

US Senate budget bill makes sequester cuts permanent

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The US Senate passed a bill Wednesday that would fund the US government through September, avoiding a potential government shutdown on March 28. The deal makes \$85 billion in sequester cuts permanent for most of the year, paving the way for the implementation of furloughs for about 1 million federal government employees.

The bill also includes provisions to freeze federal pay through the end of this year, reversing an earlier executive order to end the current pay freeze and give federal employees a 0.5 percent raise. Federal employees have already had their pay frozen for two years.

The Senate's version, which is similar to one passed by the House of Representatives last week, will go back for final approval in the house Thursday. It is expected to be quickly voted on and signed into law by the end of the week.

Despite their earlier denunciation of the sequester cuts as "dumb" and "unfair," the Democrats made clear early on that they have no intention of using the potential shutdown of the government to reverse the cuts.

The Department of Defense began issuing furlough notices to hundreds of thousands of civilian employees Thursday. The department says that the "vast majority" of its 800,000 civilian employees will receive one-day-a-week furlough notices.

Defense department employees were told that the first furloughs will begin on April 25 and will last at least until mid-September. This means an effective pay cut of 20 percent for most workers.

The media has maintained a near-total silence on the question of the government furloughs and pay cuts. The *New York Times*, for instance, has not once mentioned the proposed pay freeze for federal employees.

The American Federation of Government Employees, which has 290,000 members, called rallies throughout the country Wednesday. Despite the union's large membership and mass opposition to the cuts, turnout at most of the rallies was not more than a few dozen, reflecting the union's unwillingness to launch any serious fight against the sequester.

Jonathan, a worker who took part in one of the protests outside the Labor Department in Washington D.C., told the WSW, "These rallies don't get us much attention. Workers need to take over their workplaces. I think once folks begin feeling the pain of the furloughs, we may be at that point."

He added that many of his coworkers were similarly outraged by the cuts. "The furloughs will give us a 20 percent pay cut. It's disgusting the way the government deals with its workers," Jonathan said.

Another worker at the rally added, "I know someone in Texas who is being furloughed. He has three kids and a sick mother that he has to take care of on \$35,000 a year. Food banks won't accept him because they say 35k isn't suffering. He's been forced to pull his son from college because he can't afford to pay his tuition, and his whole family survives on Ramen Noodles and peanut butter sandwiches. Why does the government have to go after him?"

All told, close to one million workers will receive furlough days because of the sequester cuts, with some taking as much as a 35 percent pay cut as a result.

The Senate's version of the funding bill, like that passed by the House, allows some departments, particularly the military, to maintain spending for certain projects by shifting the costs to other areas, including furloughs and pay cuts. The State Department is also given specific authority to fund Syrian opposition forces with \$50 million.

The Senate's version makes some other modifications to the planned cuts. For instance, it removes planned furloughs for meat inspectors, which was heavily opposed by meatpacking corporations because it would cause them production losses. This was paid for in part by cutting an Agriculture Department school breakfast grant program for low-income students.

The Senate's final version of the bill will cut \$366 million from the Head Start nutrition program, kicking over 60,000 children off the rolls. It also leaves the sequester cuts to special education unchanged.

The imposition of the sequester cuts will result in almost \$3 billion in cuts to public education, contributing further to the precipitous decline in education funding and the rise in college tuition. Compared to five years ago, states now spend 28 percent less per student on higher education, according to a recent report by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, forcing colleges to increase tuition by an average of \$1,850 per student.

On the rapid passage of the funding resolution, the *Washington Post* wrote, "The process of approving the proposal has been unfolding remarkably smoothly for a divided Congress that has gone to the brink repeatedly over spending issues."

The conspicuous unanimity of the Democrats and Republicans in making the sequester cuts permanent points to a fundamental reality: these two parties are united in their desire to make the working class pay for the crisis of capitalism through wage cuts and the slashing of social services.

With the appropriations bill out of the way, Congress is now proceeding to its main order of business: the drafting of a budget that will slash hundreds of billions of dollars from Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security.



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