

Democrats begin budget “reconciliation” process with Senate vote

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The US Senate voted early Wednesday morning to adopt a budget resolution that purports to allow up to \$3.5 trillion in social spending, backed by the Biden administration and the Democratic leadership in Congress.

Despite the Republican howls about massive spending and even “socialism,” the blueprint is highly unlikely to be enacted in anything like the form outlined by Senator Bernie Sanders, the chairman of the Senate Budget Committee, who took the lead role in the debate on the resolution.

Sanders mocked the Republicans, saying they were “finding it hard to believe that the president, the Democratic caucus, are prepared to go forward in addressing the long-neglected needs of working families and not just the 1 percent.”

He continued with more “left” phrases, claiming, “This legislation will not only provide enormous support to the kids of this country, to the parents of this country, to the elderly people of this country,” but then reached the real purpose of the resolution: “It will also, I hope, restore the belief that in America we can have a government that works for all, not just the few.”

In other words, the purpose of the budget resolution is to spread illusions among working people in the viability of the corporate-controlled political system. It seeks to put a “left” face on an administration that just concluded a deal with Senate Republicans on an infrastructure bill that is tailored to their demands—and backed by Republican leader Mitch McConnell. And Sanders is given a leading role in order to sustain the pretense of what even the *New York Times* called, in its headline, “Budget Political Theater.”

The budget resolution passed on a 50–49 vote, with all Democrats supporting it and every Republican in attendance voting “no.” Vice President Kamala Harris

chaired the session but her tie-breaking vote was not needed because one Republican was absent because his wife is severely ill.

The Senate action sets in motion an extremely convoluted procedure. The resolution must be passed by the House of Representatives, but it does not then go to the White House and it does not become law. It is essentially a procedural motion that sets the terms for subsequent congressional action in which the Senate waives the 60-vote requirement in effect for most legislation, and only a simple majority is required.

House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer announced Wednesday that the House would be recalled from its summer recess to meet August 23, presumably to approve the same resolution, setting the stage for further action in September. Democratic leaders have suggested that all committee action on the components of the actual spending bill should be completed by September 15.

This budget procedure, known as “reconciliation,” would allow the passage of the actual spending legislation without any Republican support in the Senate, provided all 50 Democrats vote as a bloc. But that is highly unlikely, as two of the most right-wing Senate Democrats, Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona, have already announced their opposition to the \$3.5 trillion top number for total spending.

Only hours after he voted for the budget resolution, Manchin made it clear that this was support only for starting the process, not for the outcome, and that he had “serious concerns about the grave consequences facing West Virginians and every American family if Congress decides to spend another \$3.5 trillion.”

He added, “Given the current state of the economic recovery, it is simply irresponsible to continue

spending at levels more suited to respond to a Great Depression or Great Recession—not an economy that is on the verge of overheating.” A drive through the devastated former coal mining regions of his state would suggest that West Virginia is undergoing an economic collapse of comparable dimensions, but Manchin is doing the bidding of Wall Street and the energy conglomerates.

Kyrsten Sinema said last month, “while I will support beginning this process, I do not support a bill that costs \$3.5 trillion.” She also cited the need for working with “my colleagues” (i.e., Senate Republicans) and the Biden administration going forward.

In the hours preceding the final vote, both Manchin and Sinema and several other Senate Democrats indicated their willingness to break ranks and torpedo an eventual spending bill by voting for Republican-backed amendments to the resolution.

These amendments, under a special procedure that allows rapid-fire introduction and consideration and requires only 50 votes for passage, do not have any legal force, since the resolution is not a law. But they serve as political litmus tests for the two parties and for individual senators in their reelection campaigns.

Manchin supplied that 50th vote for two of these amendments, one supporting funding for health care providers that refuse to participate in abortions, the other banning any spending that supports the teaching of “critical race theory” in the schools.

Sinema sided with Republicans in voting down an amendment proposed by another Democratic senator that called for “protecting family farms, ranches, and small businesses while ensuring the wealthy pay their fair share.” The objection was to the “fair share” language.

A similar Democratic amendment, which backed raising taxes on the wealthiest 0.1 percent of Americans, was defeated when Sinema and the two Democrats from New Hampshire, Jeanne Shaheen and Maggie Hassan, voted against it.

Another Republican amendment, although defeated, underscores the right-wing character of the entire debate. Mitt Romney of Utah, one of the wealthiest members of the Senate, proposes to ban any tax increases at all, excluding both corporations and the wealthy from paying for social improvements. This was defeated on a 50–49 party-line vote.

Some of the right-wing amendments passed by overwhelming votes after they were embraced by the Democratic leadership. The Senate voted by 88–11 to bar transporting immigrants in federal custody away from the border area unless they test negative for COVID-19.

By a 96–3 vote, the senators voted in support of an amendment by Josh Hawley of Missouri—who by rights should be arrested for his role in the January 6 attack on the Capitol—endorsing the hiring of an additional 100,000 police.

Most revealing of all was the response of the Democrats to an amendment by Republican Senator Tommy Tuberville of Alabama to withhold federal funds for any local governments that “defund the police.” Senator Cory Booker of New Jersey called the amendment “a gift” that would allow the Democrats to “put to bed this scurrilous accusation that somebody in this great esteemed body would want to defund the police.” He said he wanted to “walk over there and hug my colleague.” The amendment then passed by a vote of 99–0.



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