

A provocation against democratic rights: Texas Republicans order state police to seize Democratic legislators

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This week's political events in Texas—Democratic legislators boycotting the state House of Representatives to block reactionary legislation, the Republican governor ordering state police to arrest them, the Democrats fleeing the state capital and taking refuge in neighboring Oklahoma, under the protection of that state's Democratic administration—are an indication of the extraordinary buildup of political tensions within the United States.

Democrats boycotted the state house to prevent passage of a redistricting bill which would gerrymander the state's congressional delegation in Washington, shifting as many as seven seats from Democratic to Republican control. This could be decisive in maintaining control of the US House of Representatives by the Republicans in the 2004 election. They presently hold a narrow majority of 229 to 205.

House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, who represents a wealthy Houston suburban district, played the key role in drawing up the new boundaries and deciding to push for them with legislation that would overturn district lines set only last year by a nonpartisan panel of federal judges. DeLay made no bones about his motive: "I'm the majority leader," he said, "and I want more seats."

Unable to defeat the redistricting bill in a straight up-or-down vote, the Democrats blocked action under a state legislative rule which requires a quorum of two-thirds of the lower house (100 members out of 150) to be present for passage of legislation. On Monday, May 12, 57 Democrats absented themselves from the legislative chamber, leaving only 93 representatives available to vote.

Republican House Speaker Tom Craddick invoked another legislative rule allowing the sergeant-at-arms to seek the assistance of the state police to bring absent legislators back to the chamber. Governor Rick Perry, a Republican who served as lieutenant governor under George W. Bush, dispatched Department of Public Safety officers to the homes of the legislators, to arrest them and produce a quorum by force.

Having anticipated this order, however, the bulk of the Democratic legislators had left Austin on the night of May 11 and made their way across the state's borders with New

Mexico and Oklahoma, assembling at a Holiday Inn in Ardmore, Oklahoma, about 30 miles north of the Texas state line. There they remain, planning to wait out a Thursday deadline for House action on the redistricting bill.

Despite the efforts of the national media to portray these events as a comic opera, the Texas crisis has the potential for serious and even violent consequences, including direct clashes between the armed police of the states involved, fought out along party lines.

Four Texas DPS agents arrived at the Holiday Inn in Ardmore to attempt to "convince" some Democratic legislators to return with them to Texas, in a plane which was standing by. Oklahoma Governor Brad Henry, a Democrat, ordered his state's police not to cooperate with the Texas officers, effectively placing the fugitive legislators under his protection. State officials in New Mexico, under Democratic Governor Bill Richardson, also declared that they would not assist the Texas state police in arresting the boycotting legislators.

Significantly, none of the 53 Democrats who left the state went to Louisiana, which is much closer to legislative districts in Houston, Beaumont and other east Texas cities. They obviously believed that Louisiana's Republican governor, Mike Foster, would have returned them, forcibly if need be, to the jurisdiction of Texas.

The conduct of the DPS officers belies the complacent suggestions that the crisis was a quaint Texas ritual of no national significance. Police visited the homes and offices of many of the Democratic legislators, tailing family members and interrogating staff aides, while threatening some of them with prosecution if they did not cooperate.

The DPS set up a "war room" in the Capitol to organize its campaign to find and bring back the legislators. It continued visiting homes and conducting surveillance—allegedly for the purpose of obtaining information to locate the legislators—even after the 53 Democrats appeared on television to announce their arrival in Oklahoma.

According to one Democratic legislator, Craig Eiland of Galveston, a Texas state policeman visited the neo-natal intensive care unit at a local hospital where his premature twins

were receiving care. The state trooper also visited his home, where his wife is recuperating from her pregnancy and delivery.

Frustrated Republican officials erupted in hysterical anger against the Democratic maneuver. One Republican legislator printed up a pack of cards, modeled on that used by the US military to track down Iraqi government officials, with each fugitive Democrat's face displayed on a card. Another asked for a criminal investigation by Travis County District Attorney Ronnie Earle, although failing to attend a quorum call does not violate any Texas state law.

The Republican Party began running radio ads targeting selected representatives, which reported that orders had been given to arrest the Democrats and asking listeners to call the Department of Public Safety if they had information on the whereabouts of those who had "taken flight."

DeLay condemned the Democratic stalling tactic and called for the intervention of federal agencies like the FBI, which could operate across state lines. "If it is legal for them to do so, it would be nice for them to help them out, help out the Texas Rangers and the Texas troopers because these members are violating the Texas Constitution," he told the press.

The attempt to criminalize Democratic Party opposition to the Republicans takes place against the backdrop of a deepening financial crisis of the Texas state government, and mounting public outrage over the extreme-right political agenda unveiled by the Republicans after they took control of the Texas legislature for the first time in over a century.

Since the legislature assembled earlier this year, the new Republican majority has pushed for severe cuts in social programs, including dumping hundreds of thousands of poor children from the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), slashing health care coverage for school teachers, pregnant women and the elderly, and deregulating tuition at state universities and colleges. Governor Perry had dozens of handicapped people arrested when they protested at the state capitol against his proposed cuts.

The Republican legislators introduced bills to require a moment of silence in public schools, a measure which some supporters openly called a "school prayer bill," to impose a 24-hour waiting period for women seeking abortions, to give far-right nominees to the state Board of Education the power to censor or reject new school textbooks, and to impose penalties for "ecological terrorism," defined to cover virtually any type of environmental protest.

The reactionary frenzy of the far right was summed up in a comment by one Republican legislator that has been widely quoted in the Texas media. In the course of a diatribe blaming illegal immigrants from Mexico for the state's health care budget crisis, Debbie Riddle, a horse breeder from Houston, declared, "Where did this idea come from that everybody deserves free education, free medical care, free whatever? It comes from Moscow, from Russia. It comes straight out of the

pit of hell. And it's cleverly disguised as having a tender heart."

The political crisis in Texas is a warning to the American people on the decay and disintegration of democratic processes in the United States. In Bush's home state, the methods employed against Arab and Muslim immigrants in the aftermath of September 11 are now being utilized against officeholders of one of the two big business parties.

The role of DeLay—and behind him, chief White House political czar Karl Rove—is significant. If this is what the Bush administration and the congressional Republicans are prepared to do to individuals who are themselves pillars of the political establishment, how will they respond to a movement of genuine opposition from below, from the working class?

The Bush administration only holds power thanks to the theft of the 2000 elections, the outcome of the long-running right-wing campaign of political subversion and destabilization of the Clinton administration. A government that lacks any democratic legitimacy, headed by a president who lost the popular vote and was installed in office by the Supreme Court, is now seeking to remove any check on its power.

In Washington, just as the Texas crisis unfolded, leading congressional Republicans announced plans to overturn a filibuster by Senate Democrats against two ultra-right nominees for positions on the federal appeals court. The Senate has approved 98 out of 100 Bush judicial nominees, virtually all of them far-right ideologues committed to attacks on democratic rights and the elimination of all governmental and judicial restraint on big business. But the White House cannot tolerate even such token opposition.

The attempt to rig the Texas redistricting has the most ominous implications for the 2004 elections as a whole, above all the presidential campaign. This vote will be conducted under unprecedented conditions. The mounting social and economic crisis of American capitalism will drive millions of working people into opposition to this government. At the same time, the Republican Party will virtually demand public support for Bush as a wartime president, casting all opposition as quasi-treasonous support for "terrorism."



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