

HOW CAN LABOR SUPPORT A POLITICAL PARTY WHOSE LEADERS VOTE TO CUT FOOD STAMPS?

December 6, 2013

On June 10, 2013 the U.S. Senate, with its Democratic majority, approved a farm bill that included a \$4.1 billion cut in food stamp funding over a 10-year period. According to the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office (CBO), under this proposal 500,000 households would lose \$90 in food stamp benefits each month. Despite that, the Senate passed the measure by a 66-27 margin, making clear that it had bipartisan support.

Only one Senate Democrat voted against the farm bill.

Of course the Senate measure will not become law because it must be reconciled with the Republican-dominated House of Representative's version of a farm bill.

On September 19, the House passed a farm bill cutting food stamp spending by \$39 billion over 10 years. The vote was 217-210. The AFL-CIO sent members of Congress a letter blasting the House's action as "cruel." The letter stated in part:

"The Nutrition Reform and Work Opportunity Act of 2013 [passed by the House] would deny millions of children, seniors, people with disabilities, low-income and unemployed Americans food assistance during a prolonged period of anemic job growth, declining or stagnant wages and growing income inequality."

(Incidentally, 15 members of Congress are the beneficiaries of subsidies provided by farm legislation, the same legislation that includes food stamp funding. As an example, one of these, Rep. Stephen Fincher, a Republican from Tennessee, and his wife collected nearly \$3.5 million in subsidies for 1999-2012. Yet Fincher is one of the loudest voices in Congress demanding steep cuts in food stamp funding!)

So now representatives from the House and Senate are meeting in an attempt to reconcile the different versions. The question is how deep the cuts to the food stamp program will be. Sen. Debbie Stabenow, who chairs that body's agriculture committee, has already expressed a willingness to cut food stamp funding even more than the Senate bill did.

President Obama is on record as opposing major cuts in food stamp funding, meaning that he favors cutting such funding providing that the cuts are not too drastic. Labor should demand that the president declare that he will veto any farm legislation that contains *any* cuts to food stamps!

What makes the proposed cuts so much worse is that food stamp funding took a big hit on November 1 of this year, when monthly benefits for all 47 million recipients of the program were cut by roughly 7 percent. This occurred due to the expiration of a benefit increase that resulted from the 2009 stimulus program. A number of Democrats supported the November cuts, saying that the money should be used to forestall the states laying off teachers. This is a crass example of robbing Peter to pay Paul at a time when there is plenty of money available from other sources to maintain teachers' jobs while not only maintaining funding for food stamps but increasing that funding.

So unless labor intervenes in alliance with its community partners to build a powerful movement that demands no cuts to food stamp funding, further cuts are inevitable in addition to those implemented in November. In fact, we should be demanding not only that the program be maintained, it should be expanded to guarantee more adequate nutrition for children (who make up half of food stamp recipients), disabled people, seniors, veterans, military families and others who rely so heavily on food stamps.

What Happened to Labor's Proclaimed Congressional Allies?

Those politicians who like to identify themselves as "friends of labor" have, in fact, compromised away any claim to solidarity with working people. Instead of drawing a line in the sand and forcefully opposing *all* cuts to food stamps, they caved in, claiming that a farm bill was needed and cutting food stamps was the only way to get it passed. They also point to the fact that in the Senate they voted for an amendment to restore food stamp funding, but it was defeated 26-70. In addition, they take pains to condemn the much more extreme cuts voted by the House.

None of these rationalizations should carry any weight with trade unionists. Voting to deprive children and their families of essential meals cannot be justified under any circumstances — period. The Senate could have voted to separate food stamp funding from the rest of the farm bill but it chose not to do so. The lopsided vote defeating the effort to restore the \$4.1 billion food stamp funding shows where things now stand. Since that failed, then it was incumbent to vote against the farm bill as a whole, as only one Democratic senator did. If a majority had taken that position, the Senate would have been in an infinitely stronger position in negotiating with the Republican-dominated House and preventing additional millions from experiencing greater malnutrition.

As for the Republicans pressing for greater cuts, that hardly justifies voting for lesser cuts. That is part and parcel of the old discredited game the politicians play of supporting lesser evil legislation and claiming victory in averting a worse outcome, no matter the damage done to the working class majority by whatever is enacted. It has never occurred to Democratic Party leaders to call upon masses of people to descend on Washington to oppose any and all food stamp cuts in this epic struggle. Since when have these leaders ever sought to mobilize the people for any progressive cause?

Labor's Role

The failure of labor to mount an aggressive campaign against food stamp cuts, starting with condemning the Senate's June 10 action, is due to its failed strategy of relying on Democratic Party leaders and the president to protect workers' interests. We in labor will continue to suffer painful setbacks so long as this strategy is pursued. What is needed instead is for labor to act independently in the interests of the working class majority. The immediate need is to pull out all the stops in the weeks ahead to ensure the largest possible mobilizations demanding "NO Cuts!" to food stamps. This is a needed step forward for labor and its allies to have a real voice in determining national policies, culminating in forming a party of our own: a workers party based on the unions and our community partners. The public as a whole, according to the latest polls, gives the Democratic Party a low favorability rating. Over 60 percent have lost faith in both major parties and are looking for an alternative. Labor can provide that alternative.

It's time for a change!

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