

California State Senate suspends three Democratic lawmakers under indictment

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The Democratic-controlled California State Senate took the unprecedented action March 28 of suspending three Democratic lawmakers from office pending the resolution of various criminal charges against them. The bipartisan 28-1 vote came two days after State Senator Leland Yee was arrested in his hometown of San Francisco and charged by federal authorities with conspiracy to traffic in firearms without a license and accepting campaign funds in exchange for political favors.

The allegations against Yee were outlined in an FBI criminal complaint that names 25 other defendants, including Raymond Chow, a onetime gang leader with ties to San Francisco's Chinatown known as "Shrimp Boy," and Keith Jackson, Yee's campaign aide. The affidavit accuses Yee of conspiracy to deal firearms without a license and to illegally import firearms.

According to an affidavit by FBI agent Emmanuel V. Pascua, Yee discussed helping the agent get weapons worth \$500,000 to \$2.5 million, including shoulder-fired missiles, and explained the entire process of acquiring them from a Muslim separatist group in the Philippines and bringing them to the US. Yee had made a name for himself in state politics as an advocate of gun control.

The state senator is also accused of accepting tens of thousands of dollars in campaign contributions and cash payments to provide introductions, help a client get a contract and influence legislation. He or members of his campaign staff are alleged to have accepted at least \$42,800 in cash or campaign contributions from undercover FBI agents in exchange for carrying out the agents' specific requests, according to these court documents.

Raymond Chow is a "former" leader of an Asian gang who was sentenced in 1992 to 24 years in prison

on an assortment of racketeering and weapons charges. Chow's sentence was later reduced when he gave evidence regarding another gang leader and he was released in 2003.

Chow thereafter insisted that he had turned his life around, presented himself as an upstanding citizen and a role model for troubled youth. Within a short period, he was lauded by US senator Dianne Feinstein of California for his work as a former offender who had become a community role model, and praised by San Francisco mayor Ed Lee for his "willingness to give back to the community." He also posted pictures of himself on Facebook with Lt. Gov. Gavin Newsom.

Yee began his political career in 1988 when he won a seat to the San Francisco United School Board. In 1996, he was elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors and in 2002 to the State Assembly. By 2004, he became the first Asian-American to be appointed speaker pro tempore, which made him the second-highest-ranking Democrat of the California State Assembly. Due to term limits, Yee had to leave the State Assembly and was elected to the State Senate in 2006. Again facing term limits, Yee had recently begun to campaign for the office of secretary of state, California's chief election officer.

Yee's arrest follows the January 28, 2014, conviction of State Senator Roderick Wright, who was found guilty of committing voter fraud and perjury for falsely claiming residence in his impoverished district including Inglewood and south Los Angeles, when he actually lived in affluent Baldwin Hills.

The following month, in February, State Senator Ronald Calderon of Montebello, an eastern suburb of Los Angeles, was indicted by a federal grand jury on 24 felony counts, including accepting nearly \$100,000 in bribes.

Because of Wright's and Calderon's legal problems, they each took a leave of absence from the state Senate. As a result, the Democrats lost their super-majority in the Senate, which had allowed them to act in all matters without needing support from Republicans in the 40-member chamber.

With the arrest of Yee, bringing to three the number of Democratic state senators indicted or convicted of criminal charges, the state senate leadership came under intense pressure from fellow Democrats to conduct damage limitation. Governor Jerry Brown and the states two US senators, Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein, have all called for the resignation of Yee, Calderon and Wright.

Senate President Pro Tempore Darrell Steinberg of Sacramento said he was shocked at having 7 percent of the chamber face felony charges this year. "One is an anomaly, two a coincidence, but three? That's not what this Senate is about," Steinberg said to his fellow lawmakers before the suspension vote.

Despite Steinberg's protests to the contrary, rampant bribery, influence peddling and other forms of criminality are precisely what bourgeois politics is about. The scandal-ridden legislature of the nation's most populous state, dominated by Democrats and "progressives," is just the latest illustration of the systemic criminality of the American political process.

Presently, a host of other politicians throughout the county are facing criminal charges, and two former mayors, Ray Nagin of New Orleans, and Tony Mack of Trenton, New Jersey, are awaiting sentencing after having been found guilty of offenses committed while in office.

The actions of Yee and his colleagues are not simply the result of personal failings, but are typical of the social layer that serves as the political representatives of big business. Democrats and Republicans alike, these political servants view self-enrichment by even the basest methods as part of what is due to them for defending the interests of corporate America at the expense of the working class.



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