

Republican 'Contract' grinds to a halt

by William Jones

When Republican congressmen start to "take the pulse" of their constituents back in their districts during the August recess, they may well be returning for their next bout of legislative activities in September with considerably less enthusiasm for the "Contract with America." As voters learn more about the legislative contents of the Contract, Republican lawmakers are beginning to feel the heat from an outraged constituency. GOP legislators now out on the hustings trying to explain to voters their plan for instituting a more "cost-effective" program than Medicare, are starting to realize what they will face if they continue on their present course.

Because whatever saccharine label GOP "hawkers" may put on their mysterious concoctions, they are quickly finding that marketing fascist economics is going to be an uphill climb. The fact of the matter is, that despite massive rhetoric to the contrary, the Contract with America was simply never understood, much less accepted, by the American voters, and the hard sell of Republican demagogues to get them to accept it is failing miserably.

Far more than an election gimmick, the Contract with America is a recipe for disaster. Manufactured on the basis of the "free trade" philosophy popularized by Austro-Hungarian fascist demagogue Friedrich von Hayek, the darling of the Conservative Revolution, the Contract is designed to gut necessary social spending in order to assure the flow of payments to an ever-more-bankrupt financial system. The Contract would have cumulatively cut roughly \$140 billion from programs for food, education, child and adult health care, housing, job training, and other necessities provided for low-income families by fiscal year 2001. In addition, in a blatant pay-back for services (and finances) rendered, the Contract would have plowed back to the wealthy, billions of dollars for speculative and other purposes in the form of a capital gains tax cut.

The initial targets of the Contract were to be the unemployed and welfare recipients. But the gouging wouldn't stop there. The elderly, pensioners, and the sick were also going to have to bear a good chunk of the "burden" for the Contract with America. The Contract included cuts in Medicare, Medicaid, and (although not everybody wanted to be caught saying this out loud) Social Security.

While a hyperactive, Republican-controlled House of

Representatives passed most of the items of the Contract during its first 100 days, most of the Contract is now in political never-never land. The Balanced Budget Amendment, line-item veto, welfare reform, crime legislation, regulatory reform, and tax cuts for the rich were all rushed through the House under new rules set up by Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.). These rules significantly limited debate, allowing the fascist agenda to be rammed through more quickly.

Different rules

The particular rules of the Senate, fashioned to allow more reasoned debate, gave many senators pause. One by one, practically all the Contract measures passed by the House were rejected by the Senate, and only in a few cases because of the rule requiring 60 votes to override a filibuster. Republican "deficit hawks" were skeptical about the "tax cut to the rich," hoping instead that any savings made from gouging social programs would instead go to cutting the deficit. Some Republicans were not so keen in shifting responsibility for welfare reform entirely to the states, knowing full well that many states, no longer under the mandate of the federal government, would simply scrap many welfare programs.

Despite efforts by Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole (R-Kan.) to "get on the scoreboard" with welfare reform before the August recess, Republican disunity and Democratic opposition forced him to table the measure until after September. The anti-constitutional line-item veto, which ironically had strong bipartisan support, was stalled by Republican senators who didn't want to give such strong executive control over financial matters to a Democratic President.

The equally unconstitutional term-limits proposal, which was bandied about so frequently on the campaign trail by conservative Republican candidates conscious of voters' intense dissatisfaction with "professional politicians," was quickly shelved by both Houses, as soon as the new candidates were seated. Ironically, the petty ambition of individual legislators served to save the constitutional prerogative of the voters to set their own "term limits."

One of the Contract items that came close to passing, but was stymied by the filibuster rule, was the Balanced Budget Amendment. If enacted, the amendment would force Congress every year to make severe, across-the-board cuts in the budget in order to balance expenditures against that year's federal revenue. The measure would effectively eliminate Congress's constitutional authority to appropriate funds. It would undoubtedly be subject to challenge in the courts, and face a near-certain presidential veto. It passed the House, but failed to pass the Senate with a veto-proof majority—of only one vote. Dole is threatening to take up the amendment again as soon as he feels he has the needed votes. Also, a draconian crime bill that significantly restricts *habeas corpus* rules was passed in the House in the beginning of February, but has yet to be considered in the Senate.