

As 114th Congress convenes

Washington resumes work on right-wing agenda

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The Obama administration and the new Republican majority in Congress resume work this week on a right-wing agenda of militarism and attacks on the working class. President Obama returned Saturday from his 16-day vacation in Hawaii, while Congress prepared to open its new session on Tuesday.

The 114th US Congress has the largest Republican majority in the House of Representatives since 1928, 246 to 189, and a 54 to 46 Republican majority in the US Senate. Given Senate rules, which require a 60-vote majority for most actions, and Obama's veto power, which can be overridden only by a two-thirds vote of both houses, no significant legislation can be passed without bipartisan agreement between the two big-business parties.

Congressional Republicans and Democrats, speaking on Sunday morning television interview programs, indicated an array of areas where the two parties will collaborate, despite the public pretense of unbridgeable differences. The reality is that both parties are controlled by the ruling financial aristocracy and do its bidding on every serious matter.

One of the first items of business will be the passage of a congressional resolution to authorize the use of military force against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Sunni fundamentalist group that Obama has targeted for air strikes in both countries since August.

Appearing on "Fox News Sunday," the incoming chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Bob Corker of Tennessee, said there would be further hearings on the war against ISIS in January and February. "What we are all hoping to happen is getting the White House to lay out a plan that has a plausible...way to the outcome that they rhetorically have outlined," he said.

Most Senate Republicans are demanding a more

sweeping anti-ISIS resolution than the one drafted by the outgoing Democratic majority on the committee, lifting any limitations on the duration or geographic scope of the intervention, as well as any restrictions on the deployment of US ground troops. Both Corker and Senator John McCain, the incoming chairman of the Armed Forces Committee, favor a more aggressive approach.

Congress has already appropriated billions in funding for the new war, as well as authorizing US training of thousands of Syrian "rebel" fighters. The actions of these forces will be aimed not only against ISIS, which has been the beneficiary of aid from the US and its allies in the US-backed civil war in Syria, but also at the overthrow of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Some Senate Democrats have joined the Republicans in criticizing the administration from the right on foreign policy. The outgoing chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, Democrat Robert Menendez of New Jersey, is vociferously opposed to Obama's decision to open diplomatic relations with Cuba. Speaking on Sunday, he also criticized Obama's description of the cyberattack on Sony Pictures as "an act of vandalism," claiming it was a North Korean terrorist attack on a US-based company.

Menendez has already demanded that the State Department put North Korea back on its list of nations sponsoring terrorism, even though the administration has not produced any evidence of North Korean involvement in the attack on Sony Pictures, which many security experts blame on independent hackers.

The line-up on foreign policy—a virtually unanimous Republican caucus joined by a sufficient number of Democrats to pass legislation—is likely to set the pattern for actions on domestic policy as well, according to another leading Democrat, Senator Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota.

Klobuchar is a principal backer of one of the first new pieces of legislation supported by Senate Republicans. The measure would repeal a tax on manufacturers of medical devices that is part of the Obamacare program. She is joined by other liberals, including Al Franken of Minnesota and Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts, from states where these manufacturers are headquartered.

Appearing on the ABC program “This Week,” Klobuchar said there would be “floating coalitions” involving different groups of Democrats joining with the Republican caucus on different issues. Among these issues are approval of the Keystone Pipeline to move Canadian tar sands oil to Texas Gulf Coast refineries, ratification of a Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement, the blocking of environmental regulations on coal mining and other energy-related industries, and a sizeable cut in the corporate income tax rate.

The overall spending level for most government departments, including all major social services, has been frozen through September 30 under the latest in a series of bipartisan budget deals aimed at imposing austerity on the working class. Republican congressional leaders have said they intend to return to “regular order” in the budget for Fiscal Year 2016, which begins October 1, making even deeper cuts in social spending.

In relation to the one issue left over from the lame-duck session of Congress, funding for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which is set to expire at the end of February, Republican Senator John Thune, incoming chairman of the Commerce Committee, said there would be no effort to shut down the department in order to force a change in the Obama administration’s enforcement of immigration policies.

The DHS includes not only Immigration and Customs Enforcement, which has deported more than two million undocumented workers under Obama, but also the Transportation Security Administration, the Secret Service, the Coast Guard, and a raft of other repressive agencies.

For all the racist and anti-immigrant demagoguery of the Republican Tea Party elements, the party leadership is well aware that corporate America largely supports Obama’s immigration actions, which are aimed not at helping the undocumented, but at stabilizing the supply of labor for US agribusiness, construction and other sectors dependent on super-exploited low-wage labor.

In an interview with CNN, incoming Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell spoke effusively of the prospects of bipartisan collaboration in Washington. He

said, “[W]hen the American people elect a divided government, they’re not saying they don’t want anything done. What they are saying is they want things done in the political center, things that both sides can agree on.”

Translated into plain language, “American people” means “financial bosses,” whose vast wealth manipulates the rigged two-party system. They “want things done in the political center”—in other words, in line with the consensus right-wing policies of the ruling elite. McConnell and House Speaker John Boehner will use the Tea Party zealots to push the Washington debate further to the right, but there will almost certainly be no government shutdowns or other actions that might destabilize the financial markets.

As for Obama and the Democrats, their real attitude to the incoming Republican majority was expressed most clearly in their muted response to the exposure of House Majority Whip Steve Scalise’s links to racist forces. Last week, a blogger uncovered the fact that the Louisiana Republican had spoken at a white supremacist meeting in suburban New Orleans in 2002, when he was a member of the state legislature.

Subsequent media investigations not only confirmed the appearance, but also brought to light comments by Scalise to the effect that he shared the politics of David Duke, but without the baggage of the former Ku Klux Klan leader. He was one of six state representatives in 2004 to vote against establishing Martin Luther King Day as a state holiday.

Republicans vociferously defended Scalise. Only one Democrat in Congress has called for him to step down from the leadership. The lone Democrat in the Louisiana congressional delegation, Cedric Richmond, an African American from New Orleans, declared his full support for Scalise, saying he was not going to let critics “use Steve as a scapegoat to score political points when I know him and know his family.”

There has not been a word from the Obama White House on the controversy, and no indication that it will put a crimp in his frequent pledges to work with the incoming congressional Republican leadership—in which Scalise is a major player.



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