

The end of “don’t ask, don’t tell” in the US military

Tom Eley
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Over the weekend, the US Senate passed by a vote of 65 to 31 a bill that will allow gays and lesbians to serve openly in the US military, supplanting the bigoted policy of “don’t ask, don’t tell.” President Obama is expected to sign the bill into law on Monday.

“Don’t ask, don’t tell” was implemented in early 1990s by the Clinton administration as a compromise between the demands of gays and lesbians for equality in the armed forces and the military brass’s bitter opposition to gays serving openly in the ranks. A section of the officer corps continues to oppose repealing the law, claiming the result will be an erosion of the cohesion of fighting units.

The treatment of gays has been appalling and reflects the generally backward and reactionary atmosphere that prevails in the armed forces. This is not a conscription army, but a professional military increasingly under the political influence of Christian fundamentalists and other right-wing elements and contemptuous of the principle of civilian control. Even with the repeal of “don’t ask, don’t tell,” it is all but certain that chilling cases will emerge of persecution and brutality against gay and lesbian soldiers.

There is a genuine democratic issue in ending an official policy that discriminates against people on the basis of their sexual orientation. However, the manner in which the repeal is being presented by President Obama and congressional supporters should serve as a caution to anyone inclined to believe that it represents a historic breakthrough for democratic rights. What predominates is flag-waving patriotism and the glorification of the US military, along with the suggestion that repeal will make the military a more effective fighting force.

“As commander in chief, I am also absolutely convinced that making this change will only underscore

the professionalism of our troops as the best led and best trained fighting force the world has ever known,” Obama said in a statement.

Sen. Carl Levin a Michigan Democrat, said he supported the bill “because men and women wearing the uniform of the United States who are gay and lesbian have died for this country, because gay and lesbian men and women wearing the uniform of this country have their lives on the line right now.”

Claims made following the Senate vote that the repeal of “don’t ask, don’t tell” is the historical equivalent of the desegregation of the US military in 1948 are specious. The end of institutionalized racism in the US military, in the form of segregated units, took place in the context of the post-war upsurge of the working class, and in particular the emerging struggle of African-American workers against Jim Crow segregation in the South. It coincided with the desegregation of professional baseball and the beginnings of the civil rights movement.

It was part of a general—though by no means universal—expansion of democratic rights in the US, which would culminate in the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts of the 1960s.

The present move to allow openly gay and lesbian soldiers in the military occurs under vastly different historical conditions, dominated by the eruption of US military violence all over the world and within the context of an escalating assault on basic democratic rights. The same government that repealed the ban on openly gay service members continues to persecute Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks, whose publication of diplomatic and military documents has revealed the predatory and brutal nature of the US military’s wars abroad. The same government asserts the right to arrest or even assassinate alleged terrorists,

including US citizens, without trial or even the right to know the basis of the charges against them.

The *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Christian Science Monitor* all called the Senate vote “historic.” There was jubilation among gay rights groups and across what passes for the American left.

But the repeal of “don’t ask, don’t tell” will in no way change the character of the military, no more than racial integration ended its imperialist nature, or the hiring of blacks in urban police departments altered the character of the police or lessened police brutality, or the election of an African American changed the nature of the US presidency.

The American military, responsible for more deaths and crimes than any other army since Hitler’s Wehrmacht, has dispensed with a discriminatory and irrational policy. It will not make the slightest difference to the victims of American imperialism in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and elsewhere that the soldiers raining death and destruction on their cities and villages can now openly declare they are gay.

The main aim of the move is to give a “democratic” face-lift to the American killing machine. It was for this reason that the bill was championed by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen, several Republican senators and congressmen, and Senator Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, one of Washington’s most vociferous advocates of the unrestrained use of military violence.

Socialists unequivocally defend the rights of gays and lesbians to full equality, as we do the rights of racial minorities, women, and immigrants.

But the defense of democratic rights has become an urgent class question. All of the most basic rights—freedom of speech, of assembly, of dissent, the “great writ” of habeas corpus—are under unrelenting assault by the ruling elite, an attack which is bound up with its assault on working class living standards in the US and its predatory wars abroad.

The right to equality can be advanced only through the independent political mobilization of the working class, against social inequality and American militarism, and against the capitalist system that gives rise to them.

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