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As US Congress reconvenes

Democrats looking for deal with Trump on social cuts, increased military spending

The two top congressional Democrats will meet Wednesday at the White House with their Republican counterparts and Trump administration officials, beginning a month of intense bipartisan collaboration between the two corporate-controlled political parties.

Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi are to hold talks with the Republican leaders of the Senate and House, Mitch McConnell and Paul Ryan, respectively, and two White House officials, budget director Mick Mulvaney and legislative director Marc Short, but not President Trump himself.

This is to be followed January 6-7 by meetings at Camp David between Trump and the congressional Republican leadership to discuss a broader legislative agenda for 2018.

Unlike last year's conflicts over the failed attempt to repeal Obamacare and the passage of the biggest tax cut for the wealthy in recent history, the Trump administration and its Republican allies in Congress are seeking Democratic Party support for their main initiatives in 2018.

These include increased military spending, cuts in domestic social programs—including food stamps, Medicaid and direct cash welfare—and measures to accelerate the buildup of police-state powers, in relation both to attacks on immigrants and spying on the American population. Leading Republicans are also calling for so-called “reform” of the basic entitlement programs, Medicare and Social Security.

The immediate pressure for bipartisan action comes from the expiration January 19 of the “continuing resolution” adopted last month, allowing federal agencies to continue

spending at current rates. The Republican leadership chose to delay final action on the budget to a point more than 100 days into Fiscal Year 2018, which began last October 1, in order to push through the enormous tax cut for the wealthy that Trump signed into law on December 22.

Democratic support will be needed for passage of any full-year budget resolution, in both houses of Congress. In the Senate, with the Republican majority reduced to 51-49 following the seating of Democrat Doug Jones as senator from Alabama, McConnell would need the support of at least nine Democrats to reach the 60-vote majority required for most legislative action. In the House, an ultra-right faction of Republicans will likely vote against any budget deal in order to press demands for further spending cuts, forcing Ryan to rely on Democratic support despite a 46-seat Republican majority.

With unbounded cynicism, Republican leaders have cited the huge federal deficit—increased by \$1.5 trillion in borrowing to fund the tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy—as justification for cutting federal social spending to the bone. House Speaker Ryan set the tone with a radio interview last month in which he called for restructuring of entitlement programs such as Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid as a major congressional priority for 2018.

There are divisions within the Republican Party over whether to target Social Security and Medicare this year, with McConnell dismissing the possibility given his narrow majority in the Senate. White House advisers have issued conflicting pronouncements, suggesting that a proposal for increased infrastructure spending—essentially a boondoggle for the construction industry—would be less likely to provoke widespread popular opposition.

One prominent outside adviser to Trump, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, rejected Ryan's approach. "Infrastructure first," Gingrich told *Politico*. "I wouldn't touch entitlements. There's zero reason to pick a fight on any of those in an election year."

More likely in the short term is an effort to attack programs that can be characterized as "welfare," that is, programs that largely benefit the poorest sections of the working class, such as Medicaid, food stamps and Temporary Aid for Needy Families (TANF). These programs would be hit both by spending cuts and measures to restrict eligibility, such as punitive work requirements or mandatory drug testing. Here the Republicans would expect significant Democratic Party support.

House Republicans are taking the lead. Ryan called for giving states "more flexibility in Medicaid," i.e., allowing states to cut off benefits for failure to meet various requirements, or for no reason at all, simply by lowering the income level at which people become

eligible. Majority Whip Steve Scalise of Louisiana called Tuesday for an effort to “reform those welfare programs that are trapping people in a failed welfare state,” including the imposition of work requirements.

Backroom discussions over the budget have been ongoing over the past several weeks, with the reported sticking point being Republican demands for a significantly greater increase in military spending than for domestic programs, while Democrats have called for rough parity, as in previous budget deals. It is likely that a deal along the lines demanded by the Republicans, with a few cosmetic concessions to the Democrats, will be reached.

Attached to the budget talks are issues such as continued funding for the CHIP health insurance program for poor children, whose authorization expired September 30, and the enactment of a disaster-relief package for Puerto Rico, Texas and Florida, which passed the House last month but has not been voted on in the Senate.

Even more contentious is the question of the treatment of young undocumented immigrants brought to this country as children, who were given a limited opportunity to work and attend school under the program known as DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals).

DACA was established by an executive order issued by President Obama, but repealed by President Trump in September. The program is set to expire in March, and without legislative action some 800,000 young people, many of whom have no memory of any other country, will be rounded up and deported.

The Democrats have postured as advocates of the immigrant youth, initially demanding that legislative revival of DACA be included in the continuing resolution passed last month, only to drop the demand in the face of Republican threats to allow funding authorization to expire and trigger a partial shutdown of the government.

Pelosi has revived the demand for a “DACA fix” in the new round of budget negotiations, but there is little doubt that this is again an empty threat. Trump has countered by demanding that extension of DACA be coupled with savage border enforcement measures, including congressional authorization and funding to build his much-promised wall along the US-Mexico border. He has also called for actions to reduce legal immigration, such as restricting the right of US citizens and legal residents to bring close family members into the United States.

One other significant issue faces a January 19 deadline, although it is not directly related to the budget. Section 702 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA), which authorizes massive government surveillance of telecommunications and the Internet, was

set to expire January 1 until Democrats agreed to a short-term extension as part of the budget resolution.

Most Democrats are in favor of extending the authorization for NSA spying, which was enormously expanded under the Obama administration. Opposition to a FISA extension had come mainly from a group of right-wing Republicans, based on libertarian grounds, but they are expected to agree to passage of a renewal of Section 702 in return for the opportunity to offer amendments to the bill.