

Infrastructure Jobs Act Is Introduced in House

by Nancy Spannaus

Democratic Reps. William Lacy Clay (Mo.) and Major Owens (N.Y.), on Sept. 26, introduced a serious infrastructure employment initiative, unique in this “do-nothing” Congress, and modelled on Franklin Roosevelt’s Civilian Conservation Corps. The new bill is the “National Infrastructure Corps Act of 2006.” The Congressmen are circulating the bill for bipartisan sponsorship.

This bill, H.R. 6181, would transform some of the urban programs of Americorps—a national public corporation for volunteer programs, created by legislation in 1993—from volunteer programs, into employment programs on economic infrastructure projects “at reasonable prevailing wage levels.” It would link these programs to the Army Corps of Engineers’ infrastructure works projects, as well as the public works projects of the Transportation, HUD, and Labor Departments of the Federal government. For example, it would recruit and employ unemployed or semi-employed Americans to construction jobs on potential Army Corps lock-and-dam replacement projects on the Ohio and Mississippi River systems, or Gulf States disaster rebuilding projects, assisting those projects in getting done. Special emphasis is put on employing youth in their twenties. The sponsors’ “Dear Colleague” letter says that the bill would thus “enable Americorps to play a role in rebuilding our nation’s infrastructure while American workers find more jobs at reasonable prevailing wage levels.”

The bill would increase Americorps’ funding by the authorization of funding for Americorps employment projects up to a level of \$900 million annually for four years, thus creating up to 40,000 well-paid jobs on infrastructure public works. Should Congress move seriously to tackle a new national infrastructure for the U.S. economy, as Lyndon LaRouche has proposed in his Emergency Recovery Act of 2006, the Americorps Infrastructure Act could be rapidly expanded to provide more public works employment funding.

Put America Back to Work!

The “Dear Colleague” letter of Clay and Owens puts the issue behind this bill squarely on the table. “Let’s Put America Back to Work!!!” reads the headline, followed by

the subhead, “Approximately 3 million industrial jobs have been lost since 2000!!” It begins: “The American Society of Civil Engineers estimates that our nation needs to invest \$1.7 trillion to repair and replace obsolescent and broken-down infrastructure systems. This infrastructure crisis was made painstakingly clear after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita exposed the weaknesses in our nation’s infrastructure.”

Concretely, H.R. 6181 would amend the National and Community Service Act of 1990 to establish a National Infrastructure Corps to address the nation’s infrastructure needs and provide employment opportunities. It begins with the following findings:

1) The United States is suffering a worsening crisis in public infrastructure, including a lack or insufficiency of railroad, mass transportation, power, water control, river navigation, port, oil refining, and hospital infrastructure facilities.

2) The “infrastructure report card” issued by the American Society of Civil Engineers estimates the need for \$1.7 trillion in investments to repair and replace obsolescent and broken-down infrastructure facilities in the United States.

3) The nation’s infrastructure crisis became dramatically apparent after the breakdown of water control, transportation, and power infrastructure facilities in the Gulf States, following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

4) Each \$1 billion of Federal funding invested in infrastructure facilities creates approximately 50,000 jobs and \$6 billion in economic activity.

5) The United States continues to suffer high rates of unemployment in urban and rural areas, especially among males in their twenties, and individuals and households continue to experience decreases in wages and real income.

6. Regional, state, and local infrastructure rebuilding projects require a great deal of semi-skilled and labor-intensive employment.

7. These projects include the necessary repair and rebuilding of large numbers of the nation’s “upstream” dams, which could provide employment to 100,000 individuals, and the replacement of the ten obsolete locks and dams on the Ohio River Mainstem system, which would generate approximately 20,000 jobs over a multi-year period.

8. The Urban Youth Corps administered by the Departments of Housing and Urban Development and Transportation, the National Civilian Community Corps, and other volunteer programs of the Corporation for National and Community Service have greatly contributed to public works and disaster response projects.

9. The authority of the Corporation for National and Community Service should be expanded to provide employment opportunities and reverse trends in urban employment through the establishment of a National Infrastructure Corps modelled after the Civilian Conservation Corps created at the outset of the Great Depression.