

After the January 6 coup attempt, Republicans escalate attack on voting rights

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On Thursday, Georgia Governor Brian Kemp signed into law a sweeping attack on voting rights aimed at crippling the ability of poor, minority and working class people to cast a ballot. Kemp, a Republican, signed the misnamed “Election Integrity Act” in a closed-door ceremony only hours after both Republican-controlled houses of the state legislature passed the measure on a party-line vote.

Georgia is one of 43 states whose legislatures are, for the most part, controlled by the Republican Party, and that have introduced bills attacking the most basic of all democratic rights, the right to vote. This drive was dramatically accelerated in the aftermath of Donald Trump’s unsuccessful effort to overturn the 2020 election and retain power as de facto dictator. Georgia is the first of these states to turn its proposals to gut voting rights into law.

Trump’s plot to overturn the Constitution was based on the lie, supported by virtually the entire Republican Party, of pervasive voter fraud and a “stolen election.” His conspiracy culminated in the fascist assault on the US Capitol on January 6, which, assisted by Trump and his appointed leaders of the Pentagon, came within seconds of achieving its goal of taking lawmakers hostage and blocking congressional certification of Joe Biden’s election victory.

Given Georgia’s history of lynch law and Jim Crow segregation, the arrest and jailing of state Representative Park Cannon, an African American woman, for demanding entry to Kemp’s office so as to protest the rollback of key gains of the civil rights movement, has a sinister symbolic significance.

Georgia was one of five “swing states” that switched from the Republicans to the Democrats in the 2020 presidential race, giving Biden a substantial victory in the electoral vote and contributing to his lopsided 8 million vote majority in the popular vote.

In an election that saw record voter participation nationally, Georgia voters cast ballots in record numbers, with black and working class Democratic voters in particular choosing to cast mail-in ballots due to the pandemic.

Trump’s defeat in November was followed in early January by the victory of Democratic challengers in two Senate runoff races, fueled by large turnouts among young and black voters. Those wins in Georgia shifted control of the Senate from the Republicans to the Democrats, giving them control of both houses of Congress as well as the White House.

The Republican “election integrity” provisions are in line with Trump’s unsuccessful demands on state officials and the courts to

overturn the results of the 2020 election. Trump repeatedly attacked Kemp and the Georgia secretary of state after they rejected his claims of election fraud and refused to carry out his demand that they overturn Biden’s win.

Provisions in the Georgia law include voter ID requirements for absentee ballots, a shorter period for voters to apply for mail-in ballots, limits on the use of ballot drop boxes, and a ban on mobile voting vans (which were used in the heavily black and Democratic Atlanta area).

The law even makes it a crime to offer food and water to voters waiting in line. It allows any state resident to lodge an unlimited number of challenges to voter registration and eligibility. It also allows state lawmakers to initiate takeovers of local election boards, giving them legal cover to block local officials in poor, minority and working class counties from certifying Democratic victories—something Trump attempted to do extra-legally by personally intervening to overturn the results in cities such as Atlanta and Detroit.

Similar provisions are included in bills being introduced in other states, from Arizona to Mississippi, South Carolina, Florida and Texas to northern industrial states such as Michigan. Some include even more overtly unconstitutional provisions, such as giving the state legislature the power to override the popular vote and choose its own slate of electors.

The entire working class must be united in the struggle to defeat the attack on voting rights. The first prerequisite for such a struggle, however, is to understand that no confidence can be placed in the other party of the American corporate-financial oligarchy, the Democrats, to defend the right to vote.

Trump and the Republicans speak for the most predatory and fascist sections of the ruling class. They have been emboldened to lay siege to democratic gains won through the struggles of millions of workers of all races by the feckless and duplicitous response of Biden and the Democrats to the January 6 attempted coup.

Rather than demanding the criminal prosecution of Trump and his Republican co-conspirators, they have incessantly pleaded with their “Republican colleagues” for unity and bipartisanship. At the same time, they have sought to cover up the massive scale of the coup conspiracy and the role of the Republican Party and high-ranking officials in the military, the police and the state intelligence apparatus. They have to this point held only a handful of public hearings, and refused to call Pentagon officials who

delayed for hours the dispatch of National Guard troops to protect the Capitol from the fascist mob.

At his first press conference, held Thursday, even as the Georgia bill was being rushed through the legislature, Biden repeated his appeal for “unity” and refused to endorse calls from voting rights advocates and some Democrats for the Democratic-controlled Congress to put an end to the anti-democratic filibuster, which gives the Republicans an effective veto on any and all legislation to protect the right to vote.

The current assault on voting rights is an escalation of an attack that has been ongoing for decades, against which the Democratic Party has mounted no serious opposition. It demonstrated its lack of any genuine commitment to the defense of voting rights in 2000, when Al Gore and the entire party accepted the Supreme Court ruling halting the counting of votes in Florida and handing the election to the loser of the popular vote, George W. Bush.

In 2013, the Supreme Court carried out the next major attack on voting rights in its 5–4 decision to overturn Section 5 of the landmark Voting Rights Act of 1965, the most important gain of the mass civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s. That ruling invalidated the enforcement mechanism of the act, lifting the requirement for former Jim Crow states in the South to pre-clear any changes in voting procedures with the federal government.

The Voting Rights Act put an end to the systematic exclusion of blacks from the ballot box, enforced mainly through KKK bombings and the murder of civil rights activists, white as well as black, by “law enforcement.” This reign of terror was carried out with the tacit support of J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI, which declared the struggle for civil rights to be a communist plot. All of this took place under the aegis of the Democratic Party, which based its political control of the South on its brutal enforcement of segregation.

The bill’s passage was extracted from the Johnson administration at the cost of the blood and lives of hundreds of martyrs. These included the three young activists, two white and one black, who joined the drive in the summer of 1964 to register blacks in Mississippi and were murdered by the KKK and local police. Passage of the act was preceded by the 1965 Selma to Montgomery voting rights marches, in which a number of participants and supporters were murdered by police and FBI informants.

Neither the Obama administration nor the congressional Democrats mounted any effort to pass legislation restoring the enforcement provisions of the Voting Rights Act, emboldening the Republicans to expand their drive to impose barriers in states across the country to block working class voters.

The Democrats are above all motivated by fear of the emergence of a left-wing, anti-war and socialist movement of the working class outside of the two-party system. When it comes to blocking ballot access to parties to their left, above all, socialist parties, they are no less ruthless and contemptuous of democratic rights than the Republicans.

In the 2020 election, Democratic governors, election officials and judges played the leading role in blocking the presidential candidates of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) from obtaining ballot status. The Democratic governors of Michigan and

California opposed legal motions by the SEP and its candidates, Joseph Kishore and Norissa Santa Cruz, to suspend already prohibitive and undemocratic signature requirements—12,000 in Michigan and 200,000 in California—in light of the coronavirus pandemic, which made petitioning for signatures a threat to the health of both SEP supporters and the general public.

They refused to place the SEP candidates on the ballot, arguing that they should risk their lives and violate state lockdown requirements even as the infection rate and death toll surged.

The Democratic attorney general of California argued that allowing the SEP on the ballot would cause “an unmanageable and overcrowded ballot” that would create “voter confusion” and “frustration of the democratic process.” Of course, the opposite was the case. The Democrats were, and remain, determined to prevent working class voters from having an opportunity to vote for a socialist alternative to the capitalist politicians.

As the WWS has explained, the pandemic is a trigger event that has intensified the global crisis of capitalism and accelerated the drive of the ruling classes to war and dictatorship. This is an international process. The criminal and incompetent response of capitalist governments all over the world to the pandemic, knowingly sacrificing millions of lives in order to protect and expand the profits and wealth of the rich and the super-rich, is discrediting the entire system in the eyes of the working class.

The turn toward fascism and dictatorship is the universal ruling class response. None of the social and democratic gains of the past century can be defended within the framework of a system that fuels ever more staggering levels of social inequality.

The defense of the right to vote is impossible without a political break with the Democratic Party and the building of a mass socialist movement of the working class. Millions of workers all over the world will come to understand that today there is no democracy without socialism, and will, under the revolutionary leadership of the SEP and its sister parties in the world Trotskyist movement, act accordingly.



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