

California: Passage of proposition banning same-sex marriage sparks protests

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The passage in California of Proposition 8, a ballot measure prohibiting same-sex marriage, has touched off an outpouring of criticism. Following the November 4 vote, protests began springing up all over California. On November 15, tens of thousands gathered in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Sacramento, San Diego, Long Beach, Palm Springs and other communities to express their opposition to Prop 8. Nationwide, large crowds gathered to protest the measure in Anchorage, Alaska, and Fargo, North Dakota, as well as in larger cities such as New York, Boston, Chicago, Miami, and Salt Lake City.

The measure was not the first such proposition to be placed on the California ballot. Proposition 22, an anti-gay marriage measure in 2000, was approved by voters by a 61.4 percent margin. Legal challenges were brought against this law on various grounds. The measure was ultimately repealed by the California Supreme Court in June of this year on state constitutional grounds. To prevent Prop 8 from suffering the same fate, its right-wing proponents fashioned it as an amendment to the state's constitution.

The passage of Prop 8, which was secured only by a narrow margin, was the product of a massive campaign of bigotry and misinformation sponsored by the religious right. With more than \$47 million spent, most of it supporting passage of the measure, Prop 8 was the most expensive ballot measure in California history. Funding sources for the initiative included the fundamentalist group Focus on the Family, Christian radio proprietor Edward Atsinger, and right-wing billionaire Howard Ahmanson.

The measure's primary supporter was the Mormon Church, which was aided in its efforts by evangelical Protestant and conservative Catholic leaders. These

forces pulled out the stops in portraying the Prop 8 campaign as a battle between good and evil, making the claim that schools would be forced to promote same-sex marriage in their curricula, and arguing that churches that refused to perform same-sex weddings would lose their tax-exempt status should the measure be defeated.

In attacking the democratic right of gays and lesbians to marry, the religious right maintains that homosexuality is one of the main sources of the crisis in American society. Gays and lesbians are used as scapegoats for the fact that families are being torn apart by the disappearance of decent pay jobs, the housing crisis, the lack of affordable healthcare and the gutting of funding for public education.

This approach serves to divert people's attention from the root cause of the problems confronting working people on a daily basis—the subordination of all aspects of life to the profit motive. American capitalism has failed to provide for the needs of masses of people and to create a sustainable and healthy environment for families and children, much less foster a flowering of everyday culture. The very social and political forces leading the crusade against same-sex marriage are some of the most ardent defenders of the free market, opponents of government-funded social programs, and backers of the wholesale assault on democratic rights in the United States.

Proposition 8 passed narrowly, with only 52.5 percent of the vote, reflecting an increasingly tolerant attitude toward homosexuality within the California population as a whole. Despite this, a narrow social layer with disproportionate political influence was able to mobilize its own supporters and channel the confusion and backwardness that still exists among segments of the population into victory for this reactionary measure.

In the face of the passage of Prop 8, however, the response of the liberal establishment and their allies among leading layers in the gay and lesbian rights movement has been to conceal the larger and more fundamental political issues involved. In the immediate aftermath of the vote, the argument emerged from commentators sympathetic to the struggle for same-sex marriage that the passage of Prop 8 could be largely attributed to African-American voters who had voted overwhelmingly for Barack Obama and tended also to vote for the ban on same-sex marriage.

Blacks were criticized for failing to recognize same-sex marriage as a right akin to those fought for in the civil rights struggles in the South. At demonstrations against Prop 8 around the state, signs were held aloft expressing this outlook. While this claim proved groundless upon examination of the election returns, its underlying perspective—that ordinary people as a whole are at fault for Prop 8 because of their deep-seeded prejudices, hostility to social differences, and inability to embrace "universal" love—persisted in the subsequent commentaries by public figures condemning the measure's passage.

These layers reject the fact that the passage of Prop 8 is closed bound up with the failure of the Democratic Party—whose candidate they vigorously promoted in the November 4 presidential election—to defend the democratic rights of the population as a whole, of which same-sex marriage is only one component.

The Democratic Party has never been a champion of gay and lesbian rights, or a genuine opponent of discrimination against this segment of the population. Obama's lack of support for same-sex marriage, and his belated opposition to Prop 8, is in keeping with the tradition of his party. In 2004, John Kerry and the Democratic Party held a similarly unprincipled position. And it was Bill Clinton in 1996 who signed the Defense of Marriage Act, giving states the right to determine whether to allow same-sex marriage.

Obama and the Democratic Party's position on same-sex marriage is of a piece with their stand on democratic rights more broadly. They have collaborated with the Bush administration assault on a whole range of civil liberties: passage of the Patriot Act, the defense of torture, attacks on the right to habeas corpus, to name just a few. Such forces cannot be relied upon to advance the interests of any section of

working people, much less gays and lesbians.

However, this fact finds no expression in the response of the liberal establishment to the passage of Proposition 8. For example, at a recent Prop 8 protest in Long Beach, California, speakers celebrated the election of Barack Obama and urged attendees to channel their energies into the Democratic Party. No explanation was provided for how man who had repeatedly expressed his *opposition* to same-sex marriages—and has voted with the Democrats on a whole range of attacks on civil liberties—could be counted on to defend democratic rights.

The *World Socialist Web Site* unequivocally supports the right of gays and lesbians to marry and opposes all forms of prejudice and discrimination against this social group. However, it insists that this question must be seen in its broader political context. Democratic rights are under assault not because of the ignorance of the general population, or its inability to appreciate the importance of these liberties, but because the US ruling elite is intent on closing off those avenues that can be utilized by working people to express their opposition to worsening conditions and growing social inequality and unite them in a struggle against them.

The attack on same-sex marriage and the passage of Proposition 8 is an indication of the extremely tenuous character of democratic rights as a whole under the present political order and the necessity of mounting a genuine struggle to defend them. Such a defense can only be mounted on the basis of a mass mobilization of working people, unified on a socialist program, against the socioeconomic system creating these conditions.



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