

Right-wing consensus in California gubernatorial elections

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22 October 2010

On November 2, elections will be held to determine the next California Governor. Republican Meg Whitman and Democrat Jerry Brown have spent the last several months fiercely competing to establish themselves as the best qualified to impose further harsh austerity measures, including mass layoffs and cuts to education, health care, and pensions and other critical social programs.

Brown's campaign is emblematic of the shift of the entire Democratic Party to the right, even as the population moves to the left. Following the elections, the Democrats, led by the Obama administration, are preparing major cuts. Obama himself has intervened strongly to support Brown's campaign, including a planned rally at the University of Southern California on Friday.

The content of the differences between the proposals of Brown and Whitman are as insignificant as the differences between their respective big-business parties.

Whitman, the former CEO of eBay, has financed her campaign with close to \$140 million of her own money, smashing the record for personal spending on a political campaign—previously set by Michael Bloomberg in his successful bid to take the New York mayor's seat.

Whitman's millions have bought her a series of round-the-clock television commercials and her own channel on cable provider Comcast, which highlights her supposed experience as a corporate CEO. She calls for a corporate perspective for California in a period of unprecedented popular hostility to such social elements.

Although Brown has peppered the debates with a number of phony populist attacks on Whitman's wealth and corporate background, both campaigns are firmly rooted in a call to slash the jobs and pensions of state

workers to the bone.

Early this year, Whitman announced her plan to fire 40,000 state workers. Whitman has also vowed to erase existing agreements with state employees in order to slash their pensions and convert them to 401(k)-style retirements, based on a highly volatile stock market and requiring large contributions from each employee.

For his part, Brown has called Whitman out for exempting police and firefighters from her pension reform. Brown instead calls for pension-slashing across the board. In his 8-page plan for California, Brown states, "The current pension system costs too much and needs to be changed. We have to be realistic about what the state can afford..." More generally, he says he will "Review and cut wasteful spending for all state agencies".

According to Brown's plan, "Fixing government is not simply about cutting state employees or expenses" but it should also include an effort to cut regulations for big business.

Brown reiterated these positions repeatedly during the debates. On pensions, he said he would "raise ages, raise contributions" like Whitman and negotiate with public employee unions to make more desired cuts. Brown has boasted, "When it comes to unions: I'm the only governor who ever vetoed the pay raises for all public employees. I did it once, I did it twice, and I'll do it again." He asserted, "No one is tougher with a buck than I am."

Brown's campaign has the backing of most of the major unions, and his strategy is to work with them in imposing cuts. The latest austerity budget negotiated by current governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and the Democratic Party-controlled legislature includes a pledge of significant cuts in public employee benefits agreed to by the Service Employees International

Union.

When asked if he would roll back the fees for university students that have made the cost of education “astronomical” (in Brown’s words) he said “no”. When asked if he would promise to freeze fees where they are, he gave the same response.

On the issue of immigration, Brown boasted of initiating the invasive “Secure Communities” program, which attempts to collect identifying information (fingerprints) for all immigrants in the country and compile it in a database. He said, “If they are found to be here illegally, they get deported.” He also mentioned that, “Workplace inspections are part of the solution.”

When confronted with the death penalty, Brown again reveled in his right-wing record saying, “I’ve defended literally hundreds and hundreds of executions.” His website also claims it will free up money by challenging the judicial intervention into the state’s decaying prison healthcare system by simply refusing to make the court ordered changes. As Governor, Brown passed the first determinate sentencing law in 1977, which is considered the first step in the move to draconian measures underlying the state’s massive incarcerated population.

Whitman had the same general orientation on every issue. With no real political differences, the only way the candidates have attempted to distinguish themselves is in how they plan to carry through their reactionary attack on the state’s population.

Whitman, like her predecessor Arnold Schwarzenegger, is rather blunt, calling for immediate lay-offs and pension reductions, by ballot measure if needed.

Brown, in contrast, has described his method for imposing austerity as “empowering local governments,” by which he means unloading decision-making on education, health care and welfare spending to cash-strapped local governments, which would relieve the state government of direct accountability. In this sense, he’s made much of his connections with politicians and union bureaucrats as proof he’s best qualified to impose the brutal cuts demanded by the financial elite.

Brown typifies the movement of the Democratic Party to the right. Elected twice to the governor’s seat (1975-83), he took the office from Republican Ronald

Reagan. He has cultivated a left image through a number of stunts—like picking Black Panther chief Elaine Brown as one of his convention delegates in his 1976 bid for the presidency or renouncing the governor’s mansion and limo for a futon mattress and a fuel efficient car—while pushing right-wing politics and austerity. In an article last year the *American Conservative* noted approvingly: “In Brown’s first year in office, Reagan’s director of programs and policies joked that his old boss ‘thinks Jerry Brown has gone too far to the right.’”

Now, as California suffers through an unprecedented economic crisis—including record home foreclosures and unemployment—Brown, like his fellow Democrats nationwide, is determined to force the working class to pay for it.



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