

US House of Representatives votes to slash \$8.7 billion from food stamps

By Andre Damon
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The US House of Representatives voted Wednesday to slash the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, or food stamps) by \$8.7 billion over ten years, cutting food benefits by an average of \$90 per month for 850,000 of the country's most vulnerable people.

The vote, 251-166, came only two days after bipartisan negotiators released the bill Monday, and the vote passed after only one hour of debate on the House floor.

The Senate is expected to take up the bill Thursday, and to approve it by Friday. White House press secretary Jay Carney told reporters Wednesday that when the bill reaches Obama's desk, "he would sign it." The assault on nutritional assistance comes one day after Obama's State of the Union speech, which was billed as a major address on social inequality but in fact sets the framework for a deeper attack on the working class.

The cuts are part of the so-called farm bill, a five-year omnibus measure that deals with programs administered by the United States Department of Agriculture.

The measure had the full support of the House Democratic leadership, including Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi and Minority Whip Steny Hoyer. Democrat Collin Peterson told the *Hill* that Pelosi was key in the bill's passage, saying, "She really worked the bill."

"I think we got it about right," said Peterson, the top Democrat on the House Agriculture Committee. "Of course it's not perfect, if you want perfect, you'll get that in heaven," fellow Democrat Tim Walz, who voted for the bill, told *Politico*.

The Republican-controlled House of Representatives had originally proposed a \$39 billion cut to the food

stamp program, while the Democrat-controlled Senate version called for a \$4 billion reduction. Following the well-worn pattern in American politics, the more draconian Republican proposal served as the baseline for a "compromise" by the Democrats that imposes sweeping cuts to a vital social program and will spell destitution for hundreds of thousands.

"It's a disaster," Dan Reyes, coordinator for the Delaware-based Coalition to End Hunger, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "This will have a direct impact on people's ability to feed themselves. We are cutting the budgets of people who need money to pay for food. You can't look at it from any other angle. What it comes down to is that people are going to have less food to put on the table."

The bill comes on top of a previous cut in November, which slashed food assistance by \$319 per year for a typical family of three, totaling \$11 billion through 2016.

Reyes added that the cut to food stamp benefits implemented in November was greater than the operating budget of all the Feeding America member agencies, of which the Delaware Food Bank—which coordinates all local food banks in the state—is one. "Our yearly budget is \$15 million, but last year's cuts slashed food assistance by \$16 million," he said.

Most of the \$8.7 billion in food stamp cuts will be implemented by eliminating what the deal's supporters call, in Orwellian language, a "loophole," by means of which families eligible for home heating aid received extra food assistance.

"The 'heat and eat' program provides extra funding for people who receive home heating assistance to keep people from choosing whether to heat their homes or feed their families," Reyes said.

"SNAP is already insufficient for its recipients to

afford a healthy diet. With each new cut, it is becoming increasingly insufficient,” he said.

Currently, people convicted for drug-related felonies are permanently barred from receiving food stamp benefits. The bill expands the ban to a broader range of felonies, including murder and sexual assault. Additionally, the deal would launch pilot programs in ten states that would require food stamp recipients to be actively looking for work. According to newspaper reports, the proposal would also prevent college students from receiving food stamp aid.

Even before November’s cut to food stamp benefits, demand for food assistance had been surging. According to the US Conference of Mayors, requests for emergency food aid in 25 major cities surged by 7 percent between mid-2012 and mid-2013.

“Food banks can’t put up with the demand as it is,” Reyes said. “Not only are charities strapped for cash, but they can’t meet the demand that is being put on them.” He added, “We have reports from agencies that they’re running out of food, that they’re seeing new people who haven’t had to come to food pantries before.”

Over 80 percent of SNAP benefits go to households with incomes below the federal poverty line, which stands at an abysmally low \$19,530 annually for a family of three. Forty percent of recipients live in deep poverty, defined as below \$9,765 annually for a family of three.

The vast majority of food stamp recipients who do not work are disabled, elderly or under-age. The number of people who receive food stamps will continue to rise through 2014, according to projections by the Congressional Budget Office.

Over 21 million children, more than 1 in 4, live in a household that receives food stamp benefits, according to the CBPP report, and 9 million people with disabilities receive food stamps.

One in seven Americans receives food stamp assistance, up from 9 percent of the population in 2008 to nearly 15 percent in 2012. The program helps feed 48 million people, up from 26 million in 2007.

On top of the food stamp cuts, the bill slashes \$6 billion in spending by cutting almost in half the number of environmental conservation programs run by the Department of Agriculture. The deal also cuts about \$19 billion in farm programs, including ending direct

payments to farmers, in favor of expanded crop insurance programs.

In addition to cutting food aid for recipients of home heating assistance, the deal further tightens food stamp eligibility restrictions and prohibits the US Department of Agriculture from publicizing the food stamp program to poor families who may not know of its existence.

This draconian assault on food stamp benefits is only the latest in a series of sweeping assaults on social programs due to the action of the Obama administration and both big business parties. This includes the expiration of federal jobless benefits and the sequester budget cuts, aimed at doing away with bedrock social protections, and rolling back the conditions of life for working people to those that existed in the 19th century.

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