

Democrats bow to Bush on budget attacks

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In another indication of their organic incapacity to offer any alternative to the policies of the Bush administration, Democrats on Capitol Hill dropped their opposition Thursday to a Republican-drafted federal budget that includes a provision depriving up to 8 million workers of the right to overtime pay.

The move by the Senate Democratic leadership to wind up a two-day filibuster against the omnibus spending bill exposed the cynicism underlying all of the feeble populist posturing of the party's presidential candidates and the fundamental allegiance of the Democratic leadership to the same financial elite that controls the White House.

"We feel we've had the opportunity to make our statement about this issue," Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle, a Democrat from South Dakota, declared Wednesday, signaling an end to Democratic opposition to the legislation. "We're certainly not going to shut down the government ... or deny important funding" to government agencies.

Yet that was precisely the course pursued by the Republicans during the Clinton administration. They were prepared to bring the government to a halt in order to impose their right-wing social agenda and to secure the interests of their wealthy backers. This tactic was one of the means used to shift Clinton's own policies ever more sharply to the right.

That the Democrats have no inclination to mount a similar confrontation over measures affecting the living standards, social conditions and basic rights of millions of working people merely confirms that the party has continued along that right-wing trajectory. The Democratic Party failed to mount a struggle against the theft of the 2000 presidential election and, since 2001, it has been implicated in every one of the reactionary measures carried out by the Bush administration—the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the USA Patriot Act, the massive tax cuts for the rich and attacks on social programs.

The token filibuster provided Senate Democrats facing reelection with political cover without interfering in the slightest with the Bush administration's agenda. At the same time, support for the package was assured through a series of corrupt deals that earmarked billions of dollars in funding

for pork-barrel projects for legislators' home districts.

The legislation lumps seven separate spending bills into one \$822 billion package—the bulk of which consists of mandated funding of programs like Medicare and Medicaid, with \$328 billion left for so-called discretionary spending on the government's non-military programs.

While the process was supposed to have been completed by October—the start of the fiscal year—it was delayed by the Bush administration's demand last fall for \$87 billion in emergency funding for the continuing military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, a request that won the support of the overwhelming majority of Democrats in the Senate and more than half of those in the House.

The spending bill was further delayed by a series of disputes over controversial administrative measures taken by the Bush administration—including the change in overtime regulations and a provision to allow greater monopolization of the media—that had been rescinded in the original legislation worked out in compromises between the House and Senate leaderships. These measures were then re-imposed by the Bush White House, which threatened to veto any legislation that did not meet its specifications.

The Senate and the House both voted last year to block for one year proposed changes to the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act that would deny time-and-a-half pay to a whole range of mid-level supervisors and white-collar employees—including nurses, dental hygienists and certified public accountants—who are currently eligible to receive it.

Similarly, the House voted to overturn a measure inserted in the spending legislation that would have changed Federal Communications Commission rules limiting the share of the TV airwaves controlled by a single media company, raising the ceiling from 35 percent to 45 percent of the US viewing public.

The Bush administration refused to accept these compromises, however, as they cut across deals already made with the president's big business supporters, including media moguls like Rupert Murdoch of Fox TV. The White House demanded that the legislation be redrafted behind closed doors, with the Democrats excluded and corporate lobbyists virtually dictating the language.

The abolition of overtime rights was restored and the television ownership cap was permanently raised to 39 percent. Similarly, a measure agreed to in a House-Senate committee that would have guaranteed the right of federal public employees to compete with private contractors for government functions subject to outsourcing was excised at the White House's insistence.

The final legislation includes a series of cuts and socially regressive measures aimed at boosting the profits of big business and currying favor with the Republican Party's right-wing base.

An across-the-board cut of 0.59 percent applied to all non-military programs slashes some \$73 million from the so-called "No Child Left Behind" program touted by Bush in his State of the Union Address as the solution to the US education crisis. The effect will be to leave at least another 24,000 disadvantaged children without aid. The administration had already left the program's funding \$6 billion below the amount authorized by previous legislation, leaving a total of 2.1 million eligible children without aid.

At the same time, the administration slipped into the bill the first-ever federally funded school voucher program for Washington, D.C. whose finances are under Congressional jurisdiction. The program represents another attempt to undermine public education by exploiting the frustrations of parents and students in one of the most deprived school districts in the country.

The manner in which the final version of the omnibus spending bill was rammed through the Senate is a clear manifestation of the protracted decay of constitutional forms of rule in the US and the emergence of an ever-more authoritarian presidency. The Senate never voted on many of the separate funding measures before they were submitted as part of the massive and unamendable omnibus bill; and, indeed, many of the measures were never even subjected to debate. The terms were decreed by the White House, followed by the Republican Congressional leadership and accepted by the Democrats.

Only one Democratic senator, Robert Byrd of West Virginia, made a serious issue of the deeply anti-democratic character of the funding process, a matter that was not even referred to by the Democratic presidential candidates in a debate held in New Hampshire the very night the legislation was passed.

"Under the constitution, Congress writes the laws and the president executes them," declared Byrd. "Under the constitution, the power of the purse rests with the Congress, not the president.... This omnibus bill leaves those pillars of our constitutional system in shambles."

What Byrd left unstated was the obvious complicity of his own party in the creation of this shambles. Having accepted

the installation of an unelected president, supported a criminal war and collaborated in the ripping up of fundamental democratic rights, the Democratic leadership is hardly going to wage a fight over the abrogation of the constitutional separation of powers.

The passing of the fiscal 2004 federal budget will be followed within less than a month by the presentation of new budget proposals for fiscal 2005 that promise even deeper attacks on social programs to finance a continued massive buildup of the military and the police powers of the state as well as the hundreds of billions of dollars in annual tax cuts for the wealthy.

In a speech Thursday, Bush unveiled proposals for a 19 percent increase in "counterterrorism" programs. The budget for the FBI would be raised to \$5.1 billion, a 60 percent increase over the federal police agency's 2001 budget.

The Pentagon, meanwhile, is set to request a \$401.7 billion budget, 7 percent more than the current fiscal year's funding. However, this will not include tens of billions of dollars more to finance the ongoing occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, which it will seek in the form of emergency supplemental funds, most likely after the elections. Last year, the Congress approved a total of more than \$150 billion in supplemental funds for military operations in the two countries.

Meanwhile, Bush's tax cuts are expected to cost some \$2 trillion over the next decade and \$293 billion in the 2004 calendar year alone. The federal deficit is projected to total \$5 trillion over the next 10 years and to approach a record \$500 billion this year.

The mounting fiscal crisis will undoubtedly be utilized by the administration as well as the Democrats in Congress to justify far more devastating cuts in core social programs in the 2005 budget.



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