

California's ballot initiative for English-only schools

An attack on democratic rights

The Editorial Board
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One of the initiatives on the California ballot next Tuesday is the "English for the Children Initiative" or Proposition 227. The stated aim of the measure is to end bilingual education in California's schools by June 1998.

If approved, Proposition 227 would require the placement of all public school pupils in English-language classrooms regardless of their ability to understand instruction in English. The state's limited-English-proficient (LEP) students--who currently number about 1.4 million or 24 percent of the student population--would be "educated through sheltered English immersion during a temporary period not normally intended to exceed one year" and then mainstreamed into regular classrooms. Teaching in any language other than English would be forbidden and teachers or administrators who tried to assist children in their native language could face legal action and financial penalties.

The Socialist Equality Party in the US urges Californians to vote "No" on Proposition 227 on June 2. Any measure that discriminates against children because of their language and makes it more difficult for them to obtain an education is an attack on democratic rights that all working people should oppose. The ballot initiative violates the principle that all children, regardless of the income level of their parents, their ethnic background or special needs, have a right to high-quality public education. The attack on bilingual education is in line with the promotion of vouchers, for-profit schools and other measures aimed at undermining the public school system.

Coming on the heels of Proposition 187 in 1994, which sought to exclude children of undocumented immigrants from the public schools, this latest ballot initiative is but another attempt to divert masses of

people angered over the scarcity of jobs, social programs and adequate schools with appeals to anti-immigrant chauvinism. By using immigrants as scapegoats, big business and its political representatives hope to block a common struggle by native-born and immigrant workers against the corporate and government attack on living standards.

By depriving immigrant workers of their democratic rights, they are seeking to create a class of social pariahs, forced to take any work at any wage. This pool of cheap labor, together with the hundreds of thousands being deprived of welfare benefits, will be used to drive down the wages, benefits and working conditions of the entire working class.

Proposition 227 is being promoted by an organization called "One Nation/One California," which claims that bilingual education prevents immigrant children from learning English and becoming assimilated into American society. The initiative's author is Robert Unz, a Silicon Valley millionaire who ran an unsuccessful challenge against Governor Pete Wilson for the Republican gubernatorial nomination in 1994.

The supporters of Proposition 227 point to statistics showing that only 7 percent of LEP students advance to English fluency each year as proof that "America's experiment with bilingual education has failed." Moreover, they claim, bilingual education is draining resources from the rest of the California school system.

In reality, more than two-thirds of California's LEP students do not receive instruction in their native language at all, according to a California Board of Education report. This is due to a chronic teacher shortage and federal cutbacks in bilingual education programs, which have seen funding reduced nationally from \$264 million in 1980 to \$128 million in 1996. This has coincided with an explosion in the demand for

bilingual education in California resulting from the tripling of the number of LEP students in the state, from 520,000 in 1985 to 1.4 million in 1997.

As of 1997, California had only one bilingual teacher for every 92 limited-English students. In particular languages, like Vietnamese, the ratio was 535 to 1. For Khmer-speaking students from Cambodia, it was 2,000 to 1. Thus the vast majority of students who are failing to attain English fluency are not enrolled in bilingual education, but are already receiving English-only instruction.

Much of the debate surrounding Proposition 227 has been focused on the merits of bilingual education versus English immersion. However, it is impossible to develop programs to deal with such a complex challenge as developing language skills under conditions in which the California public school system, like its counterparts throughout the United States, is in a state of crisis and decline.

Thirty years ago, California was fifth in the nation in per-pupil spending. Since Proposition 13 and other tax-cutting measures of the late 1970s, the state has steadily fallen behind. Out of 50 states, California now ranks forty-third in per pupil expenditures, and the gap between wealthy and poorer school districts has never been wider. This has had a detrimental impact on all children, black and white, native-born and immigrant. California's fourth-graders tie for last, with Louisiana, in reading skills. In math, they surpass only the fourth-graders of Mississippi.

These educational problems are inseparable from the fact that hundreds of thousands of working class children come to school from impoverished neighborhoods plagued by crime, inadequate housing, poor diet, lack of adequate medical care, and many other social deprivations. The poverty rate of California students has doubled since 1969 to 28 percent, due to the wave of plant shutdowns, corporate downsizing and the elimination of social benefits. For the most part, students attend underfunded schools, ill-equipped to deal with this social crisis.

Rather than eliminating bilingual education, the existing, inadequate programs must be expanded and improved, as part of an overall effort to raise the level of public education. Funding for bilingual education must be increased. Tens of thousands of qualified teachers must be hired and the most up-to-date

technology provided so that the best methods of language instruction are employed.

Any attempt to pit LEP students against other students must be rejected. The resources must be made available for every aspect of public education. A multi-billion-dollar program must be launched to rebuild old schools and construct new ones, hire more teachers and school employees, reduce classroom sizes and equip every school with sufficient supplies, computers and other learning tools.

While the SEP defends the right of children to be taught in their native language, our goal is not to foster separatism on the basis of language, culture or ethnic differences. On the contrary, we are for the greatest possible integration of all sections of the working class into a united social and political force. We see bilingual education as a means towards this end. We encourage immigrant youth to master English--the predominant language in the US--because it is essential to their ability to function in society, and because it facilitates a common struggle of workers against corporate America and the big business politicians.

Our standpoint is that of socialist internationalism, not nationalism. We do not start from linguistic, ethnic or racial differences--which are secondary issues--but from the overriding commonality of interests of all working people.

The SEP rejects the claim that there is "no money" for public schools and other vital social services. The issue is who controls society's wealth and how is it allocated. Working people must build a mass political party that advances a socialist program to guarantee a decent future to all youth.

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