

# California governor announces special election to push through right-wing measures

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In an effort to push through a series of right-wing measures that will further erode the living standards of California workers and increase the power of the executive branch at the expense of the state legislature, California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger last month announced that a special election will be held in the state later this year.

On November 8, voters will be asked to cast ballots on a series of initiatives, several of which are part of Schwarzenegger's so-called "Year of Reform" agenda.

Like the recall election of 2003, which resulted in the ejection of Democrat Gray Davis and his replacement by the Republican Schwarzenegger, this special election represents a drive to dispense with normal parliamentary methods of rule in an attempt to impose political and economic measures that are backed by big business but have little popular support. Notwithstanding its populist trappings, Schwarzenegger's effort to govern by plebiscite is of an essentially antidemocratic character.

A total of eight initiatives have qualified to be placed on the special election ballot, three of which are sponsored by Schwarzenegger—the "Live Within Our Means Act," the "Put the Kids First Act" and the "Redistricting Reform: Voter Empowerment Act." Two of the four others—the "Union Paycheck Protection Act" and a measure that limits abortion rights—are backed by leading figures within the far-right in California. In addition, the pharmaceutical industry and the Democrats were able to place two competing measures on the ballot regarding the state's ability to negotiate discounted drug prices for low-income individuals. An eighth initiative deals with energy regulation.

The "Live Within Our Means Act" is a spending cap that, if implemented, would sharply limit the amount by which governmental expenditures could increase each year by making them dependent on revenue growth. Spending outlays would be restricted to those stipulated in the previous year's budget plus any additional money that had come into the state's coffers. Both parties reject any increase in the income tax to offset the decline in revenues that has occurred since the late 1990s.

The initiative also invalidates Proposition 98, the voter-approved constitutional mandate that sets the minimum level of state funding for K-12 education at 40 percent of the state's general fund. In addition, the "Live Within Our Means Act" allots unprecedented powers to the executive branch by giving the governor the right to impose mid-year spending cuts by fiat should the budget go out of balance. Currently, this power resides solely with the State

Assembly.

This attack on the living standards of California workers is accompanied by a second initiative backed by Schwarzenegger that is aimed at eroding the job security and wages of the state's teachers. The "Put the Kids First Act" will ask voters to increase the amount of time that public school teachers require to achieve tenure from two to five years, and would allow for teachers to be fired after two consecutive negative evaluations.

With teacher evaluations dependent to a significant degree on students' test scores, this measure is effectively a means to bring a "merit pay" system into the schools. It will be used to deny tenure, and therefore salary increases, to those teachers working in the most underprivileged schools where students are unable to meet state testing standards because of the combined effects of poverty, an under-resourced school system, and other social ills. Schwarzenegger has cut \$3 billion from public education this year alone. Over the last four years, funding for K-12 schools has decreased by a total of \$9.8 billion.

The third ballot initiative being promoted by Schwarzenegger is aimed at changing the way in which congressional and state legislative election districts are drawn by amending the California constitution. A process currently overseen by the Democrat-controlled State Legislature, the governor is proposing that the task be transferred to a panel of retired federal judges, with the boundaries subject to voter approval.

Schwarzenegger's purpose is to erode Democratic domination of California's political system by breaking up Democratic majorities in the state's voting districts. His ultimate aim is to increase the influence of the Republican Party in California in a manner disproportionate to its actual level of support within the population.

The significance of the special election goes beyond the reactionary character of the measures being promoted. Schwarzenegger has been threatening to call the referendum for several months, insisting that if the State Legislature did not approve his measures he would simply "go to the people." In doing so, he is attempting to wield political power in the state with the same methods with which he secured office—through the subversion of the normal political process and the manipulation of public opinion by way of a massively financed, Hollywood-style media campaign.

Schwarzenegger, a former body building champion and film star, who had no political or administrative experience, was elevated to

the governor's mansion through an antidemocratic campaign initiated by the far-right to unseat the elected governor, Gray Davis, whose own right-wing policies had alienated broad sections of the electorate. The movie celebrity was sold to the population as a man who stood above partisan politics and "special interests." Under this guise, the Republican Party was able to secure the election of a figure wholly dedicated to implementing policies whose impact—if fully understood by voters—would have been deeply opposed.

Both the 2003 recall election and Schwarzenegger's attempts to govern by plebiscite are a product of the breakdown of traditional methods of political rule under the combined pressure of the state's four-year-long fiscal meltdown, a stagnant economy, a growing gulf between the rich and the masses of working people, and mounting social problems. While Schwarzenegger's decision to call a special election was prompted by a decline in his approval ratings over the course of the past six months, and reflects turmoil within his administration, it is ultimately a product of California's ongoing political and economic crisis.

The decision to call the special election is something of a political gamble for Schwarzenegger and the corporate interests in California who back him. They evidently hope that by means of this maneuver, they will be able to once again buffalo the people and strengthen the governor's position in advance of the next gubernatorial election, scheduled for November 2006. However, there are concerns within the Republican Party that the effort could backfire and provide a means for the public to register its growing anger over the socially destructive agenda of the administration in Sacramento.

Since 2000, California has been in a fiscal emergency of massive proportions as a result of the state's reliance on income tax revenues to fund government spending, the bursting of the dot-com bubble, and the multibillion-dollar rip-off of the treasury that occurred during the energy crisis of 2001. In addition, the economy has failed to recover to any substantial degree from the recession that followed the collapse of the stock market in 2000 and the decline of Silicon Valley in Northern California.

These conditions have led to an escalation in the attacks on working people's living standards, including large-scale cuts in state spending on social services, health care, and public education year after year. The effect of this has been to exacerbate the deteriorating social conditions faced by millions of people in a state where the median home price—\$500,000—has created a housing crisis and left working families saddled with unheard of levels of debt.

Big business, for its part, is intent on pushing ahead with a program of massive cuts in social spending and huge tax and regulatory windfalls for corporate interests. This finds clearest expression in Schwarzenegger's "Year of Reform" agenda, which includes everything from the effective dismantling of workers' compensation to plans to privatize the state pension system. The three initiatives promoted by the governor on the November 8 ballot are part of this general assault.

At the moment, there exists no mass base of support for the measures on the November 8 ballot. However, with the aid of the \$40 million pledged by the Citizens to Save California Coalition—a

big business lobby that includes the California Chamber of Commerce, the California Bankers Association and major sections of the state's health-care industry—a compliant media and a subservient Democratic Party, Schwarzenegger believes he can bulldoze the population into passing the initiatives.

Schwarzenegger is temporarily holding off on unleashing this media campaign because he is in negotiations with the Democratic Party over a series of compromise proposals to his ballot initiatives. These discussions, the details of which have not been made public, are aimed at creating a series of compromise proposals that would then be placed on the ballot alongside the governor's initial measures. The Democrats would jointly campaign with Schwarzenegger to have voters support the compromise version of the initiatives. In exchange, the Democrats are hoping to secure from Schwarzenegger an agreement to either publicly oppose or abstain from supporting the "Paycheck Deception Act."

The "Paycheck Deception Act" is a ballot initiative sponsored by conservative anti-tax activist Lewis K. Uhler that would require California's public employee unions to get the explicit written permission of each member to use his or her dues to support a political campaign. While thus far Schwarzenegger has not taken a position on the measure, it has the support of the state Republican Party and is viewed by many sections of the far right as the most critical issue on the November 8 ballot. Likewise, the primary concern of the Democrats and the trade unions in the special election is defeating the "Paycheck Deception Act," which they see as an attack on one of the major sources of funding for the Democratic Party.

The current game of horse-trading in Sacramento reveals the fraudulent character of the Democrats' claim to represent a serious opposition to the attacks being mounted by Schwarzenegger and the Republicans. Beholden to the same corporate interests as the Republicans, demoralized and cowed by what they see as Schwarzenegger's invulnerability, and fearful of unleashing popular opposition to the pro-business agenda they too promote, the Democrats in California exemplify the cowardly and two-faced character of the Democratic Party nationally.



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