

US House Approves Drastic Social Spending Cuts

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The US House of Representatives voted early Saturday for legislation that would impose \$61 billion in cuts in current federal spending, the vast majority of it slashed from domestic social programs. It was a near party-line vote of 235 to 189, with no Democrats supporting the measure, and only three Republicans opposing it because they wanted even deeper cuts.

The vote came on a bill that would fund the federal government for the rest of the fiscal year, through September 30. With the fiscal year nearly half over, the cuts would have a disproportionate impact, since the reduction in spending would be compressed into the seven months remaining. The cuts average 14 percent of discretionary domestic spending, a category that covers most functions of the federal government outside of the military, counterterrorism, interest payments, Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid.

The Democratic-controlled Congress failed to pass any appropriations bills last year, a default that gives the House, now under Republican control, the opportunity to carry out an onslaught on social programs.

The continuing resolution adopted when Congress adjourned last year keeps the federal government funded only through March 4. With Congress in recess during the week of President's Day, the House and Senate will not resume work on funding the government until Monday, February 28, leaving only five days to avert a government shutdown.

After the House passed the \$61 billion in cuts, Speaker John Boehner declared that the Republicans would not support any extension of the continuing resolution unless the bill contained major cuts—even a brief extension of a few weeks to allow for House-Senate negotiations.

Congressman Paul Ryan of Wisconsin, chairman of the House Budget Committee, said in a television interview Sunday that some temporary extension would be passed to prevent a shutdown. Referring to the \$61 billion in cuts in the House bill, he said, "I don't think the Senate will pass those cuts, we'll have to negotiate."

Other Republicans did raise the possibility of a government shutdown, including conservative Steve King of Iowa, who said that the public reaction to the closing down of federal offices would be different in 2011 than in 1995-96, when a previous Republican congressional majority forced a shutdown during the Clinton administration.

Senate Democrats, who will head the negotiations with the Republican House, were at pains to emphasize their support for major spending cuts. Majority Whip Richard Durbin of Illinois, appearing on NBC's "Meet the Press," said, "I think we need to sit down in a positive,

constructive way and work out our differences. There are differences. But the starting point is that we know we need to cut spending, we know we need to live within our means.”

Democratic Senator Claire McCaskill of Missouri, speaking on “Fox News Sunday,” said, “If we don’t want to make political points and we’re not posturing for the extreme element of our party, we can all sit down and find those compromises.”

A majority of House Republicans actually supported even deeper cuts, but a measure to cut \$22 billion more was defeated by a 147-281 vote on Friday, as 92 Republicans, including the entire House leadership, joined with all the Democrats to vote the amendment down.

The House Republican leadership argued that the \$61 billion in cuts in current spending actually fulfilled a campaign promise to cut \$100 billion, if it were compared to the spending levels proposed by the Obama administration last year but never enacted. Using the same yardstick, Senate Democrats are advocating \$41 billion in cuts from the level requested by Obama, which amounts to an effective freeze in current spending levels.

Following the vote, Boehner hailed the cuts as an effort “to liberate our economy from the shackles of out-of-control spending.” He claimed that “cutting federal spending is critical to reducing economic uncertainty, encouraging private-sector investment, and creating a better environment for job creation in our country.”

Boehner is pandering to politically unhinged ultra-right elements, drawn largely from the upper-middle class, who view all forms of federal spending and regulation—except for the military and police—as tantamount to socialism. But the real driving force of the spending cuts is not the Tea Party, but Wall Street, which extracted trillions in federal subsidies for the bailout of the banks, and now is demanding that working people pay the cost.

The entire framework of the Washington “debate” over the fiscal crisis is fraudulent. Both parties, Democrats as much as Republicans, defend the interests of the super-rich and embraced the extension of the Bush tax cuts for the wealthy, carried out in the December bipartisan “compromise”, which swelled the current fiscal deficit to record levels. Both endorse the gargantuan military budget, which set an all-time record last year and is expected to top \$670 billion this year. And both parties and two administrations—first Bush, then Obama—carried out the bailout of Wall Street.

Both Democrats and Republicans agree that spending cuts should be focused on domestic social spending programs, and their divisions are over which programs should be cut back or eliminated. The Republicans support programs that provide tax breaks and subsidies for their favored industries, especially oil, mining and agriculture, while the Democrats are seeking to defend programs that benefit urban areas, the union bureaucracy and sections of the middle class.

These differing priorities were expressed in a series of votes from Wednesday through early Saturday, as the House approved nearly 100 amendments to the package of cuts drafted by Ryan and the Budget Committee and backed by the House Republican leadership. In most cases, the amendments were proposed by ultra-right Republican congressmen sympathetic to the Tea Party movement, and targeted programs that they oppose for political rather than fiscal reasons.

These measures included cuts of \$747 million from food assistance programs for the poor,

cutting Pell Grants for low-income college students by an even greater amount than already proposed by the Obama administration, a cut of one-third in overall funding for the Environmental Protection Agency, and a 50 percent cut in funding of the Bureau of Consumer Financial Protection.

At least eight separate amendments were adopted to block implementation of the Obama health care legislation adopted by the Democratic-controlled Congress last year, while another half-dozen amendments prohibit funds for EPA action on greenhouse gases, strip mining, solid fuel combustion, particulate emissions or revoking water pollution permits. The EPA is even barred from measuring the level of greenhouse gas pollutants being released into the atmosphere.

The House rejected amendments that would have made it more difficult for federal agencies to give pay increases to workers through promotion or reclassification, as well as an effort to suspend the Davis-Bacon Act, which requires payment of prevailing union wages on most federally funded construction projects. A proposal to eliminate funding for the National Labor Relations Board was defeated, in favor of a measure to cut NLRB funding by 18 percent.

A few cuts were made in military and security programs, notably the scrapping of a second engine for the F-35 fighter aircraft, built by General Electric, and an end to funding for the East-West Center and the US Institute of Peace, both propaganda outfits for promoting the interests of US imperialism. An amendment to cancel the US contribution to the United Nations—a hobbyhorse of the ultra-right—was defeated.

Other amendments simply reflect the ultra-right sentiments of various Republican congressmen, translated into budgetary provisions, including:

- barring all funding for Planned Parenthood, the largest family planning organization, because it provides counseling and referrals for women seeking abortions;

- ending federal funding for AmeriCorps;

- ending federal funding for the Public Broadcasting System;

- cutting funding by a third for the Commodity Futures Trading Commission, charged with monitoring derivatives trading in the financial reform bill passed last year;

- barring FCC enforcement of “net neutrality” rules for the Internet;

- defunding a database of injuries caused by defective consumer products;

- rejecting any increase in funding for the Securities and Exchange Commission, which has the main responsibility for implementing the new financial regulations;

- cutting spending for the National Endowment for the Arts by \$20 million.

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