

From impeachment to a tainted election: The conspiracy against democratic rights continues

The Editorial Board
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The brazen attempt of the Bush campaign to declare victory in the presidential campaign—in the face of mounting evidence of massive ballot irregularities in the state of Florida—exposes its utter contempt for the democratic rights of the American people. In 1998-99 the Republican Party, controlled by the extreme right, sought to overturn the result of two presidential elections through the impeachment and trial of Bill Clinton. Now it is attempting to hijack the 2000 presidential elections through crudely antidemocratic methods, using their control of the state government in Florida headed by the brother of the Republican presidential candidate.

The issue goes beyond the fact that Gore won the popular vote but still, under the US Constitution's archaic and undemocratic Electoral College procedure, could be denied election to the presidency. In fact, Bush is presently trailing in both the popular vote and the Electoral College. His chances for eventual Electoral College victory—by a margin of only 271-267—depend entirely on the outcome of the tainted Florida vote.

There is clear and convincing evidence that thousands of pro-Gore voters in critical Florida precincts were disenfranchised. Approximately 19,000 votes were invalidated in Palm Beach County because a defective ballot paper led people to punch two lines rather than one for president; several thousand votes in that county were wrongly cast for ultra-rightist Patrick Buchanan, because of the same improper ballot; computer “malfunctions” caused a sudden drop in Gore's vote total in Volusia County; there was exclusion and intimidation of black voters at polling places in the Miami metro area and in the state's rural Panhandle.

Already, only two days after the election, revulsion against the ballot rigging has produced public protests. Hundreds of college students from Florida A&M, mainly black, held a demonstration and sit-in at the state capitol in Tallahassee. Hundreds of elderly Jewish voters rallied in Palm Beach

County to denounce the Election Day travesty there. Many expressed outrage that their votes were being counted for the anti-Semitic Buchanan, and they demanded an opportunity to re-vote.

So obviously compromised was the result in Palm Beach that a local judge ordered a full vote-by-vote hand recount in the county, rather than the cursory canvass of computers and voting machines that the state government ordered for all 67 Florida counties. Even this superficial retallying had slashed Bush's lead to only 225 votes out of six million cast, before it was halted at the direction of Florida's Republican Secretary of State on Thursday evening.

The evident irregularities, combined with the growing public protests, compelled the Gore campaign to reverse its cautious stance of Wednesday and announce that a full-scale legal challenge of the Florida vote would be made. Former Secretary of State Warren Christopher, named by Gore to represent his interests in the Florida recount, described the Palm Beach ballot as “illegal.”

Gore campaign chairman William Daley, who the day before had refused to claim victory in the state, told a press conference Thursday that Gore was the winner of the popular vote in Florida as well as in the country as a whole. “If the will of the people is to prevail, Al Gore should be awarded a victory in Florida and be our next president,” Daley said, adding that “the disenfranchisement of thousands of Floridians” represented “an injustice unparalleled in our history.”

The initial response of the Bush campaign and the Republican Party was to brazen out the disputed election rather than to try to prove their case. Bush aides scheduled a victory rally in Austin for Thursday evening, after the Florida recount results were to be released. They announced that the Texas governor was beginning to assemble a transition team and plan his first appointments as president-elect. Campaign officials Don Evans, Karl Rove and Karen Hughes dismissed the reports of voting irregularities in Palm

Beach County in a manner that demonstrated contempt for democratic rights.

By late Thursday, as Bush's margin dwindled to near zero in the state-run recount, a partial retreat was sounded. The victory rally was cancelled. Former Secretary of State James Baker, Bush's designated representative in the Florida recount, said that the outcome of the election would not be known until November 17, the deadline for overseas absentee ballots to be received in Tallahassee. "The presidential election is ... on hold," he admitted.

The Socialist Equality Party did not support the campaign of Al Gore. We have unbridgeable political differences with the Democratic Party. Nonetheless, there are fundamental issues of democratic rights involved in the struggle over the outcome of the 2000 election. The working class cannot stand on the sidelines and allow the extreme right-wing elements in the Bush camp to, in effect, steal the election.

The issues are essentially the same as those posed by the impeachment drive against Clinton. An attempt is underway, using conspiratorial methods, to overturn a democratic decision by the American people.

In the impeachment, the far right made use of bogus lawsuits and independent counsel investigations to bring trumped-up charges against an elected president. The Republican-controlled House of Representatives voted for impeachment shortly after the 1998 congressional elections had revealed widespread popular hostility to the anti-Clinton campaign. The right wing thumbed their noses at public opinion and went ahead with their politically motivated assault on the White House.

Bush and his congressional Republican allies speak for an entire layer of the ruling elite that has grown utterly contemptuous of democratic rights. They want control over all agencies of state power to ride roughshod over democratic rights and impose social policies of the most reactionary character—the abolition of all taxation on wealth and income; the elimination of federal regulatory powers over business; the destruction of Social Security, Medicare, and whatever else remains of the social welfare programs.

Impeachment failed to oust Clinton because of public opposition, but there was widespread confusion about the political significance of this right-wing campaign, because of the cowardice of the Democrats and the torrent of media sensationalism about a "sex scandal" in the White House. In the struggle now developing over the presidential vote, the political line-up is clearer and more readily apparent to public opinion.

The Bush campaign's vicious response to the Florida vote fraud gives the lie to his entire campaign demagoguery about "ending the bickering in Washington." Instead of ending partisan warfare, Bush is engaged in a dramatic escalation,

claiming a victory based on the disenfranchisement of tens of thousands of Democratic voters.

The installation of Bush in the White House on the basis of such a fraudulent vote would mean a government imposed on the American people against their will. The only genuinely democratic resolution of the Florida travesty is to demand a complete revote in the disputed precincts.

As for the Democrats, no one should rely on Al Gore & Co. to fight this attack on basic democratic rights. The Democrats fought impeachment on their knees, and then deliberately buried the issue during the election—thus contributing directly to the closeness of the final result and giving the right wing another opportunity. In the end, the deepest instincts of Clinton, Gore and the Democratic Party establishment are directed toward working out a rotten compromise with the Republicans behind the backs of the people. Even if the election were finally brought to a conclusion with the installation of Gore, it is all but certain that the back-room deal would include conditions highly injurious to the democratic rights and social interests of the working class.

Above all, it must be understood that the present crisis expresses, in the final analysis, the fragile state of American democracy. The breakdown of traditional democratic norms—expressed first in the impeachment crisis and now in the tainted election—reflects the tremendous divisions and tensions in American society. While it is critical that workers oppose the present efforts of the Republicans to steal the election, they must recognize that the threat to democratic rights arises from the crisis of capitalist society. In a country whose social structure is defined by a staggering and historically unprecedented level of social inequality, with nearly half the nation's wealth concentrated in the hands of two percent of its population, democratic forms of rule cannot long survive.

The unfolding events testify to the urgent need for the development of a genuinely independent political movement of the working class on the basis of a democratic and socialist program.



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