

The 112th US Congress convenes

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The 112th US Congress convenes Wednesday, with a large Republican majority in the House of Representatives and a diminished Democratic majority in the Senate. This division is the outcome of the November 2010 election, in which the Republicans made a net gain of 63 seats and took control of the House while picking up six Senate seats but falling short of a majority in the upper chamber.

The Republican majority in the House of Representatives reflects most directly and starkly the further lurch to the right of the entire Congress and both parties in the aftermath of the midterm elections.

Nearly half of the incoming class of 87 freshmen Republicans has no previous experience in elective office, and many of these are associated with the radical right-wing Tea Party movement. These are for the most part not self-financed multi-millionaires—most of those candidates lost—but elements drawn from disoriented sections of the middle class, including seven doctors and dentists, three financial advisers, two realtors, two car dealers, two farmers, a pilot, a teacher, an insurance broker, a retired professional football player, and owners of a pizza parlor, a pest control business and small construction companies.

There are also, of course, traditional Republican political operatives who took advantage of the Democratic collapse, including five former congressmen who regained their seats, three former US attorneys in the widely hated Bush administration, and 37 who moved up from positions in state or local government.

The overall political stance of the new House majority could be described as perverted populism—tub-thumping denunciations of nefarious elites and the Washington establishment, combined with policies that serve the interests of the actual elite that rules America, the one percent at the top who monopolize the wealth and consume the lion's share of the national income.

Insofar as the incoming Republican freshmen actually adhere to the politics of the Tea Party groups, they demonstrate the growing instability of bourgeois politics and the increasing irrationality of a financial aristocracy that is fixated on its personal stock portfolios and tax bills.

Leaders of the Tea Party caucus, like Michele Bachman of Minnesota, have already declared their opposition to any increase of the federal debt ceiling, a stance that would force a default by the federal government sometime this spring.

The Republican leadership, headed by incoming Speaker of the House John Boehner, is more attuned to the requirements of the financial markets, and plans to use the intransigence of the ultra-rightists in its bargaining with the White House over what spending cuts will accompany an increase in the debt ceiling.

The willingness of the Obama administration to collaborate in this charade was demonstrated by the appearance of White House economic adviser Austan Goolsbee on a television interview program Sunday. He said failure to raise the debt ceiling would be catastrophic economically and would represent the first government default in world history brought on by “sheer insanity.”

Another sop to the ultra-right will be next week's vote in the House to repeal the Obama health care plan, a meaningless gesture in view of Democratic control of the Senate, Obama's veto power, and the growing support for the program in business circles as a deficit-cutting measure.

The House Republicans will also adopt new budget rules which will allow unlimited tax cuts for the wealthy, regardless of the impact on the deficit, but forbid any increase in social spending or tax cuts for working people, like the Earned Income Tax Credit, without offsetting cuts elsewhere.

For all its populist howling about jobs and the Wall

Street bailout during the election campaign, the Republican Party is just as devoted to serving the interests of the financial elite as the Democrats. Many of the new Tea Party congressmen have already been taken in hand by corporate lobbyists, who have supplied them with personnel—particularly chiefs of staff—and begun staging fundraising events for their future reelection campaigns.

The real agenda of the new Republican majority is demonstrated by Congressman Darrell Issa of California, who will head the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, which has wide powers to subpoena Obama administration officials and grill them about their conduct in office.

Over the Christmas recess, Issa sent letters to more than 150 trade associations and corporations requesting a list of existing and proposed federal regulations that they opposed and wanted changed or blocked. The groups solicited include the oil industry, the electric power generation industry, the National Association of Manufacturers, the railroad industry, the drug companies and the telecommunications companies.

The cover letter suggested that objections to regulations should be presented as efforts to “stimulate job creation.” Among the regulations generating corporate opposition are OSHA rules on workplace safety and noise, limits on hours of work for truck drivers, consumer product safety rules, environmental rules of every kind, and controls on the trading of derivatives. In other words, big business is demanding the “right” to the completely unrestrained exploitation of workers as well as the environment.

The further shift to the right in bourgeois politics is not the product of a shift to the right among the American people as a whole, and particularly the working class, which constitutes the vast majority. The Republican agenda of tax cuts for the wealthy and massive military spending—which is shared in all essentials by the Obama administration and the Democrats—is widely unpopular.

A poll published Monday found that when Americans were asked to choose measures to reduce the federal deficit, 61 percent favored raising taxes on the wealthy and 20 percent cutting military spending—in other words, the vast majority of the American people are diametrically opposed to the two top priorities of the Republican Party. For its part, the Obama

administration has already embraced the Republicans’ demand to extend Bush-era tax cuts for the rich and is signaling its eagerness to collaborate in austerity measures, falsely claiming that in doing so it is responding the popular will as expressed in the November vote.

The debacle for the Democratic Party in the November elections was the byproduct of its own right-wing orientation. Tens of millions of working people and young people, who turned out to vote for Obama and the Democrats in 2008, stayed home in 2010, in large measure because of the refusal of the Democratic administration to take any serious action against the deepening recession.

Except for a stimulus package that consisted largely of subsidies to state and local government and tax breaks for business, with no direct job creation let alone a significant public works program, the administration did nothing in the face of the rising toll of unemployment and social misery. On the contrary, Obama filled his administration with Wall Street figures who could barely conceal their indifference to the plight of the masses.

In the peculiar framework of American electoral politics, with its two officially recognized parties, both representing business interests and both far to the right, the mass disillusionment with Obama and the Democrats found a distorted expression in the victory of the Republicans, whose program is even more right-wing than that of the Democrats.

This only underscores the central political problem facing American working people. It is necessary to break with the two-party system and build a mass independent political party of the working class to fight for workers’ power and socialism.

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