

Pennsylvania's James takes lead vs. fascist economics

by Nancy Spannaus

As states around the United States embark upon their early January ritual of budget (cutting) presentations, and as aspects of the 1996 so-called welfare reform act begin to push tens of thousands of needy out of the social safety net, the model for dealing with fascist economic austerity policies is being provided in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. There, state Rep. Harold James, who also heads the Legislative Black Caucus, has launched an initiative to roll back the welfare cuts imposed by Gov. Tom Ridge in 1996—cuts which are known to have killed two people outright, and probably many more whose deaths were unpublicized.

Representative James held a press conference at Philadelphia's City Hall on Dec. 30, to call upon the governor to restore his deadly cuts in the state medical assistance program, using the \$123 million surplus announced by Ridge's budget secretary on Dec. 11. James was joined by eight other Democratic state legislators and Philadelphia City Council President John Street, and he announced the support of many other state leaders, including heads of many labor unions.

"The restoration of this safety net does not have to cost the taxpayers of Pennsylvania any additional money," James declared. "The restoration of the safety net for the concluding six months of the fiscal year, which ends June 30, 1997, could be funded with the \$123 million surplus in state revenues that has already accrued during the first five months of this fiscal year." James said that Governor Ridge could use his executive powers to restore the medical cuts immediately. He said that the alternative mechanism would be passage of a bill sponsored by Rep. John Myers (D-Phila.), to restore eligibility for the 220,000 unemployed, working poor, and disabled persons who were cut off earlier this year.

To sustain the medical assistance program into the future, Representative James has an additional solution at hand. In

mid-1996, he introduced a bill to tax the purchase of financial securities, at a rate of 0.2%. This small tax, applied to the huge *untaxed* market in securities in Pennsylvania, would raise at least \$10 billion for the Commonwealth.

The Nuremberg standard

If Governor Ridge does not act to restore the cuts in medical assistance, he will be indicting himself for Nuremberg crimes against humanity. The issue of Ridge's willful murder, with the stroke of a pen, of the working poor whom he took off welfare assistance in order to "balance the budget," has been increasingly prominent in Pennsylvania since its passage in May 1996. The LaRouche Presidential campaign took the point in circulating over 1 million pamphlets denouncing the governor's actions, and showing precisely how they mimic those of the Nazis, who wrote off "lives not worthy to be lived."

Representative James took the occasion of a policy forum sponsored by FDR-PAC, the political action committee led by LaRouche and his associates, on Dec. 14 in Washington, D.C., to define his approach to Governor Ridge's actions. He said:

"Government officials should be held personally responsible for the deadly consequences of their policies—this is the principle established at the Nuremberg trials after World War II.

"What appears to be happening, is that some people are no longer considered worthy of proper medical care, especially the poor, the elderly, the mentally disabled, and people with grave illnesses such as HIV. . . .

"The Nuremberg trials provide a historic precedent, whereby high government officials are held personally accountable for the results of their policies.

“One of the charges in the indictment at Nuremberg referred directly to their inhumane medical policies. Count Three, War Crimes, and Count Four, Crimes against Humanity, charge them with ‘inadequate provision of surgical and medical services,’ and says this constituted one means of committing ‘murder and ill-treatment of the civilian population.’

“Accordingly, on Oct. 31,” Representative James continued, “I released a statement calling for statewide hearings on Governor Ridge’s medical cuts, which I said may lead to an impeachment resolution.

“I said that Governor Ridge must sit down with our legislative leadership, including the Democratic chairman of the Health and Human Services Committee and other pertinent legislators, and work out a plan whereby adequate medical services will be provided to those being cut off of medical assistance.

“At the same time, I called for public hearings to thoroughly document the deadly impact of Governor Ridge’s actions.

“I believe, based on the information already at hand, plus the additional information we will gather as people’s health further deteriorates, and lives are lost, that Governor Ridge’s actions will rise to the level of an impeachable offense.

“The objective of impeachment would be to charge the governor with gross misbehavior in office under Article VI of the Pennsylvania Constitution, since he knew, or should have known, that his medical cuts would result in the wrongful death or injury of innocent persons.

“This will demonstrate that the people will hold government leaders responsible for the Gingrich-style, mean-spirited policies that cause injury and loss of innocent lives.”

How many deaths?

One of the events which spurred support for Representative James’s initiative was the highly publicized death of Lolita Cunningham, a young woman who had been the first childhood heart transplant recipient in Philadelphia. Cunningham, who had been working as a toxicologist, and was intent upon returning to school to become a scientist, was denied state medical assistance in the summer, because she was making “too much money.” She was unable to pay for her drug maintenance, which cost \$600 a month, and died, at the age of 24, on Dec. 11.

Governor Ridge and his office contend that the cuts in medical assistance are necessary because of budget shortfalls, and the alleged unwillingness of people to work. In fact, Ridge’s spokesman Tim Reeves responded to Representative James’s Dec. 30 press conference by telling National Public Radio that “we said people must work part-time to get free health benefits, and *the governor has no interest in reversing that.*”

Yet, Cunningham was working—as are many of the 220,000 individuals who were cut off. Reeves was just outright lying.

The previous publicized death caused by Ridge’s cuts was that of Wilson Lezcay, a legal immigrant with mental health problems, who had been cut off assistance. Soon after Lezcay’s death, Governor Ridge unilaterally changed his policy of cutting off legal immigrants from medical assistance, stating that the policy was probably unconstitutional.

But Lezcay and Cunningham are just two of what may be thousands of individuals who have met death as a result of the cuts.

Representative James, and LaRouche Democrats in the state, have campaigned relentlessly for the governor to undertake a study of the effects of the medical cuts. An authorization was made by the legislature, but Governor Ridge refused to spend the money. Hearings have been requested, as has the list of names of those being cut off. The LaRouche campaign has cited statistical studies from another state’s health cuts, showing that as many as 3,000 Pennsylvanians of the 220,000 cut off, might die as a result—within six months.

So far, however, no hearings have been called by the Republican-dominated legislature. And the needless deaths, mostly unpublicized, continue.

The rest of the country

What is unique about Pennsylvania is that leading Democrats, including LaRouche Democrats, have launched a highly visible fight to prevent Nazi-like austerity policies from going into effect. Those Nazi-like austerity policies are being implemented throughout the country, with many more people on the victim list, and very little opposition in sight.

The Democratic Party caved in to the Gingrichite welfare reform program in the summer of 1996, and thus set in motion a series of social service cuts that are projected to throw at least 1 million more children into poverty, among other things. Legal immigrants, for example, are going to be cut off food stamps around the country. Individuals with histories of drug and alcohol addiction are scheduled to be cut off Supplemental Security Income. Many children now receiving SSI for disabilities are targeted to be removed from assistance. And millions more adults, many with children, are under the gun to begin working—maybe even taking some public employee’s job—in order to receive some food stamps or cash assistance.

Given the state of the economy, and the level of jobs available, this new “reform” is going to kill people, just as the Ridge cuts have done. The majority of Americans seem to have accepted the idea that such deaths are a “necessary evil,” in order to accomplish the balancing of the budget. But increasingly, they are going to have to face the fact, that fascist policies against the poorest, will eventually hit them as well.

This message—in its economic and moral content—is what the LaRouche Democrats and their allies in labor and civil rights and community groups, are determined to get across now.

Pennsylvania lawmakers: Restore medical cuts

The following are excerpts from the Dec. 30, 1996 press conference called by Pennsylvania State Rep. Harold James.

Rep. Harold James: My name is Harold James, state legislator from the 186th legislative district, chairman of the Pennsylvania Legislative Black Caucus, and I'm joined by State Rep. Jim Roebuck, first vice chair of the Black Caucus; Babette Josephs, one of our honorary members; John Myers; from our Democratic leadership, Mark Cohen; also Reverend Bailey from the Black Clergy; Rep. Curtis Thomas; Rep. LeAnna Washington. Also joining us is Leona Smith, president of the National Union of the Homeless.

I am calling for emergency bipartisan action that would immediately restore all the cuts in the state medical assistance program, that occurred as a result of the passage of Act 35 this past May.

The restoration of this safety net does not have to cost the taxpayers of Pennsylvania any additional money. The restoration of the safety net for the concluding six months of the fiscal year, which ends June 30, 1997, could be funded with the \$123 million surplus in state revenues that has already accrued during the first five months of this fiscal year. On Dec. 11, Governor Ridge's budget secretary, Robert Bitenbender, announced the existence of this \$123 million surplus.

When Governor Ridge insisted upon eliminating over 220,000 poor and disabled Pennsylvanians from the state's medical assistance/health care program last spring, he claimed that he was forced to do so solely for budgetary considerations. He said that he anticipated a \$250 million budget deficit for fiscal year 1996-97. The slashing of the health care safety net, was supposedly carried out in order to "save" \$250 million, and, thereby, balance the budget on poor people.

Now his own budget secretary has announced that not only do we have *no* deficit, but we have a \$123 million surplus, after only five months of the current fiscal year!

Governor Ridge's commendable action in seeking help for the victims of the recent tragic fire in Philadelphia, indicates that he is concerned about his image as a man lacking compassion for the ordinary people. But the 220,000 people cut off medical assistance need more than image-building gestures—they need medicine, they need basic health care, so as to be able to live and be productive citizens. Governor

Ridge should do the right thing, the humane thing, and support this initiative to immediately restore the medical assistance/health care benefits which he took from the people.

New evidence is continuously coming into my office about the casualty toll, and the devastating effects on people's lives, that have been wrought by this mean-spirited Act 35, and the elimination of over 220,000 unemployed, working poor, and disabled people from the medical assistance/health care program. My office has assembled dozens of case studies of deaths, injuries, and inhumane treatment of needy people disqualified from medical assistance by Act 35. These are cases in urban, suburban, and rural areas, from Philadelphia to Beaver County, and many places in between, and we have the case studies here for those who are interested. This includes testimony and evidence from 48 witnesses and sources, describing 9 deaths—2 from the case studies, and 7 testified to by the Nurses of Pennsylvania—and 20 life-threatening situations, directly and indirectly related to Governor Ridge's medical assistance and health-care cuts. We continue to call for state-wide public hearings, to document the devastation caused by these mean-spirited policies, and to provide relief to those who are suffering as a result. . . .

We've been joined by Appropriations Chair Rep. Dwight Evans. As to how we can best fund the health-care safety net for fiscal year 1997-98, that will be the subject of budgetary discussions that will occur this spring, under the leadership of Rep. Dwight Evans. That question need have no bearing on this situation, which applies to the concluding six months of the current fiscal year.

We hope the governor would not choose to take this \$123 million surplus (which could possibly grow to over \$250 million by the end of the fiscal year), and apply it to business tax cuts. Too often, he takes from the poor and gives to the rich. I say to the business community: Doesn't it make more sense to have a healthy workforce, and healthy customers, and the harmony that flows from that, than the misery, discord, and mounting casualty toll, that the cuts in the medical assistance/health care program have unleashed? So we would hope big business would support restoration of these medical assistance cuts, so they, in turn, can have healthy customers. . . .

Rep. Dwight Evans: . . . The chairman has indicated, the potential surplus that he's referring to, is what was announced by the governor's budget secretary—that there is a potential budget surplus that could happen by the end of the year. As the chairman indicated also, we probably would not have passed Act 35; basically, that's where a great deal of the money came from, in the first place. Clearly, the working poor and the needy are individuals who desperately need health care. Again, it's a question of choices, it's not a question of needing additional money: The money is there. The reality of it, is that that money could be used and invested in terms of health care, not just for the city, but through this entire state.