

Lessons of the Democratic debacle in California

Barry Grey
9 October 2003

The recall of California Governor Gray Davis and his replacement by Arnold Schwarzenegger is a debacle of historic proportions for the Democratic Party. Once again, extreme right-wing forces in the Republican Party have been able to exploit the bankruptcy of their rival bourgeois party to capture political power—this time in the largest state in the US.

That they were able to do so handily and with a backward and politically illiterate film star as their standard bearer only underscores the dimensions of the Democratic collapse. The vote to recall the incumbent Democratic governor, the first issue before those who went to the polls, was not even close—with 54 percent voting “yes” and 46 percent voting “no.” In the second vote, on the replacement for Davis should the recall pass, Schwarzenegger’s margin over his main Democratic opponent was even more lopsided: 48 percent for the multi-millionaire action “hero” and real estate investor to only 32 percent for Lieutenant Governor Cruz Bustamante.

When the vote for Schwarzenegger is combined with that of the other prominent Republican candidate, State Senator Tom McClintock, who received 13 percent of the vote, the percentage that cast ballots for Republicans rises to 61 percent. This in a heavily Democratic state, where registered Democrats outnumber registered Republicans by 44 percent to 35 percent.

Voter turnout data and statistical breakdowns of the vote shed further light on the disintegration of support for the Democrats among those who have traditionally comprised the party’s electoral base. While the overall turnout, at about 60 percent of registered voters, was relatively high in comparison with other recent statewide elections, the participation in Republican strongholds was considerably more intense than in Democratic precincts.

Half of union members voted for the recall, defying the labor bureaucracy, which spent millions in an effort to keep its political ally Davis in office. Some 40 percent of voters in union households voted for Schwarzenegger. Bustamante outpolled Schwarzenegger by a mere 9 percentage points

among union members, while voters earning less than \$40,000 a year split evenly.

A quarter of registered Democrats deserted their party and voted to recall Davis, and one in five voted to replace him with Schwarzenegger. In all, less than two in three Democrats voted for Bustamante.

Despite Bustamante’s candidacy and a last-minute sop to Mexican immigrants in the form of a bill signed by Davis allowing undocumented workers to obtain driver’s licenses, the Democrats fared poorly among Hispanic voters. Half of Hispanics who went to the polls voted for the recall, and Bustamante received less than 60 percent of the Hispanic vote.

Other indices point to the inability of the Democratic Party to rally broad support among working class and middle-class sections of the electorate. Some 40 percent of independents voted for Schwarzenegger, as compared to less than 30 percent who voted for Bustamante.

A majority of voters in every age group supported the recall, and nearly three in five first-time voters favored ousting Davis. The San Francisco Bay Area was the only region in the state where a majority voted against the recall.

The debacle for the Democrats is even more stark in light of the parade of party celebrities who made the pilgrimage to California to appear with Davis and show their support. This included former president Bill Clinton, the 2000 Democratic presidential candidate Al Gore, virtually all of the current Democratic presidential aspirants, Jesse Jackson, former California governor Jerry Brown, Democratic senators from California Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer, and others. Their combined impact in generating support for Davis was roughly zero.

That the fiasco for the Democrats was not the result of some broad shift to the right by the electorate is shown by the vote on Proposition 54. This initiative, sponsored by right-wing forces in California, would have banned the state from collecting data on race and ethnicity. It was overwhelmingly defeated, 63 percent to 37 percent.

Rather, the vote reflected the anger and frustration of

workers and middle-class people over the policies of the Davis administration and the failure of the Democrats to provide any answer to worsening social conditions and growing economic insecurity. Davis, a model of the so-called “centrist” Democrat, embodies the rightward shift of the party as a whole over the past quarter century.

He is a supporter of the death penalty and law-and-order policies that have produced a staggering growth in the state’s prison population. He imposed sharp increases in electricity rates after Enron and other energy giants created power shortages and jacked up prices in 2000-2001, and followed this with massive cuts in education and health care, as well as a tripling of car license fees, when state revenues plummeted after the collapse of the speculative dot.com bubble. In the midst of the recall campaign, Davis and the Democratic majority in the state legislature joined with the Republicans to pass a workers’ compensation “reform” that slashes benefits for employees injured on the job.

The campaigns of both Davis and Bustamante were notable above all for their cowardly avoidance of any attack on the Bush administration and their refusal to link the Republican recall drive to the White House’s policies of social reaction, repression and war. The Democrats maintained a deafening silence on the growing debacle for the US in Iraq.

They maintained this hands-off attitude toward the Bush administration even as the crisis in Washington palpably intensified, fueled by the exposure of Bush’s lies, the quagmire in Iraq and explosive growth of the federal budget deficit. The last thing the Democrats wanted to do was provide a focus for the growing hatred for the right-wing clique in the White House, because that could unleash a social explosion and threaten the basic interests of the financial oligarchy. They would sooner see themselves shifted out of office.

Following their defeat, the Democrats pledged to work with the Schwarzenegger administration and oppose any challenges to the election.

The Republicans waged an utterly cynical campaign, putting Schwarzenegger forward as the front man for big business interests bent on destroying all that remains of social welfare programs and restrictions on corporate profit-making. While posturing as the populist enemy of “special interests” who would “clean house” in Sacramento, the body-builder-turned movie star took in millions in campaign contributions from real estate and other business interests and repeatedly signaled his readiness to make further cuts in social programs, attack the wages and conditions of state employees, and gut environmental regulations.

In a televised address Wednesday, the governor-elect reaffirmed his commitment to the agenda of his corporate

backers in the form of a pledge not to raise taxes. Under conditions of a looming multi-billion-dollar deficit in the next fiscal year, this can only mean an unprecedented assault on health care, housing, programs for the poor and state workers’ jobs.

All that remains for the Democratic Party, its credibility shattered by its humiliation in the recall election, is to move further to the right and collaborate with the Republican governor in launching new attacks on the working class in California. The California debacle provides, moreover, a portent of the role of the Democrats in the 2004 presidential election. No matter how deep the crisis of the Bush administration and how unpopular its policies, the Democrats can be counted on to cede the initiative to the Republican right and provide only token opposition.

At the root of the political collapse of the Democratic Party is the mounting crisis of American and world capitalism. The growth of social inequality—the most malignant expression of this crisis—leaves no room for two right-wing bourgeois parties in the US. The Democrats—the party of an impotent and hypocritical liberalism that has abandoned any policy of liberal reforms—is being increasingly marginalized, because the Republicans represent more ruthlessly and consistently the interests and aims of the corporate oligarchy.

The fundamental lesson of the California recall election is sharply posed: the working class must break from the semi-corpse of the Democratic Party and take the road of independent political struggle. The campaign of the Socialist Equality Party candidate in the recall election, John Christopher Burton, brought this perspective before hundreds of thousands of working people in California, and advanced a socialist program to resolve the crisis in their interests. It marked an important step in building the Socialist Equality Party as the mass socialist party of the working class.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact