Berkeley City Council caves on anti-recruiting resolution

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Over the course of the past several weeks, the city of Berkeley, California has been the target of an orchestrated right-wing campaign after the city council passed a resolution opposing US Marine recruitment. In response, the Berkeley City Council has engaged in a cowardly retreat.

On February 13, the council voted 7-2 to issue a revised statement regarding the recruitment efforts. It also decided not send the initial letter the council drafted to the Marines informing them they were "unwelcome and uninvited intruders."

The controversy began on January 29 when, in response to recommendations by the Berkeley Peace and Justice Commission, the City Council voted 6-3 for a resolution declaring, among other things, that the US Marine Recruiting Station "is not welcome in the City." It also "encourage[d] all people to avoid cooperation with the Marine Corps recruiting station and applaud[ed] residents and organizations such as Code Pink that may volunteer to impede, passively or actively, by nonviolent means, the work of any military recruiting office located in the City of Berkeley."

The text of the initial resolution was mild and toothless. It did not place any real limits on the ability of the Marines to recruit in the city, but had more the form of a verbal gesture—an attempt to appeal to widespread antiwar sentiment in the city and throughout the country.

The council also voted 8-1 to give Code Pink, an anti-war protest group that has been demonstrating in front of the recruiting center since September 26 of last year, a free sound permit and a designated parking space in front of the recruiting station for the next six months.

In response to these moves, right-wing organizations initiated a campaign that extended into the highest levels of the US government to demonize the Berkeley City Council and the widely held anti-war sentiment its actions expressed. Far-right media outlets described the Council's resolution as "treasonous," while supposedly more moderate newspapers attacked the resolution as going too far, being "stupid" and "insensitive."

On February 6, Congress got into the act. California Congressman John Campbell introduced the so-called "Semper Fi" Act into the House of Representatives. If passed, the act would rescind over $2 million in earmarks for Berkeley in the 2008 Omnibus Appropriations bill and transfer the funds to the Marine Corps. In the Senate, Republican Jim DeMint of South Carolina introduced a companion bill. These acts are aimed at punishing the population of Berkeley for daring to express their opposition to US militarism.

Among the funding for Berkeley threatened by the "Semper Fi" bills are: $975,000 for the University of California at Berkeley, for the Matsui Center for Politics and Public Service; $750,000 for the Berkeley/Albany ferry service; $243,000 for the Chez Panisse Foundation, for a school lunch initiative to integrate lessons about wellness, sustainability, and nutrition into the academic curriculum; $94,000 for a Berkeley public safety interoperability program; and $87,000 for the Berkeley Unified School District nutrition education program.

In a flagrant attack on the right of free speech, DeMint justified his sponsorship of the "Semper Fi" bill by saying, "This particular case became the business of the American people when the city of Berkeley insulted our troops and their constitutional mission to defend our country, while still coming to the federal government asking for special taxpayer-funded handouts." Following this logic, citizens and cities that dare to express opposition to the policies of the US government should be stripped of federal funding.

In addition, on February 7, State Assemblyman Guy Houston of San Ramon called on the State Legislature to consider withholding $3.3 million in state road funds.

On February 12, there was a protest and rally in Berkeley, with 2,000 anti- and pro-war demonstrators appearing in front of old City Hall. On one side were an array of middle-class protest groups, including The World Can't Wait, A.N.S.W.E.R., Code Pink, Iraq Veterans against the War, and various student organizations.

They were confronted by a few hundred "counter-protesters," of which a group called Move America Forward formed a significant contingent. This organization, which advocates kicking the United Nations out of the United States, restricting what it calls "liberal" or "activist" media, closing the US-Mexico border, and deporting illegal aliens to their countries of origin, carried signs calling members of Code Pink "terrorists" and demanding, "Waterboard the Liberals!"

Police and pro-war protestors responded with violence to those demonstrating in support of the Berkeley City Council's anti-recruiting resolution. A 15-year-old high school student from the Bay Area Revolution Club was punched in the face by an ex-Marine in full view of Berkeley police, while a 13-year-old was thrown to the ground and handcuffed before being dragged off to the police station.

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The sister of the arrested 15-year-old was slammed up against the wall of the police station, where she and other students had gone to protest the arrests, and then arrested. Other students testified to being hit with nightsticks without provocation and being grabbed by the throat and thrown to the ground by police.

In the face of these provocations, the Berkeley City Council refused to defend its previous resolution and instead beat a quick retreat.

On the very day following the protests and arrests just mentioned, the council members issued a new statement declaring that the City Council would "differentiate between the City's opposition to the Iraq war and its support for those serving in the armed forces." They further asserted, in what has become the formula for government officials who claim opposition to the war but refuse to lead a genuine fight against militarism, their "support for the troops."

The council also announced that it was not going to send the initial letter that it drafted informing the Marines of their "unwelcome" status in the city, which it had actually never mailed.

Upon the release of the change in the City's resolution, Berkeley Councilwoman Linda Maio went so far as to attempt to shirk any responsibility for voting for the anti-recruiting resolution in the first place. "We need to better scrutinize what's before us, especially from the commissions," she said.

Thus far, the City Council has not issued a formal apology to the Marines, although there is reason to believe that they will backtrack on this as well. Despite the council's *mea culpa*, the right-wing campaign against Berkeley has not ended. In many ways, it has even intensified.

Shortly after the Berkeley City Council revised its previous resolution, Representative Campbell and Senator DeMint promised to continue to push the "Semper Fi" bills in the House and Senate.

The right-wing outfit Move America Forward is launching a television ad campaign encouraging people to sign a petition demanding an apology from the Berkeley City Council. The ads will run not only in the Bay Area and Sacramento during evening news programs, but nationally on networks such as CNN and Fox News.

Various media outlets have continued to publish new stories and editorials attacking the actions of the council, joining the right-wing cacophony. One article published in the *Modesto Bee* is typical.

"By now, Berkeley Mayor Tom Bates—who five years ago admitted going to news racks and trashing 1,000 copies of *The Daily Californian*, the Berkeley student paper, after it endorsed his opponent during the election campaign of 2002—ought to know a little more about free speech and First Amendment Rights. At that time he even apologized.

"But apparently the lesson was forgotten—or perhaps it never occurred to his fellow council members that even the Marine Corps has the right to hang its shingle on the streets of Berkeley," opined Peter Schrag.

On February 25, RecruitMilitary, a private firm that specializes in finding civilian jobs for former members of the military, launched a website to encourage readers to write outraged letters to council members. The immediate aim of this can only be to pressure the city into issuing a formal apology to the Marines. More generally, these forces want to intimidate into silence all those opposed to the war and the policies of the Bush Administration.

The US military is currently facing a recruitment crisis due to widespread opposition to US foreign policy. The ferociousness of the response from the right wing to the actions of the Berkeley City Council is in part a product of this situation, as the political establishment is determined to combat any attempt to limit recruitment.

The Democratic Party has made it clear that they will do nothing to fundamentally challenge the political outlook motivating the right-wing attacks on Berkeley.

In a demonstration of the real outlook of supposedly "anti-war" Democratic politicians, California Senator Barbara Boxer opposed the "Semper Fi" bills but made clear her own hostility to the actions of the Berkeley City Council.

"Why on Earth would we punish good, decent citizens because some members of their local government or their sewer district or the mosquito abatement district or water district, any of their districts, say something that's highly offensive?" Boxer said.

The Democrats have no more interest in limiting recruitment than the Republicans. In fact, one of the first acts of the Democratic majority Congress last year was to increase the size of the army. Both of the leading Democratic Party presidential candidates, Senators Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, support a "national service" program aimed at increasing recruitment into the military.

Whether or not the City Council eventually agrees to apologize for the initial resolution, the past month has underscored the timid and ineffective character of the brand of protest politics that it promotes—ultimately aimed at pressuring the Democratic Party. At the first sign of being called "anti-military" by those forces against which the council is supposedly fighting, it buckled.

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