

Democrats provide critical votes to pass budget-cutting bill on US debt ceiling

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Democratic Party members of the House of Representatives provided the critical votes required to push through the deal made by House Speaker Kevin McCarthy and President Joe Biden on legislation to cut domestic social spending, increase military spending and suspend the federal debt ceiling until January 2025, thus averting an imminent default on federal debt payments.

The vote on final passage of the bill came by a top-heavy margin of 314-117, with more Democrats supporting it than Republicans, although the Republicans have a narrow four-vote majority in the House. Republicans voted 149-71 for the bill, while Democrats backed it 165-46.

The more critical vote came several hours earlier, as the House adopted a rule setting the terms of floor debate. Such rules are usually adopted on a straight party-line vote. But there was so much opposition to the deal in the fascistic ranks of House Republicans that 29 members of the House Freedom Caucus broke ranks and voted against the rule.

The tally was about to be announced, with the rule going down to defeat by a margin of 189-239, some 50 votes, when Democratic Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries waved a green card in the air. As the *New York Times* described it, Jeffries was “signaling to fellow Democrats that it was time to go ahead and bail Republicans out. A stream of centrist and veteran Democrats—52 in all—crowded into the well of the House and voted ‘yes,’ rescuing the deal from collapse.”

Jeffries declared that House Democrats had “bailed out the majority from their own extremism.” Another top House Democrat, Richard Neal of Massachusetts, one of those who initially voted to reject the rule and then reversed his vote, said the Democrats had been waiting to see whether the bulk of Republicans would back McCarthy in the rules vote. “We needed an act of good faith on their side, which I think is fair,” he told the press, and once sufficient Republicans had voted yes, the Democrats supplied enough votes to ensure passage of the rule.

Michigan Representative Elissa Slotkin, a former CIA officer and Pentagon official now running for an open

Senate seat, said she and other Democrats in the right-wing Problem Solvers Caucus had been preparing for several days to rescue the Republican leadership. She explained, “we weren’t gonna let our country go off a fiscal cliff and that had to be our guiding force.”

The two principal concerns of the Biden administration and congressional Democrats have been defending the interests of Wall Street by preventing a default and insuring that the Pentagon, and particularly the prosecution of the war in Ukraine, were protected in any deal on budget cuts with the Republicans. In pursuit of those two goals, they were more than willing to impose drastic cuts on domestic social programs like SNAP (food stamps) and TANF (welfare payments).

Nonetheless, the pseudo-left, including those affiliated with the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), a faction of the Democratic Party, were at pains to place sole blame for the cuts in social spending on the Republicans.

“Republicans need to own this vote,” Democratic Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez said. “This was their deal. This was their negotiations. They’re the ones trying to come in and cut SNAP, cut environmental protections, trying to ram through an oil pipeline through a community that does not want it.”

Actually, there was considerable Democratic support for these measures, and the oil pipeline authorization was inserted in the bill at the insistence of West Virginia Democratic Senator Joe Manchin.

Ocasio-Cortez added, “we’re going to work as a team to make sure that we prevent default.” This only confirms that, despite her reputation as a radical, grossly exaggerated by the media, the Democratic representative and DSA member from an impoverished Bronx-Queens district in New York City is just as devoted to the interests of the financial aristocracy as Senate Majority Leader Charles Schumer, the proverbial “Senator from Wall Street.”

Representative Ro Khanna of California, former national chair of the Bernie Sanders presidential campaign, underscored the cynical calculations involved in

Wednesday's voting. "The Democrats should supply the votes needed to get to 218, but we don't have to supply any more than that," he told the press.

Representative Greg Casar of Texas, another member of the DSA, explained the token character of the opposition to the cuts. "Since we all expect this deal is gonna get done, then I think it's appropriate for a significant number of progressives to push back," he said.

The Congressional Budget Office said Tuesday that the legislation was likely to cut deficits by \$2.1 trillion over a decade. The bulk of that will come directly out of the most impoverished sections of the working class, and from necessary social services like mass transportation and environmental protection.

The military budget is protected in two ways. The increase of 3 percent in Pentagon spending, proposed in Biden's budget submitted to Congress in March, will remain untouched, although other discretionary spending will be frozen at current levels. And all spending for the war in Ukraine remains off-budget and subject to no constraints.

Within hours of the bill's passage through the House, Senate Republican war hawk Lindsey Graham of South Carolina was telling his colleagues that the unlimited spending for Ukraine could become a loophole for a broader increase in Pentagon spending, beyond the 3 percent proposed by Biden. The Pentagon could simply declare that new warplanes, warships and other military equipment and supplies were intended for use in Ukraine, or to replace stocks depleted by the war, even if they were for another purpose entirely.

Analysis of the details in the 99-page bill by advocacy groups and think tanks has already begun to demonstrate new and profoundly reactionary elements in the Biden-McCarthy deal.

- The bill will claw back \$27 billion in unspent pandemic relief money. Nearly half of this, more than \$13 billion, will come from preparations for future pandemics through programs of vaccine research and testing and monitoring the supply chain for potential shortages, carried out by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Food and Drug Administration and other agencies.

- The bill codifies an end to the "pause" in collection of federal student loan debt and interest payments. The pause is an administrative measure announced by Biden last year and set to expire on August 30. This termination date is now set in law, meaning the Biden administration no longer has the power to extend it. The separate debt cancellation plan has not gone into effect pending a legal challenge now before the Supreme Court.

- The 1 percent across-the-board cut in domestic spending in fiscal year 2024, a penalty if Congress fails to enact all 12

appropriations bills by January 1, 2024, will actually slash spending more than all the cuts spelled out in the legislation combined, according to new estimates. Congress has not enacted all 12 appropriations bills on time since 1997.

At her press briefing Wednesday, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre declared, "We are proud of this agreement" and went on to boast about the scale of the cuts: "You all saw the CBO score just yesterday, where it talked about how it's going to reduce the deficit by an additional \$1.2 trillion, which is incredibly important as we talk about the deficit. This is something that the President takes very seriously."

It is increasingly clear that for the US ruling elite, the agreement on the debt ceiling is only a baby step in the direction of a full-scale assault on domestic social spending, particularly the biggest programs, Social Security and Medicare, which were not part of the Biden-McCarthy talks because the spending is automatic, mandated by law, and not subject to annual appropriations.

The clearest statement of this viewpoint came in an editorial in the *Washington Post*, which welcomed passage of the debt ceiling bill, but demanded far more. After acknowledging, "The nation is \$31 trillion in debt largely because of tax cuts, wars, recessions and a pandemic," the editorial continued, "But going forward, it's different. The top expenses worsening the national debt in the years to come are the rising costs of Social Security, Medicare and interest. Unfortunately, President Biden and congressional leaders refuse even to discuss these key drivers."

This newspaper, owned by Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, one of the three richest men in the world, demands sacrifices from the elderly, the sick and the disabled. It gives voice to the reactionary logic of the capitalist system, in which the ruling class is constantly driven to increase its extraction of surplus value from the working class, the producer of all wealth.



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