Michigan Democrats, unions refuse to break ties with anti-Semitic candidate

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The Michigan Democratic Party has indicated it will impose no sanctions against State Representative William Callahan, who recently said Sander Levin, his opponent in an August 6 primary election, could not represent voters in the 12th Congressional District because Levin was a "liberal" and a "Jew." The United Auto Workers union and the Michigan AFL-CIO, which have close ties with Callahan, have similarly refused to demand the resignation or removal of the three-term state legislator.

In a recent interview with the Associated Press (AP), Callahan, who describes himself as a "very conservative" proponent of Christian values, said incumbent US Congressman Levin's Jewish heritage and support for abortion made him unfit to represent voters in the newly redrawn district, situated in the northeastern suburbs of Detroit.

Earlier this year the Republican-controlled state government remapped the district—which had been long been a safe seat for the Democrats, and for Levin since 1994—to include a majority of voters from Macomb County. The county is largely populated by white working class and middle-class residents, many of whom left Detroit after the 1968 riots. Disillusioned by the Democratic Party and economically impacted by the inflationary crisis of the late 1970s, a significant layer of Macomb County voters moved to the right and supported Ronald Reagan in the early 1980s, acquiring the media tag "Reagan Democrats."

Explaining why he had decided to run against Levin, Callahan told the AP: "I mean, the man never owned a Christmas tree. He's not Christian. And I'm thinking, 'Jeez, how can he represent me then?'" Callahan added, "I am a Catholic who is pro-life and of Irish, Polish and German descent. He is very much pro-choice and Hebrew. Enough said."

Callahan said Levin represented voters in Levin's old congressional district in Oakland County because of its many Jewish residents. "If you drive around Oak Park or Southfield, you see a lot of synagogues," Callahan said. "But there may be only one in all of Macomb County." He added, "I really feel that in order for somebody to represent you, they should be pretty much like you, and Mr. Levin is not."

In addition to his anti-Jewish remarks, Callahan denounced Levin and other "liberals" in the Democratic Party for pandering to welfare recipients and the poor. In the context of the demographics of the region—one of the most racially segregated in the US—this can only be interpreted as a reference to the impoverished black population of Detroit. "All the Democrats argue about is welfare and fighting for the rights of the indigent and poor," he said, adding demagogically, "What about the guys who spend their lives working? What's being done to protect the pension system?"

Callahan's anti-Semitic outburst evoked only mild verbal criticism from the Democratic Party, including from Levin himself. The senior Democrat and brother of Senator Carl Levin said complacently, "I think the issue of religious affiliation was put to rest in American political life 40 years ago by JFK."

The Michigan Democratic Party issued a perfunctory one-paragraph statement, saying it "deplores bigotry and discrimination, including anti-Semitism." The statement concluded, "Such views, just like those of Republicans like David Duke and [former Macomb County Republican state representative] David Jaye, have no place in the Democratic Party or as part of any civilized discourse in a democratic society."

But leading state Democrats made clear they had no intention of sanctioning or expelling Callahan. House

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Minority Leader Buzz Thomas said he spoke with Callahan and told him his comments did not represent the Democratic Party, but Thomas indicated no further action would be taken.

The *World Socialist Web Site* asked a representative of the Michigan Democrats why they were not expelling Callahan and calling for his removal from the state House of Representatives. Ben Kohrman, director of communications, replied that "there is no specific party mechanism for discontinuing Representative Callahan's membership in the Democratic Party." He added all the party could do was "express our extreme displeasure at his comments."

Kohrman would not rule out the possibility that the Democrats would back Callahan's congressional bid if he defeated Levin in the primary.

As anyone familiar with the history of the Democratic Party knows, it had no problem expelling officers and members with socialist or left-wing sympathies during the McCarthyite witch-hunt after World War II. The United Auto Workers and other unions also carried out red-baiting purges, and until two years ago the AFL-CIO retained a constitutional clause barring members of the Communist Party from participating in the labor federation and its leadership bodies.

The WSWS spoke with the Michigan AFL-CIO about Callahan's anti-Semitic campaign. Our reporter asked if the union federation would call for Callahan's removal from the state House of Representatives. Spokesperson Denise Cook responded with an emphatic "No."

"We have not thought through what we are going to do," she said, and continued: "He had a good voting record. This is not the Bill Callahan we've known. We endorsed him during his last run for state representative and for other things. He has voted for many of the issues that help working people. People are shocked by these statements."

The United Auto Workers issued a statement calling Callahan's remarks "despicable," adding that "this sort of cynical effort to divide people by religion and ethnic background has no place in our politics or our society."

However, the UAW has for many years resorted to American chauvinism and anti-immigrant prejudice to promote its economic nationalist and protectionist agenda. It is no accident that the union was a political supporter of Callahan.

The UAW enthusiastically backed Callahan because of his opposition to trade with China and to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). In his current campaign, Callahan has attacked Levin for backing trade with China and Mexico, echoing the UAW line that such trade destroys American jobs.

In their chauvinist campaign against NAFTA, the UAW and AFL-CIO made common cause not only with right-wing politicians like Ross Perot and Patrick Buchanan, but also with semi-fascist militia groups.

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