

Recall election for California governor set for October 7

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A special election to recall Gray Davis, the Democratic governor of California, has been set for Tuesday, October 7, after the California secretary of state certified the recall petitions. The recall campaign was financed by right-wing multimillionaire Republican Congressman Darrell Issa, who spent over \$2 million to hire paid signature gatherers to collect the 900,000 signatures of registered voters required by law.

A two-part ballot will be used in the recall, the first of a state governor since 1921 and only the second in US history. In the first part, voters will decide whether Davis, first elected in 1998 and reelected only nine months ago, should be removed from office. The second portion of the ballot will list candidates to replace Davis in the event the recall passes. Issa is one of three Republicans who have already announced their candidacy.

If Davis is recalled, the candidate receiving the most votes in the second ballot will be installed immediately as governor. There is no requirement that a candidate win a majority and no provision for a runoff. With only 65 signatures or \$3,500 required to be listed on the ballot, dozens if not hundreds of candidates are expected, and a new governor could be chosen by only a tiny fraction of the electorate.

On Friday, the California state supreme court threw out a last-ditch challenge by Davis's supporters to have the recall petitions nullified because out-of-state petition-gatherers were hired, in violation of state law. Both Davis and his right-wing opponents held campaign-style rallies on the weekend.

There is one key date left before the recall vote itself: August 9, the deadline for candidates to file for the October 7 second ballot. At least a half dozen prominent Republicans are reportedly considering campaigns, including former Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan, Hollywood movie star Arnold Schwarzenegger, former congressman and vice-presidential candidate Jack Kemp, and multimillionaire Bill Simon, who was defeated by Davis last November.

Davis and the Democratic Party leadership have opted for a strategy of discouraging any Democrat from running as a candidate in the second ballot, because Davis is so widely unpopular that their only hope of defeating the recall is to portray it as a choice between Davis and the ultra-right. (Ironically, the Republicans have made a similar political calculation, concluding, based on recent California results, that

they can only hope to win the governor's mansion in an uncontested election.)

As the August 9 deadline approaches, however, if polls show Davis likely to lose the recall vote there could well be a change of plans, with the drafting of a prominent Democrat to stand in on the second ballot and prevent a Republican victory by default. Senator Dianne Feinstein was initially approached for this role, but declined. Now the candidate in waiting is believed to be former Clinton budget director Leon Panetta, a former congressman from California.

The recall campaign against Davis represents a right-wing perversion of the democratic procedure, established nearly a century ago during the Progressive Era, to give the people the ability to remove a governor from office. While the recall was established to make it possible to remove state officials who were corrupted by big business interests after taking office, the 2003 recall is a political coup financed by an extreme-right section of the corporate elite.

Six months ago the recall was treated by the media and the state's political establishment as the hobby horse of a few right-wing cranks. The enormous speed with which the recall was transformed into a real threat to Davis is a testament to the financial resources and contempt for democracy on the part of the Republican far right—and to the right-wing and anti-popular character of the Davis administration and the Democratic Party.

Preparations for this takeover of the state's executive branch began on March 2003. An organization calling itself the People's Advocate (PA) initiated the campaign, using the pretext that Davis had lied about the true financial condition of California during the 2002 election campaign.

PA is a product of the far-right milieu in California which has consistently failed to win elections, but has enjoyed some political success by sponsoring referendum campaigns appealing to popular prejudice and ignorance, and in some cases—most successfully with the Proposition 13 initiative in 1978—making a right-wing populist appeal to the social grievances of sections of the working class and middle class.

Referendum and initiative campaigns, heavily financed by corporate interests and individual right-wing multimillionaires, have become a staple of California's election ballots. These have included the "English only" initiative of 1986, directed

against the rights of Spanish-speaking and Asian immigrants; another anti-immigrant initiative, Proposition 187; and various initiatives targeting affirmative action.

Equally vast sums have been expended to defeat attempts to use the initiative process against big business. In 1998, supporters of Proposition 9 attempted to change the terms of an impending energy deregulation to add some safeguards for consumers. Opponents of the change—utility and energy companies from across the United States—spent over \$38 million fighting the initiative, versus \$1.4 million for its backers. The proposal was rejected, helping the energy monopolies enrich themselves by looting \$9 billion from California's coffers, a direct contribution to the state's budget crisis.

In the case of the recall campaign, the financier was Congressman Darrell Issa, the proprietor of a car alarm company who is worth over \$100 million. After he spent nearly \$10 million in an unsuccessful effort to win the Republican nomination for US Senate, he bought himself a safe Republican congressional seat in San Diego County, frightening potential rivals by the size of his bankroll and his willingness to use it.

The recall campaign required more than Issa's money, however. The organizers took advantage of popular dissatisfaction with Davis's obsequiousness to large campaign donors, his passivity toward the energy crisis, and his budget cuts in social, educational and health programs. Davis's subservience to big business has been clearly demonstrated in the current state budget crisis.

The crisis was caused largely by the collapse of the dot-com bubble, which has slashed state tax revenues and opened up a \$38 billion deficit. Despite top-heavy Democratic majorities in both houses of the legislature, Davis from the beginning proposed heavy cuts in state services as the principal means of financing the deficit, as well as increases in regressive taxes such as the automobile registration fee and the state sales tax, which fall disproportionately on the poor and the working class.

The Republican minority in the state legislature did not have the power to enact its own proposed cuts, including measures which would require a Charles Dickens to properly describe: excluding 110,000 children from kindergarten and ending payments to blind people to provide food for their guide dogs. They were able to block the Democratic Party budget, however, under a provision requiring a two-thirds majority to approve any new taxes.

The Republicans deliberately prolonged the stalemate in Sacramento to fuel support for the recall campaign. Once the signatures were in and the date of the recall election set, they quickly reached agreement on a budget deal that includes the higher auto registration fees but no additional taxes, and covers the deficit through a one-time massive borrowing of over \$10 billion—essentially postponing the reckoning until next year.

After five years in which Davis has frequently boasted of his “independence” of core Democratic Party constituency

groups—blacks, Latinos, trade unionists, etc.—he is now embracing the support of the trade union bureaucracy and various black and Latino politicians in a desperate effort to mobilize support against the recall. He has appeared at a series of rallies with union officials who in the past criticized him for his hostility to state employees.

The Democratic Party leadership has decided that it is impossible to defend Davis's political record and that the recall can only be defeated by focusing on the right-wing elements who instigated it. Bob Mulholland, political director of the California Democratic Party, told the press, “This is a coup attempt by certain Republican extremists.”

The most cynical statement came from Terry McAuliffe, chairman of the Democratic National Committee, who acknowledged wanting to keep any other Democrat's name off the second ballot of the recall, as a form of blackmail of the voters. “If you are a California voter and you want to vote to recall Gray Davis, you are not going to have an option but a bunch of right-wing conservatives on the ballot,” he said. “That's going to be your option.”

After refusing to conduct any serious struggle against the right-wing campaign to destabilize the Clinton administration, which culminated in impeachment, and then in the theft of the 2000 presidential election, the Democratic Party establishment is reacting in California with a mixture of panic and apprehension. But it is incapable of offering any genuine alternative to the right-wing effort to take over the government of the largest US state.

After decades of pursuing increasingly right-wing policies, working in tandem with the Republicans, and prostituting themselves openly before big business, the Democratic Party has no basis upon which to make an appeal to working people. Ultimately, the California crisis illustrates that neither democratic rights nor the social needs of working people—adequate health care, decent housing, quality education, and jobs—can be left to the machinations of a political system controlled by the financial oligarchy. The working class must build a new political party of its own, independent of and opposed to both the Democrats and Republicans and based on a socialist program.



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