7, when he described the onslaught against federal poverty programs as "budget-cutting . . . wrapped in the cloak of welfare reform."

That evening, the House Agriculture Committee voted to reduce eligibility for food stamps and to roll back benefit levels to "save" \$16.5 billion over the next five years. Committee chairman Pat Roberts (R-Kan.) defended the reductions, claiming they were "all policy decisions tied to welfare reform," not to budget-cutting. The Department of Agriculture promptly declared that the proposal "would eliminate the national nutritional safety net."

About 27 million people currently receive food stamps to help them buy groceries, at a cost to the government of \$27 billion a year. One out of every four American children under the age of six was already living in poverty in 1992, according to a recent study—which certainly leaves no room for further cutbacks in food assistance.

## A program for enforced poverty

In their assault on the food stamp program, the Conservative Revolutionists fell short of a key objective, however. Their goal was to enforce their "Contract with America" promise to convert the program's funding into block grants to be administered by the states. The existing federal program increases food stamp allotments if a family's income goes down, whereas the Gramm-Gingrich gang wants to *reduce* the total income of families already living in poverty.

A number of Republican governors, led by welfare termi-

nators William Weld (Mass.) and John Engler (Mich.), had lobbied hard to include food stamps in the block grant "reforms." They do not wish their plans for further reduction and outright elimination of welfare assistance undermined, by the escape valve of increased federal food stamp allotments. Even though the House Agriculture Committee refused to turn the food stamp program over to block-grant control by the states, the plan now being considered includes some provisions to enforce greater poverty nonetheless.

The Gramm-Gingrich gang of thieves proposes to count energy assistance payments as income—and include them as "personal assets" in determining food stamp eligibility! In some northern states, such payments account for as much as 26% of cash welfare benefits, simply to enable the poor to heat their dwellings and avoid freezing to death. To receive food stamps, recipients currently cannot have assets worth more than \$2,000—or \$3,000 if they are elderly. Any further tightening of requirements would essentially deny benefits to anyone who has any assets at all, or—under the scheme to count energy assistance as "assets"—offer them the choice of freezing or starving.

The chiselers on the House Agriculture Committee would also cap the personal vehicle allowance at \$4,550, and chalk up any value beyond that as "assets" as well. The current exemption for vehicles used to transport water or fuel would be repealed. One member, Rep. Nick Smith (R-Mich.), offered an amendment to prevent food stamp recipients from buying candy, candy-coated ice cream, coffee, tea, cocoa, and most non-dairy beverages. Ridiculed as "the Gruel Stamp Amendment" by Rep. Earl Pomeroy (D-N.D.), the proposal was fortunately defeated.

Legal immigrants who have not yet realized the "American Dream" may soon find Newt in their nightmares. The food stamp "reforms" would also deny them assistance until they have fulfilled residency requirements and applied for citizenship, effectively disqualifying them for at least five years.

And if, by a near-miracle, a potential recipient clears all these hurdles to become eligible for assistance (and is still alive to tell about it), food stamp benefits would flow forth at their current level: a whopping 103% of what the Department of Agriculture so generously calls its "thrifty meal plan." That should permit some additional household savings, since only small plates would be required. But House Republicans also plan to restore an annual cap on authorized spending, which could lead to further reductions in benefits if the cap were exceeded.

The beadles of the Gramm-Gingrich poorhouse did, however, offer to increase funding for programs to deliver food to soup kitchens, by \$500 million—leaving their net gouge into the food stamp program at \$16 billion. If decency and sanity do not prevail in the House, perhaps the Senate will find more of the resolve it mustered in defeating the Balanced Budget Amendment.