

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

Kennedy bill would increase minimum wage

On Jan. 27, on Congress's first day back from the winter recess, Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) introduced a bill to increase the minimum wage from the present \$5.15 an hour to \$6.65 over the next three years, and then to index it to inflation thereafter.

In his floor statement, Kennedy demolished the old arguments that increasing the minimum wage causes job losses and inflation, neither of which have occurred as a result of the last increase in the minimum wage passed in 1996. Kennedy pointed to the fact that the minimum wage, at the current level, is worth less in buying power than it was in 1968. "If we do not take action now to increase the minimum wage," he said, "then the progress we made in the last two years is gradually going to deteriorate."

Because of the 1996 welfare reform bill, Kennedy said, "there will be millions of Americans who will be out there in the job market without health care for their children that Medicaid would have provided or child care coverage that welfare benefits would have provided. What we are asking is that at least we pay them a livable wage."

House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt (D-Mo.) and Minority Whip David Bonior (D-Mich.) have introduced an identical companion bill in the House.

GOP doesn't like Clinton's budget

The GOP found much to complain about in President Clinton's budget submission, which arrived at the House and Senate Budget Committees on Feb. 2. Senate Budget Committee Chairman Pete Domenici (R-N.M.) and House Budget Committee Chairman John Kasich (R-Ohio) both complained, at hearings the next day, that

Clinton's budget increases both spending and the size of government, both of which, according to their ideology and their reading of last year's budget agreement, are supposed to be shrinking.

Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.) countered that such accusations are not true. "The size of government," he said, "is down to a level of three decades ago." He challenged Republicans to be specific about which new spending programs they don't like. Those increases that are in the budget are popular because "they meet the needs of ordinary families," and each fits within the caps imposed by the budget agreement, he said.

House panel hears more testimony on IMF

The House Banking Committee held a second hearing on Feb. 6 on legislation to fulfill the Clinton administration's request for an additional \$18 billion in funds for the International Monetary Fund, which heard from IMF critics, opponents, and supporters. Written testimony submitted by *EIR* (see Feb. 13 issue, p. 11) was posted on the committee's Internet website.

A parade of Congressman to the witness table presented a wide variety of criticisms which only served to further confuse the issue. Michael Crapo (R-Id.) demanded "solid reform" in the economy of South Korea, involving an end to government-directed credit to Korean industries, the *chaebols*, which have been key in Korea's economic growth. Quack economist Ron Paul (R-Tex.), and Cliff Stearns (R-Fla.), argued that the IMF is not promoting the interests of the international bankers or the "markets" efficiently enough.

Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.), speaking for a "left-right" coalition against IMF bailouts, which includes extreme envi-

ronmentalists and right-wingers who don't like the IMF, pointed to the hypocrisy of IMF supporters who denounce government interventions on behalf of social welfare, but are the first to yelp for bailouts when the banks are in trouble.

IMF supporters, such as Banking Committee Chairman Jim Leach (R-Iowa), were reduced to supporting all the criticisms, even as they beg for funds. Leach said that the IMF must change its ways, but changes cannot be made until this crisis is over.

Senate confirms Satcher as new Surgeon General

On Feb. 10, the Senate confirmed the nomination of Dr. David Satcher, the director since 1993 of the Atlanta, Georgia, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, to be U.S. Surgeon General, finally filling a post that had been vacant for three years. The vote, which followed a week of debate, was 63-35.

The confirmation was briefly held up by a filibuster led by John Ashcroft (R-Mo.), who apparently was trying to enhance his support among conservatives for a possible bid for the year 2000 Republican Presidential nomination. He accused Satcher of conducting unethical AIDS experiments on Third World populations, as well as holding opinions on subjects like needle exchange and partial-birth abortions, that are too close to those of President Bill Clinton.

Ashcroft's charges were forcefully rebutted by Labor and Human Resources Committee Chairman James Jeffords (R-Vt.) and Bill Frist (R-Tenn.). They said that Satcher's AIDS experiments were not what Ashcroft charged, and they argued strongly that the United States needs a Surgeon General. At the end of the debate, Ashcroft's filibuster was ended by a vote of 75-23.