Oregon legislature shut down by right-wing militia threats

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25 June 2019

On Saturday, the Oregon State Capitol building was shut down after armed right-wing militias made violent threats against Democratic legislators and building staff. State police recommended the building be shut down and monitored developments on Saturday. Captain Tim Fox said, "the safety of legislators, staff and citizen visitors could be compromised if certain threatened behaviors were realized."

Though precise details have yet to be released about the nature of the threats, the threats were prompted by a conflict between Senate Republicans and Democrats over a bill (HB 2020) that ostensibly aims to address climate change by imposing market-based caps on fuel use and pollution, cutting emissions 80 percent by 2050 from 1990 levels.

The fascistic militias also planned protests over the weekend. Small demonstrations did take place Saturday and Sunday at the Capitol, though these featured only limited numbers of militia clad in their military-style attire. The demonstrations were supported by the Oregon Republican Party and were also attended by some rural workers and farmers who oppose the bill's imposition of regressive taxes and fines.

The bill has been predominantly opposed by manufacturing, timber and agricultural business groups who oppose government regulation of their right to profit at the expense of environmental sustainability. Democrats have agreed to a number of major concessions to big business, including by allowing the richest companies to buy the right to pollute under the legislation.

Oregon has been dominated by the Democratic Party since the 1980s, with Democrats occupying the majority of all levels of state government. There are only 11 Republicans out of 30 state senators, representing mostly the rural areas in the eastern and central parts of the state.

When Republican senators fled the capital city of Salem on Thursday in order to prevent a vote on HB 2020, Governor Kate Brown called upon the state police to pursue them and return them to the Capitol. The Republicans took refuge across the border in Idaho, although one state senator issued the first threat of violence last Wednesday.

Indicating his readiness to use violence against the state police, Republican Brian Boquist warned, "Send bachelors and come heavily armed … I'm not going to be a political prisoner in the state of Oregon. It's just that simple."

This type of political stunt is not without precedent. In 2011, the Democratic minority in Wisconsin fled to Illinois to block a vote on a Republican-led budget bill that stripped public employee benefits and bargaining rights, with state police tracking down legislators as workers and students engaged in large protests. Indiana Democrats did the same over a right-to-work law passed in that state.

The conflict in Oregon is especially significant for two reasons. First, the state police, a body legally subordinate to the executive branch, initiated the process of shutting down the legislative building with a strong recommendation that was accepted by Democratic leaders. Second, the legislative conflict between Democrats and Republicans over the cap-and-trade bill acquired an extra-legislative side with the violent threats by right-wing militias.

One of the main militias involved is the Three Percenters, a far-right group founded in 2008 that has provided armed protection to a number of ultra-right organizations and demonstrations throughout the United States and Canada, including the Charlottesville neo-fascist riot. The Southern Poverty Law Center

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describes them as anti-government extremists and involved in armed protests against immigrants, refugees and minorities.

Members of the Three Percenters in both Oregon and Idaho publicly offered to do “whatever it takes to keep these senators safe,” stating that they would provide security, transport and refuge for the missing legislators. So far, the Oregon Republicans have publicly rejected their offer of protection.

In 2016, the Three Percenters Idaho sent armed members to patrol in support of a right-wing militia’s occupation of the US Fish and Wildlife Service’s Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, located in the largely rural southeast corner of Oregon.

Protesting restrictions on government-controlled lands and demanding the release of Dwight Hammond and his son Steve, imprisoned for setting fire to federal lands, about two dozen armed militia members, led by brothers Ammon and Ryan Bundy and calling themselves Citizens for Constitutional Freedom, took over the Refuge’s visitor center in an occupation that lasted 41 days. After federal troops killed one and arrested eight in a standoff with the militia leaders, the arrested extremists were acquitted of all charges.

Other militia-style groups within the so-called “patriot movement” include the Oath Keepers, Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association. These groups, along with far-right political groups like Patriot Prayer, have been emboldened over the past few years with the continuous lurch to the right in bourgeois politics and support by the police.

Such fascistic organizations have been encouraged and promoted by the Trump administration, which has responded to growing social unrest and conflicts within the state by seeking to mobilize far-right paramilitary groups.

In the state’s largest city of Portland, friendly ties between the far-right group Patriot Prayer and Portland police were exposed earlier this year by local publication *Willamette Week*. Portland Police Bureau Lieutenant Jeff Niiya and Patriot Prayer leader Joey Gibson exchanged hundreds of friendly texts, confirming the hands-off approach by police toward the far right and an effective alliance against left-wing protesters.

The events in Oregon reveal the further decay of capitalist “democracy” in the United States. While large numbers of young people and workers recognize the seriousness of the current social crisis, whether it be in the lack of decent jobs and rights or the threat of climate change, both parties of the rich offer no way forward to resolve these fundamental issues. Instead, all the conditions have been laid up to this point in order for the state police and armed right-wing militias to intervene as the decisive forces in political life.

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