

US Congress approves measly relief package for Hurricane Sandy victims

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Both houses of the US Congress hurriedly approved a small appropriation of new aid for the victims of Hurricane Sandy on January 4. The \$9.7 billion package is designed to cover some of the insurance claims of the tens of thousands of homeowners devastated by last October's storm. The bill was approved in the House of Representatives by a 354 to 67 vote, with all the opposition coming from Republicans. It was later carried in the Senate by unanimous voice vote, and is expected to be quickly signed by President Obama.

The new legislation allows the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which administers the National Flood Insurance Program, to borrow another \$9.7 billion to meet claims. This program has only covered claims totaling \$1.7 billion so far, barely making a dent in the needs of those suffering after the storm. And the insurance coverage does not involve any of the other massive expenses of storm recovery, including rebuilding costs, the repair of bridges, tunnels and other transportation infrastructure, funds for the reimbursement of overtime costs to local governments, and longer-term preparation for future extreme weather. Many of these expenditures, contained in another \$51 billion package, are to be brought to the House floor on January 15, according to House Republican Speaker John Boehner.

Even this bill, not guaranteed of passage, would fall short of earlier proposals by both New York Governor Andrew Cuomo and New Jersey Governor Chris Christie. More than two months after the hurricane, coastal communities in New York and New Jersey remain ravaged and thousands upon thousands of poor and working people have seen little to no aid.

The significant Republican opposition to the first spending bill highlights the tactical divisions within the

Republican majority of the House, with a vocal Tea-Party faction, backed by such right-wing think tanks as the Club for Growth and the Heritage Foundation, opposing any new spending, even the bare minimums contained in the proposed legislation.

This opposition may have led Speaker Boehner to suddenly pull the bill from the House floor in the closing hours of the last Congressional session on December 31. This in turn led Christie and some other fellow Republicans to blast Boehner, with Christie accusing the Speaker of refusing to take his phone calls. The New Jersey governor blustered that his own party had failed a "basic test of public service."

"There's only one group to blame for the continued suffering of these innocent victims: the House majority and their speaker, John Boehner," Christie declared.

The media made much of the spectacle of the New Jersey demagogue, hailed only a few months ago as the keynote speaker of the Republican convention that nominated Mitt Romney for president, now turning on his own leadership. Christie was of course joined by numerous Democrats, with New York Congressman Jerrold Nadler declaring "this was the most callous action I've ever seen" and Representative Frank Pallone of New Jersey complaining that the interim bill "is too little too late."

In fact, Christie and the Democrats are only trying to cover up their own responsibility, and divert the outrage of millions in the aftermath of the hurricane, which exposed the role of all branches of government in the hopelessly inadequate emergency response, as well as the decay of the infrastructure and inaction on climate change.

Predictably, after the theatrics of Christie, Long Island Congressman Peter King and a number of other Republicans, Boehner brought the partial relief

authorization before the new session of Congress in one of its first meetings. Christie and his New York counterpart Cuomo, a Democrat who like Christie is sometimes mentioned as a possible 2016 presidential nominee, then issued a joint statement calling the bill's passage "a necessary and critical first step toward delivering aid to the people of New Jersey and New York."

The maneuvers in Washington do not reflect any substantive disagreements between the big business politicians, but rather the contradictions they face as they seek to impose unending austerity on the American people. In the final analysis, much of the suffering caused by last fall's hurricane was the product of the deepening economic crisis of American capitalism. This translates into social disaster and the virtual abandonment of large sections of the population.



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