

John Conyers forced to resign from Congress as sex witch-hunt escalates

A reporter

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The longest-serving member of Congress, 88-year-old John Conyers, announced his immediate retirement—in effect, his resignation—in a radio interview Tuesday morning. A few hours later, an official letter from Conyers was read out on the floor of the House of Representatives, confirming his decision to quit.

Conyers is the most prominent congressional victim of the accelerating media hysteria over charges of sexual misconduct, and the first one to step down from office. The longtime Detroit Democratic congressman saw his 53-year political career terminated in only 16 days, from the first report on Buzzfeed, based on a tip from an ultra-right political activist that a former Conyers staff employee had received a \$27,000 settlement in 2015 for unfair dismissal because she allegedly refused the congressman's sexual advances.

Despite repeated denials by Conyers that he ever harassed anyone, and his calls for observing due process, he was quickly forced to step down as the ranking Democrat on the House Judiciary Committee. Last Thursday, top Democrats in the House, including Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi and leaders of the Congressional Black Caucus, called for Conyers to resign, and they were joined by the top Republican, Speaker Paul Ryan.

Representative Sheila Jackson Lee of Texas, another longtime member of the Congressional Black Caucus and the Judiciary Committee, announced Tuesday afternoon on the House floor that Conyers had “offered his retirement immediately,” and read out his final letter to the House.

The letter affirms Conyers' longtime association with the civil rights movement, including successful sponsorship of the law establishing the Martin Luther King holiday, and defends his legislative record over

five decades. Referring to the ongoing witch-hunt over allegations of sexual misconduct—which the leaders of his own party are spearheading—Conyers declared, “Given the totality of the circumstance of not being afforded the right of due process, in conjunction with current health conditions and to preserve my legacy and good name, I am retiring.”

Governor Rick Snyder of Michigan will decide whether and when to schedule a special election to fill the seat. He also has the option to leave the seat open until the next scheduled general election, on November 6, 2018. This is considered unlikely because it would leave a large swathe of the Detroit metropolitan area unrepresented in Congress for some 13 months.

Besides Conyers, four other members of Congress are in immediate danger of being forced out of office, and that may be only the tip of the iceberg.

Republican Representative Joe Barton of Texas has already announced he will not run again for his Dallas-area seat, after reports he shared nude photos of himself in social media exchanges with a mistress. Republican Representative Blake Farenthold of Texas made an \$84,000 payout, using taxpayer funds, to a female staffer after she sued for sexual harassment.

First-term Democratic Representative Ruben Kihuen of Nevada is accused of propositioning his campaign finance officer and “touching her thighs twice” against her will. And then there is Senator Al Franken, a Minnesota Democrat, facing charges of groping and other acts of sexual harassment against a half dozen women, all but one before his election to the Senate in 2008.

For all the lurid headlines, no criminal charges have been filed against any of those named. Both Conyers and Farenthold agreed to financial settlements to former employees over allegations of sexual

harassment, but Conyers paid out little more than a few months' severance payment, and claims he only authorized that to save on legal costs.

The Conyers case is the most noteworthy, not only because it has led to the ouster of a longtime representative, but because his removal was spearheaded by his own party's leadership: after initially defending Conyers as an historic figure from the civil rights era—a gross exaggeration of his actual status—Pelosi switched quickly to demanding his immediate resignation. “Zero tolerance means consequences for everyone,” she declared.

Leading figures in the liberal wing of the Democratic Party led the calls for Conyers to go. One of the first to raise this demand was Representative Pramila Jayapal of Washington, a member of the Judiciary Committee, and the most prominent of the candidates backed by Senator Bernie Sanders and his “Our Revolution” political action group.

One week into the media furor, she issued a statement declaring this “a watershed moment where, finally, the country seems to be waking up and realizing we need to have a zero-tolerance policy toward sexual harassment,” and adding, “I believe these women, I see the pattern, and there is only one conclusion: Mr. Conyers must resign.”

The Socialist Equality Party and its predecessor the Workers League have waged a protracted struggle against the unprincipled politics of John Conyers. He has always been a demagogic defender of the trade union bureaucracy—his father was one of the first UAW organizers of Chrysler workers, a fact which gave the son his first leg up in electoral politics. Conyers was affiliated for many years with the Democratic Socialists of America, and he in return was hailed by the pseudo-left as a “progressive” who proved that the Democratic Party could be reformed and pressured to the left.

But his political career has been brought to an end, not by the movement of the working class to the left, but by the continuing shift of capitalist politics to the right, and particularly by the embrace of McCarthyite witch-hunting by the Democratic Party, both in relation to the Russia investigation, and in the ongoing media campaign over sexual misconduct.

Here a detail of Conyers' biography is revealing. His political career began in 1964 with his election to Congress, and after 1968, when Richard Nixon won the

presidency, the liberal black Democrat became a target for White House political operatives. Conyers was put on Nixon's notorious “enemies list,” a fact that he later cited with pride. On the list, which named key political opponents and described vulnerable points that could be used against them, Conyers' weakness was identified as women.

The campaign over alleged sexual misconduct, launched by the *New York Times* and now echoed throughout the media has thus succeeded in dragging American politics back to the muck and mire of Nixon, J. Edgar Hoover, and others who traded in gossip, blackmail and similar filth to gain their objectives.



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