

# Deficit commission votes 11-7 for budget-cutting plan

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President Obama's National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform on Friday voted 11 to 7 in favor of a plan that aims to resolve the nation's long-term fiscal crisis on the backs of the working class through cuts to social spending and increases in taxes targeting consumer spending.

Though the vote failed to achieve the threshold of 14 votes necessary to trigger an automatic debate on the plan in the Democratic-controlled lame duck Congress, the fact that it garnered a plurality among the commissioners—and in particular that it won the vote of Senator Dick Durbin of Illinois, one of the leading Congressional liberals—was hailed as a major victory.

The commission, chaired by former Republican Senator Allen Simpson and former Clinton administration official Erskine Bowles, was a sort of trial balloon to gauge ruling class support for the most far-reaching attack ever mounted on social programs that benefit workers. This included attacks on Social Security and Medicare—the old age entitlements for retirement and health care often called the “Third Rail” of American politics, because, the saying went, if you touch them you die.

The plan also includes new regressive taxes on consumer spending, a drastic reduction in the size of the federal workforce, cuts to Medicaid (the health insurance plan for the poor), the imposition of income taxes on employee health insurance plans, and, shamelessly, massive tax cuts for the rich and corporations.

Obama's aim in forming the commission was to “depoliticize” these issues—that is, inoculate both parties against overwhelming popular opposition to such cuts by removing them from the sphere of electoral politics. This is why the commission timed the release of its plan for right after the midterm elections.

In the upside-down world of bourgeois politics, this is hailed as “political courage.” Representative John Spratt, a South Carolina Democrat, captured this sentiment when he boasted that after determining to vote for the proposal, “I thought frequently, thank God I'm not running [for office] again.”

The trial balloon was a success. Among the commissioners, a majority of both parties voted in favor of the plan that claims to cut \$4 trillion of the deficit by 2020. Five US representatives voted against it: two Democrats concerned over the political implications of its attack on Social Security, and three Republicans because the plan banks on the continuation of Obama's health care overhaul. Senators, elected every six years and thus even more immune from popular sentiment, all fell in line, except for Democrat Max Baucus of Montana. All of those who voted in opposition, however, including Andy Stern, the former president of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), said that they support the general thrust of the measure.

Outside of the commission, prominent members of both parties backed the plan, as did the liberal *New York Times* and *Washington Post* and the conservative *Wall Street Journal*.

In a statement, Obama all but endorsed the proposal and touted his own budget-cutting credentials, including the multi-year freeze on non-military discretionary spending he imposed last year.

“I don't doubt our ability to meet this challenge, but our success depends on our willingness to engage in the kind of honest conversation and cooperation that hasn't always happened in Washington,” he said. “We cannot afford to fall back on old ideologies, and we will all have to budge on long-held positions. So I ask members of both parties to maintain an open mind and

a commitment to progress as we work to lift this burden from the shoulders of future generations.”

In coded language Obama is reminding both parties to put aside electoral calculations and seize the opportunity presented by the fiscal crisis—caused largely by the bailout of Wall Street—in order to dismantle what remains of the social safety net.

Durbin’s support is particularly telling. The Illinois senator is one of the handful of Congressional Democrats held up as progressives. His vote in favor of the plan indicates that there will be no significant opposition to attacks on Social Security and other forms of social spending from even the “left” wing of the Democratic Party.

“When we borrow 40 cents of every dollar we spend, whether it’s for the Pentagon or for food stamps, that’s not sustainable,” Durbin said in justifying his vote. The senator’s equation of the military and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) as commensurate targets for spending cuts is a testament to the advanced rot of US liberalism. Under conditions of record hunger, the 2011 budget will likely fund SNAP with at most about \$8 billion in discretionary spending, less than 1 percent of the total military outlay, which will approach \$1 trillion.

“Some of my closest friends and allies in politics can’t understand this,” Durbin said. “They have said, ‘Why is a progressive like Dick Durbin voting for this deficit commission report?’ Well, here’s why: I believe that politicians on the left and the right, Democrats and Republicans, have to acknowledge the deficit crisis our nation faces.”

The AFL-CIO and Change to Win have thrown themselves behind the budget-cutting, entirely in line with the bureaucrats’ drive to make US exports more globally competitive by driving down the wages and conditions of the workers it nominally represents. Stern voted against the plan but made clear he backs the main line of the measure against working class living standards.

“This plan deserves a vote and this president needs to make sure that by the State of the Union [in January] he also has his own plan and his own leadership because this is the issue of our time that must be solved,” Stern said, hailing the proposal as “an enormous, tectonic paradigm shift.”

Edward McElroy, a former AFL-CIO vice president

and American Federation of Teachers president, sat on a commission sponsored by the Bipartisan Policy Center that recently put forth a plan advocating similar cuts.

The lineup against the working class on the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform is a mirror image of the social and political forces workers face at large: Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives, CEOs and trade union bureaucrats.

Workers must pose their own solution to the fiscal crisis: the expropriation of the ill-gotten wealth of the financial elite and the breaking of their hold over the levers of power in government and the economy.



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