Republicans nominate Scalise for Speaker but lack clear majority

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The House Republican Conference voted Wednesday to nominate Representative Steve Scalise as its candidate for Speaker, but a planned session of the House of Representatives was shut down within minutes without a vote, since it was clear that Scalise would not obtain a majority.

Scalise, the current House Majority Leader, the number two position under ousted Speaker Kevin McCarthy, received 113 votes, compared to 99 votes for House Judiciary Committee Chair Jim Jordan, an ultra-right standard-bearer who co-founded the fascist Freedom Caucus and was endorsed by Donald Trump. Scalise barely cleared the threshold of 111 votes required for nomination (nine Republicans did not vote).

Since the Republicans hold only a narrow 221-212 majority in the House, they can afford only four defections in order to obtain the 217 votes needed to elect Scalise. Far more than that number of Republicans have said publicly that they will not vote for Scalise, choosing to vote either Jordan or McCarthy to express a protest against the party leadership. All 212 Democrats are expected to vote for Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries.

Jordan did far better than expected by the corporate media, in part because he reportedly benefited from a sizeable group of “moderate” Republicans who objected to the ouster of McCarthy and viewed Scalise as having undermined the former Speaker.

The actual political differences between Jordan and Scalise are insignificant. Both are advocates of massive spending cuts in social programs and other attacks on the working class. Both voted on January 7, 2021 not to certify the election of Joe Biden as president, lending support to the mob, which had stormed the Capitol the previous day. Both are firm supporters of American militarism and of the state of Israel, although they differ in their willingness to send billions in additional aid to Ukraine.

In the aftermath of the conference vote, at least a dozen Republican House members said publicly they would not vote for Scalise in the election of a Speaker. These included Thomas Massie of Kentucky, Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia, Chip Roy and Michael Cloud of Texas, Lauren Boebert of Colorado, and Max Miller of Ohio, all of whom voted for Kevin McCarthy last week.

Of the eight ultra-right members who joined with the Democrats to oust McCarthy, Matt Gaetz of Florida, Tim Burchett of Tennessee, Matt Rosendale of Montana and Eli Crane of Arizona said they would vote for Scalise, while Nancy Mace of South Carolina, Bob Good of Virginia and Ken Buck of Colorado said they would not. Andy Biggs of Arizona was non-committal but seemed opposed, according to press reports.

The opposition to Scalise was intensified by a vote in the Republican Conference earlier Wednesday against a proposed change in party rules for nominating a candidate for Speaker, including a public roll call and a requirement that the candidate win 217 votes from the conference before his or her name was submitted to the full House. Scalise’s supporters opposed the measure, and it was tabled by a vote of 135-88.

After a significant delay following the Conference vote on the nomination of Scalise, Jordan announced that he would support Scalise’s election by the full House and offered to make one of the nominating speeches.

Meanwhile, the prospect that Scalise might move up to the position of Speaker opened up a chain reaction of candidacies to replace him as Majority Leader and for lesser positions in the Republican leadership. Kevin

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Hern (Republican-Oklahoma) and Tom Emmer (Republican-Minnesota) announced plans to run for Majority Leader, and House Republican Conference Chair Elise Stefanik of New York was expected to join that race as well.

Other candidates were lining up to replace Emmer as House Minority Whip, Hern as chair the powerful Republican Study Group, and Stefanik. The infighting over positions of influence in the Republican leadership could well have an impact on the efforts by Scalise and other top Republicans to round up the 217 votes needed to elect a new Speaker.

House Republicans are under enormous pressure to conclude this process because constitutionally the House can take no action without an elected Speaker to lead it, decide on which bills will come to a vote and assign members to the various committees. The Speaker is, moreover, second in line of succession to the presidency after Vice President Kamala Harris.

The outbreak of full-scale war in the Middle East has intensified this pressure from the national security establishment, the Democratic Party, senators of both parties and the corporate media.

Already, a bipartisan resolution declaring absolute US support for Israel has been delayed by the leadership crisis. It was submitted by Republican Michael McCaul of Texas and Democrat Gregory Meeks of New York, the chair and ranking member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and co-sponsored by 390 of the 433 members of the House.

The White House expressed concern that any protracted delay in choosing a new Speaker—let alone the record 15 ballots required to elect Kevin McCarthy in January—would also delay passage of legislation to authorize billions in additional US military aid to Israel and Ukraine.

The dysfunction in the political system is not limited to the House. In the US Senate, “holds” imposed by various Republican senators have blocked hundreds of nominations to top positions in the national security apparatus. There are currently no confirmed US ambassadors to Egypt, Israel, Lebanon and Kuwait, among the countries in the Middle East. More than 300 nominations to fill top military positions have been held up by Senator Tommy Tuberville of Alabama in a protest against a Pentagon policy of paying for the travel costs of military women, who must travel from a state where abortion is banned to another state to obtain abortion services.

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