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USA

“Infrastructure” is all the rage, and not only...

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“Infrastructure” is all the rage, and not only just now. Trump talked about it, president Obama promised it, and so have administrations going back to the 1980s. Amidst the talk, the United States’ roads and bridges are crumbling, water and sanitation systems faltering, public health services left in a condition that’s only been fully exposed in the coronavirus pandemic, and rapid transit and high-speed internet access in much of the country inferior to what’s available in the rural interior of China.

A combination of circumstances have changed the discussion. The objective realities include the pandemic; its devastating economic impacts most heavily on Black, brown and women’s employment; the necessity of rapid conversion to renewable energy, now clear even to much of capital — and yes, the pressures of deepening competition and rivalry with China. The obvious immediate political factors are the defeat of Trump and the ascendance of the Democrats to narrow Congressional and Senate majorities.

It became clear, however, that there would be no Republican support for anything resembling Biden’s infrastructure program — even after he’d stripped several hundred billion dollars and scrapped raising the corporate tax rate to pay for it.

Instead, the Senate has hastily come together around “research and development” legislation explicitly aimed at facing China’s rising capacity. It signals that anything happening in the name of government economic development policy will be coming with a stop-China tinge — as was also clear in Biden’s statements at the G7 summit.

Gridlock

President Biden’s and the Democrats’ “nearly two trillion dollar infrastructure package,” as it was called, could only be enacted in the Senate with all 48 Democratic and two independent votes (Bernie Sanders and Angus King), plus Vice President Kamala Harris’ tie-breaker. That’s in order to pass the bill through the “budget reconciliation” provision that bypasses the Senate’s 60 votes required to choke off the buffoonery that passes for “debate” in that spectacularly unrepresentative chamber.

As the Republican Party at the congressional level consolidates itself as the party of the Big Lie and the still-to-be-indicted Big Liar lurking in his Mar-A-Lago bunker, the long tradition of “bipartisan” negotiation (with all the cynicism and pork-barrel tradeoffs it entails) has become middle-of-the-road kill. Loyal enscorced for decades in the old habits, Biden routinely reaches across the aisle to Mitch McConnell, who responds by stomping on the president’s face. After several repetitions, most Democrats not named Joe Manchin get the point.

In essence, the Democrats were left negotiating with their own Senator Manchin and one or two Republicans he might bring along — maybe Lisa Murkowski, whose main purpose in political life is to keep her state of Alaska open for ecocidal oil and gas drilling. Under more bipartisan circumstances, the Democratic leadership would likely be willing to sacrifice their bill’s more innovative measures — “social infrastructure” like expanded child credit and health care access, as well as some first steps toward mitigating climate disaster — to get Republican support, even though enraging their progressive-minded base.

Now, however, the Democrats need that base and its Congressional voices to once again, as Alexandria

Ocasio-Cortez put it to journalist Marina Hinojosa about the 2020 election, “save the party’s ass.” If the Democrats don’t “go big” and deliver serious results, they might well be electorally dead in 2022 and beyond. That pressure, along with the party’s left wing, put some backbone into the administration’s posture although the “progressive” forces certainly don’t control the agenda.

Size and Scope

Without trying to predict what if any infrastructure spending might finally survive the filibuster-blockaded mess known as the United States Senate, it’s worth looking at what the Biden administration and congressional Democrats hoped to accomplish. These proposals are by no means “socialist,” as Republicans absurdly pronounce. We’ll come back to the issue of what a socialist infrastructure program would look like.

Importantly, however, the Biden proposals were big — even ground-shifting by the standards of decades of neoliberal gutting of social spending by both capitalist parties. It’s worth exploring why. Dollar figures do matter, although they fluctuate with each day’s news reports. (To paraphrase the late Illinois Senator Everett Dirksen, “a trillion dollars here, a trillion there, and pretty soon you’re talking real money.” In the long-ago 1960s, Dirksen actually said “billion.” How outdated is that?)

The biggest attempted innovations, however, are over the Democrats’ “wide range of concerns, including elder care, parents and families” and social support, scorned by Republicans like John Barrasso of Wyoming “as ‘socialism camouflaged as infrastructure.’”

“Maintaining their belief that any package should hew to what they describe as traditional infrastructure,” the Senate Republicans’ new plan “proposes more than \$500 billion for roads, \$98 billion for public transit, \$46 billion for passenger rail and more than \$70 billion for water infrastructure” and other items. (“Senate Republicans make new infrastructure offer as House Democrats urge Biden to dig in,” Washington Post, May 27, 2021)

Through budget legerdemain, however, Republicans propose paying for some of this through money already legislated, but not yet spent, under the previous COVID relief bill. Under no circumstances, McConnell pledges, will any part of the sacred Trump tax cuts for corporate capital and the rich be touched. In any case the Republican proposition adds up to something less than half of the Biden administration’s proposal.

Proposing infrastructure spending to meet social needs is a departure from established practice. That fact shows the depth of our society’s crisis, and the backwardness of its politics. Consider the amazing reality that both Joe Manchin and Senator Shelley Moore Capito, the Republican “negotiator” put in charge of sabotaging Biden’s proposal, are from West Virginia — a state that needs human as well as “traditional” infrastructure repair probably more than any other.

Here’s what Biden proposed, as summarized by CNN politics (March 31, 2021) from White House figures:

- Transportation — \$621 billion, including \$174 billion investment in the electric vehicle market.
- Home care services and workforce — \$400 billion, including improving wages for home health workers (anathema to Republicans, of course).

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- Manufacturing — \$300 billion, including domestic semiconductor and medical manufacturing as well as “focus on clean energy, rural communities, and programs that give small businesses access to credit.”
- Housing — \$213 billion toward retrofitting, renovating or building two million-plus homes and housing units to improve energy efficiency. (Clearly much more is needed to make this a transformative program.)
- Research and development — \$180 billion “to advance U.S. leadership in critical technologies” as well as climate science. (It’s not clear how this intersects with the Senate’s hastily passed \$250 billion R&D bill.)
- Water — \$111 billion including replacement of lead pipes and service lines.
- Schools — \$100 billion to build new and upgrade existing public school buildings. (An additional \$37 billion are requested for infrastructure needs of community colleges and child care facilities.)
- Digital infrastructure — \$100 billion for universal high-speed broadband access.
- Workforce development — \$100 billion for dislocated workers and underserved populations.
- Veterans’ hospitals and federal buildings modernization — \$18 and \$10 billion respectively.

To most of which we can apparently bid R.I.P. As we go to press, a “bipartisan” group of 10 Senators is floating a proposal just over half the size of the original Biden/Democrats’ bill. The outcome is an open question.

Socialist Infrastructure for Real

Taken individually and as a package, the Biden/Democratic measures respond to the crisis of infrastructure decay in capitalist America. They would be helpful to tens if not hundreds of millions of people whose lives are blighted by the existing mess. The argument that they’re needed “in order to globally compete” is partly a patriotic selling pitch, but also an objective reality facing U.S. capital.

The immediate blockage is the extreme dysfunction of a political system that’s become a paralyzed hostage to the far right. Still, the very real differences between the Biden and Republican infrastructure policies are dwarfed by the gap between either of them and what a socialist program would look like — not just in scale but above all in priorities and objectives.

No question, trillions of dollars need to be invested — but for what, and controlled by whom? A socialist program would entail not only spending but enormous inroads on capital, beginning with nationalization of the sectors of the economy most critically in need of renovation and transformation to a sustainable future, notably energy and transportation. Preferably those nationalized industries would be reorganized under workers’ control ; in any case, the most fundamental change would be full public discussion and democratic decision-making about priorities.

Consider for example a range of hugely complex issues around tackling the environmental crisis. Does our society’s future lie in mass conversion to individually-owned electric automobiles, or should the emphasis be a whole new infrastructure centered on public transportation? And should the decision be based on where the profit is, or what

people and the planet need?

Does the energy solution mean industrial-scale wind turbines and solar panels, or localized alternatives and significant reductions in energy consumption? What's the pathway to sustainable agriculture replacing corporate monopoly agribusiness? What can replace gigantic factory farms that destroy land, water and Indigenous farming communities globally — and how to get there?

For some discussion of these challenges, see for example two posts on the Solidarity website, “Biden’s Climate Pledge is a Promise He Cannot Keep” by Howie Hawkins and “What Would a Deep Green New Deal Look Like?” by Don Fitz.

We don’t claim to have quick answers. The essential point is that fundamental problems that affect everyone’s lives need to be decided by society democratically and collectively on the basis of science-based knowledge of the options and their consequences, rather than by the necessity to preserve and expand corporate profit.

Another set of priorities revolves around the scope of what’s called “human infrastructure.” For socialists, the resources required to develop universal health care, public education that works for everyone, universal child care, guaranteed child nutrition and cleaning up our fouled waterways and toxic dumps — to name just a few priorities — are immense. They demand, for openers, cuts in military spending beyond what either of our capitalist parties are able to even contemplate.

On top of the quantitative scale of the task is the social necessity to put the most resources into the very places, the communities of oppressed people and in rural areas, which were never properly served by capitalist development and are now especially ravaged by recent decades of neoliberal policy.

The Biden program responds in part to the reality that neglect of physical, social and human “infrastructure” (pretty much everything except the military) has reached the point of weakening U.S. capital’s ability to compete in the world, notably against a rising China. As we’ve noted, for the Democrats it also means that if they can’t deliver serious relief for their constituencies, they might as well fold up. That confluence of circumstances opens up possibilities.

In short, the answer to our question “Infrastructure. Who Needs It:” Capital needs it. Workers and families need it. Black, brown, Indigenous and rural communities need it. We all need it. But what kind we get, and who benefits, will be decided not automatically but through political struggle and social mobilization.

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