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*Issue 172 – February 23, 2006*

Congress Betrays Both the People and the Constitution  
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Guest Commentator

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Congress passed a federal budget that will shake the foundation of our country for years to come. On Feb 1, they voted to drastically reduce income, food, education, and medicine for US youth, infants, elders, caregivers, and people with disabilities. In the same bill Congress slipped in their mandated reevaluation of the experimental welfare bill, TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families). Their deadly TANF decision will leave millions of mothers and children facing permanent poverty and increased infant death. As a committed family advocate for the past 30 years and a former single mom, I am grieving for the US people in need, low-income workers, and our US democracy.

For four years the cowardly Congress had refused to make a final decision about work hours, dollars and child care expenditures for families in poverty. Unified resistance from family advocates across the country had stopped Congress from increasing TANF's cruelty. When Congress sneaked the TANF vote into the vast budget cut, they cheated the American people out of a democratic voice and betrayed the advocates and moms who had lobbied them through ten postponements.

Both the House and the Senate secretly agreed to again require TANF moms to fulfill 30 hours of work activities each week – with little increase in child care funds. Those work activities can include as many unwaged workfare hours as the states dictate. The Congress also limited education to a maximum of 12 months vocational education for single breadwinners! Without the option for real education – and with the budget bill's \$20 billion reduction in child support – single moms simply cannot support a family alone.

Inflexible hours of mandatory job search and workfare has already begun to endanger children's lives. Without care giving options for mothers of children with disabilities (and moms suffering from disabilities themselves), infant mortality has begun rising dangerously and survival of the fittest is becoming the norm. Wisconsin's experiment, as leader in the welfare reform game, provided Congress a glaring example of this

## The Black Commentator – Congress Betrays Both the People and the Constitution

danger with an 11 % increase in infant mortality statewide since 1997 and a horrifying 37% increase in Milwaukee's African American infant mortality rate. (See *Start Smart Milwaukee*.)

30 hours at two different job sites can condemn a mom using public transportation to as many as 50 hours away from her children. States will not be able to cover their childcare costs because Congress allocated only \$1 billion for this essential care, \$7.4 billion short of the amount deemed necessary by the Budget Office. Following Wisconsin's example, states are expected to deny TANF benefits to eligible families to accommodate inadequate federal funds. According to the US Census, 571,000 Wisconsin residents live in poverty, yet only 7,954 families managed to receive any TANF cash assistance last year.

In their TANF vote, Congress also allows states to criminally violate federal minimum wage law. Many states will require moms to do 15–20 hours unpaid workfare. Since the average welfare grant is \$354 a month, parents performing 20 hours of workfare will be compensated \$4.12 (or less) an hour, not the minimum wage of \$5.15. Thus Congress has authorized states to violate Article 13 of the US Constitution, which prohibits involuntary servitude except as a punishment for a convicted crime.

Millions of single mother families will be directly affected by these deadly punishments during the coming years. But many more Americans will feel the repercussions. To avoid the ugly option of working 15–20 hours for no pay for whatever employer wants them, moms will accept any job for any pay – minimum wage, temporary, part-time jobs. Forced low-wage and no-wage labor of millions of women will keep wages and benefits low for tens of millions of other US workers as well. And jobs will be lost when employers prefer to use workfare moms instead of paid employees.

Congress' violation of both labor law and the U.S. Constitution makes a joke of our beleaguered democracy. And their underhanded TANF vote, which creates permanent poverty, increases infant death, reduces workforce wages, and abandons our babies is a recipe for community and social disaster for America.

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