

New Congress targets Social Security disability benefits

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The 114th US Congress completed its first two days by preparing the passage of regressive, anti-social policies, including measures that would defund Social Security disability insurance benefits, increase the number of hours that classify as “full-time” employment, and make it easier to pass pro-business tax cuts.

On Tuesday, the House of Representatives adopted a rule that blocks the transfer of funds from the Social Security retirement trust fund to the separate underfunded Social Security Disability Insurance trust fund unless the move is accompanied by a corresponding cut to disability spending.

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) warned that the move “could threaten Disability Insurance (DI) beneficiaries—a group of severely impaired and vulnerable Americans—with a sudden, one-fifth cut in their benefits by late 2016.” There are more than 10 million people in the United States who rely on disability payments after they suffer an injury that prevents them from working.

Proponents of the measure claimed that they were implementing it in order to “protect the Old-Age and Survivors Insurance.” In reality, they are seeking to use a procedural move to force through cuts to the Social Security program one piece at a time.

The CBPP noted that “reallocating some taxes between the retirement and disability trust funds is a historically noncontroversial measure that Congress has taken 11 times, in both directions depending on which trust fund was running short.”

The federal disability insurance system is underfunded because two recent funding reallocations have short-changed the program, while the demand for disability benefits has grown due to demographic factors and the raising of the retirement age for Social

Security.

Lawmakers from both parties have called for “fixing” the “broken” Social Security disability insurance program, making fraudulent claims that the system is commonly abused, despite the fact that the standards for qualifying for disability insurance payments are extremely stringent, with the majority of applicants being denied.

Congressional Republicans are likewise gearing up to turn their grandstanding opposition to the Affordable Care Act, known as Obamacare, into specific right-wing policy proposals. Republican representative Paul Ryan, chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, penned an op-ed in *USA Today* Tuesday calling for the House to “take up a bill to define ‘full time’ as 40 hours per week,” claiming that such a measure aims to make it “so more people can work full time.”

The measure would make Obamacare an even more naked subsidy to big business by paring back one of the few obligations it places on employers. As the CBPP notes, the measure “would allow employers with 50 or more employees who do not offer coverage to employees working 30-39 hours a week to do so without facing any penalty.”

The organization notes that, given that 44 percent of US workers work 40 hours a week, the proposal “would weaken the traditional 40-hour work week by placing far more workers at risk that employers will cut their hours to push them below the threshold.”

On Tuesday, the House of Representatives voted to implement a rule change known as “dynamic scoring,” in which the theoretical impact on “economic growth” would be taken into account when measuring the cost of policy proposals. This would enshrine supply-side theories—once denounced by George H. W. Bush as

“voodoo economics”—as the official economic doctrine of the US Congress.

The measure would facilitate the passage of tax cuts, based on the claim that they would lead to economic growth, and the increased revenues from growing incomes would offset the cost of the cuts. As the CBPP put it, “Dynamic scoring could facilitate congressional passage of large rate cuts in tax reform by making the rate cuts appear—on paper—less expensive than under a traditional cost estimate.”

In reality, big tax cuts for the wealthy lead to lower government revenues and higher deficits, which are then invoked as the reason for cuts in spending on domestic social programs.

The Democrats have put on a show of opposition in response to these actions. On Wednesday, Obama vowed to veto the proposal to redefine full-time employment under the Affordable Care Act to 40 hours. The day before, Obama said he would veto proposals to move forward with the expansion of the Keystone XL pipeline, which Republicans have made a priority.

Obama’s attitude was echoed by Senate minority leader Harry Reid, who said in a statement Wednesday that “I have no intention of just rolling over. I can’t.... Not when the middle class is teetering on the verge of extinction.”

That said, Reid reasserted that he would not pursue the same tactics as the Republicans when they were in the minority, declaring, “The mistakes of the past—the gratuitous obstruction, and wanton filibustering—will not be a hallmark of the 114th Congress.”

For all their pretended opposition to the Republican proposals and their rhetorical invocations of the “middle class,” the fact remains that the actual policy differences between the two parties are minimal.

This reality was underscored by the fact that there have been no serious protests by Democrats at the reelection of Steve Scalise as House majority whip after he admitted last month to having spoken at a white supremacist conference.



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