

# US ruling elite moves to repeal the 1960s

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The repeal of Obamacare, which began last week with the introduction of legislation drafted by Republican House Speaker Paul Ryan, working in conjunction with the Trump administration, has become the vehicle for a much wider program of social reaction.

The new legislation, which will cut off health coverage for 24 million people, will essentially put an end to Medicaid, one of the major social reforms of the 1960s, a program that has funded health care for tens of millions of poor, blind or otherwise disabled people, as well as nursing home care for the low-income elderly. It sets the stage, as Ryan has indicated, for even more sweeping legislation that will undermine and eventually destroy Medicare, which has provided health coverage for most elderly people in the United States for more than 50 years.

The major social gains of the 1960s--the last period of significant social reform in American history--are in the final stages of liquidation. This is the culmination of a protracted historical process that began almost as soon as the American ruling elite made its decision, driven by the breakdown of the post-World War II economic boom, to shift from policies of relative class compromise to ruthless class warfare. The initial steps were taken as long ago as the Democratic administration of Jimmy Carter (1977-81), which began to curb social welfare spending and targeted striking coal miners for government intervention under the Taft-Hartley Law.

The attacks were accelerated greatly under Republican Ronald Reagan, who smashed the PATCO air traffic controllers strike, giving the green light for a decade of corporate union-busting and wage-cutting, and slashed federal social spending to fuel a record military buildup. Reagan set the pace for further attacks on the programs established in the 1960s and even in the 1930s, from Clinton's abolition of Aid to Families with Dependent Children to Bush's targeting of aid to public education with his "No Child Left Behind" legislation, co-authored by Democrat Edward Kennedy, and the first steps towards the privatization of Medicare.

The Obama administration did not mark a reversal of this decades-long process, but rather its intensification. Obamacare was not an expansion of the welfare state, as its apologists claimed, but a reactionary effort to shift the cost of health care from employers and the government to working people. The all-out support of the Democrats for this legislation, worked out in

collaboration with the insurance industry and the drug monopolies, testifies to the rightward evolution of the Democratic Party over the past 40 years.

The eight years of the Obama administration--begun with promises of "hope" and "change" and filled instead with endless war, attacks on jobs and living standards, and the steady erosion of social services such as education and health care--created the conditions for the Republican takeover of Congress and finally the victory of Donald Trump.

The ideologues of capitalism claim that the "free market" will work wonders if only the restraints placed upon its operations by past social reforms are removed. These "restraints" include every social benefit won through the struggles of the working class over more than a century. Now, every one of Great Society liberalism's "big four," as one historian described the laws enacted in a six-month period from April to October 1965, is targeted for destruction.

**The Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965:** This legislation provided the first extensive federal support for local public schools, which had become politically possible following the legal abolition of segregated public schools in the South. Funds were allocated to improve public schools in poor communities, expand libraries and take the first steps in what became known as "special education." The law established the pre-school program Head Start as a permanent federal program.

Republican Congressman Steve King of Iowa has introduced legislation that would rescind the Elementary and Secondary Act and bar the Department of Education from funding any educational program except state-controlled vouchers that could be used for charter or religious schools or for home schooling.

**Medicare and Medicaid,** established through the Social Security Act of 1965: This bill for the first time provided government-backed health insurance for those over 65, half of whom had no coverage in 1965. Medicare covered hospital care (Part A) and medical and nursing fees (Part B), but did not pay for vision, dental or prescription drugs. Medicaid covered the poorest sections of working people, including children, the disabled and the blind, as well as long-term nursing home care for the poorest elderly.

The Obamacare repeal legislation would put an end to Medicaid as an entitlement program beginning in 2020, when grants to the states would be capped, forcing them to ration care

to the poor and disabled. Medicare was already significantly undermined through Obamacare itself, which cut \$700 billion in reimbursements over 10 years, and the repeal legislation will set the stage for even larger cuts, based on Ryan's plan to convert the program from an entitlement to a voucher program.

**The Voting Rights Act of 1965** was the most radical democratic measure enacted by a US Congress since post-Civil War Reconstruction. It targeted those states, mainly in the Deep South, where denial of the franchise to minorities was widespread. Before its passage, few blacks were allowed to register and vote in southern states from Texas to Virginia. Afterwards, voter participation among African-Americans rose sharply, as the federal Justice Department continued to oversee state electoral policies to block any efforts to discriminate.

The US Supreme Court gutted the Voting Rights Act by a 5-4 decision in 2013 in *Shelby vs. Holder*, ruling that the targeting of the southern states for federal intervention could no longer be justified, despite repeated renewal and extension of the law by Congress, most recently in 2006. This decision was part of a wider effort led by Republicans in state after state to enact voter ID laws and other measures whose purpose was to resurrect discriminatory practices against minority and poor voters.

**The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965**, also known as the Hart-Celler Act after its leading Senate and House sponsors, abolished longstanding restrictions on immigrants from Asia, Africa and the Middle East, and ended the preference for immigrants from Northern and Western Europe over those from Southern and Eastern Europe. It also allowed unlimited immigration of family members of US citizens and residents, encouraging the growth of immigrant communities.

Trump's travel ban on visitors from six majority Muslim countries directly violates the 1965 law, which prohibits the use of national origin as a test for restricting immigration. His executive orders on immigration as well as the proposed wall along the US-Mexico border represent an effort to turn the clock back to the period of the exclusion laws that barred Asian immigrants and the *bracero* program that allowed Mexican immigrants only as semi-slave labor in the fields.

There are other reforms of the 1960s, from the establishment of the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for Humanities, to the Clean Water Act and dozens of other anti-pollution laws, which led ultimately to the creation of the Environmental Protection Administration. All these are under attack by the Trump administration and the Republican Congress.

The Democratic Party has collaborated in one attack after another on the social reforms with which it was once identified. The Democrats have spearheaded the attacks on public education, introduced major cuts in Medicare funding as part of Obamacare, and did not lift a finger to restore enforcement after the Supreme Court gutted the Voting Rights Act. They oppose Trump, not in defense of social services, but on behalf of

sections of Wall Street and the military-intelligence apparatus, attacking the new administration over its supposed softness towards Russia.

Even in the 1960s, Democratic Party liberalism was not a challenge to capitalism, but rather an effort, at the height of the post-World War II economic boom, to make American capitalism more palatable to the masses, and therefore safer for the capitalists, under conditions of growing mass struggles over civil rights, against the Vietnam War, and for better wages and working conditions. The measures of Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" were far less ambitious than the welfare states built up in Western Europe during the same period.

As historian James T. Patterson wrote of that period: "The Great Society programs were... quintessentially liberal, not radical. Except in the area of race relations--a major exception--they made no serious effort to challenge the power of established groups, including large corporations. In no way did they seriously confront socio-economic inequality or seek to redistribute wealth."

Today, under conditions of the protracted historical decline of American capitalism, exacerbated by the impact of the 2008 financial crash and the massive transfer of wealth from working people to bail out Wall Street, no section of the American ruling class can or will defend any of the social gains of the 1960s.

The supposed Democratic resistance to Trump's program in Congress is merely for show. The Trump administration and the Republican Party will get nearly everything they want, while the Democrats wage a phony war and call on the victims of Trump's attacks to wait until the 2018 elections.

The Democratic Party does not represent the popular opposition to Trump and the Republicans, as congressional Democrats and political charlatans like Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren claim. Rather, its function is to serve as a brake on the actual resistance to Trump, from the working class, which will take on an increasingly explosive and politically radical form.

The working class must take the lead in the struggles to defend health care, education, environmental protection, the rights of immigrants and all basic democratic rights. It must answer the capitalist program of social counterrevolution with the working class alternative of social revolution. Workers must build a mass political movement independent of and opposed to the twin parties of big business, fighting on the basis of a socialist program.



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