

US House passes short-term budget bill, but federal shutdown looms

Patrick Martin
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The Republican-controlled House of Representatives approved a short-term budget authorization bill Thursday night, but its prospects seemed dim in the US Senate, with less than 24 hours remaining before a partial shutdown of the federal government at 12:01 a.m. Saturday morning.

The budget bill, called a “continuing resolution,” authorizes federal agencies to continue spending money for an additional four weeks, through February 16. In an effort to attract Democratic support, the bill includes a provision extending spending authorization for the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) for an additional six years. A previous continuing resolution, adopted last September with overwhelming bipartisan support, allowed CHIP authorization to expire.

The maneuver failed, as the continuing resolution passed on a near party-line vote of 230-197. Only six Democrats supported the bill, mostly those in districts with large numbers of federal government workers who now face the prospect of payless paydays. Only 11 Republicans opposed the bill, mainly members of the extreme-right Freedom Caucus who want more spending on the military and less on domestic social programs.

The continuing resolution also delays several taxes that are part of the Obama-era Affordable Care Act, including the so-called Cadillac Tax on supposedly overly-generous health benefits, which affects workers covered under an array of union contracts, as well as a tax on medical device manufacturers and another on insurance companies.

The House Republican leadership was able to buy off the opposition of most members of the Freedom Caucus with promises that a right-wing immigration bill will be brought to a vote if it has majority support in the House, and that there will be a vote within 10

days to increase military spending by billions of dollars. Once this deal was made, the majority of the Freedom Caucus agreed to back the continuing resolution.

The vast majority of House Democrats claimed to oppose the continuing resolution because it says nothing about the status of so-called “Dreamers,” the young undocumented immigrants brought to the United States as children. Some 800,000 young immigrants face the expiration on March 5 of protection, under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, against deportation.

In a letter to the White House, 171 of the 193 Democrats in the House claimed they would not vote for a continuing resolution unless it incorporated a deal on immigration, which would include a raft of reactionary and repressive measures, including funding for Trump’s wall on the US-Mexico border, a huge boost in spending on Border Patrol and Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents, and restrictions on legal immigration, in return for a limited legalization of DACA recipients.

Democratic Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, however, expressed a willingness to abandon any immigration deal, even of such a right-wing character. “This isn’t about Dreamers,” she said at a press briefing in the Capitol. “Even if not one Dreamer ever existed, we still have a problem on the budget side of this. This isn’t something that Dreamers are holding up.”

Prospects for the continuing resolution in the Senate were uncertain, since the Republican majority is only 51-49 and 60 votes will be required for passage. The previous continuing resolution passed with 66 votes, but as many as 10 of the 18 Democrats who voted for it now say they will vote against or are undecided. In addition, several Republicans are opposed to the bill,

either because they want more cuts in social spending or more money for the military, and two Republicans, John McCain of Arizona and Thad Cochran of Mississippi, are absent because of long-term illness.

According to press accounts, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell planned to bring the continuing resolution before the Senate late Thursday, with a vote to close debate expected sometime Friday. On that motion as many as 13 Democrats would have to support bringing the legislation to a vote.

In the event that the Senate kills the continuing resolution in the form passed by the House, talks will then resume between Republican and Democratic leaders in both houses with only a few hours remaining before the start of a federal shutdown.

The last partial shutdown took place in 2013 and extended for 17 days, with 2 million workers either furloughed or working without paychecks, although Congress ultimately approved back pay. National parks, museums and monuments were closed, as well as numerous government offices, but the military-intelligence apparatus, the bulk of the federal government, suffered no interruption.

There were conference calls this week among senior officials at most government agencies to identify the federal employees who would be told not come to work on Monday, January 22, estimated at 800,000 workers. According to press reports, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention would furlough 61 percent of its staff, about 8,400 people, under conditions of the worst flu epidemic in a decade.

The *Washington Post* reported Thursday that the House version of the continuing resolution contained an exceptional provision, drafted by the White House Office of Management and Budget, which would “give President Trump the power to secretly reshuffle money the administration spends on intelligence programs for the next month—sweeping authority that is unprecedented since the CIA was established.”

A clause would render Section 504 of the National Security Act of 1947 “notwithstanding,” in other words, inoperative, during the four-week period covered by the continuing resolution. This would allow Trump to direct spending on intelligence activities that Congress has not authorized, or even been notified about.

Given the ongoing US confrontation with North

Korea, as well as claims of “cyberwarfare” by Iran and Russia, this amounts to a green light to the White House to engage in even more reckless provocations.



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