

Trump tweets support for armed right-wing protesters in Michigan

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One day after demonstrators, some armed with assault rifles, entered the state Capitol in Lansing to demand that Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer lift her COVID-19 stay-at-home executive order, President Donald Trump tweeted his endorsement of the right-wing protesters.

Intentionally recalling his support for the “very fine people” involved in the neo-Nazi rampage in Charlottesville, Virginia in August of 2017, Trump tweeted: “The Governor of Michigan should give a little and put out the fire. These are very good people, but they are angry. They want their lives back again, safely! See them, talk to them, make a deal.”

The several hundred protesters, including many from outside the state, came to Lansing on Thursday for what organizers called the “American Patriot Rally.” At 1:00 pm, police began scanning demonstrators with temperature devices while permitting them, guns and all, to enter the Capitol chanting, “Lock her up!” and “Heil Whitmer!”

Once inside the Capitol, the demonstrators—who defied the state’s social distancing and face covering regulations—attempted to force their way onto the Michigan House floor but were blocked by legislative sergeants-at-arms and state police. As some moved onto the gallery above the House floor, the main body of protesters remained in the stairwell and outside the entrance to the House chamber, chanting “Let us in!”

In addition to carrying automatic long arms, some protesters wore pro-Trump paraphernalia and others reportedly displayed swastikas, waved Confederate flags and brandished nooses. A group of armed individuals, who identified themselves as the Michigan Liberty Militia, said they were a “security detail” for protesters and lined up with their hands on their weapons outside the governor’s office.

Posting a photograph showing armed men patrolling the gallery, Michigan Senator Dayna Polehanki, a Democrat, tweeted: “Directly above me, men with rifles yelling at us. Some of my colleagues who own bullet proof vests are wearing them. I have never appreciated our Sergeants-at-Arms more than today.”

As with the protest organized in Lansing on April 17 and numerous other demonstrations in states around the country, the protest on Thursday was coordinated by the Republican Party

establishment. Trump’s urging of Whitmer to “make a deal” with the protesters is part of the nationwide campaign being coordinated by the White House to end social distancing during the pandemic and force the working class back to work.

For weeks now, Wall Street and the corporate media have been pushing the lie that the pandemic is essentially over, and everyone needs to get back on the job. The danger of this premature return to work is evident in Michigan, where the number of confirmed cases climbed by nearly 1,000 on Friday, reaching a total of 42,356, and the death toll rose to 3,866, with no sign of a “flattening of the curve.”

Thursday’s demonstration was timed to coincide with the midnight expiration of Governor Whitmer’s March 23 state of emergency declaration, which shut down businesses and ordered the public to stay at home. According to Michigan law, an extension of an emergency declaration beyond 28 days requires legislative approval.

With the protesters in the Capitol, the Republican-controlled House voted to refuse to extend the declaration. However, Governor Whitmer issued a series of executive orders anyway, including an extension of the COVID-19 state of emergency to May 28.

While the demonstration was ostensibly organized by a nonprofit group called Michigan United for Liberty, the website of the organization provides very little information about its purpose and goals. A check of the registration information for the domain name associated with the organization shows that it was created on April 9. A Twitter account for the organization was also created in April 2020.

A central purpose of Michigan United for Liberty is to serve as plaintiff in a lawsuit filed against Whitmer in a Michigan court on April 22 challenging the authority of the governor to issue executive orders. This case, which has yet to be decided, is one of several lawsuits filed primarily on behalf of Republican-backed plaintiffs aimed at forcing an end to the state of emergency and a return to work.

In addition to voting against the extension of Whitmer’s “stay-home, stay-safe” declaration, the Michigan House voted in favor of giving Republican Speaker Lee Chatfield the authority to file a lawsuit over the governor’s handling of the COVID-19 crisis. Chatfield said of the vote, “We have three

branches of government—the executive, the legislative and the judicial. They all have their role, even in a pandemic, and this may be one where we get the third branch of government involved.”

Chatfield’s comments and the earlier lawsuits against Whitmer bring into sharp relief the intervention of Attorney General William Barr in the conflict over the emergency shutdown of states by governors across the country. Barr issued a memorandum on Monday stating that he was directing Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights Eric Dreiband and the US attorney for the Eastern District of Michigan, Matthew Schneider, to take action “if a state or local ordinance crosses the line from an appropriate exercise of authority to stop the spread of COVID-19 into an overbearing infringement of constitutional and statutory protections.”

The selection of Schneider to lead the effort—which brings the authority of law enforcement agencies including the FBI as well as the federal courts into the back-to-work campaign—is an indication that Michigan is the focal point of a high-level offensive by the ruling elite to force workers back on the job regardless of widespread concerns voiced by public health and medical experts about the safety of doing so and ongoing strikes and protests by workers against unsafe conditions in factories and workplaces.

This political and legal campaign is required because the political establishment is well aware of the opposition that exists within the working class to ending social distancing and self-isolation, under conditions where the pandemic continues to spread throughout the population.

Poll after poll has shown that the American public by a more than a two-to-one margin does not support a rapid return to work, even if it means further economic disruption. An exhaustive nationwide poll of all 50 states conducted by Harvard, Northeastern University and Rutgers published on Thursday showed that 68 percent of Michiganders said they thought their state government was “reacting about right” to the crisis, while 24 percent said they thought it was overreacting.

These expressions of opposition to the back-to-work campaign have been downplayed in the corporate media, while the demonstration in Lansing, which mobilized only a few hundred people, has been widely reported and presented as an expression of widespread popular sentiment in favor of a rapid “reopening” of the economy. The same is true of a dozen or more similar, and generally small, right-wing demonstrations in other states across the country, primarily those with Democratic governors.

This disproportionate coverage is very consciously timed to coincide with the intensification of the demands by the White House, Wall Street and the super-rich to reopen the economy. This false narrative of a popular drumbeat to get back to work is supported by both the Democrats and Republicans, although there are tactical differences between them as to the pace of the lifting of social-distancing measures.

Although the constituency for far-right and fascist groups remains very small, it would be a dangerous mistake to underestimate the danger of a growth of fascism in America. Groups of extreme right-wing and armed militiamen patrolling the halls of the state Capitol building is a warning to the working class. These groups have the backing of substantial sections of the US ruling class, political establishment and state apparatus, which are encouraging their development to be thrown against an insurgent working class. They are being groomed as strikebreakers and attack dogs for the ruling elite.

The protests in Michigan are backed by organizations linked to Betsy DeVos, the billionaire education secretary in the Trump administration. In other states, right-wing billionaires including the Koch brothers and the Coors family are giving financial support to right-wing groups organizing “back-to-work” demonstrations.

At the same time, these forces are seeking to exploit the very real fears and frustrations of mainly middle-class layers, such as small business owners, who are being ruined by the response of the financial oligarchy to the pandemic. The Democratic Party, which fully backs the handover of unlimited public funds to the corporations and banks, offers nothing to desperate middle-class layers.

To the extent that the working class is blocked by the trade unions, the Democratic Party and their pseudo-left allies from offering an independent policy to fight the pandemic and defend the living standards and democratic rights of workers and other social layers being sacrificed to the drive of the corporate elite to increase its wealth, the ruined middle class can be drawn behind the far-right and turned against the workers.

This underscores the need to build an independent movement of the working class in opposition to both parties of big business to fight the pandemic and the capitalist system that blocks any effective mobilization of science and resources internationally to contain it and limit its ravages. On the basis of a socialist program, the working class can and will win the support of significant sections of the middle class looking for a way out of the catastrophe created by capitalism.



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