

As Trump threatens national emergency

Democrats offer increased spending for border policing

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2 February 2019

Negotiations began on Wednesday between Democratic and Republican members of a bipartisan conference committee established as part of the deal that ended the five-week partial government shutdown on January 25. The committee of 17 House and Senate members must agree on legislation to fund the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and obtain President Trump's signature before the three-week stop-gap funding provided in last month's agreement expires on Friday, February 15, triggering yet another shutdown crisis.

Democratic Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi pointed out on Thursday that, as a practical matter, the negotiators would have to issue a signed conference committee report by next Friday, February 8, in order to send it to the White House in time for Trump to sign it into law by the mid-February deadline.

As the talks got underway, two basic political facts quickly emerged: (1) Trump is determined to obtain a deal that he can present as vindication of his demand for a wall along the US-Mexican border, and he is prepared, if necessary, to declare a national emergency to bypass Congress and unilaterally allocate money for the wall; and (2) the Democrats have no principled differences either with his reactionary wall mania or the rest of his brutal anti-immigrant policy.

Trump, in various tweets, White House remarks and press interviews, called the conference committee talks a "waste of time" unless the Democrats agreed to fund his wall, and reiterated his threat to assume emergency powers and order the military to build the border barrier. Democrats, meanwhile, made clear in statements and in their initial offer on border funding that they fully support the further militarization of the

border as well as the persecution of workers from Central America seeking refuge in the US from poverty and violence in their home countries.

On Wednesday, the Democrats presented their initial proposal for so-called border security and funding for the DHS, the federal department that oversees the agencies—Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP)—which are carrying out the mass imprisonment, persecution and abuse of undocumented workers. The Democrats proposed to allocate \$55.8 billion for the DHS for the 2019 budget year, more than a billion dollars *above* the Trump administration's budget request and half a billion more than the previous fiscal year's funding.

The Democratic proposal included:

- \$22 billion in total funding for Customs and Border Protection and Immigration and Customs Enforcement
- \$675 million for scanners at points of entry
- \$400 million in border security technology and 1,000 new customs agents
- \$156.7 million for new boats, planes and sensors
- Funding for an average daily population in detention beds of 35,520 for the rest of the fiscal year.

This vast expenditure of funds—at a time when there is supposedly "no money" for public schools, health care or housing—would be used for, among other things, installing imaging technology to scan every vehicle entering the country, more Border Patrol planes and ships, more money for the Secret Service, stepped-up "risk-based" targeting of passengers and cargo at ports of entry, and enhancement of the Transportation Security Administration's "threat detection" capabilities at airport security checkpoints.

The proposal contained no money earmarked for the

construction of a wall, and Pelosi, at her weekly press conference, said, “There’s not going to be any wall money in the legislation.”

At the same time, she hinted that the standoff on the wall might be resolved by means of a semantic sleight of hand. She suggested that the Democrats were open to allocating funding for additional “Normandy fencing” and other barriers.

Posing the question, “Is there a place for enhanced fencing?” she replied, “Let them [the conference committee members] have that discussion.” She went on to say that it came down to a “cost-benefit analysis.”

Senator Jon Tester, Democrat from Montana and a member of the committee, said on Monday that he supported including money for a wall in the security package. Democratic Representative Nita Lowey of New York, who heads the House Appropriations Committee and is co-chair of the conference committee, declined to say after the first meeting whether the Democrats would block money for barriers or fencing, telling reporters that “everything is on the table.”

Another Democrat on the committee, Representative Henry Cuellar, who represents a Texas border district, said, “Hint, hint. [There are already] three hundred miles of vehicle barriers. There’s ways to get where we need to get.”

In fact, the Democrats have repeatedly voted for border barriers, and just last January Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer offered to support tens of billions of dollars for Trump’s wall in return for limited guarantees against deportation for some undocumented immigrants who were brought to the US as children.

Another Democrat who is among the 17 negotiators, Representative David Price of North Carolina, boasted, “Because of the work we did years ago, we’ve already built almost 700 miles of fencing on our nation’s border.”

Meanwhile, the Democrats are silent on the far-reaching and profoundly anti-democratic implications of Trump’s threat to declare a national emergency in order to unilaterally implement his border policy. They say nothing of the fact that this would mark an irreversible attack on the constitutional separation of powers and an assertion of quasi-dictatorial rule, setting a precedent for an all-out siege against the social and

democratic rights of the working class, including the right to protest and strike and oppose government policy.

On the contrary, pro-Democratic newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* have indicated their support for such an action to resolve the budget crisis.

Nor have the Democrats raised the threat to democratic rights posed by the Trump administration’s expansion and indefinite deployment of troops to the border and its abrogation of the right of refugees to asylum. They have remained virtually mute on the horrific conditions, including forced feeding of hunger strikers, being inflicted on imprisoned immigrants.



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