

Democrats pass “anti-war” bill that funds the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan

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After weeks of public posturing and behind-the-scenes maneuvering, Democrats in the House of Representatives secured passage Friday of an emergency spending bill that grants the Bush administration’s request for over \$100 billion in additional funds for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In what amounts to a colossal political fraud, they presented their “Troop Readiness, Veterans Health and Iraq Accountability Act” as a measure to force an end to the war in Iraq by September 1, 2008.

It does nothing of the kind. Even if a similar Democratic measure were to be passed in the Senate—and it will not—and the final bill were to survive a presidential veto—a political impossibility—the resulting law would do nothing to halt the current military escalation in both Iraq and Afghanistan, and would allow upwards of 75,000 US troops to remain in Iraq indefinitely.

The bill is a labored attempt by the Democratic leadership to pose as opponents of the Iraq war, while in practice ensuring its continuation. The vote to authorize war funding flies in the face of the will of the electorate, which expressed its desire to end the war and its opposition to the policies of the Bush administration in last November’s congressional elections, overturning Republican control in both houses of Congress.

In remarks following the vote, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi went out of her way to declare her party’s support for the US military and the so-called “war on terror,” calling the bill “a giant step to end the war and responsibly redeploy our troops out of Iraq” so they could concentrate on Afghanistan, “where the war on terrorism is.”

The Bush administration has denounced the bill and promised to veto it, in line with the White House’s blanket opposition to any conditions, no matter how toothless, being placed on its war-making powers.

The bill passed by the narrowest possible margin, with 218 votes in favor and 212 opposed. Only two Republicans voted for the bill and 14 Democrats voted against it.

The conditions attached to US troop deployments by the bill are themselves so conditional as to be meaningless. Under the measure, Bush would be obliged to certify to Congress on July 1, 2007 and again on October 1, 2007 that the Iraqi government has made progress in meeting certain benchmarks, such as containing sectarian violence, reining in militias, and reforming the constitution. Should Bush fail to go through the motions of making such a certification, withdrawal of US combat troops would begin.

Even if the government certified progress, US combat troops would be withdrawn by September 1, 2008.

But this “final deadline” could be extended if the administration obtained approval from Congress. In any event, less than half of the 140,000 US troops currently in Iraq are designated as combat forces, meaning that 75,000 or more troops would remain after the “deadline” to conduct counterinsurgency operations, train Iraqi forces, police borders and protect US assets.

As New York Senator Hillary Clinton, the front-runner for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination, made clear in an interview with the *New York Times* last week, if elected she would keep a large force of American troops in Iraq indefinitely to secure “remaining vital national security interests” there. She elaborated on these “national security interests” by noting that Iraq is “right in the heart of the oil region.”

Similarly, the House Democrats’ bill upholds the war aims of US imperialism by listing as one of the benchmarks the passage of an oil law that will open up Iraq’s vast reserves to exploitation by US energy conglomerates.

The bill also requires the Pentagon to observe standards for training, equipping and resting troops before their deployment and limits the duration of Army tours of duty to 365 days. With the military already stretched to the limit, these provisions could actually create obstacles to the further escalation of the war under Bush’s so-called troop “surge” in Baghdad and Anbar Province. Consequently, the bill allows Bush to waive these requirements in the name of “national security,” giving him a free hand to send as many additional troops as he desires.

In the weeks leading up to Friday’s vote on the floor of the House, the White House and congressional Republicans continually called the Democrats’ bluff, exposing their antiwar pretenses by challenging them to cut off war funding. This culminated last week in the passage, with overwhelming Democratic support, of a Republican-sponsored nonbinding Senate resolution vowing to never cut funds for “troops in the field.”

For their part, Pelosi and the rest of the Democratic leadership continually tacked to the right, readjusting their war spending bill to placate Blue Dog Democrats and other war supporters within the Democratic caucus by further watering down its nominal restrictions on Bush’s war powers. They secured the support of the party’s right wing by dropping language that would have required Bush to obtain congressional support before launching an attack on Iran.

They loaded the bill with allocations for special projects targeted to win over specific congressmen. Thus the final result includes \$25 million for spinach farmers in California, \$75 million for peanut storage in Georgia, \$15 million for Louisiana rice fields and \$120 million for shrimp fishermen.

As Pelosi and her subordinates scrambled to assemble the necessary 218 votes to secure passage, groups on the so-called liberal wing of the party declared their support, including the Congressional Black Caucus and MoveOn.org.

The critical role was played by the misnamed “Out of Iraq Caucus” of House Democrats. This group of some 70 congressmen has postured as the most militant critics of the war. Their key leaders, such as Lynn Woolsey and Maxine Waters, both of California, have been paraded before antiwar demonstrators by protest organizers as living proof that the Democratic Party can be pressured to end the war.

Pelosi dealt with them through a combination of threats and inducements. The house speaker reportedly warned California Rep. Barbara Lee, another leader of the Out of Iraq Caucus, that she would be stripped of her post on the powerful House Appropriations Committee if she sought to block passage of the bill.

On Thursday, Lee, Woolsey, Waters and company insured passage of the bill at a closed-door session with Pelosi. The *Washington Post* reported on Friday:

“As debate began on the bill yesterday, members of the antiwar caucus and party leaders held a backroom meeting in which House Speaker Nancy Pelosi made a final plea to the group, asking it to deliver at least four votes when the roll is called. The members promised ten.”

Lee, the author of a bill that would supposedly withdraw US troops from Iraq by the end of 2007, said, “While I cannot betray my conscience, I cannot stand in the way of passing a measure that puts a concrete end date on this unnecessary war.”

Waters said the leaders of the caucus had told their members, “We don’t want them to be in a position of undermining Nancy’s speakership.”

In the debate on the floor of the House, supposedly antiwar liberals denounced the war, and proceeded to call for a vote to fund it. Typical were the remarks of Jim McDermott of Washington State, who declared, “The Iraq war is a fraud... Perpetuating it is a tragedy,” and then announced he would vote for the war funding measure.

Virtually all of the Democratic speakers wrapped themselves in the flag and declared their unconditional “support for the troops.” According to one press report: “In the closing round of the debate, most Democrats focused on elements of the bill that they said would protect American troops by requiring better training and longer periods of rest between deployments.”

Rep. Ike Skelton of Missouri, who heads the Armed Services Committee, said the bill would strengthen the US military, which has been strained by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. “I’m deeply concerned about the readiness of our forces,” he said.

The legislative charade mounted by the Democratic Party has nothing to do with ending the war in Iraq. There are, in fact, no principled differences between the Democrats and Bush when it

comes to the imperialist aims of the war. Both parties, the Democrats no less than the Republicans, serve the corporate interests—the oil conglomerates, the Wall Street banks, and the American financial oligarchy as a whole—that seek through military violence to establish US control of the resources and markets of the world.

The differences between those within the political establishment who favor continued escalation of the war and those who seek to continue the colonial occupation with reduced US troops are purely tactical. They have to do with the best means of salvaging the US debacle in Iraq by killing and brutalizing more Iraqis, in order to secure US control of the Middle East.

The real political purpose of the Democrats’ bill was indicated in an interview this week on the “Democracy Now” radio program with Robert Borosage, a long-time Democratic Party operative and contributing editor at the *Nation* magazine. Arguing in support of the war spending bill, he said, “The question is about, can you create a symbolic vote—because the president has vowed to veto it if it passes—a symbolic vote that unites the opponents of the war and shows that there’s a majority in the Congress now united about a date certain to get the troops out.”

In other words, a measure that will have no effect on the war, but will promote the fiction that the Democratic Party is in some way a vehicle for the antiwar sentiments of the people, and thereby keep social opposition within the bounds of the two-party system.

In this critical task for the American ruling elite, forces like the Out of Iraq Caucus and their “left” allies in the protest movement play a crucial role. They serve not to end the war, but to provide a right-wing, pro-war party with a left-wing, antiwar gloss, the better to block the emergence of an independent movement of working people against war, repression and social inequality.

Four-and-a-half months after the election, in which the people expressed their opposition to the war, the result is the opposite of their wishes. Tens of thousands more troops are being deployed, the carnage and death are increasing, and US military spokesmen like Gen. David Petraeus are speaking of an escalation unlimited in both size and duration.

Ending the catastrophe inflicted by American imperialism on Iraq, and preventing new wars in Iran and elsewhere, requires a complete political break with the Democratic Party and the two-party system. It requires the independent political mobilization of working people, both in the US and internationally, in a class-conscious socialist movement.

We urge all those who agree with this perspective to make preparations to attend the Emergency Conference Against War sponsored by the *World Socialist Web Site*, the Socialist Equality Party and the International Students for Social Equality on the weekend of March 31-April 1.



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