

US Senate approves bipartisan austerity budget

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19 December 2013

The US Senate gave final approval Wednesday to a two-year budget agreement that will maintain the bulk of the spending cuts imposed through the “sequester” process and allow extended unemployment benefits for 1.3 million people to lapse on December 28.

The bill passed by 64-36, with 9 Republicans joining all 55 Democrats and pro-Democrat independents. Most Senate Republicans voted against the bill, in part because they wanted even deeper cuts, in part because they wanted to posture as opponents of a provision trimming pensions for retirees from the career military.

Wednesday’s passage was assured by the 67-33 vote on Tuesday to close debate, easily exceeding the required 60-vote majority. Final approval of the bill was by a simple majority, needing only 51 votes.

The bill alleviates a portion of the cuts imposed through the sequester process, which took effect last March, but only for the current year, where \$45 billion is restored, and next year, where \$18 billion is added. This amounts to restoring 50 percent of the scheduled cuts for fiscal year 2014 and 20 percent of the cuts for 2015. The cuts for the remaining seven years of the sequester (2016-2022) are to be carried out in full.

The budget does not include an extension of federally funded benefits for the long-term unemployed. As a result, cash benefits for 1.3 million workers and an estimated total of 3.9 million people, counting family members, will be cut off right after Christmas. The government has said that, unless the program is restored, as many as 15 million people will be affected by the end of 2014.

The Obama White House hailed the budget deal as offering “green shoots of hope” for more collaboration between the Democratic and Republican parties in 2014. “The year is ending with some real positive signs,” Dan Pfeiffer, a senior adviser to Obama, told

the *New York Times* .

The supposedly intractable conflict between the two corporate-controlled right-wing parties is largely an effort to distract the American population and conceal the two-party consensus on slashing spending that benefits working people, the poor and the elderly, in favor of tax breaks for corporations and the wealthy and financing continued military aggression around the world.

The main concern of leading elements in both parties, in terms of the immediate budget deal, was the potential impact of the sequester process on US military operations. The sequester cuts in the current fiscal year have been handled by shuffling money between various Pentagon accounts. The military brass warned that such expedients had been exhausted and there could be real disruptions in military operations from the sequester cuts going forward.

In an extraordinary political intervention by the uniformed military, Lt. Gen. Joseph Anderson, commanding general of the 18th Airborne Corps at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, who is scheduled to take command of the US-NATO forces in Afghanistan next year, sent a letter to the Senate urging passage of the budget deal.

The letter was released by the office of Senator Kay Hagan, a Democrat of North Carolina, who said her vote for final passage was in direct response to the general’s appeal. “Over the last several days I have heard directly from top leadership in North Carolina’s military community regarding the importance of avoiding the harsh and unnecessary cuts from sequestration and urging support for this bipartisan bill,” Hagan said. “For these reasons, I will be supporting the bipartisan budget agreement.”

Only a few decades ago, such open interference into

congressional deliberation would have resulted in the reprimand or outright dismissal of the officer for violating the principle of civilian control of the military. In the militarized America of the Bush-Obama years, however, such actions take place with hardly any notice from the media, let alone condemnation from the political establishment.

Both the sequester cuts and the legislation approved Wednesday apply only to so-called discretionary programs—domestic and military spending that is authorized and appropriated each year, rather than the automatic authorizations for programs such as Social Security, Medicare and interest payments on the federal debt.

The bill is a budget blueprint that sets overall targets for the appropriations bills pending in both the House and the Senate. Total discretionary spending in the current fiscal year is now set at \$1.012 trillion, and for next year at \$1.014 trillion.



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