California recall exposes political myths

Bill Vann
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The California Secretary of State's office announced August 13 that 135 candidates had been certified for the ballot in the October 5 recall election that will decide whether Democratic incumbent Governor Gray Davis is ousted, and, if so, who shall replace him.

The mass media has reacted in lockstep to the unusually large number of candidates in a statewide election, branding their presence on the ballot a political travesty. "A Circus Without Solutions," proclaimed the editorial headline in the *Los Angeles Times*. Other newspapers weighed in with similar descriptions: "Left Coast Lunacy," "California Circus Isn't Funny," "California Carnival."

The television networks have focused their coverage almost exclusively on the celebrity status of Republican candidate Arnold Schwarzenegger, while running virtually identical segments highlighting the presence on the ballot of an adult film actress, a former child actor, a comedian, etc. Others have sharply criticized the state for determining ballot position according to an alphabetical lottery, with the names of prominent Democratic and Republican politicians listed on an equal basis with those of independent and third-party candidates.

What these guardians of American-style "democracy" find truly disturbing is that large numbers of ordinary citizens, reflecting a wide spectrum of political views, have taken it upon themselves to participate in the political process. They also recognize that the recall has taken on a life of its own, and thereby delivered blows to certain myths that have helped buttress the political setup in the US.

The first myth is the fiction that the political monopoly exerted by the Democratic and Republican parties provides a legitimate framework for reflecting the views of the American people. The second is that the domination of political life by the extreme right wing is based on broad popular support for the policies of this reactionary element.

The recall was the initiative of the Republican right in the nation's largest state. They seized on a near century-old provision for removing governors guilty of malfeasance, seeking to manipulate it for antidemocratic ends inimical to both its letter and spirit. The transparent aim was to overturn the results of an election and implement a reactionary social agenda for which there is little popular support.

The multimillionaire politician who financed the recall drive, Congressman Darrell Issa, set out to exploit California's fiscal crisis in order to capture the state house for himself or some other representative of those forces who want to dismantle all legal and political restrictions on the accumulation of personal wealth and corporate profit.

The recall drive arose out of conflicts raging within the ruling elite. But, to the chagrin of its organizers, the electoral maneuver has opened the door to the participation of far broader layers of the population. It has allowed candidates to run who would normally be excluded under California's absurdly antidemocratic ballot access statutes.

In California, election laws require parties and individuals seeking a spot on the statewide ballot in general elections to submit the signatures of registered voters equal to 10 percent of the number who participated in the last statewide election. Currently, this amounts to nearly three-quarters of a million signatures.

None of the candidates of the two major parties would be able to meet such a requirement based on their real levels of popular support. For independent or third-party candidates who lack millions in campaign cash or a personal fortune to dispose of, these requirements have the intended effect of foreclosing access to the ballot.

The ballot requirements in the current recall election, as stipulated by the 1911 recall law, are far less onerous.

For all the hand-wringing by the media over the proliferation of candidates—50 Democrats, 42 Republicans, 32 independents and 11 from several other parties, including the Greens, Peace and Freedom and the Libertarians—California has become the only place in the United States where the electoral lineup even begins to reflect the political thinking within the population at large. The range of candidates presents a far more representative cross-section than any American election in recent memory.

What is the political norm that the so-called "circus" has disrupted? Widespread disgust with the existing political setup is reflected at the polls, with the US recording among the highest electoral abstention rates in the world. The two major parties' stranglehold over political life has

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conditioned the American people to expect little or no choice at the ballot box.

The Democrats, like the Republicans, have perfected a system of primaries and fundraising which guarantees that the party's candidates reflect the interests of the narrow and privileged strata that dominate every aspect of American public life. The vast sums spent on media campaigns to disorient public opinion, while drowning out any substantive debate, assure the exclusion of the overwhelming majority of the people from any real say-so in the political life of the country.

All of this is designed to uphold the domination of extreme right-wing forces, and maintain the illusion that they enjoy broad popular support.

The opening days of the recall campaign in California have already shattered this political fiction. A CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup poll released August 11 showed the two candidates identified with the dominant right wing of the California Republican Party—multimillionaire financier Bill Simon and State Senator Tom McClintock—each receiving the support of just 4 percent of those expected to vote in the recall, only slightly more than *Hustler* magazine publisher Larry Flynt.

Simon—the Republican candidate defeated by Davis last November—and McClintock are the authentic representatives of the political faction that not only controls the California Republican Party and its caucuses in the state legislature, but also plays the dominant role in the formulation of the policies of the Bush administration. Yet their popular support is negligible.

The current Republican frontrunner Arnold Schwarzenegger, it is generally acknowledged, would have stood little chance of being selected as the Republican Party standard bearer via the normal primary process. While the multimillionaire actor in general backs the anti-working class economic policies of the Bush White House, his moderate views on issues such as abortion, gun control and gay rights—as well as his publicly stated opposition to the Clinton impeachment—make him anathema to the party's right-wing base.

How, then, is the pervasive influence of this right-wing element over American politics and what passes for political discourse to be explained? The answer lies not in the sentiments of the American people, but in a combination of other factors, the first of which is the power exerted over politics by vast conglomerations of money.

The second is the role of the Democratic Party, which hardly bothers any longer to make a pretense of opposing the Republicans. The Democratic Party is organically incapable of resisting the Republican right, having repudiated the last vestiges of social reformism and ever more openly adapted itself to the Republicans' agenda. Its rightward trajectory is determined, in the final analysis, by its subservience to the same financial oligarchy that controls its rival big business party.

The third factor is the role of the American media—a vast apparatus of propaganda, lies and ideological pollution that systematically excludes the expression of views that are even vaguely liberal or progressive, much less socialist. This apparatus is itself owned and controlled by corporate behemoths.

Finally, there is the role of the official trade unions. The AFL-CIO and its affiliated organizations have systematically betrayed the working class and, through their alliance with the Democratic Party, blocked the emergence of an independent political movement of the working masses. They are chiefly responsible for the collapse of the American labor movement, which has, in turn, given the extreme right a free hand to pursue its anti-working class agenda.

Behind the media sarcasm and hostility toward the so-called "circus" in California is the fear that the underlying economic and social tensions within American society—so assiduously concealed in the normal course of US elections—are breaking through to the surface and shattering the old two-party system, not just in California, but nationwide.

The Socialist Equality Party will fight politically in California for just such an outcome. The SEP is campaigning for a vote to reject the recall as a reactionary maneuver by the extreme right within the Republican Party.

But in opposing the recall, the SEP is giving no political support to Davis and the Democrats. It has endorsed the candidacy of John Christopher Burton, a civil rights attorney and socialist, who is on the ballot as an independent candidate and is fighting to advance the program and policies of the SEP.

In campaigning to build support for Burton's candidacy, the SEP will fight to expose the dangers facing working people in California and nationally and create the conditions for the emergence of a genuinely independent political movement of the working class that advances a democratic and socialist solution to the crisis of the profit system.

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