

California recall election: SEP candidate John Christopher Burton calls for “no” vote on Proposition 54

John Christopher Burton
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In the October 7 recall election, Californians will have the opportunity to vote on two ballot initiatives, which, if passed, would amend the state constitution. The one entitled the “Racial Privacy Initiative,” known as Proposition 54, would prohibit state and local government agencies from recording and collecting information on the “race, ethnicity, color or national origin” of any individual. The ban applies to “public education, public contracting or public employment” as well as all other state operations unless exempted by votes of two thirds of both houses of the state legislature and approved by the governor. Limited exemptions are provided for the state’s Department of Fair Employment and Housing, for health care providers and researchers, and for police agencies, but the vague wording of the exemptions has raised questions as to whether they would have meaningful application.

We post below the statement on Proposition 54 issued by John Christopher Burton, a civil rights attorney in Los Angeles and supporter of the Socialist Equality Party. While opposing the recall itself, Burton is running as an independent candidate for governor in the replacement election in order to provide workers with a socialist alternative to the candidates associated with the Democratic and Republican parties. He has been endorsed by the Socialist Equality Party. The statement is also available in PDF leaflet format.

I urge a “no” vote on Proposition 54. Like the recall election itself, this “Racial Privacy Initiative” is inspired and backed by right-wing forces seeking to destroy what remains of the past social gains of the working class.

The sponsors of Proposition 54 falsely claim that their measure would promote the goal of a color-blind society. If passed, the effect would be the opposite. By prohibiting the collection of data on race, ethnicity and national origin, the most blatant forms of discrimination in housing, jobs and education would return to everyday life. With no statistical evidence available, groups facing discrimination would find

themselves without legal recourse.

Proposition 54’s backers allege that exemptions provided in the measure would preserve certain anti-discrimination protections. But a close reading of the text reveals that the exemptions are defined in such a way as to have questionable application, at best.

The medical exemption is limited to “research subjects and patients.” It is possible under this wording that important scientific surveys on how diseases ranging from sickle cell anemia to heart disease affect different population groups could be shut down. That is why the California Medical Association and every other major health organization have declared their opposition to Proposition 54.

Most noxious of all, the law enforcement “exemption” allows police officers to describe individuals by race and other characteristics in their files, but would prevent the state from requiring that aggregate arrest and conviction records be kept. As a civil rights attorney specializing in representing victims of police misconduct, I am well aware of the impact of racial profiling by the police. If Proposition 54 were to pass, today’s already inadequate checks on racial profiling would be eliminated. It would also be virtually impossible to prove racial bias in sentencing, including the application of the death penalty.

Proposition 54 is designed to block the application of affirmative action and other programs based on racial preferences. It does so from a retrograde standpoint and with a veiled appeal to racial prejudices. In so far as the measure’s opposition to affirmative action is not linked to demands for full and equal access of all young people to quality higher education, it points backward to an era when all but a handful of minority youth were effectively denied a chance to attend college.

While opposing Proposition 54, I do not accept affirmative action or other programs based on racial preferences as a viable means of defending the interests of workers and young people, whatever their race or national origin. A basic

flaw of affirmative action is the fact that it accepts the limits of what the corporate elite and its political representatives are prepared to give in the way of employment, education and housing opportunities. Under conditions of sweeping cuts in funding for social needs, including higher education, any policy that pits one group against another for dwindling resources assists, either wittingly or unwittingly, the ruling class in its time-tested strategy of divide and rule.

Affirmative action proceeds, furthermore, from the standpoint that the basic division in society is race, not class. This is a false premise, and it carries with it the inevitable result of white workers and youth, who are not responsible for the oppression and discrimination of capitalist society, being unfairly deprived of university slots or other positions to make way for minority workers and youth. The resulting resentments are seized upon by right-wingers such as those who have launched Proposition 54.

Far from seeing affirmative action as a threat to its economic domination and monopoly of political power, the US ruling elite has institutionalized the policy. It was given its first major push by the Nixon administration, as part of its advocacy of “black capitalism.” It has since been used to promote a small and privileged layer of blacks and other minorities, who have become politicians, administrators and corporate executives and no less loyal defenders of the profit system than their white counterparts. The benefits of racial preferences have gone overwhelmingly to such better-off layers, while the vast majority of blacks and other minorities have seen only a minimal improvement, at best, in their living standards.

The ruling elite has cynically employed affirmative action programs to bolster the credibility of its corporate and political institutions in the eyes of the working class public. The US Supreme Court admitted as much in its ruling last June upholding affirmative action. The majority of the justices defended racial preferences at “elite” universities on the grounds that such a policy was necessary to “cultivate a set of leaders with legitimacy in the eyes of the citizenry.”

My campaign unequivocally demands full equality of opportunity, and it further demands the allocation of the financial resources needed to guarantee every young person access to quality higher education at no cost, and every worker a secure job at decent pay.

The interests of white and minority workers and youth are not in conflict. They are identical. Working people of all races and nationalities share the same essential needs, and a common enemy. They face the domination of society by a financial oligarchy that arrogates to itself the bulk of the wealth produced by the labor of the working class. The result is obscene levels of wealth at one pole of society, and economic insecurity and poverty for the masses at the other

pole.

When a single Californian, Oracle CEO Larry Ellison, can accumulate a personal fortune that peaked at \$58 billion in 2000—\$20 billion more than California’s budget deficit—it is obvious that the state’s budget crisis is not caused by a lack of wealth, but rather by the shifting of resources into the pockets of the few at the top.

I am campaigning for a Social Bill of Rights for the working class that includes the right of all young people to a quality college education, the right of all families to decent housing, and the right of all workers to a good job. My program demands full equality of opportunity, with a rigorous ban on all forms of discrimination, whether on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, gender or sexual orientation.

This program is eminently realizable. Billions of dollars can be made available to finance it by freeing the vast resources of California and the United States as a whole from the grip of the capitalist elite.

I state directly and openly, however, that the implementation of this program requires a revolutionary restructuring of the economy. It requires a united struggle by all workers and youth—black, Latino, Asian, Native American and white—against big business and its bought and paid-for politicians of the Republican and Democratic parties. This struggle cannot be waged within the confines of California alone, but must embrace workers across the country and internationally.

The policies I am advocating will foster just such a united struggle. I urge all workers and young people who agree with this program to vote for me on October 7 and, more importantly, to join the Socialist Equality Party and help make it the mass socialist party of the working class.



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