

Largest House Republican group backs increase in Social Security retirement age to 69

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The largest caucus of House Republicans proposed Wednesday that the US retirement age for collecting full Social Security benefits be raised to 69 from the current 66. The Republican Study Committee (RSC), with 176 out of the 222 Republican members of the House of Representatives, made the proposal as part of a “fiscal blueprint” that would cut spending by \$16.3 trillion over the next decade, compared to the projected baseline.

The plan also includes making the Trump tax cuts for the wealthy permanent—they are currently scheduled to expire in 2027—while leaving Pentagon spending untouched, at a gargantuan \$886 billion for the coming year.

Automatic (entitlement) spending programs like Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid would absorb two-thirds of the cuts proposed by the RSC, with discretionary spending programs, those which must be voted on by Congress each year, absorbing one-third, or about \$5 trillion. With military spending kept intact, the discretionary cuts would fall entirely on domestic social spending, and programs on the environment, mass transportation, housing and education would see cuts of 30 percent or more.

It was the first time since the Republicans gained a narrow majority in the House in the 2022 elections that so many Republican members have publicly committed themselves to a major cut in Social Security benefits. The RSC made a similar proposal last year; Republicans were in the minority and its recommendations had no prospect of receiving a vote on the House floor.

The RSC dropped a proposal, adopted a year ago, to raise the eligibility age for Medicare from the present 65. But the “blueprint” includes significant measures to promote the privatization of Medicare, an intermediate step towards dismantling the program entirely.

Social Security was established under the “New Deal” Roosevelt administration in 1935. Medicare was established under the Johnson administration in 1965, as the centerpiece of its loudly proclaimed “war on poverty.” The “war” was

quickly abandoned by the Democrats, but Medicare has remained as a fixture in the lives of tens of millions of elderly and retired people, many of them entirely dependent on the federal insurance program to assure access to affordable health care.

The RSC proposal would phase in the increased retirement age for full Social Security benefits gradually, adding four months a year until it is age 69 for those turning 62 in the year 2033—the more than 3 million people who were born in 1971. Age 62 will remain the lowest age at which people can take early retirement, but with severely reduced benefits.

The current retirement age is already going up gradually to age 67, a month each year, until 2027. This increase was agreed upon in the bipartisan deal between Democratic House Speaker Tip O’Neill and Republican President Ronald Reagan in 1983, which supposedly “saved” Social Security but only postponed the crisis.

The bourgeois media portrays the “crisis” in Social Security as a purely demographic problem: the elderly are living much longer than envisioned when the program was first established, and changes must be made in eligibility and benefit levels to reflect that. Similar claims were made by French President Emmanuel Macron when he pushed through a two-year increase in the French retirement age, from 62 to 64, against explosive mass resistance among working people that was diverted and suppressed by the trade unions.

In reality, the program is running short of funds primarily because of the ceiling on taxation of the wealthy—who pay Social Security taxes only on the first \$160,000 in income, even if they take in millions or even billions in a year. Moreover, Wall Street looks upon the gargantuan amounts still remaining in the Social Security Trust Fund as a source of new investment funding for its parasitic financial operations, while the Pentagon views it hungrily as a potential resource for the military.

The Republican Study Committee proposal is unlikely to

pass in the near future because Democrats control the Senate and the White House, and they will seek to demagogically present themselves as the defenders of Social Security in the 2024 elections. But it is highly significant politically, because it puts the question of Social Security cuts, once described as the “third rail” of American politics, squarely on the agenda of future congresses and administrations.

The pattern over many decades is that the Republican Party sets the most right-wing marker on social policy, the Democrats claim to oppose them and to defend the interests of the poor, the sick and the elderly. Then the two parties make use of the next crisis—or manufacture one, as in this year’s agreement on the federal debt ceiling—to adopt a “compromise” proposal, taking a giant step in the reactionary direction first indicated by the Republicans.

There have already been a slew of right-wing Democrats, like Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia, who have indicated their willingness to “consider” changes in Social Security and Medicare eligibility that will devastate millions of retired people.

Biden continues the posture of irreconcilable opposition to changes in Social Security that he adopted in his State of the Union speech, when he charged that Republicans wanted cuts and they vociferously denied it, some interrupting him from the floor of the House of Representatives. But there is no question that if Biden has to choose between funding the war against Russia in Ukraine, and funding full benefits for the elderly, that he will join the Republicans in demanding “sacrifices” from the American people.

Besides enlisting more than three-quarters of all House Republicans, the supposedly “mainstream conservative” RSC includes Majority Leader Steve Scalise, the third-ranking Republican Elise Stefanik, Kay Granger, chair of the Appropriations Committee, and other top House Republicans. (By convention, Speaker Kevin McCarthy does not belong to ideological caucuses.)

The RSC also includes seven of the 11 Republican representatives who participated in last week’s disruption of House functioning. These 11, all members of the far-right House Freedom Caucus, voted against the rule proposed by the Republican leadership to schedule bills for consideration and govern debate for the week. Traditionally, these are party-line votes, and with all Democrats also opposed, the rules failed and the House could not take any action.

The 11 were venting their spleen against the debt-ceiling agreement between McCarthy and Biden, saying the spending cuts provided were too little and claiming that McCarthy could have forced an even bigger surrender by the White House by blocking an increase in the debt ceiling, an action which threatened to trigger a meltdown on Wall Street.

McCarthy met with the 11 on Monday and they agreed to unblock the work of the House in return for unspecified concessions by the Republican leader on bringing up legislation and seeking even more cuts in federal spending.

As part of this process of pushing the House further and further to the right, Appropriations Committee Chair Kay Granger announced Monday evening that most Appropriations subcommittees would receive smaller allocations of spending authority than agreed on in the Biden-McCarthy deal. Money for the Pentagon, the Veterans Administration and the Department of Homeland Security would be unaffected.

For all other programs, instead of freezing spending at 2023 levels, as Biden and McCarthy agreed, the subcommittees would be instructed to hold spending to 2022 levels, cutting another \$160 billion. This was the central demand of the Freedom Caucus members, who claimed McCarthy had agreed to that as part of the wheeling and dealing that made possible his election as speaker in January after an unprecedented 15 ballots.

In both capitalist parties, the dynamic is the same: the most right-wing elements drive the policy-making process, because they have the support of the capitalist ruling elite. In the Republican Party, a handful of fascists hold the whip hand over McCarthy.

In the Democratic Party, such figures as Senator Manchin exercise decisive influence. This was shown by the Senate passage of a Republican-sponsored resolution to strike down Biden’s executive action forgiving \$400 billion in student loan debt, despite the Democrats holding a 51-49 majority. Manchin, Montana Democrat Jon Tester and Arizona independent ex-Democrat Kyrsten Sinema all voted for the bill, which Biden was compelled to veto Wednesday.



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