

# California recall election: media push for Schwarzenegger leaves Democrats in disarray

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The final week of the California recall election campaign has seen a concerted effort by most media outlets to promote the candidacy of Republican film actor Arnold Schwarzenegger and lend an aura of inevitability to the removal of Democratic governor Gray Davis.

On October 7, California voters will cast ballots on two questions: whether or not Davis should be recalled; and who—in the event that more than 50 percent vote in favor of recall—should replace him. Whichever of the 135 candidates on the replacement ballot receives a plurality of votes will become the new governor if Davis is recalled.

Two separate polls published over the past six days, one by the Gallop organization for CNN and USA Today and the other by the Los Angeles Times, have reported a surge in support for both the recall of Davis and his replacement by Schwarzenegger, the candidate overwhelmingly backed by big business interests and the Republican Party hierarchy in California. Schwarzenegger's leading opponent among replacement candidates is Democratic Lieutenant Governor Cruz Bustamante. Republican State Senator Tom McClintock, a spokesman for the party's right-wing establishment, has been abandoned by the party officialdom, but has refused to pull out of the race.

It is impossible to say how accurately these polls reflect actual voter sentiment. Such polls are always dubious, in that the polling organizations have considerable leeway to manipulate the results through the selection of polling samples, the projection of voter turnout, the criteria for "likely voters," the wording of questions and similar factors. In this case, the poll results are sharply at odds with previous polls, which showed a narrow majority for recalling Davis, and Schwarzenegger trailing Bustamante in the replacement race.

The explanation given for Schwarzenegger's remarkable surge in popularity—15 percent in the case of the *Los Angeles Times* poll—is hardly convincing. The Republican front-runner supposedly benefited in a major way from his performance in a September 24 televised candidates' debate. This forum—the only one Schwarzenegger did not boycott—was not a debate at all, since the questions were submitted to the candidates in advance. It was little more than a mud-slinging match, in which the actor distinguished himself for his boorish attempts to talk over and intimidate his opponents. The event was such a travesty that the *Los Angeles Times* felt obliged to publish an editorial denouncing it.

The publication of the Gallup Poll on September 28 was followed the next day by two endorsements of Schwarzenegger—by the executive board of the state Republican Party and the California Taxpayers Association. The latter, representing large California-based corporations, had never previously endorsed a candidate in its 77-year history. A spokesman said the big business group had officially embraced Schwarzenegger because Bustamante was proposing to raise taxes by \$8 billion, including a modest increase in tax rates for the rich, to help balance the state budget.

The California Taxpayers Association endorsement underscored the essential character of the Schwarzenegger campaign. The actor is a front man for the corporate interests that backed the recall in the first place

because they were dissatisfied with the pace and scope of Davis's budget-cutting attacks on social services such as education and health care. They are seeking the installation of an administration that will go much further in dismantling social programs, privatizing government operations, slashing taxes for corporations and the wealthy, and lifting environmental and other restrictions on corporate profit-making.

Knowing that such policies are deeply unpopular—McClintock openly articulates them, and his poll numbers have never risen above 18 percent—the corporate elite is seeking to impose them by mounting a thoroughly cynical Hollywood-style extravaganza. Their star is a man with no political experience and few clear political views beyond an instinctive hatred for socialism and a worship of wealth and power. The result is a tawdry and degrading spectacle, even by American political standards.

In the course of a five-week campaign, Schwarzenegger—obviously on the advice of his handlers, most of whom are associates of former Republican governor Pete Wilson—has not only refused to present a program to deal with the state's fiscal crisis; he has failed to address any issue with more than a sound bite. He has refused to hold press conferences or answer questions from the press. All of his public appearances have been scripted and brief, and all of his town meetings have been held before invitation-only audiences.

While telling the general public little more than he intends to "terminate" the Gray Davis administration, the star of violence- and special effects-packed movies has sent repeated signals to the corporate world of his readiness to do its bidding. He has appealed to the far-right supporters of McClintock to overlook his moderate views on abortion and gay rights and focus on his agreement with McClintock's economic policies.

Last Monday, for example, Schwarzenegger suggested he might dismantle the state's Environmental Protection Agency. This followed pledges to make further spending cuts, including deeper inroads into workers' compensation benefits. He has also pledged to wring new concessions from state employee unions.

At the same time, he has appealed to widespread anger over Davis's threefold increase in car registration fees, promising to repeal it without explaining how he would make up for the resulting loss of \$4 billion in state revenues. Schwarzenegger has not hesitated to appeal to backward and racist sentiments, denouncing Davis for signing a law allowing undocumented workers ("illegal aliens") to obtain drivers' licenses, and promising to overturn it.

The recent polls have thrown the Democratic camp into disarray bordering on panic. Leading party officials have begun to talk down the significance of a Republican takeover of California, the largest state in the country. The schism between Davis, who had urged prominent Democrats not to enter the replacement race in order to focus on defeating the recall, and Bustamante, who defied him, has widened. The two have made a point of not appearing together, and Davis has never officially endorsed

Bustamante's campaign. The lieutenant governor, for his part, has made only pro forma statements against the recall, attempting instead to promote his own bid for power.

The Democrats have seized on recent revelations about Schwarzenegger's apparently habitual sexual harassment of women colleagues in an attempt to shift the momentum of the campaign, to all appearances with little success. The Republicans, who insisted that Clinton's marital infidelity rendered him morally unfit to hold office, have dismissed their candidate's predations as harmless pranks, and the media has generally downplayed the issue.

This sordid episode in the campaign has served to underscore both the hypocrisy of the media and the "family values" right wing, and the political cowardice of the Democrats, who have tried to exploit the sex issue—timidly as always—as a substitute for exposing the extreme right-wing and fascistic forces that stand behind the recall drive and the Schwarzenegger campaign.

As for the Green Party candidate Peter Camejo and the liberal "independent" Arianna Huffington, the publication of the Gallup Poll last weekend put paid to their pretense of representing independent alternatives to the Democrats and Republicans. Huffington announced Tuesday she was withdrawing from the race and would concentrate her efforts on defeating the recall and blocking Schwarzenegger from winning the governorship.

She told a television interviewer that she had been opposed to the recall drive from the outset—a claim that flies in the face of her campaign appearances, including her participation in several televised debates. If Huffington was opposed to the recall, she kept her opposition to herself. Instead, she helped legitimize the recall drive by echoing the Republican line that Davis was solely responsible for the budget crisis and calling for his ouster. Now, faced with the prospect of a Republican victory, she has reverted to form and rallied behind the Democrats.

In essence, Camejo and the Greens have followed suit. While not formally withdrawing his candidacy, Camejo has said he would "understand" if his supporters voted for Bustamante, and a Green Party spokesperson said on Tuesday: "We believe that it would be better for California if someone other than a Republican were in the state house."

Camejo was an early and avid supporter of the recall and continues to officially call for a "yes" vote on removing Davis from office. Both he and Huffington evince a combination of opportunism and political charlatany that led them to bloc with the most reactionary political forces.

Whatever the outcome of the October 7 vote, the recall campaign is an indictment of the American political system. It has demonstrated the enormous decay of democratic processes and institutions in the US.

That a figure like Arnold Schwarzenegger—a man with no political experience who demonstrates both political and personal backwardness—can be taken seriously as a candidate to head the country's largest state, let alone stand a good chance of winning the election, speaks volumes about the degradation of the political system. The farcical campaign of the multimillionaire actor and real estate speculator is only the crudest expression of a more general process.

None of the so-called major candidates have seriously addressed any of the critical issues facing working people in California. All of their campaigns have been marked by hollow rhetoric and hypocrisy.

The official debates organized by various media outlets and get-out-the-vote groups such as the League of Women Voters have revealed an appallingly low level of political consciousness. The vast majority of candidates on the replacement election ballot have been summarily excluded. The debate formats have inevitably been designed to prevent any serious exchange of ideas, with opening and closing statements of a minute each and 30 seconds allotted for candidates to respond to questions.

There is no conception within the media and political establishment that

an election should be a forum for public debate and discussion of the important issues of the day. Rather, it is seen as a horse race, in which victory goes, with rare exceptions, to the candidates with the biggest campaign war chests.

This election, from start to finish, has provided an object lesson of the degree to which those who possess great wealth manipulate the political process. From the recall drive itself—financed by the right-wing Republican congressman and multimillionaire businessman Darrell Issa—to the lavishly stage-managed campaign of Schwarzenegger, the election has demonstrated the incompatibility of democracy with the concentration of wealth into ever fewer hands and the colossal growth of social inequality.

This unprecedented social polarization underlies the narrowing of the social base of both the Democratic and Republican parties. They have been transformed into hollow shells that serve in the most open and direct manner as instruments of different factions of the ruling elite. They are little more than window dressing for the rule of a financial oligarchy.

The prostration of the Democrats has been amply demonstrated in the California recall election. Under conditions of a mounting political crisis for the Bush administration, both Davis and Bustamante have studiously avoided attacking the White House. They have, in particular, maintained a resolute silence on the Iraq war and the deepening debacle of the US occupation.

They are neither willing nor able to make an appeal to the broad masses of working people. Virtually every leading figure in the national Democratic Party—Clinton, Gore, the presidential candidates, Jesse Jackson—has traveled to California and appeared with Davis in an attempt to generate popular support for the governor. The results have been dismal, and little wonder!

Davis can hardly go to the working class public based on his record as governor. He has carried out a right-wing, law-and-order agenda. At the height of the dot.com bubble of the late 1990s, when the state ran budget surpluses from rising tax revenues, he ignored the chronic problems of poverty, crumbling schools, lack of health care and soaring housing costs. When the stock market collapse and the price gouging of Enron and other energy giants plunged the state into deficit, he enacted austerity measures to place the burden of the crisis on the backs of the working class.

The Democratic Party has nothing to offer the workers and youth of California, since its corporate sponsors will not tolerate any genuine social reforms. It thereby cedes the initiative to the most right-wing forces, which seek to exploit public anger and channel it behind an even more reactionary social agenda.

The trade unions have once again demonstrated their political bankruptcy in the California election. They have become an apparatus for funneling cash and providing manpower for Democratic politicians who turn around and adapt themselves to the program of the Republican right. In so doing, they defend not the interests of workers, but the bloated salaries and privileges of the union bureaucracy.

The election has underscored as well the crisis of political perspective and leadership within the working class. Broad masses of working people and youth are alienated from the entire political establishment, and growing numbers are looking for a way to defend their jobs, living standards and democratic rights. But they as yet lack a viable political perspective for waging such a struggle.

Whoever wins the October 7 vote, the working people of California will rapidly undergo bitter experiences, as either Davis or his successor intensifies the assault on their social conditions. No amount of Hollywood hype can prevent the eruption of historic social struggles, which will create new conditions for the development of political consciousness.

The decisive issue is the development of a conscious leadership in the working class to fight for a new strategy and open a new road of struggle. That is the significance of the election campaign of John Christopher

Burton, who is running for governor as an independent with the support of the Socialist Equality Party.

Burton, a civil rights lawyer from Los Angeles, is calling for a “no” vote on the recall, in order to oppose the attempt by right-wing forces to overturn last November’s election and carry out a constitutional coup. At the same time, he is giving no support to Davis, Bustamante, or any other the other candidates associated with the Democrats and Republicans, including Camejo and Huffington.

Burton is running to advance a socialist program for the working class. The fundamental principles of his campaign are: the political independence of the working class from all of the parties and politicians of the capitalist ruling elite; the international unity of the working class and the unity of all working people within the US, regardless of race, national origin or religion; and the revolutionary restructuring of the economy on socialist lines, so that the satisfaction of human needs, not the accumulation of personal wealth and corporate profit, is the guiding principle.

His campaign marks an important step in the building of the Socialist Equality Party as the mass socialist party of the working class. All those who agree with the election program of Burton and the SEP (see “Vote no on the recall. Vote John Christopher Burton for governor, for a socialist solution to the crisis”) are urged to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* and join the SEP.



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