US House passes $3 trillion coronavirus “relief” bill

Jacob Crosse
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Late Friday evening, in a near party-line vote, the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives passed the so-called “Heroes Act” by a vote of 208 to 199.

The $3 trillion measure, presented by the Democrats as a boon to workers struggling with mass unemployment, is, in fact, a political maneuver. It is the opening salvo in a process of political theatrics between the two parties that will produce, in the end, a measure that further benefits the corporate elite while providing little to no relief for the mass of the population.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi brought the bill to the floor knowing that it has no chance of being passed by the Senate and signed into law by President Trump. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell made clear that his caucus in the Senate would oppose any major aid to bankrupt state and local governments, the centerpiece of the Democratic bill, and Trump declared it “dead on arrival.”

Pelosi has stressed that she considers the bill a mere starting point for negotiations that are expected to drag on for weeks before any compromise is reached. At her weekly press conference on Thursday, she said, “We’re putting our offer on the table. We’re open to negotiation.”

She chided the Republicans for departing from the bipartisan harmony that accompanied the passage in March of the CARES Act, the biggest corporate bailout in world history. That measure provided some $8 trillion in Treasury and Federal Reserve money to redeem the bad debts of the banks, corporations and Wall Street speculators. The Democrats voted unanimously for the bill in the Senate and ushered it through the House by voice vote. Among those voting for the bill were senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, leaders of the so-called “progressive” wing of the party.

Trump has called for a cut in the payroll tax as part of any new stimulus bill, a measure designed to deprive Social Security and Medicare of much of their revenue stream. McConnell said he would insist on “narrowly targeted legislation.”

He and Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin have declared that no bill will be approved unless it includes legal immunity for companies from lawsuits filed on behalf of workers sickened or killed from COVID-19 as a result of unsafe working conditions.

The Democrats have said little about this demand for a legal green light for what amounts to corporate murder, but House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer signaled their willingness to negotiate such a provision as part of a compromise bill. Asked about the Republican demand earlier this week, he made a point of not ruling it out. He merely said that “it is not a focus of ours, nor do we think it should be a priority.”

New York’s Democratic governor, Andrew Cuomo, has already quietly slipped legal immunity for nursing homes into the state’s latest budget. These privately owned, for-profit institutions have been centers of COVID-19 outbreaks that have taken tens of thousands of lives, including the lives of nursing home workers.

Prior to passage of the “Heroes Act,” a rule change was passed, again along party lines, that temporarily allows House members, for the duration of the pandemic, to vote by proxy or remotely for the first time in US history.

The $3 trillion bill includes nearly $1 trillion in funding to state and local governments, whose tax revenues have been decimated due to the lockdown and mass layoffs. Democrats included no provisions within the package to raise taxes on corporations or the rich.

The bill also includes another one-time stipend of $1,200 for all citizens. As with the previous round of checks, some 12 million undocumented workers are ineligible. The bill would also extend state unemployment benefits through next year and extend the $600-per-week federal bonus on top of state benefits through January instead of through July.

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The measure includes bailouts for corporate lobbyists, landlords and mortgage servicers. It does not extend Medicare to laid-off workers who lose their employer-sponsored health insurance. Instead, it provides billions in subsidies to private insurance companies via COBRA.

In crafting the bill, the Democrats took pains to make clear that they fully support the back-to-work drive that is being carried out by the Trump administration under conditions of a still rampaging pandemic and a lack of safety and health protections for workers and their families.

Speaking earlier this week on MSNBC's "Morning Joe" program, Pelosi said that "number one in our bill is how do we open up the economy." Speaking of the bill at her weekly press conference on Thursday, Pelosi began by saying, "First, open the economy. Test, test, test."

The party leadership rejected calls by the Congressional Progressive Caucus to include a payroll guarantee to cover the lost wages of laid-off or furloughed workers during the pandemic. Pelosi brushed aside the demand. Speaking Friday on the House floor before the vote, she said, "There is more we could have done, but we wanted to keep the cost low."

Only one Republican, Peter King of New York, voted for the bill. Fourteen Democrats voted against. The Democratic "no" votes included only one so-called "progressive," the cochair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, Pramila Jayapal of Washington state. All of the left-talking members of the "squad"—Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib and Ayanna Pressley—voted in favor.

The other Democrats who voted against, including Virginia Representative Abigail Spanberger, a former CIA officer, did so because they considered the bill too expensive. Spanberger released a statement chiding "my own party" for going "far beyond pandemic relief."

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