

The Poverty Draft

Recruiting The Working Class To The Frontlines

Class Against Class (NEFAC-Boston)

2003

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Recruiters are relentlessly using marketing strategies to woo low income youths with little prospects for education and good jobs into the armed forces. Painting the Army as a kind of job training and vocational school, and simultaneously as a financial aid institution, recruiters get youths in high school to sign up to the DEP (Deferred Enlistment Program). When young people try and back out of enlisting, recruiters often lie and tell them it is impossible or illegal to drop out.

In fact, the military isn't a generous financial aid institution, and it isn't concerned with helping pay for school. Two-thirds of all recruits never get any college funding from the military. Only 15% graduated with a four year degree. 65% of recruits who pay the required \$1200 into the Montgomery GI Bill never get a dime in return.

In terms of job opportunities, to join the army is actually more detrimental to job prospects. Veterans actually earn less than non-veterans: the average post-Vietnam War-era veteran will earn between 11% and 19% less than non-veterans from comparable class backgrounds. Over 50,000 unemployed veterans are on the waiting list for the military's "retraining" program. The Veterans Administration estimates that 1/3 of homeless people are vets.

The evidence on rates of return to training and the probability of finding a job in one's chosen occupation, strongly suggests that, all else being equal, young people should look to sources of training other than the military if they wish to optimize their careers.

YOUTH OF COLOR

The military uses economic discrimination (i.e. economic conscription or an economic draft), that forces lower income people into the military in order to earn a living, try to learn a trade or get money for their education. Not surprisingly, the "poverty draft" primarily targets youth of color from low-income areas, both urban and rural. Military recruiters prey upon the working classes in Black, Latino, Native American, Asian, Arab, and Pacific Islander communities. Quite simply, the armed forces target people of color for recruitment disproportionately, and thus die in war disproportionately. During Operation Desert Storm over 50% of the front-line troops were people of color, largely Latino.

Desperate to meet recruiting goals, the military has undertaken another mass expansion of its Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) program. These programs traditionally target communities of color, especially areas of Latino concentration. The prior JROTC expansion took place in 1992 in the aftermath of the Gulf War and the L.A. uprising. Writes Shelly Reese, for American Demographics Magazine, "The riots underscored the lack of opportunities for teenagers in economically disadvantaged areas. That led General Colin Powell to lobby for expanded JROTC."

PUERTO RICO: THE ARMY'S #1 RECRUITING GROUNDS

A glaring example of the poverty draft at work is the case of Puerto Rico. On the island, unemployment is more than double the national average of 5%. In addition, wages and salaries are low — per capita income is \$8,000 annually, compared to \$18,000 in the poorest state, Mississippi. No wonder the Army Times reports the San Juan and Aguadilla recruiting companies averaged nearly 900 Regular Army and Army Reserve recruits in 1998. In contrast, the average for the

Army's other 240 recruiting companies was half that. This situation in Puerto Rico is but one case of what is happening in Latino communities across the land.

HOW TO RESIST THE POVERTY DRAFT

Youths who are targeted for recruitment, signed up for DEP, or GIs already serving active duty have responded more than ever against the military's plans for them. With the growing war mania and calls for revenge from the Bush administration ever since 9/11, and the "Operation Iraqi Freedom" War now under way, those in the military who understand the serious mistake of war have been seeking a way out. Last year there were 21,000 calls to one program designed to help those enlisted: the GI Rights Hotline. Already in 2003 they are fielding twice as many calls as compared to this time last year. They have information on how to get out of DEP, how to keep students' private information like addresses and phone numbers out of the hands of the recruitment vultures, and they have the facts about AWOL/Unauthorized Absence status and how to file for conscientious objector status.

The GI Rights hotline and related projects like the 'Military Out of Our Schools Project' can be contacted in their Philadelphia office: 1-888-236-2226. The GI Rights hotline is 1-800-394-9544. Also www.objector.org for more information.

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