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As US government shutdown looms, Democrats push punitive immigration deal

With a 12:01 a.m. Saturday deadline for a partial federal government shutdown looming, the Democratic Party is continuing to push for a bipartisan “compromise” on immigration that would meet most of the reactionary demands of the Trump administration. The plan, agreed to by a group of six Republican and Democratic senators, includes a reprieve for some 700,000 young undocumented immigrants threatened with deportation when the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program expires on March 5.

Last September, President Trump revoked the Obama administration executive order that established the program to protect so-called “Dreamers,” young people brought as children to the US without papers, from deportation. Trump put off implementation of his order until early March.

On Tuesday, the senators, headed by Democratic Senate Whip Dick Durbin of Illinois and Republican Lindsay Graham of South Carolina, unveiled a new version of their plan, which appears to go further in acquiescing to the administration’s demands for attacks on both legal and “illegal” immigration than the version they presented last Thursday to Trump at a closed-door White House meeting. At that meeting, Trump denounced the plan for continuing to allow immigration from “shithole” countries such as Haiti and nations in Africa. Underscoring the racism animating the outburst, Trump said the US should instead encourage immigration from countries such as Norway.

The latest version of the plan proposes even more money to further militarize the US-Mexico border (\$18 billion over the next decade), including funds earmarked for Trump’s

border wall (an immediate \$1.6 billion down payment). It accepts the administration's demand to end the diversity lottery visa program, which randomly picks immigrants from countries with low immigration rates to the US, and transitions to a so-called "merit" system of legal immigration. This is a more openly class-based system, designed to favor highly educated and skilled people from "priority" countries and largely exclude poor and working class people from impoverished parts of the world.

Such a system is more directly tailored to the requirements of corporations in need of skilled labor, although any such "reform" of the immigration system will undoubtedly maintain the ability of Agribusiness and other industries to bring in unskilled workers to be super-exploited and paid poverty wages.

The plan also severely cuts family-based immigration, which Trump, in the name of stopping the entry of terrorists allowed in by "chain migration," wants to abolish. The Democrats have agreed to prevent Dreamers from legalizing their parents and restrict the entry of family members of immigrants with permanent legal residency to spouses and unmarried children younger than 21. Parents and siblings are to be excluded under the bipartisan plan.

The proposal grants permanent legal status to Dreamers and puts them on a 12-year path to citizenship. It also allows for tens of thousands of undocumented immigrants from El Salvador, Haiti, Sudan and Nicaragua who have been living in the US for many years under the Temporary Protected Status program to retain legal status and work authorization. The administration recently ended the protection of these immigrants from deportation.

On Wednesday, Trump rejected this proposal out of hand, calling it "horrible" on border security and "very, very weak" on legal immigration "reform." In an attempt to whip up right-wing and backward sentiment in support of its brutal immigration policy, the administration on Tuesday released a long-delayed report on terrorism drawn up jointly by the Justice Department and the Department of Homeland Security. The report claims that 73 percent of defendants convicted of terrorism-related crimes since the 9/11 attacks were foreign born.

Attorney General Jeff Sessions declared that the report proved the need to slash family-based migration and end the diversity visa lottery. Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen released a statement saying the report showed it was necessary to overhaul an immigration system based on "pre-9/11 thinking that leaves us vulnerable to foreign-born terrorists."

The White House on Wednesday threw its support behind a House Republican plan to pass a so-called “continuing resolution” that would extend funding for the federal government until February 16, the fourth such stop-gap measure since last September. The House plan, which may go to the floor for a vote on Thursday, excludes a “fix” for DACA or other immigration measures. Its main feature, designed to win Democratic support, is a six-year extension of the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP), whose funding expired last October 1. The program insures some 9 million children and was allowed to expire by both parties.

Democratic leaders have come under attack from immigrant organizations for renegeing on previous pledges to insist on protection for DACA recipients as part of any legislation to extend funding for the federal government. On Tuesday, several hundred Dreamers converged on the Capitol to demand that such a bill be passed by the Friday budget deadline.

The Republicans need Democratic votes to get their funding bill passed and avert a government shutdown, which would likely be more damaging politically to them than to the Democrats. With a narrow 51-49 majority in the Senate, the Republicans need nine Democratic votes to block a filibuster and bring a funding bill to the floor for a vote.

In the House, Republican leaders face a potential rebellion by the 30-member far-right Freedom Caucus, which is hostile to any extension of CHIP and demands a two-year authorization of military funding. With a 23-seat majority, House Speaker Paul Ryan may need Democratic votes to push his plan through the lower chamber.

A minority of Democratic lawmakers have declared their intention to vote against any funding bill that does not include a reprieve for DACA recipients. At the same time, virtually all Democrats are backing the reactionary Senate bipartisan “compromise” rejected by Trump.

Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi have not made their position clear, and the outcome of the budget crisis remains in doubt.

A shutdown would have the biggest impact on federal workers and the general public, triggering the furlough without pay of tens of thousands of government employees and curtailing social services from national parks to the passport service. The military, the intelligence agencies and the FBI would not be affected.

The Democrats’ own statements underscore the absence of any democratic or progressive content to their horse-trading with Trump and the Republicans. Schumer on Wednesday dismissed their House stop-gap spending bill in part for failing to meet “defense needs.”

Emerging from a closed-door meeting between the White House chief of staff, retired Gen. John Kelly, and the Democratic Hispanic Caucus, New Jersey Senator Robert Menendez on Wednesday made clear the readiness of the Democrats to continue negotiating an immigration “reform” package acceptable to Trump. He told the press that “they’re going to have to come more to the center if they truly want a fix.”

At a Senate hearing on Tuesday, Democratic Whip Durbin, who was present at last Thursday’s meeting where Trump made his racist remarks, responded to charges by Homeland Security Secretary Nielsen that the Democrats were short-changing border policing by protesting, “We gave you every penny you asked for.”