

US Senate backs \$708 billion military authorization

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The US Senate approved the National Defense Authorization Act, a blueprint for \$708 billion in Pentagon spending, voting Wednesday by a margin of 87-10. Forty-six Republicans were joined by 41 Democrats in approving the bill, which now goes to the White House for President Trump's signature.

The bill sets policy for the Department of Defense, approving weapons programs, a sizable troop build-up and a 2.6 percent across-the-board raise for uniformed personnel, but a separate appropriations bill must still be passed to actually approve the funding.

The 41-8 split in the Democratic Party caucus in the Senate was determined partly by political positioning. Those Democrats who are testing the waters for a presidential run and aim to strike a "left" posture for the 2020 primary campaign opposed the military spending bill: Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, Kamala Harris, Kirsten Gillibrand and Jeff Merkley.

All the Democratic senators seeking reelection this year in states carried by Trump in 2016 voted in favor of the military spending bill, and will undoubtedly feature it in their election campaign ads as proof of their desire to "work with the president." These include Joe Manchin of West Virginia, Joe Donnelly of Indiana, Jon Tester of Montana, Claire McCaskill of Missouri, Sherrod Brown of Ohio, Tammy Baldwin of Wisconsin and Bill Nelson of Florida.

Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer and virtually every other Democrat in the Senate voted for the record military spending without electoral calculations playing any role. They are just as ardent supporters of American imperialism as the Republicans, and demonstrated that in their votes. In this they were following the example of House Democrats, who backed the Pentagon authorization bill by a landslide margin, 139-49.

Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell declared, "This NDAA builds on the progress we made earlier this year in the bipartisan budget agreement, which provided for the largest year-on-year increase in funding for American armed forces in 15 years."

Secretary of Defense James Mattis likewise hailed the vote, saying the bill's quick passage "demonstrated the deep and abiding bipartisan support our military enjoys." He could have noted, but did not bother, that the House-Senate conference version of the NDAA actually set prospective spending levels \$30 billion above those requested by the White House and Pentagon.

Despite incessant efforts by the media to portray Congress as an institution where nothing can be done because of supposedly intractable differences between the Democrats and Republicans, the passage of the NDAA marked the 58th consecutive year that a Pentagon authorization was passed before the beginning of the new fiscal year on October 1.

When it comes to the vital interests of US imperialism, the two capitalist parties can move expeditiously. It is only when working people face an emergency—as with the hundreds of thousands of immigrant youth affected by the termination of DACA, or the victims of forest fires in California or crumbling infrastructure in Flint, Michigan and other old industrial centers—that the leaders of the two parties throw up their hands and proclaim nothing can be done.

The WSWs has already analyzed some of the provisions of this bill, particularly its ominous authorization of cyberwarfare attacks on Russia, China, Iran and North Korea, in a previous report on the House vote.

It is worth examining the final legislation, however, from the standpoint of what it says about the priorities

of the US ruling elite.

The \$708 billion authorization is the largest in dollar terms since 2010, the last year of full-scale military operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan. It maintains the new baseline for the Pentagon established after the 9/11 attacks. Since 2001, the regular Pentagon budget has roughly doubled, from \$300 billion a year in the 1990s to more than \$600 billion a year for the past decade. This does not count funding for what are described as Overseas Contingency Operations, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and later against ISIS.

The figures in fiscal 2019 will be \$617 billion for regular Pentagon operations, plus \$69 billion for Overseas Contingency Operations and \$22 billion for nuclear weapons operations of the Department of Energy, which oversees the construction of atomic warheads.

It is instructive to compare the provisions of this legislation with the funding requirements to meet urgent social needs, for which no such resources are being mobilized.

The \$617 billion in regular Pentagon spending is as much as the United States spends on public education, combining local, state and federal governments (\$620 billion in 2016). It is also 10 times what Russia spends on its military (\$61 billion).

The \$69 billion for wars in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, and drone warfare across North Africa and the Middle East is more than twice the amount of money required to feed all 862 million malnourished people in the world (\$30 billion).

The bill authorizes \$24.1 billion for shipbuilding, including the building of 13 new warships, among them a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier and two nuclear-powered submarines armed with nuclear weapons.

The same amount of money, \$24.1 billion, would provide decent housing for every homeless person in the United States (\$20 billion), with enough left over to replace the toxic water infrastructure of Flint, Michigan (\$1.5 billion).

The bill provides \$12 billion for new aircraft, including \$7.6 billion for 77 new F-35 Joint Strike Fighter jets, \$2.3 billion for 20 short takeoff and vertical landing F-35B Lightning II Joint Strike Fighters (the Marine Corps version), and \$1.1 billion for nine F-35C fighters, used by the Navy.

The same amount of money would provide free

maternal and prenatal care for every mother in the developing world (\$13 billion). It would be twice the sum required to provide treatment and vaccination to prevent 4 million malaria deaths (\$6 billion).

The working class must oppose squandering vast sums on the military not only because it represents a colossal waste of resources that could meet urgent social needs, but because the build-up of this vast military-intelligence apparatus is a deadly threat to both the democratic rights and the physical survival of the entire human race.

The most urgent task facing working people, both in the United States and internationally, is the building of a mass, international movement against militarism and war, and for a socialist alternative.



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