Congressional Democrats stage “sit-in” stunt on gun control

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On Wednesday, congressional Democrats staged a “sit-in” on the floor of the House of Representatives in an attempt to force a vote on gun control legislation, in the aftermath of the mass murder of 49 people by a heavily armed gunman at a gay nightclub in Orlando .

At around 11:30 Wednesday morning, around 40 Democrats, led by the former civil rights leader and longtime congressman from Atlanta, John Lewis, entered the House chamber while the Republican Speaker of the House Paul Ryan was attempting to hold a vote on an unrelated bill, and sat on the floor in the aisles around the speakers’ platform.

The sit-in continued overnight, in spite of unsuccessful attempts by Republicans to restore order. However, the move completely failed as a disruptive tactic. Republicans were able to pass an appropriations bill, and later voted early Thursday morning to adjourn for the Fourth of July holiday. With the House no longer in session, Democrats left the chamber Thursday afternoon, declaring that they would continue to press the issue after the recess.

The “occupation” demanded that the House hold a vote on two bills, one expanding background checks for people purchasing weapons and another which would strip the right to buy a gun from people listed on the government’s “no-fly list,” enacted after the September 11th attacks, which prohibits people on the list from boarding commercial aircraft in the United States.

The argument that such a measure would prevent such homicidal outbursts as the Orlando shooting, which occur with tragic regularity in the United States, does not hold water. The no-fly list reportedly contains the names of 81,000 people, of whom only 2,700 are American citizens. Nearly all are foreign terrorists, like Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the head of ISIS. The demand that these people be barred from purchasing guns in the US is meaningless when the vast majority of them are legally banned from even entering the United States.

More broadly, the Democratic Party’s campaign over gun control would set the precedent that inclusion on a secret government list, with no judicial oversight or ability to appeal, is sufficient grounds to deprive someone of their rights, using the tragedy in Orlando as a pretext. Even more ominous in this regard is the proposal in the upper house of Congress by California Senator Dianne Feinstein, who proposed the prohibition of the purchase of firearms be linked to the far more expansive “terror watch list,” which according to the ACLU includes more than 1 million names, often selected on the flimsiest basis.

The logic of the Democrats’ proposed legislation does not end with restrictions on purchasing a weapon, but leads to more overtly police-state measures such as preventive detention. The campaign slogan of “no fly, no buy” seeks to obscure the essential anti-democratic character of these proposals.

The response of the political establishment as a whole has been to falsify the real issues posed by Orlando and other mass shootings. Public pronouncements by Republicans have focused on the question of “terrorism” and the need for more strident intervention in the Middle East, coupled with attacks on democratic rights, save the right to buy a gun, the one right which they support. Democrats, on the other hand, have focused entirely on “gun culture” and the availability of weapons. There is no discussion of the deep crisis of American society that has produced the phenomenon of mass shootings.

The Democrats did not resort to sit-ins when Congress voted to slash funding for food stamps or extended unemployment benefits. When they held majorities in both houses of Congress in the first two years of the Obama administration they did nothing to address the economic distress facing millions of workers. They have not staged a protest on the House floor against funding for the war in Syria or NATO’s troop buildup against Russia, moves which they wholly support.

Instead, they have latched on to a phony issue, gun control, which does nothing to alleviate the social crisis which gives rise to frequent mass shootings in the United States, in order to make it an issue they can run on in the general election in

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November. A headline appearing on the *Washington Post*'s website yesterday put it bluntly: "House sit-in guarantees gun control will be a top issue in fall election." The electioneering motives behind the "protest" are underscored by the fact that the bill has already been defeated in the Senate, in voting Monday forced by a 15-hour filibuster by Democratic Senator Chris Murphy last week.

As Hillary Clinton, the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, prepares to run a right-wing campaign in the general election, the Democrats are eager to find less explosive issues to campaign on than economic inequality, the main focus of Bernie Sanders' campaign, with which to mobilize their social base within layers of the upper middle class.

An additional motivation behind Wednesday's stunt was undoubtedly to attract the social forces, particularly young people, who were mobilized by the Sanders' campaign, with a fake show of "defiance." It is significant in this respect that the leading role in Wednesday's theatrics was played by John Lewis, whose reputation as a young civil rights leader in the 1960s was used to lend the action an air of legitimacy. Now 76, Lewis is a thoroughly establishment figure who supports the repressive powers of police; during the mass protests in Ferguson, Missouri against the police murder of Michael Brown in 2014, he called on Obama to declare martial law.

As the group of lawmakers sat on the floor, they chanted slogans such as "no fly, no buy" and "shame, shame," and held prayer vigils throughout the night. "We have been too quiet for too long," Lewis shouted. "There comes a time when you have to say something. You have to make a little noise. You have to move your feet. This is the time." G.K. Butterfield, the chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus, intoned, "This is the way great movements began. This is the way the March on Washington started, and Rosa Parks, and all the great movements that we can remember started with just an idea."

The comparison of Democratic congressmen relocating from their regular seats in the House to the floor mere feet away to the mass struggles of the civil rights movement in the 1960s is absurd. The US Congress is a bastion of wealth and privilege. The average net worth across both houses surged past $1 million in 2014, with Democrats outpacing their Republican counterparts. Nancy Pelosi, leader of the Democrats in the House of Representatives, has a net worth of at least $29.3 million, according to a report last year by Politico.

The civil rights struggles which this stunt is meant to evoke placed their participants at considerable personal risk. In contrast, the Democratic "occupation" of the House received favorable wall-to-wall coverage in the media, and Speaker Ryan did not even attempt to enforce the rules of the chamber when the protest began. The only "repression" meted out against the protesting legislators was the shutting off of cameras for C-SPAN, the cable network that regularly broadcasts House proceedings. President Barack Obama expressed his support for the action on Twitter.

Most importantly, the civil rights movement was a struggle for the expansion of democratic rights, whereas the "sit-in" in the House of Representatives is designed to limit and undermine them. It is a measure of the reactionary character of this campaign that it allowed congressional Republicans, whose presumptive nominee Donald Trump responded to the Orlando shooting by reiterating his call for a ban on all Muslims entering the United States, to posture as defenders of due process. As Mark Walker, a Republican congressman from North Carolina, posted on Twitter, "Calling this a sit-in is a disgrace to [the sit-ins in the 1960s protesting segregated lunch counters]. They sat in for rights. Dems are 'sitting in' to 'strip them away.'"

The real attitude of the Republicans to democratic rights was expressed by Senator John Cornyn of Texas, the Republican deputy leader, who offered an alternative to the "no-fly, no buy" legislation in the Senate, requiring the government to prove its case against someone on the watch list within 72 hours in order to deprive that individual of gun rights. He then declared, "If they are too dangerous to buy a firearm, they are too dangerous to be loose on our streets."

In other words, the Republicans "defend" the dubiously interpreted Second Amendment right to bear arms, promoted by reactionary lobbies like the National Rifle Association, but they have no problem with using government lists as the basis for rounding people up.

The "no-fly, no buy" legislation, like the whole bipartisan campaign reducing incidents like Orlando to "terrorism," has a definite logic, whatever the immediate intentions of Feinstein, John Lewis or Cornyn: it leads inexorably to demands for the preventive detention of everyone on the watch list, a modern version of mass detention camps like those established for Japanese-Americans during World War II.

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