

Schwarzenegger announces 2006 run for governor

The special election and the crisis of the political establishment in California

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California Republican Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger announced September 15 that he will run for reelection in 2006. Schwarzenegger's decision to declare his candidacy in next year's race is an attempt to reverse his sagging political fortunes, shore up confidence among big business, and preempt the growth of opposition to his administration within the Republican Party.

The problems besetting the Schwarzenegger administration are part of a growing crisis within the two-party system in California as a whole. The Democratic Party has been unable to capitalize upon the increasing popular opposition to the governor's right-wing policies amid deepening political alienation of working people from both big-business parties.

The current political crisis in Sacramento is unfolding in the lead-up to the special election, which Schwarzenegger announced in June. The November 8 referendum will force a popular vote on a series of right-wing measures that the governor was unable to get passed through the normal legislative process. In calling for the special election, Schwarzenegger is attempting to rule with the same methods that landed him in office in the first place—through the subversion of longstanding electoral and legislative processes.

However, rather than halting Schwarzenegger's downward slide in the polls, the special election has worsened his political problems. The governor's approval ratings hover at 36 percent, the same as in June of this year and 30 percentage points lower than a year ago. Polls show growing numbers of likely voters opposing two of the ballot propositions that Schwarzenegger is backing in the November 8 election—a state spending cap and an act that would extend the time it takes for teachers to achieve tenure. Schwarzenegger's third proposition, a redistricting measure, has also fallen flat, with a plurality of likely voters indicating that they will vote against it.

The special election has also revealed the gulf between the sentiments of working people and the policies of the Democratic Party. Despite an extensive media campaign, the Democrats and the trade unions have thus far failed to make

significant headway against the majority support among likely voters for the "Union Paycheck Initiative," which will also be on the November 8 ballot. This measure, which is sponsored by the right wing, would require public employee unions to get the annual consent of each member before using their dues money to support a political campaign. If passed, it would seriously erode one of the major sources of funding for the Democratic Party by limiting the ability of the trade unions to funnel money to the organization.

In another sign of the alienation of the population from the political establishment, approval ratings for the state legislature, which is dominated by the Democrats, are even lower than Schwarzenegger's, standing at just 27 percent.

The political crisis within the two-party system in California has developed in tandem with a protracted and deepening fiscal and social crisis, spawning further attacks on the living standards of the working class and leading to a breakdown in the traditional norms of political rule.

The state treasury is now entering its fourth year of a multibillion-dollar deficit. This massive budget shortfall was the result of a sharp fall-off in income tax revenues due to the bursting of the dot-com bubble in 2000, the implementation of right-wing tax policies during the 1970s that severely limit the ability of the state to collect property taxes, and the theft of \$15 billion worth of public money by large energy corporations during the power crisis of 2001.

In 2003, the state house in Sacramento was occupied by right-wing Democratic Governor Gray Davis, who had become increasingly unpopular due to his policies, the emergence of the state budget deficit, and the 2001 energy crisis. At the same time, a far-right section of the Republican Party wanted to see the implementation of far more severe attacks on the living standards of workers. These included the dismantling of workers' compensation, the privatization of the state pension system, the institution of spending caps, and drastic cuts in funding for social services, public education and health care.

These forces saw Davis's collapsing approval ratings as an

opportunity to further their own agenda. Latching on to the growing disaffection in the population with the Davis administration, the Republican right led by multimillionaire Congressman Darrell Issa orchestrated the 2003 recall election.

When it became clear that the efforts to unseat Davis might prove successful, big business and more mainstream sections of the Republican Party outmaneuvered the arch-conservative layers around Issa and advanced Schwarzenegger as a candidate who would be able to advance right-wing policies under a populist guise. Schwarzenegger presented himself as a man who, because of his personal wealth and lack of prior political experience, stood above the influence of “special interests.” He used his Hollywood persona and millions of dollars of campaign funds to launch a massive media campaign to stampede public opinion into supporting him.

The Democratic Party proved incapable of fending off this attack. Having themselves shifted to the right for many years, they had no basis to oppose the agenda of the Republican Party and were unable to expose the fundamentally antidemocratic character of the recall election.

However, Schwarzenegger’s election has only served to deepen the social and political turmoil in California. In response to the state fiscal crisis, Schwarzenegger has, in tandem with the Democrats, implemented two austerity budgets that have eliminated billions of dollars of funding for health care, schools and universities, and public services. The governor has presided over the effective dismantling of workers’ compensation, a series of sharp hikes in tuition and fees at the state’s public universities and colleges, the closure of hospitals, the implementation of stricter requirements for enrollment in public health insurance programs, and the elimination of numerous environmental protections. He has also sought to privatize the state pension system.

These policies have worsened already deteriorating social conditions in the state. Over the course of the past several years, decent-paying jobs with health care, pensions and other benefits have been disappearing. Housing costs in the state have skyrocketed, with the average home price in California topping \$500,000. Already struggling to maintain a decent standard of living, many poor and working class families are seeing the public infrastructure and social programs they have relied upon in the past either vanish or become inaccessible.

Since Schwarzenegger took office in 2003, the real social and political interests behind his populist rhetoric have made themselves increasingly clear, leading to growing disillusionment in his administration.

The trade unions have responded by attempting to channel opposition to Schwarzenegger into support for the Democratic Party. This effort has included chasing the governor around the country to stage publicity stunts wherever he speaks and increasing union dues to raise an additional \$20 million for a television ad campaign calling on workers to vote “no” on the “Union Paycheck Initiative.”

The Democratic Party itself, however, has been deeply discredited by its own right-wing policies, including its support of many of Schwarzenegger’s austerity measures. The Democrats and the trade unions fear that the growing social discontent in California will move beyond the boundaries of the two-party system.

However, even given the Schwarzenegger administration’s political disarray, the Democratic Party has little confidence in its own future. In an extraordinary admission of the party’s political bankruptcy, Democratic Assembly Speaker Fabian Nuñez told the *Los Angeles Times* last July that it was “possible but unlikely” that a Democrat could beat Schwarzenegger in the 2006 elections.

“I say it’s unlikely because I think one way or another the governor will figure out a way to gain more ground among the moderate Republicans who are beginning to turn the other cheek. And he might get some of the more moderate-to-conservative Democrats if he can figure out a way to get them back,” Nuñez added.

Schwarzenegger’s calling of the Special Election was an attempt to find a way out of his administration’s political crisis by utilizing the same methods employed during the recall election—to once again swindle the population into supporting measures directly opposed to their own interests. This attempt has thus far failed.

Instead, Schwarzenegger has witnessed declining confidence in his administration on the part of big business and sections of the Republican Party, as well as growing hostility to his policies in the population at large. This has expressed itself in calls for the cancellation of the November 8 ballot by some leading Republicans and the failure of campaign fundraising contributions to the governor’s cause to keep pace with that of the trade unions. Thrashing about to find a means to restore sagging confidence, Schwarzenegger came upon his reelection bid for 2006.

However, within the framework of the two-party system, neither the Special Election this November nor the gubernatorial election in 2006 will resolve the political crisis in California. Neither the Democrats nor the Republicans have a progressive solution to the fiscal and social crisis in the state. Only through the building of a mass independent movement of the working class on the basis of a socialist program—a program that places social needs above the profit margins of big business—can working people in California defend their interests.



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