

US House passes Washington D.C. statehood bill

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On Friday, June 26, the Democratic Party-controlled House of Representatives passed a bill, House Resolution 51, the District of Columbia Statehood Act, that would grant Washington D.C. the right to claim statehood. The bill passed 232-180, largely along party lines, with the majority of House Democrats supporting the move to make the District the 51st state.

If enacted, the bill would shrink the federally-administered portion of the District of Columbia, containing the White House, Congress, the National Mall and other institutions to a two-square-mile block, ceding the rest of the roughly 70-square-mile area to the newly-minted state of “New Columbia.”

The new state would be given representation in Congress as well as direct control over budgeting and laws within its jurisdiction. Currently, the District of Columbia relies upon acts of Congress to receive funding and local legislative initiatives must receive Congressional approval. It is highly unlikely that the bill will be ratified in the Republican Party-dominated Senate, with majority leader Mitch McConnell (R-Kentucky) vowing that the resolution is dead on arrival and President Trump prepared to veto anything that comes to his desk.

Primarily, congressional Republicans fear that the induction of a new, heavily Democratic-leaning state, adding two more Democratic senators to the present 100, could upset their narrow control in the Senate. Statehood would also prevent federal legislators from interfering in the social policies enacted in the US capital, as they presently do.

For the Democrats, the statehood bill is a cynical stunt. No such legislation was ever passed when the Democrats had full control of Congress and the White House, during the first two years of the Obama administration. The bill has passed now in an effort to

strike a “progressive” stance during the ongoing protests against police violence, while the Democrats know that the Republican Senate will block it and the Republican president would veto it.

In terms of population, “New Columbia” would be one of the smallest states in the country, larger only than Vermont and Wyoming in that respect. In terms of geographical area, it would be the smallest.

Various proponents of statehood have promoted it as an advance for democratic rights, granting the city’s roughly 700,000 residents voting rights in federal government and local control over budgets. At present, the District’s House delegate has consultative rights in the crafting of legislation, but no right to vote.

The formal organization of the District of Columbia occurred in 1801, enacted as part of the “District Clause” in Article I of the United States Constitution. Congress shall have power, the clause states: “To exercise exclusive legislation in all cases whatsoever, over such District (not exceeding ten miles square) as may, by cession of particular states, and the acceptance of Congress, become the seat of the government of the United States.”

The phrase “particular states” referred to Maryland and Virginia, each having surrendered a portion of their land toward the capital’s creation, although the land south of the Potomac River was returned to Virginia and now constitutes Arlington County, where the Pentagon is located.

It was desired by the Constitution’s framers that the nation’s capital obtain territory of its own so as not to fall under the jurisdiction of any other locality. In particular, there was a concern that the host state could exercise undue sway over the federal government’s operations.

The push for statehood today has taken on an

additional impetus amid the mass protests against police violence following the killing of George Floyd, an African American man in Minneapolis, in May. Supporters of making the District a state have promoted claims that this would enfranchise the city's large African American population, which today stands at roughly 45 percent of D.C.'s total, thus making the move a victory for civil rights.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and other congressional Democrats made extravagant displays in support of the bill, wearing face masks which bore the trademark "51" of the D.C. statehood campaign.

"Congress has two choices. It can continue to exercise undemocratic, autocratic authority over the 705,000 American citizens who reside in our nation's capital, treating them, in the words of Frederick Douglass as 'aliens, not citizens, but subjects.' Or Congress can live up to this nation's promise and ideals and pass H.R. 51," stated the District's lone delegate to Congress, Eleanor Holmes Norton, a Democrat, last week.

Referring to President Trump's deployment of federal troops on the streets of D.C. last month in response to largely peaceful protests, Norton said, "The federal occupation of D.C. occurred solely because the president thought he could get away with it here."

In reality, statehood for the District of Columbia would have no practical significance for the vast majority of the city's working class population, whether African American, white or immigrant. Poverty would still remain a daily concern, and the threat of wanton police brutality would remain a constant danger.

According to recent estimates by SmartAsset, Washington D.C. is the third most expensive city for renters in the country, with the average yearly cost totaling over \$37,000. With a median income of \$82,000, this means that costs of renting in the District currently eat up more than half of the average yearly paycheck. Nearly a fifth of the city's population lives in poverty.

While historically the federal government has utilized its control over the District of Columbia to test out anti-democratic and authoritarian measures, not least of all in the realm of aggressive policing, the utilization of SWAT teams, no-knock raids and the deployment of heavily armed federal troops to city streets have

become a common occurrence throughout the United States. This process would hardly be stalled by D.C. statehood.

According to *Forbes*, last month at least 23 states activated the National Guard and deployed armed officials on American cities during the largely peaceful multiracial protests against police brutality. Rather than being a check on the deployment of troops, the acquisition of statehood within the District of Columbia has manifested itself as another battleground between the various factions of the capitalist state seeking to gain leverage in order to wield the powers of a police state against the working population.

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