

Republicans dictate agenda in lame duck Congress

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In a series of actions that display the arrogance of a party that is confident of its support in the ruling class, the Republican congressional leadership is seeking to call the tune in the “lame duck” session of Congress.

The Democrats retain their large majorities in the lame duck session, which includes nearly 100 Democratic congressmen and senators who were either defeated for reelection or retired from office. But in the three days since the session opened November 15, the Republicans have snubbed overtures from the White House, torpedoed the top foreign policy initiative of the Obama administration, sought to dictate monetary policy to the Federal Reserve Board, and blocked an effort to improve the pay status of working women.

The most telling signal of the shift in official Washington came late Tuesday, when the White House announced that the planned November 18 summit meeting between Obama and top congressional Democrats and Republicans had been cancelled by the Republicans, who said they needed more time for internal discussion and preparation.

The meeting was reset for November 30, after the Thanksgiving holiday, a delay that makes it far less likely that the talks will lead to any legislation passing the lame duck session. In particular, the bipartisan summit will take place the very day that extended unemployment benefits begin expiring for some 2 million jobless workers. Congressional action is required before then to maintain the distribution of unemployment checks averaging \$300 a week.

The Obama administration was, as usual, conciliatory towards the Republicans, with White House press spokesman Robert Gibbs playing down the slap in the face. “This is going to be the same meeting with the same people at the same location,” he said, claiming that the White House agreement to the postponement had been a successful test of its commitment to bipartisan

cooperation.

While the postponement of the summit signals that the Democrats have abandoned efforts to continue extended unemployment benefits, the top Democrat in the Senate, Majority Leader Harry Reid, said Tuesday he would consider an extension of tax cuts for the wealthy, as part of a deal to extend all the tax cuts enacted under the Bush administration in 2001.

The tax cuts are scheduled to expire December 31. Obama campaigned in the congressional elections for extending the cuts only for those making \$250,000 a year or less, criticizing the Republicans for backing continuation of the tax cuts for the wealthy at a cost of \$700 billion over 10 years. Since the November 2 election, however, first Obama and now Reid have indicated they would back a “temporary” two-year extension of all the tax cuts, including those for the super-rich.

While the White House bent over backward, a top Republican senator effectively killed what Obama described this week as his number-one foreign policy priority. Senator Jon Kyl, the Republican whip in the Senate and the designated negotiator for the Republicans on the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty with Russia, announced Tuesday that he would oppose ratification of the treaty by the lame duck session.

A two-thirds vote of the Senate is required to ratify a treaty, meaning that at least 8 Republicans must join the 59 Democrats to win approval. The Obama administration has been wooing Kyl for weeks, offering billions in additional spending to modernize US nuclear weapons. As late as last Friday, when Secretary of Defense Robert Gates assured Kyl of \$4 billion more in such weapons spending, Kyl had indicated he might support ratification in the lame duck session.

While the treaty has the support of the entire US foreign policy establishment, including such hardened

warmongers as Henry Kissinger and George Shultz, the congressional Republicans have decided to delay the ratification vote until January, when the smaller Democratic majority in the Senate gives them even more leverage.

Kyl rebuffed pleas from the Pentagon brass that ratification means resumption of access to Russian nuclear sites for US military observers, which ended last December with the expiration of the previous version of the treaty. Extreme-right elements in the Republican Party have claimed that New START could be interpreted to limit the development of a US anti-missile system, which remains largely a fantasy because of unresolved technological problems.

In another show of force, the four top congressional Republicans sent a letter Tuesday to Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke expressing “deep concerns” over the central bank’s recently announced \$600 billion program of purchasing US Treasury bonds. Echoing international criticism of the Fed policy of quantitative easing, the letter warned “such a measure introduces significant uncertainty regarding the future strength of the dollar,” adding that the purchases could “result both in hard-to-control, long-term inflation and potentially generate artificial asset bubbles.”

The letter was signed by House Republican leader John Boehner of Ohio, House Republican Whip Eric Cantor of Virginia, Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, and Senate Republican Whip Kyl of Arizona.

At the same time, two other top congressional Republicans, Senator Bob Corker of Tennessee and Representative Mike Pence of Indiana, announced they would introduce legislation requiring the Federal Reserve to focus solely on price stability. The legislation would repeal the provision adopted in 1978 in the Humphrey-Hawkins bill, which requires the Fed to seek both full employment and stable prices.

In practice, the Fed has always ignored the full employment mandate, using high interest rates to drive up unemployment when that was deemed necessary for the profits of corporate America, as, for instance, in the deep recession of 1980-1982 induced by Fed Chairman Paul Volcker, a Democrat, with interest rates of up to 20 percent.

The Republican Party captured the majority in the House of Representatives in the November 2 election in large measure because of mass disillusionment with the refusal of the Obama administration and the Democratic-controlled Congress to take any significant action to

create jobs. Now, two leading Republicans publicly declare their opposition to giving even lip service to a policy of full employment. This demonstrates the fundamental agreement in the US political establishment to using mass unemployment as a battering ram against the working class.

The congressional Republicans even attempted to dictate to the Democrats whom they should select as their leadership for the new Congress, with several prominent House Republicans all but demanding the ouster of Speaker Nancy Pelosi after she announced that she would seek to continue to lead the Democratic minority.

In a secret ballot vote on Wednesday, one third of the Democratic caucus effectively backed the Republican demand, as a motion to postpone the leadership election until December was defeated by a vote of 129 to 68. Pelosi was then elected as minority leader by a margin of 150 to 43 over Rep. Heath Shuler of North Carolina, a member of the conservative Blue Dog caucus.

In the first substantive legislative action of the lame duck session, a unanimous Republican minority in the Senate succeeded in blocking approval of the Paycheck Fairness Act, which passed the House last year, and would strengthen enforcement of equal pay for women workers performing the same jobs as men.

The 58-41 vote was 2 short of the 60 votes required to end a filibuster and proceed to a final vote on the bill. One Democrat, Ben Nelson of Nebraska, joined 40 Republicans in upholding the filibuster that killed the bill. One Republican, Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, did not vote.

The bill would have amended the existing Equal Pay Act by requiring employers to demonstrate that differences in pay rate for comparable jobs were justified by training and experience. According to the Labor Department, the median weekly earnings for full-time women workers were \$657 in 2009, compared to \$819 for men.



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