

California Democratic Party works to prop up Schwarzenegger administration

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In the aftermath of November's California Special Election, the Democratic Party is acting as a critical prop for the beleaguered administration of Republican Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. The Democrats responded to Schwarzenegger's political debacle in the Special Election, in which all of his favored ballot initiatives were defeated, by calling for a new spirit of bipartisanship. The governor responded by appointing a prominent Democrat as his new chief of staff.

This brings the two parties together behind the right-wing agenda of the corporate interests that sponsored the ex-body-builder-turned Hollywood film celebrity's promotion to the governorship and have directed his administration ever since. The governor's program of cuts in social programs and education and the gutting of basic protections for workers, combined with privatization, tax breaks for business and the wealthy, and deregulation is increasingly opposed by the majority of Californians. This, however, has not prevented the Democrats from offering their assistance in carrying out his agenda.

Schwarzenegger initially called the Special Election in an effort to push through the right-wing policies demanded by his corporate backers under the populist guise of "going to the people." He hoped that a successful outcome in the Special Election would reverse his sagging political fortunes. By mid-2005, the governor's approval ratings had fallen to 38 percent.

But the methods Schwarzenegger used to gain office in the 2003 recall election—a lavishly funded Hollywood-style media campaign, in which he posed as a political "outsider" and reformer—failed to convince the public the second time around.

Following the November 8 recall vote, Schwarzenegger made a series of political overtures to the Democratic Party. These included talk of a new spirit of bipartisanship and a search for political consensus, along with a proposal

for a \$50 billion bond measure to improve the state's infrastructure.

The most significant move was the installation November 30 of Susan Kennedy as his chief of staff. Kennedy is a right-wing Democrat with an extensive political biography.

Under the Democratic administration of Governor Gray Davis, where she served as cabinet secretary, Kennedy played a critical role in formulating Davis's right-wing economic agenda. She was also a key player in Davis's efforts to cement ties with large corporate donors.

Following Davis's ouster from office and his replacement by Schwarzenegger in the 2003 recall election, Kennedy went on to take a position on the Public Utilities Commission (PUC). There she made a name for herself as a defender of free-market policies, becoming a darling of the telecommunications industry for her opposition to regulatory measures.

She combines liberal views on social questions, such as abortion and gay marriage, with a right-wing outlook on economic and fiscal policies. Kennedy was once the director of the California Abortion Rights Action League. She herself is gay and married to her partner.

As Daniel Weintraub of the *Sacramento Bee* noted on December 6, "The truth is, despite their different party registrations, there is not much distance between Kennedy and Schwarzenegger when it comes to their core beliefs. Both are social liberals with strong environmental leanings tempered by economic realism; both believe that promoting economic growth is the best way to lift the poor, not class warfare and income redistribution."

Decoding Weintraub's euphemisms ("economic realism" and "economic growth"), both the Republican governor and the leading California Democrat support the corporate agenda of tax cuts for business and the dismantling of what little remains of a social safety net for workers and poor people.

Kennedy's politics are representative of major sections of the Democratic Party and the upper-middle-class layers that constitute their main social base. These are dominated by the well-off and nouveau riches who have benefited from the right-wing economic policies implemented by both parties over the course of the past quarter century.

The California Democratic Party responded positively to the news of Kennedy's appointment. It was hailed as a sign of the new bipartisan era in Sacramento, which they had been demanding since the Special Election. With the exception of the right-wing talk shows, the media also lauded Schwarzenegger's decision.

The fact that Kennedy advocates many of the same policies that California voters had just repudiated in the Special Election—she voted for all of the measures sponsored by Schwarzenegger—does not separate her from the “mainstream” of the Democratic Party officialdom.

The fact that the Democrats are providing a bipartisan cover for Schwarzenegger's reactionary policies reveals the absence of any outlet within the two-party system for the sentiments and interests of working people. Democratic institutions have eroded to such a degree that when the electorate clearly repudiates the policies of the government, the response of the political establishment is to find new ways to continue implementing those very same policies.

The Democratic Party is working to stabilize the crisis-ridden Schwarzenegger administration in other ways as well.

The Christian-right base of the Republican Party was outraged at Kennedy's appointment, which they viewed as a betrayal of its anti-abortion, anti-gay, fundamentalist agenda. Following the announcement of Kennedy's selection, sections of the Republican Party began advocating that the GOP pull its endorsement of Schwarzenegger for the 2006 gubernatorial election.

It could not have been any surprise to the governor that the Christian right would balk at handing the top position in his administration to a pro-choice lesbian Democrat. However, the experience of the Special Election convinced Schwarzenegger that it was necessary to develop closer working ties with the Democrats in order to shore up his government and implement the measures demanded by big business. In particular, the hostility of sections of his own party toward the trade union bureaucracy is increasingly viewed by Schwarzenegger as more of a political liability than an asset.

Schwarzenegger is himself little more than a front-man for big corporate interests in California. These forces

advanced him as their candidate in the 2003 recall election once it became clear that the efforts of the far-right to oust Governor Davis might prove successful.

Schwarzenegger's central concern is the dismantling of all restrictions on corporate profit-making and the amassing of private wealth. To this end, his corporate backers undoubtedly prefer that he assume a Bonapartist posture, presenting himself as a leader who stands above the political fray. Hence the reliance on plebiscite as a means of sidestepping traditional parliamentary processes.

However, facing a revolt within the ranks of the Republican Party over the Kennedy appointment, Schwarzenegger decided to throw a bone to the far-right by denying clemency to death-row inmate Stanley “Tookie” Williams. On December 13, Williams was put to death by lethal injection for the murder of several people when he was a leader, 25 years ago, of the Crips street gang in Los Angeles. Williams went to his death maintaining his innocence of the murder charges. Over the course of his time on death row, he repudiated his gang past and became an anti-gang advocate. He was nominated five times for the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts.

While the state killing of Williams attracted the attention of anti-death penalty advocates around the world and was condemned by dozens of foreign governments, the Democratic Party in California remained largely silent, signaling its overriding desire for a quasi-coalition with the Republican governor.

The political machinations unfolding in Sacramento in their own way reflect the deepening crisis of the two-party system. Both parties rest on ever more narrow bases of popular support, and function openly as instruments of the financial aristocracy.



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