

After anti-strike law against railroaders breezes through Congress, partisan gridlock on budget threatens government shutdown

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Last week's vote in Congress to impose a contract on US railroaders passed with huge bipartisan majorities at record speed. On Monday, President Biden first issued a statement urging congressional action to block a strike. It was sent to his desk to be signed Friday morning.

This is all the more remarkable given the massive political crisis and dysfunction gripping Washington. The midterm elections last month produced a split result, with Republicans re-taking the House and the Democrats retaining control of the Senate, each by razor-thin margins. Republicans, significant numbers of whom do not recognize Biden as the legitimate president, will use this majority after January 3, 2023 as they have for years to hold legislation for ransom to ram through their right-wing policies.

This was no barrier to imposing the anti-strike law, however, and the parties reached a bipartisan agreement before the changeover in control of the House. This was because it was of fundamental importance to the American ruling class as a whole, as a rail strike would immediately threaten their profits and potentially spread to other sections of the working class. Both parties were given their marching orders, and obediently responded.

But the crisis atmosphere has now returned as quickly as it receded. Congress is in the throes of gridlock over the next federal budget, delayed already two months into the current fiscal year, and news reports are warning of a government shutdown if, at a minimum, a continuing resolution is not passed by next Friday to fund the government for an extra week. That appears to be the most likely outcome, and Congress may continue wrangling over an appropriations bill through

Christmas, and even into next year.

Republicans are deliberately holding up the budget until they take control of the House in January, where they will have far greater influence in the process of crafting and passing it, and will push for massive cuts to social spending.

Last week, four ultra-right Republican senators, including Ted Cruz, sent a letter to Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell declaring, "We must not accept anything other than a short-term Continuing Resolution that funds the federal government until shortly after the 118th Congress is sworn in."

Biden, meanwhile, has warned of "disastrous consequences" of any delay, although there is no reason to doubt that the Democrats, who introduced the anti-strike legislation last week, will play their appointed role of meekly retreating before Republican demands.

Since 1980, there have been 10 government shutdowns affecting at least some government agencies, lasting for 87 cumulative days. Fifty-four of these shutdown days have occurred in the last decade, including a 16-day government shutdown in 2013, a three-day shutdown in 2018 and a 35-day partial shutdown in late 2018 and early 2019.

Republicans, whether in the White House or on Capitol Hill, have traditionally been the instigators of these shutdowns. But the shutdowns themselves are part of carefully crafted political theater whose aim is to disguise bipartisan support for massive cuts to social spending or other right-wing policy demands. Each time, Republicans hold federal funding hostage to provocative demands, while the Democrats beat a steady retreat before proposing a "compromise"

solution that concedes the substance to the Republicans, with a fig leaf to cover their surrender.

These shutdowns are deeply unpopular with the American public, who are impacted through suspended social services. But Wall Street has generally shrugged off the impact of the shutdowns as the “cost of doing business.” In the first day of the 2013 government shutdown, all three major indexes posted substantial gains.

This budget theater exposes the hypocrisy of Washington’s handwringing over the economic costs of a rail strike on “working families.” In a statement last week, outgoing House speaker Nancy Pelosi painted the impact of a strike in apocalyptic terms: “Our entire nation would suffer: more than 750,000 workers, including many union members, would lose their jobs in just the first two weeks. Millions of families wouldn’t be able to get groceries, medications and other goods, and our economy would be paralyzed as it continues to recover.”

The estimated \$2 billion per day that a rail strike would have cost the economy, according to both parties, justified extraordinary, dictatorial measures to rip up railroaders’ right to strike. But the federal government’s budget was \$6.27 trillion in fiscal year 2022, or an average of \$17.2 billion per day. Estimates in 2013 put the cost of a two-week shut-down at between 0.3 and 0.4 percentage points of GDP growth. The month-long government shutdown at the end of 2018 took place due to Trump’s demands for less than \$6 billion to fund a border wall between the US and Mexico.

At the same time, there have been few qualms over the passing of massive defense budgets to fund the worldwide operations of American imperialism year after year. On Thursday, the House passed a massive \$858 billion defense budget by a vote of 350 to 80. The bill is \$45 billion more than the funding requested by the Biden administration itself. The progress of the bill was only briefly held up by Republican demands to end the COVID vaccine mandate for active-duty servicemen, to which the Democrats quickly caved.

Even in the event of a shutdown, there can be no doubt that the government will ensure that billions of dollars continue to flow into the military, including funding for the proxy war against Russia in Ukraine and the military buildup against China in the Pacific.

It is significant that Bernie Sanders and the House members affiliated with the Democratic Socialists of America have voted repeatedly for war budgets, and played critical roles in the parliamentary maneuvering which ensured the rapid passage of the anti-strike law. Three members of the DSA even voted in favor of the anti-strike deal in the House.

What accounts for this double standard? Both Congress blocking a rail strike and Congress shutting down the government are aimed at attacking the social position of the working class. Congress can impose a “work stoppage” in the federal government to impose massive austerity, but a work stoppage by railroaders to demand better working conditions, pay rises above inflation and other basic demands is intolerable.

What is referred to as “partisan gridlock” conceals a class logic. Whatever is of central importance to the ruling elite passes through Capitol Hill with hardly any serious dissent. But “gridlock” suddenly emerges whenever that works to the advantage of the ruling class, or at least does not directly conflict with its core interests.

This is a further lesson in the class character of the state. It is not a neutral arbiter, but an instrument of class rule.



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