

US Senate declares English the “national language”: a boost to chauvinism and racism

Socialist Equality Party
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The Socialist Equality Party unequivocally condemns the vote by the Senate on Thursday to make English the “national language” of the United States. The measure, added to the Senate immigration “reform” bill, is but the latest in a series of reactionary, ignorant and short-sighted moves aimed at shoring up the right-wing base of the Bush administration and the Republican Party, with the most far-reaching and anti-democratic implications.

The proposal is a sop to right-wing and fascist elements who are working to whip up intolerance and hatred against immigrants in general, and Hispanic Americans in particular. It underscores the deeply undemocratic and unconstitutional essence of all of the measures being enacted in the name of “securing the border.”

The United States has existed for more than 200 years without any such official elevation of English by the federal government. No such measure was written into the US Constitution by the founders. A proposal by John Adams in 1780 to establish an official academy devoted to English was rejected at the time as undemocratic.

Not even at the height of the mass immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe at the turn of the twentieth century, when millions of people speaking dozens of foreign languages flooded into the US, did the American ruling elite feel the need to enact this form of discrimination and disenfranchisement. Why now?

The answer can lie only in the profound crisis and decay of American capitalist society, the immense growth of social inequality, which has riven American society between the broad masses and a financial oligarchy, and the efforts of an increasingly discredited ruling elite to shore up its rule by appealing to backwardness and moving toward a police state. The American economic and political system is incapable of integrating its diverse population and providing for their basic needs.

The measure was passed by a vote of 63 to 24, with the support of all but one Republican senator. Nine Democrats voted for the proposal. It directs the federal government to “preserve and enhance the role of English as the national language of the United States of America.” It further declares that no one has “a right, entitlement or claim to have the government of the United States or any of its official or representatives act, communicate, perform or provide services in any language other than English.”

This in a country where nearly 16 percent of the people, a total of 47 million, speak a language other than English at home. The Senate measure is directed first and foremost against 35 million Hispanic Americans, who comprise 13.4 percent of the population

and the country’s fastest-growing segment, in ethnic terms. The US is home to the 5th largest Spanish-speaking population in the world. But the move would also have a devastating impact on Haitian-Americans and many other national and ethnic groups.

Among its provisions is an English proficiency test for foreigners applying for residency in the US. Currently, such a test is required only for those seeking citizenship. The English proficiency requirement for citizenship would be made more onerous, with applicants being required to demonstrate as well a knowledge of American history and government.

There are not a few prominent American corporate leaders and politicians, including the current occupant of the White House, who would have difficulty meeting such a standard.

The measure stopped short of declaring English the official language of the US, which would all but ban multi-lingual services and government communications, but it is a major step in that direction. It would not alter current laws that require government provision of certain materials and services—including ballots and emergency advisories—in other languages, but it could be used to negate executive orders, regulations, civil service guidelines and other multilingual ordinances not sanctioned by acts of Congress.

Pro-immigrant groups point out that the measure would vacate executive orders enacted under the Clinton administration that mandated multilingual services and communications by a number of federal agencies, and could undermine court orders and local ordinances for multilingual services.

The Senate measure is, moreover, an encouragement to state and local authorities to enact similarly discriminatory policies. Already 27 states in the US have passed laws proclaiming English their official language.

The implications of the measure are vast. Non-English-speaking Americans could find themselves unable to communicate with hospital officials, unable to read a host of critical documents, confronted with insuperable obstacles in their attempts to carry out the elementary functions of daily life. Their attempts to exercise such basic democratic rights as registering to vote could be frustrated.

The measure would promote further attacks on bilingual education, depriving millions of Hispanic and other immigrant youth from obtaining the basic skills and training needed for decent employment, let alone access to culture and the arts.

That this proposal is an expression of a vast social and cultural decline is underscored by the astonishing fall in language

proficiency among English-speaking Americans. The same political representatives of the ruling elite who claim to cherish the English language have overseen a disastrous rise in illiteracy within the general population. According to a government report released in 1998, over 90 million US adults, nearly one in two, are functionally illiterate or near-illiterate, lacking the minimum skills required in a modern society.

That study reported that 44 million American adults, out of 191 million, could not read a newspaper or fill out a job application. Another 50 million could not read or comprehend above the eighth grade level. There is no reason to believe that conditions have improved in the intervening years.

Is it likely that a ruling elite which starves the schools of funds and refuses to provide resources for art, music or other forms of culture, producing a virtual epidemic of illiteracy, would provide the vast resources that would be needed to enable non-English speaking Americans to become proficient in the “national language”? The answer is obvious.

In any event, the official elevation of English to a privileged status is an intrinsically antidemocratic measure. It is discriminatory and exclusionist. Its reactionary essence was reflected in the remarks of senators who backed the amendment to the immigration bill.

Senator Lamar Alexander, Republican of Tennessee, declared that the United States was “a fragile idea based on a few common principles and our national common language.” His invocation of “our national common language” is pure invention, at odds with both the spirit and letter of the US Constitution.

Senator Lindsey Graham, Republican of South Carolina, was more open in voicing the racist and anti-Hispanic motivations behind the proposal. Citing recent demonstrations of millions of Hispanic immigrants demanding a fair and humane policy toward undocumented workers, he spoke of the need to “enhance our common language,” adding, “That is a good thing to say because when the demonstrators are in the streets and waving the Mexican flag, some of us have to respond to that.”

As with President Bush’s proposals to militarize the US-Mexican border, prompted by the most short-sighted calculations of political expediency, the official designation of English as the national language has massive and ultimately tragic implications which are barely considered by the right-wingers who promote it. This appeal to American chauvinism and nativism can only heighten national and ethnic tensions, initiating a process that leads ultimately to open conflict and violence among various ethnic groups.

Throughout Europe today, reactionary governments are stoking up linguistic, religious and cultural differences in order to divert their populations from the widening class chasm between rich and poor and justify ever more repressive measures. Now the American ruling elite is embarking on the same course of action, in a country where the implications are, if anything, more explosive than in Europe.

As with the vicious anti-immigrant policy announced by Bush in his nationally televised speech last Monday, the response of the Democrats to the English language measure in the Senate was one of conciliation and capitulation. Unwilling to oppose the

Republican measure on a principled basis, the Democrats submitted their own amendment to the immigration bill declaring English the country’s “common and unifying” language. The Democratic-sponsored measure specified only that “existing rights” to bilingual government services would not be curtailed, thereby implying, at the very least, an agreement to oppose any further extension of bilingual rights.

This watered-down version of the Republican measure also passed, by a vote of 58 to 39. Senate leaders said one of the two competing English language amendments would be included in any final immigration bill that emerges from negotiations with the House of Representatives.

That body passed a bill last December that would make undocumented workers felons and subject to criminal prosecution all those who harbored or aided such “criminals,” including doctors, teachers and church officials. There is little doubt which version of the English language measure will be supported by the reactionaries who control the Republican House.

Opposition to all forms of discrimination on the basis of language is a fundamental democratic principle. It must be upheld. But as with all other basic rights—freedom of speech and political expression, the right to due process, the right to privacy, the right to vote and run for political office—it cannot be defended against the drive of the American ruling elite toward dictatorial rule through the Democratic Party. Both parties of American big business are complicit in the assault on democratic rights, because this attack is a response to the crisis of the capitalist system which they both defend.

Only the American working class can defend the rights of immigrants, documented and undocumented alike, as well as all other basic rights, by breaking with the two-party system and building an independent political movement based on the unity of working people internationally to fight against global capitalism and for the establishment of a socialist society. That is the program for which the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* fight.



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