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Feeding the Pentagon, starving the poor: The class politics of the 2025 U.S. budget

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EBT at the checkout and the Pentagon on the skyline: the U.S. feeds its war budget while pushing poor and working-class people deeper into hunger.

In late 2025, after the long federal shutdown, the new federal budget said more about the real priorities of the billionaire class and the politicians who serve them than any campaign speech or press conference.

On one side, the Pentagon's budget now tops \$1 trillion, with tens of billions more handed to war contractors for ships, missiles and the F-35 fighter jet. On the other

side, food assistance and health care for tens of millions of poor and working-class people are being cut or threatened. This is not a mistake or bad planning. It is class policy.

A “K-shaped” economy means up for the rich, down for the poor

Economists have given today’s economy a polite name: “K-shaped.” In plain language, that means the line goes up for the rich and down for the poor.

The numbers make the divide plain. Over the last year, retailers in low-income neighborhoods saw their sales grow by only 0.2%, which is basically standing still. Stores in middle- and high-income areas saw sales grow by 2.5% over the same period. When businesses that serve poor communities are barely hanging on while those in wealthier areas keep expanding, that is a map of class inequality.

Surveys of business owners tell a similar story. Stores that serve low-income communities report deep pessimism about the future. Owners who serve wealthier customers are much more hopeful.

Yet on Dec. 2, Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent went on TV to promise “substantial tax refunds” to the wealthy and “real wage increases” for the upper layers in 2026. At the same time, Goldman Sachs predicts “continued underperformance in low-end spending” — in other words, continued weakness in the parts of the economy where poor and working-class people live.

These are not just mixed signals. This is how the system talks to us. Officials and experts are brought out to say that things are getting better even when their own data shows that life is getting harder for working people.

A budget written for the rich and for war

The clearest picture of class priorities is in the budget itself.

During the recent government shutdown crisis, the Senate voted 77-20 to approve a \$32 billion increase for the Pentagon. That came on top of an already approved \$156 billion increase. Together, these hikes pushed U.S. military spending past \$1 trillion a year.

Much of this money will flow straight into the coffers of a handful of giant corporations that build weapons and military equipment. Many of these contracts are “cost-plus,” which means the companies are guaranteed a profit. The more they spend, the more they make.

At the same time, Congress refused to extend subsidies under the Affordable Care Act that would cost around \$35 billion for a year — a small fraction of the Pentagon increase. Without those subsidies, health insurance premiums for millions of people will double or worse. In combination with cuts to Medicaid, as many as 17 million people are expected to lose health coverage altogether.

When a government can easily find hundreds of billions of dollars for war but claims it cannot afford basic health care, that is not hypocrisy. It is a clear sign of whose interests it serves. The Pentagon budget acts as a massive public support system for the biggest banks and corporations. It guarantees profits for military contractors, pumps government money into private hands, backs up U.S. corporate power around the world, and finances research that later becomes private technology and private profit.

Programs that help poor and working-class people do not enrich the wealthy in the same way. That is why they are always on the chopping block.

Turning hunger into a weapon

The Trump administration has escalated its attack on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, which helps more than 42 million people buy food.

Officials are now threatening to withhold federal SNAP administrative funds from 22 states led by Democratic governors. Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins claims these states are refusing to share data needed to fight “rampant fraud,” and says that \$24 million per day is supposedly being lost to fraud and errors — about \$9 billion a year.

But federal data undercuts this scare campaign. A 2023 report by the U.S. Department of Agriculture found that only 0.1% of households on SNAP were even referred for fraud review. Policy expert Katie Bergh of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities has said clearly that intentional fraud by recipients is rare.

So the question becomes: If fraud is rare, why the loud campaign about “rampant abuse”?

The answer is political. Accusations of fraud are used to demonize poor people, justify cuts to lifesaving programs, and distract from the real transfer of wealth. While officials wag their fingers at a tiny number of supposed cheaters on SNAP, billions of dollars flow without question to Pentagon contractors and the corporations behind them.

This is not the first time hunger has been used as leverage. During the recent six-week government shutdown, the administration carried out an unprecedented 13-day halt in SNAP benefit distribution. Families went without money for food while the government defended the stoppage in court all the way to the Supreme Court.

Shifting the burden onto states and working people

New rules in the budget shift the cost of SNAP away from the federal government and dump it onto the states. Beginning Oct. 1, 2026, states will be required to pay 75% of SNAP administrative costs, up from the current 50-50 split. States will also have to pay part of the benefits themselves if their “administrative error rate” is

judged too high.

In practice, this means that poorer states will be squeezed the hardest. State officials will claim they “have no choice” but to restrict access, reduce benefits, or limit eligibility. Some states may threaten to pull out of SNAP entirely.

This is a familiar pattern. When capitalism runs into crisis, those at the top use every tool available to push the costs downward onto workers, poor people and local governments, while keeping profits flowing upward.

The human impact is enormous. SNAP serves about 42 million people. That includes around 14 million children and large numbers of older adults and disabled people. Households that include at least one disabled person experience food insecurity at about twice the rate of those without. For them, delays and cuts are not abstract policy questions. They are a question of whether there will be enough to eat.

Economic warfare on working-class communities

SNAP is not only a lifeline for families. It also supports local economies.

Every dollar in SNAP benefits generates about \$1.80 in economic activity. When people use SNAP at grocery stores, that money circulates in the community. It helps pay workers’ wages, covers rent and utilities for local businesses, and supports farms and food suppliers.

In some rural communities, SNAP purchases can make up 20% of a store’s sales. If those benefits are cut back or interrupted, small grocery stores in these areas may be forced to close. When that happens, entire communities can lose their only nearby place to buy food.

While this program that supports poor and working-class communities is being choked off, the Pentagon budget — which concentrates money in a small circle of

giant military corporations — is expanding rapidly. That is not a sign of economic confusion. It is a sign of deliberate class policy.

Crystal FitzSimons of the Food Research and Action Center summed up the reality: “The problem isn’t that we have 42 million people on SNAP. The problem is that we have 42 million people who live in poverty.”

The system is doing what it was built to do

A \$1 trillion Pentagon budget and 42 million people relying on food assistance are not separate, accidental problems. They come from the same system.

On one side, the U.S. state pours money into weapons, war and corporate profits to keep a crisis-ridden capitalist order afloat. On the other side, that order produces mass poverty, hunger and insecurity, then blames the victims and cuts the programs that keep them alive.

The question is not whether this is sustainable. It is not. The real question is whether working-class resistance — from food justice campaigns and union struggles to antiwar organizing — can come together as a political force that challenges not only each round of cuts, but the whole system that makes those cuts “necessary.”

That is the choice in front of us: a future of permanent war and permanent hunger, or a fight for a society where budgets are written to meet human needs, not to guarantee profits for war corporations and the rich.



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