

California's Governor Davis denounces "right-wing power grab"

Bill Vann
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In a speech delivered to supporters at the University of California Los Angeles on August 19, California's governor Gray Davis denounced the attempt to overturn the results of last November's election by means of a recall ballot as a "right-wing power grab."

"This recall is bigger than California," Davis declared. "What's happening here is part of an ongoing national effort to steal elections Republicans cannot win."

The governor linked the recall effort, initiated and financed by right-wing Republican politicians, to a chain of political events beginning with the drive to impeach President Clinton in 1998-1999. "It continued in Florida, where they stopped the vote count, depriving thousands of Americans of the right to vote," he said, referring to the theft of the 2000 election that placed Bush in the White House.

"This year, they're trying to steal additional congressional seats in Colorado and Texas, overturning legal redistricting plans," Davis continued. "Here in California, the Republicans lost the governor's race last November. Now they're trying to use this recall to seize control of California just before the next presidential election."

In a speech that was otherwise characterized by banalities and duplicitous justifications for his own administration's reactionary policies, Davis dropped what amounted to a political bombshell. His description of the sinister political process that is at work in California and nationwide essentially portrayed the party that now controls the White House and both houses of the US Congress as an organized political conspiracy against the democratic rights of the American people.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has vigorously opposed the recall drive, and is fighting to mobilize working people in California to defeat it. It has condemned the recall as a bid by a wealthy, neo-fascistic layer within the Republican Party to exploit the anger of Californians over the breakdown in basic social services and the growth of unemployment for completely reactionary purposes. The aim of those who organized and financed the recall is to overturn the results of last November's election in order to install a new state government that will pursue economic and political policies that are even more regressive than those of Davis and the Democrats.

In carrying out this campaign, the SEP is giving no support to Davis, Lieutenant Governor Cruz Bustamante, who has made himself a candidate in the recall, or the Democratic Party as a whole. It has endorsed John Christopher Burton, a Los Angeles civil rights attorney and SEP supporter who is on the ballot as a non-partisan candidate. Burton is advancing a socialist program aimed at resolving California's crisis in the interests of working people.

In its statement issued earlier this month endorsing Burton's candidacy, the SEP declared: "The current drive to unseat Davis is a

continuation of the efforts of right-wing Republicans to undermine democratic rights—including the right to vote—and subvert democratic political processes. This was the essential content of the impeachment drive against Bill Clinton, which was followed by electoral fraud in Florida and the theft of the 2000 presidential election. All of these conspiracies are directed, in the final analysis, against the democratic rights of the working class."

The SEP has a long record of fighting to expose this conspiracy against democratic rights. For his part, Davis has none. He did not speak out against either the impeachment of Clinton or the theft of the 2000 election when they occurred. He and his advisors have decided to raise these issues only because he has himself fallen victim to these same political methods.

The response from the media and his political opponents from both sides of the official political spectrum to his raising these questions was virtually unanimous condemnation.

The editorial pages of California's dailies wrote in lock-step that Davis's speech was a disappointment because of his failure to "apologize" to the electorate for the budget and energy crises that developed under his administration. They largely dismissed his references to the national political context within which the California recall campaign has emerged as irrelevant and an attempt to evade responsibility.

The *San Francisco Chronicle* attacked the speech as an "all-too-predictable partisan call to arms," while the state political correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times* headlined his column, "Davis falls flat."

One of Davis's right-wing Republican challengers, Bill Simon, who has since dropped out of the race, commented: "What we heard is it's somebody else's fault, it is a conspiracy, it is President Bush, it is the national economy, it is everything but Gray Davis himself." He rejected the Governor's charge about a "right-wing power grab," declaring that the recall represented "a grass-roots movement to institute accountability on a governor who's completely blind to the will of the people."

Green candidate Peter Camejo, who ostensibly is opposing Davis from the "left," echoed Simon's sentiments, declaring Davis's claims of a Republican conspiracy "just not true." He too suggested that the recall represented some legitimate expression of mass public opinion, declaring, "The Republicans did not fix the polls that showed he [Davis] was at 22 percent" approval.

The attempt by the Republicans and Greens alike to cast the California recall as a "grassroots movement" for change is a patent fraud. Without some \$3 million invested by right-wing Republicans—the bulk of which came out of the pocket of multi-

millionaire Republican Congressman and car alarm mogul Darrell Issa—the attempt to put the recall on the ballot would have gone nowhere in 2003, just as similar efforts failed against several previous governors.

That the right has been able to exploit widespread hostility to the policies of the Davis government does not make the attempt to remove a sitting governor just nine months after his reelection an expression of popular will. The popular hostility to Davis is rooted in the reactionary policies pursued by the state government to place the full burden of the fiscal crisis confronting the state on the backs of California's working people, and in particular the most oppressed layers of the population, through service cuts and regressive taxes. But the aim of those pushing the recall is to intensify this assault.

Arianna Huffington, the “media personality” who has agreed to campaign jointly with Camejo, issued a typically unserious statement, simultaneously dismissing the notion that any political conspiracy was involved in either the Republican campaign for recall or the attempt to impeach Clinton. Describing Davis's remarks as “boilerplate,” she stated, “I liked the speech better when Bill Clinton gave it in 1998.”

What Davis described in his speech, a nationwide drive to overturn elections and rig the political system, is a deadly serious matter. At stake are the democratic rights of hundreds of millions as well as control of political and economic policies that will directly affect the employment, income and social welfare of the masses of working people in the US.

It is certainly not just Huffington who treats these issues as a joke. The mass media dealt with the Clinton impeachment largely as a sex scandal and has played the events in Texas—where Democratic state lawmakers were forced to flee the state to avoid being dragged by police into a session designed to gerrymander congressional districts and US House majority leader Tom Delay sought to enlist the Homeland Security Department to pursue them—as farce. The focus on California has been to ridicule the recall as a “circus” because of the unusually large number of candidates.

The hostility to Davis on the part of those who have organized the recall has a radically different source than that of the average California working person. The Republican right is determined to remove every impediment to corporate profit and the personal enrichment of those at top of the social pyramid.

While criticizing Davis for mishandling the energy crisis of 2000-2001, they back the very same energy corporations like Enron that criminally defrauded the state in a drive to boost profits and share values. While denouncing Davis for running up the state's budget deficit, they are politically aligned with the Bush administration, which has off-loaded the national fiscal crisis on to all of the state governments in order to finance massive tax giveaways to the rich.

While Davis accused his opponents of trampling over basic democratic procedures as part of a national drive to amass power in the hands of the Republicans, he made no attempt to explain why this is taking place or spell out the political motives behind this “right-wing power grab.” He did not warn that those promoting recall are bent on effecting a massive transfer of wealth from the working majority to those in the top income bracket.

Moreover, the contrast between the burning importance of the issues that Davis raised about the political conspiracy underlying the recall and the tone in which he delivered his remarks was painfully evident for anyone who sat through the speech. The media has attributed this contradiction to Davis's “wooden” style, his lack of charisma. But there was something else at work. Behind the governor's silly grins,

he appeared almost embarrassed by the incendiary content of his remarks, and in particular by the impassioned reaction of his audience, much of it consisting of workers brought to the speech by unions that support the Democratic governor.

This is certainly not Davis's core constituency. The “special interests” that he has cultivated most assiduously are the same corporations and financial elite that are represented by the Republicans who engineered the recall in order to unseat him. He cannot conduct a frontal assault on the economic and political agenda that would be pursued by Arnold Schwarzenegger, Tom McClintock or Peter Ueberroth, because he knows that the difference between the policies they would implement and those that he himself will impose is only a matter of degree.

Demographically, the Republicans see California, and indeed the country as a whole, slipping away from them. The anti-immigrant demagoguery that was the party's stock-in-trade in the 1980s and early 1990s—when then-Governor Pete Wilson and current candidate Schwarzenegger both backed Proposition 187 to deny all essential services to undocumented workers and their children—has backfired on them as the ranks of registered immigrant voters have swelled.

The recall campaign, like the tactics used to steal the election in Florida nearly three years ago and the attempts to redraw district lines in Texas today, are a measure of the increasing desperation of these forces and their determination to use undemocratic means to keep control and beat back what they see as a rising danger from a turn to the left by the masses of working people. In particular, the Republicans have adopted the position that no election is final. If the results go against them, they will utilize their almost unlimited campaign funds and their control over levers of power to overturn the popular vote.

They are able to employ such methods to great effect precisely because they face a Democratic Party that is incapable of opposing the right-wing Republican program and is largely indifferent to the onslaught against democratic rights. It nearly allowed the Republicans to unseat Clinton based on a groundless impeachment, accepted the theft of the 2000 presidential vote, and in 2002 adopted a position of not opposing Bush on war or any other basic question—the strategy that led to its rout in the midterm elections.

If Davis and the Democrats can defeat the recall initiative and maintain control in Sacramento, it will not hold back the reactionary attacks on social conditions and basic democratic rights in California in any significant way. Under conditions of unprecedented polarization between a narrow financial elite on the one hand and the vast majority of the population on the other, the Democrats, like the Republicans, will defend the interests of the former at the expense of the latter.

The defense of democratic rights and the reversal of the reactionary social policies that are being enacted in California and throughout the country depend upon the independent political mobilization of working people. That is the decisive objective of the SEP's campaign in California.



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