

Top Senate Democrat backs Medicare, Social Security cuts

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21 October 2013

The number two Democrat in the US Senate called Sunday for urgent action to reduce future federal spending on Social Security and Medicare. “If we don’t focus on health care and dealing with the entitlements,” Senator Dick Durbin warned, “the baby boom generation is going to blow away our future.”

Durbin appeared on Fox News Sunday to deliver his right-wing message, blaming the mounting federal deficit on the older generation of working people, not on the impact of the Wall Street financial crash, tax cuts for the wealthy, or the vast cost of American imperialism’s wars.

“Social Security is going to run out of money in 20 years,” Durbin declared. “I want to fix it now, before we reach that cliff. Medicare may run out of money in 10 years, let’s fix it now. And that means addressing the skyrocketing cost of health care. That’s what ObamaCare is focused on, and yet, the Republicans want nothing to do with it.”

The Illinois senator, who has close relations with the Obama White House, was only one of a half-dozen Washington power brokers who used appearances on Sunday television interview programs to make the case for “entitlement reform.”

This is the saccharine media label for brutal cuts in Social Security and Medicare, on which more than 50 million retired and disabled people depend to pay their bills and meet their health needs.

Targeting these programs—which are overwhelmingly popular with the American public—has been the real purpose of the budget and debt maneuvers in Washington, including the 16-day federal shutdown and the artificial crisis over the October 17 deadline for a default on federal debt, narrowly averted by legislation pushed through the House and Senate with only hours to spare.

Others who sounded the same theme Sunday included Republican Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, who appeared on the CBS program “Face the Nation.” Asked what he hoped President Obama would do now that the immediate funding crisis was past, McConnell said, “My first choice would be to take advantage of the opportunity presented by a divided government. You know, divided government has frequently done very, very important things.”

He cited as examples Democratic House Speaker Tip O’Neill collaborating with Republican President Ronald Reagan to raise the age of eligibility for Social Security and Democratic President Bill Clinton and a Republican Congress collaborating to carry out “welfare reform”—eliminating the federal aid program entirely—and balancing the federal budget.

McConnell declared, “We all know that the unsustainable growth rate of entitlements is the single biggest challenge confronting America’s future... We currently have a \$17 trillion national debt, and that pales in comparison to what’s coming our way if we don’t make the eligibility for entitlements fit the demographics of America today and tomorrow.”

Another Republican Senator, Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, appearing on the same program, called on Obama to “give Democrats some political cover to reform entitlements.”

Democratic Senator Mark Warner of Virginia, who appeared side-by-side with Graham, chimed in: “We all know at the end of the day, Republicans are going to have to give on revenues, Democrats are going to have to give on entitlement reform.”

The bill ending the shutdown, at least until January 15, and postponing the debt default until February or later, also called for the convening of a House-Senate conference committee on the federal budget, co-chaired

by Democratic Senator Patty Murray and Republican Congressman Paul Ryan.

This committee is tasked with drafting a budget for the balance of the current fiscal year, to be submitted by December 13. It is widely expected to begin discussing cuts in Social Security and Medicare, a significant first step even if there is not yet bipartisan agreement on the exact measures to be taken.

The process must be carried out in a concealed fashion because of the massive opposition among working people to cuts in these programs—majorities of 70 and 80 percent, according to opinion polls.

There is an unbridgeable gulf between these mass sentiments and the 100 percent agreement in favor of such cuts in the political establishment in Washington, among both Democrats and Republicans. They engage in mutual mudslinging, combined with pledges to defend these programs, mainly to disguise this developing consensus.

Obama and both the Democrats and Republicans advance the Orwellian proposition that it is necessary to slash benefits and eligibility in order to “save” Social Security and Medicare.

The unanimity in ruling class circles was underscored by two prominent media voices. Columnist George Will, appearing on Fox, gloated about the right-wing character of the budget talks. “We are now talking entirely in Republican terms, in Republican vocabulary after this so-called defeat,” he said. “No taxes, how much is the spending going to be cut? The federal workforce is being cut, discretionary domestic spending is being cut...”

The *Washington Post*, in an editorial headlined, “The fiscal bargain America needs,” argued that a bipartisan deal on slashing entitlement programs was now possible. It called on Obama to drop any proposals for tax increases—entirely token in any case—in order to reach a deal.

Like Durbin and McConnell, the *Post* editorial presented Social Security and Medicare as demographic impossibilities. It stated: “Ten years from now, the US government will be spending \$4 on entitlements for every dollar it spends on all other domestic functions... In short, the costs of an aging society would crowd out other vital national functions, while the country goes deeper into the red.”

None of these spokesmen for the American financial

aristocracy explains why the “costs of an aging society” must be reduced. None of them question the present distribution of wealth and social benefits, under which a tiny minority enjoys untold riches, while the vast majority struggle from paycheck to paycheck, or, in the case of the retired, from Social Security check to Social Security check.

They simply assert a proposition that has deeply reactionary implications: that the elderly should live shorter and poorer lives, because in the richest society in human history, there is supposedly “no money.”



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