

Democrats take control of Congress with pledge to work with Bush

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The Senate and the House of Representatives reconvened in Washington Thursday under Democratic Party control, the first time that the Democrats have held the leadership of both houses of Congress in 12 years. Democrat Nancy Pelosi was elected Speaker of the House by a party-line vote of 233 to 202, while Democrat Harry Reid of Nevada was elected Majority Leader of the Senate.

Both top leaders of the congressional Democrats voiced the desire for bipartisan collaboration with the Republican-controlled White House. Taking the gavel as Speaker, Pelosi said, “I accept this gavel in the spirit of partnership, not partisanship, and look forward to working with you on behalf of the American people. In this House, we may belong to different parties, but we serve one country.”

“Last November, the voters sent us a message—Democrats and Republicans,” Reid declared. “The voters are upset with Congress and the partisan gridlock. The voters want a government that focuses on their needs. The voters want change. Together, we must deliver that change.”

These protestations go beyond the usual ceremonial boilerplate. The congressional Democrats have absolutely no intention of conducting any struggle against the policies of the Bush administration, either at home or abroad. At most, they want to enact a few cosmetic measures that by definition—since they will be carried out in agreement with the White House—will represent a continuation of Bush’s program of reaction and war.

It is on the central issue of Iraq that the Democrats’ prostration before the Bush administration is most evident. Pelosi noted that antiwar sentiment was the driving force behind the Democrats’ election victory on November 7 in her speech accepting her election as

Speaker.

“The election of 2006 was a call to change—not merely to change the control of Congress, but for a new direction for our country,” she said. “Nowhere were the American people more clear about the need for a new direction than in Iraq. The American people rejected an open-ended obligation to a war without end.”

This formulation grossly downplays both the scale and the intensity of the opposition to the war in Iraq. The vast majority of the American population now regards Bush’s decision to invade Iraq—which was backed by the congressional Democratic leadership at the time—as a disaster. Those who voted for the Democrats did so in large measure because they viewed this vote as the only means of expressing their antiwar position.

Post-election opinion polls show more than 50 percent favoring withdrawal from Iraq before the end of this year, with barely ten percent supporting the policy, now widely expected to be outlined by Bush later this month in a television speech, for a “surge” of as many as 40,000 more US troops into Iraq.

But in her acceptance speech, Pelosi repeated the call for a “responsible redeployment” of US troops in Iraq, a formulation so elastic that it could cover anything from the Bush “surge” plan to a partial withdrawal to the launching of a US invasion of Iran or Syria.

The congressional Democratic leadership has made it clear that there will be no official Democratic Party proposal on the Iraq war until after Bush’s nationally televised speech. This is at least in part because, while the vast majority of Democratic voters want a rapid withdrawal from Iraq, the vast majority of Democratic congressmen and senators agree with the White House that such a withdrawal would represent a defeat that would have devastating international consequences for

American imperialism.

One of the chief spokesmen on the war for Senate Democrats, Carl Levin, incoming chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, made remarks Wednesday that suggested he was open to supporting a Bush decision to dispatch more troops to Baghdad and Anbar province. While admitting that “the public wants to change course and find a way out of Iraq and not get deeper in Iraq,” Levin told reporters that there might be a way to square the circle—if Bush would tie his proposal to increase the US military force in Iraq with a promise to reduce troop strength later on. “It’s likely the president would add something of a conditionality to it,” he said.

The attitude of the Democratic leadership to mass antiwar sentiment was displayed most clearly Wednesday when peace activist Cindy Sheehan, whose son was killed in Iraq in 2004, brought a group of supporters to a press conference of leaders of the new Democratic majority in the House. While Rahm Emanuel, chairman of the House Democratic Caucus, was speaking, Sheehan and other activists began to drown him out with changes of “de-escalate, investigate, troops home now.” Emanuel—who voted for the war and has consistently opposed withdrawal—nonetheless tried to reassure the antiwar protesters, declaring, “That is exactly what we’re talking about.” As the *Washington Post* then described the scene, “the hecklers kept chanting, and he fled.”

An article in the *Post* on Tuesday, January 3, observed that the principal problem for the Democrats as they took leadership of the Congress was not “disgruntled conservatives wary of Democratic control, but liberals demanding a ban on torture, an end to warrantless domestic spying and a restoration of curbed civil liberties.” The *Post* noted, in a colossal understatement, “Those priorities will not be in evidence inside the Capitol.”

The article continued, “Nowhere in the Democrats’ consensus-driven agenda is legislation revisiting last year’s establishment of military tribunals and suspending legal rights for suspected terrorists. Nor is there a revision of the civil liberties provisions of the USA Patriot Act, a measure curbing warrantless wiretapping by the National Security Agency or an aggressive confrontation of the president on his Iraq war policies.”

Post means by ~~Wh~~ consensus-driven the program of the ruling class political establishment, comprising both parties, which fully backs the police-state measures introduced by the Bush administration in the five years since the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

The incoming Democratic majority in Congress will not deviate significantly from the Bush administration’s policies on the economy or social policy either. Speaker Pelosi held her first meeting on economic policy with the chairman of the executive committee of Citibank, Robert Rubin, the former secretary of the Treasury in the Clinton administration and a fervent advocate of spending austerity and subordination of fiscal policy to the money markets.

Last April Rubin co-founded the Hamilton Project, a grouping of pro-Democratic Party corporate executives and bankers to proselytize for the Wall Street-oriented measures Rubin pursued as Clinton’s principal economic policy-maker. In a bow to Rubin, Senate and House Democrats chose the director of the Hamilton Project, Peter Orszag, to lead the Congressional Budget Office.

The Democrats are united with the Bush administration on the most fundamental issues—the war in Iraq, the attack on democratic rights at home, the maintenance of economic and tax policies that benefit only the super-rich. This underscores the central political task facing working people in the United States: the creation of an independent mass political movement of the working class opposed to both the big business parties and the corporate oligarchy they defend.



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