

On-the-spot report from Tallahassee

Florida A&M students describe Republican attack on voting rights

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On November 9, two days after the US election, hundreds of students from Florida A&M University (FAMU) staged a sit-in at the state capitol in Tallahassee to protest the disenfranchisement of tens of thousands of Florida citizens. Many of the protesters had themselves been turned away from the polls on Election Day, after officials wrongly claimed they were not registered to vote.

Student leaders at the mostly black university collected more than 100 complaints from FAMU students, including dozens who were denied the right to vote or faced intimidating and confusing instructions from polling officials. Their complaints highlight the hostility of the Republican-controlled state apparatus toward the voting rights of working class people, particularly minority workers and youth.

The issue has evoked strong feelings from FAMU students because of the long struggle by blacks in Florida and other southern states to attain voting rights against the violent resistance of Jim Crow segregationists, who resorted to poll taxes, literacy tests, property requirements and deadly repression to disenfranchise African-Americans.

Florida A&M (Agricultural and Mechanical) University, founded in 1887, is located on the one-time site of the slave plantation of Florida Governor W.P. Duval. Its students, who at the time of the university's founding were banned from Tallahassee's all-white Florida State University, played a prominent role in civil rights struggles, including the 1956 Tallahassee bus boycott.

In the months prior to the November 7 election, student organizations, the NAACP and other groups signed up nearly 5,000 first-time voters on the campus, out of a student body of 12,000. Opposition to George W. Bush was particularly sharp because of the record of his brother, Florida Governor Jeb Bush. Earlier in the year thousands of FAMU students marched in opposition to the Florida governor's move to dismantle affirmative action programs.

"When Jeb was elected it was a wake-up call," said Anthony Harris, the 20-year-old president pro tem of the student senate. "We knew George W wanted to get rid of affirmative action without proposing any alternative to help minority students. His opposition to a woman's right to an abortion and his environmental record also fueled concern. On Election Day our campus had the highest minority turnout in Tallahassee, with 85 to 90 percent of

the registered students voting.

"Because of our initiative we encountered problems with the procedures at several polling places. Students were turned away because they couldn't furnish a registration card or drivers license, although they would have been permitted to vote if they had signed an affidavit swearing they had not already voted. But they were never told that. In addition, many went to vote but the county had them listed as having to vote elsewhere, and had given the students no prior notice."

Harris said students also had difficulty getting their registration cards sent back from the Secretary of State's office, even though they had mailed their requests well in advance, in some cases months before the deadline. One student, he said, had registered on campus four times and never received a voter's card.

"The student government began the registration drive in July and August, and completed it by the cut-off day just prior to the election," Harris said. "We took hundreds of registrations to the county court house, but many students never received their cards in the mail. When students got to the polling places they were told their names weren't on the list. Others, who had no way of knowing where to vote because they had no card, arrived at the polling station, only to be told to go somewhere else."

Hillery Kelly, a 21-year-old junior, described what happened when students made an error and requested another ballot. "People realized that they had just made a mistake and punched the wrong hole. When they went up for another ballot they were refused. Instead the polling officials told them to punch the same ballot again. By law a person can get up to three ballots, but they were refused."

Ms. Kelly, continued, "At the courthouse they told us to register the students again. Many people who had signed up a month or two in advance never got their cards. One student got two cards, each with a different location to vote. We had had workshops to show people how to correctly register to vote.

"Because we are students we also change addresses often. Some students went to their new precinct and were told they were registered in their old one. One student who registered here was told her registration was sent to Clearwater.

"Many out-of-state students never received their absentee ballots. I'm from Georgia, just north of here. Things are so fishy that my mother would not allow me to mail my absentee ballot to

her. She insisted that I drive it up.”

Ms. Kelly explained that the suppression of voting rights was bound up with maintaining conditions of economic and political oppression that confront many blacks and working class people in the Deep South. “I live 50 miles away in Georgia, where poverty and other conditions make people feel they are being kept down,” she said. “Segregation continues to exist, in what we call ‘separation academies’—white-only schools that were set up after integration, using as a front the pretense that they were Christian schools or run by some academy. These schools pick the students they want and money is being channeled from public schools into these schools.”

The student leaders also said many black workers in Tallahassee had been turned away from the polls on the grounds that the polls were closed. Polling officials closed the locations while voters were still waiting in line, although the law says people must be allowed to vote if they are in line before closing time. The student leaders said one black worker complained of police intimidation near her polling location.

Contacted by the *World Socialist Web Site*, Roberta Tucker, a deputy clerk for the state of Florida, said, “The police had set up a road block, a Highway Patrol check point, about a mile from my voting precinct. The police asked me for my driver’s license, looked at it and told me to go ahead. I found this suspicious. I’ve lived in the area for 10 years and there has never been a roadblock. They didn’t check my registration or any other documents.

“I thought to myself, you’re stopping black people on their way to vote—to intimidate first-time voters. Nothing was going on to warrant a roadblock. But this is a minority area and it’s Election Day. I went ahead to vote and then I telephoned the NAACP and informed them of this. I asked them to investigate because it was suspicious to me.

“The Florida Highway Patrol chief later told the newspaper that the roadblock was not authorized and that he knew nothing about it. This was only a matter of four or five white highway patrol officers acting on their own? How could they not know about this—just a mile from the voting booths?

“My experience may have been light compared to some other cases of police intimidation around the state. At the time, I didn’t know what other people were going through, I was only suspicious.”

Elan Thompson, a representative of the student government who collected dozens of complaints about voting irregularities, said, “We had a huge effort to get people out to vote. Now they’re being told that their votes don’t count. The US preaches about democracy to everybody, but we have to stand by those ideals.

“I’m from Kansas City, Missouri, where 900 votes in the metropolitan area were thrown out for irregularities. In Jacksonville, Florida, a city with a comparable population, 22,000 votes were thrown out. This goes beyond the factions fighting it out, it’s about the right of people to vote.”

These concerns prompted Florida A&M students to organize their protest on November 9. Anthony Harris explained, “Reports the day after the election confirmed that voters were being disenfranchised around the state, not just on our campus. We held a town hall meeting and decided to hold a march.

“Almost 2,000 students, including white students from Florida State University, joined the march to the capitol and we filed into the rotunda. As we marched, people were clapping in the streets. We demanded to see Secretary of State Harris and we were prepared with pillows and blankets to stay all night.

“Ms. Harris spoke to me and some of the other student leaders. We asked her to address the students’ concerns about voting irregularities and asked her what she intended to do if the canvassing boards tried to certify what were clearly incomplete vote tallies. She said that she was going to certify the votes. She blamed the voters for being confused in places like West Palm Beach, and said their votes would be thrown out. She refused to address the students in the rotunda and after five or seven minutes, her assistant said we had to leave because Harris was preparing for a press conference.”

Another leader of the protest, Student Senate President Andrew Gillum, said, “I’d like to see the attorneys for Gore raise the issue of the disenfranchising of blacks, but they haven’t. These broken voting machines, some of which haven’t been cleaned for 10 years, were predominantly in economically deprived and minority voting precincts.

“This was not an accident. It was a grand design to strip voting rights. There is a great history of the struggle of our people, our grandparents, to fight for the right to vote. This is similar to what people faced in Mississippi and Alabama that is more readily identified with the Deep South. Who would have thought we would be dealing with disenfranchisement in the twenty-first century? This reminds me of the issues surrounding the Civil War, like states’ rights and the role of the federal government.

“The Voting Rights Act is being abridged, but the Democrats have not made this a central issue. They don’t think it’s popular, even though the turnout of blacks delivered what in reality was a winning margin for Gore. The Democrats may not think discrimination is a mainstream issue, but if you can take away the rights of blacks to vote, you can take away anybody’s right.”



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