

Democrats attack the unemployed and the poor

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13 January 2014

Congressional Democrats this week publicly offered to join Republicans in cutting back extended benefits for the unemployed and slashing food stamp benefits for the poorest sections of the working class.

On Thursday, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid advanced a plan to revive federal extended unemployment benefits, which both parties allowed to expire December 28 for 1.3 million long-term jobless. Under the Democratic plan, benefits would be restored for only ten months, until mid-November—conveniently expiring again just days after the 2014 congressional elections.

The emergency benefits would be further reduced from their level last year. Instead of adding up to 47 weeks of benefits to the 26 weeks typically offered under state unemployment insurance programs, the new plan would offer a maximum of only 31 weeks in states with official jobless rates over 9 percent. The federal extended benefits would be of even shorter duration in states with lower official unemployment rates.

Reid caved in completely to demands by House and Senate Republicans that any restoration in extended benefits be paid for through other cuts in social spending. The entire \$18 billion cost of the Democratic plan would be paid for in this way, mainly through a one-year extension of the across-the-board spending cuts known as sequestration, which would now expire in 2024 instead of 2023, cutting \$17 billion.

The Democratic leader also dropped his opposition to holding votes on a series of amendments proposed by Senate Republicans, and likely to pass with significant Democratic support, adding further restrictions to the program, including a prohibition on collecting Social Security disability payments and unemployment benefits at the same time, and new restrictions on immigrant workers obtaining federal benefits such as

the child tax credit. “We’ve done everything the Republicans wanted,” Reid said.

The Democratic plan to further shrink extended benefits for the long-term jobless was unveiled just 24 hours before the release of the latest Labor Department report on employment, which showed a dismal 74,000 net new jobs created in December and a further growth in the army of unemployed. The official unemployment rate fell to 6.7 percent, but this was a perverse expression of the worsening conditions in the labor market, as more than 347,000 jobless workers stopped seeking work because there were no jobs to be found.

As for food stamps, House Democratic Minority Whip Steny Hoyer acknowledged, in an interview taped for broadcast on Sunday by C-SPAN, that a proposal to cut \$9 billion over 10 years from what is formally known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) would likely pass the House with substantial Democratic support. Hoyer said he would vote for such a cut himself.

Food stamp spending suffered its first across-the-board cut in history last fall, when a temporary boost in spending, enacted as part of the Obama administration’s 2009 economic stimulus program, was allowed to expire, cutting \$5 billion immediately from SNAP, and \$11 billion over three years—the equivalent of one month of food per year.

In the current round of budget talks, the Democratic-controlled Senate has proposed an additional \$4 billion in food stamp cuts over ten years, while the Republican-controlled House has proposed a staggering \$40 billion over the same period. The resulting “compromise” at \$9 billion means a drastic worsening of conditions for tens of millions of people.

Medical and antipoverty groups have warned that cuts to food stamps on this scale will inevitably be

translated into higher levels of diabetes and other nutrition-related diseases, developmental problems for children, and, in the worst hit working-class neighborhoods, malnutrition and outright hunger. Half of all food stamp recipients are children, and 10 percent are elderly people, most of them living on fixed incomes.

Ever since President Obama declared, in a mid-December address, that income inequality was the great issue to which he would devote his remaining years in office, there has been a systematic effort in the media and by Obama's liberal and pseudo-left apologists to portray the Democratic Party as spearheading a new era of "progressivism" in US politics.

Such claims were always a fraud, since they covered up the consistently reactionary record of the Obama administration in attacking the living standards and democratic rights of working people, pouring trillions of dollars into bailing out the banks and propping up the stock market, while devoting massive sums to financing US military aggression around the world.

With the open embrace by the Democrats of the program of the extreme right—slashing benefits for the unemployed and the poor—the contrast between the claims of a new "progressive" politics and the actual program of Wall Street reaction is starker than ever.



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