

Florida House approves draconian HB 1 anti-protest bill

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Last Friday, Florida’s Republican-controlled House of Representatives passed the controversial HB 1 Combating Violence, Disorder, and Looting and Law Enforcement Protection Act, a draconian piece of legislation that gives the state greater power to suppress “unlawful assemblies” and maintain funding for law enforcement.

Now that the House has passed HB 1, the Florida Senate will have to pass a similar bill before it reaches the desk of Governor DeSantis. The Senate is also dominated by Republicans, who currently hold 24 of its 40 seats, but it has yet to give the bill a hearing in committee.

HB 1 is an attack on the First Amendment and serves as a reaction to the George Floyd protests last year. However, it is also a broader attempt by Republicans to strengthen the police amid concerns over the eruption of social opposition.

The bill elevates to the level of felony any crimes committed during a “riot,” which it defines as “a violent public disturbance involving an assembly of three or more persons” that results in (1) injury to another person, (2) damage to property, or (3) “imminent” danger of injury to another person or damage to property. The legislation would allow police provocateurs and fascistic “law-and-order” organizations to more easily enter any kind of protest action and convert it into a “riot” resulting in felony arrests and charges for all present.

HB 1 also holds municipalities civilly liable to maintain funding to their law enforcement agencies. It authorizes elected officials to appeal to the governor if a municipality’s governing body makes any reduction to the operating budget of its law enforcement agency—a response to the slogan “defund the police” which gained popularity during the Floyd protests.

Essentially, this would allow the governor to reject a city or county budget if it shifts any amount of money away from the police.

The bill has been spearheaded by Governor DeSantis, who first proposed the legislation in September while surrounded by law enforcement officers from around the state. On the first day of the 2021 legislative session in early March, DeSantis—an acolyte of ex-President Donald Trump—paraphrased a Merle Haggard song in his State of the State address: “When you mess with the men and women of law enforcement, you are walking on the fightin’ side of me.”

The initiation and passing of HB 1 legally encodes the lie that the George Floyd protests were riots characterized by looting and vandalism—a deliberate misrepresentation spurred on by the selective video footage aired by the media and promoted by Trump last summer. A study published last September by the US Crisis Project at Princeton University showed that about 93 percent of those protests in the United States were entirely peaceful and nondestructive.

Many elected officials have publicly opposed the bill over the past few weeks. Hillsborough County State Attorney Andrew Warren, a Democrat, critiqued the definition of “riot” in the bill for being too broad. “Under this definition, if you have a large group of people where only three of them do something bad, everybody else there is participating in a riot,” he told ABC News affiliate WTXL. “This bill doesn’t actually help prosecutors. We already have laws on the books for rioting, looting, destruction, violence. ... Rather than draw a clear distinction between peaceful protesting and criminal conduct, it actually blurs the line between them.”

Former Florida Supreme Court Justice Peggy Quince said, “This is an anti-protest bill, not a bill to enhance

public safety.” Palm Beach County State Attorney Dave Aronberg told the *Palm Beach Post*: “This is a politically motivated bill that nobody asked for, and it’s liable to be overturned in court because of its dubious constitutionality.”

The debate that took place within the House on Friday has been framed by the corporate media as being between “law and order” and “racial justice.” Imitating the stunt pulled off by Democrats in Congress last June, Florida Democrats on Friday opened their remarks by speaking for eight minutes and 46 seconds, a symbolic gesture referencing the time George Floyd was pinned to the ground with a knee on his neck before he died.

The bill was passed with a vote of 76-39, which is almost the exact divide between Republicans and Democrats currently in the House (78-42). Democrats attempted to make several amendments, but most were rejected. Among those that were accepted is a requirement that only a state attorney or local elected official can appeal a budget cut. HB 1 also originally removed liability for individuals who harm other individuals whom they think are rioters—a nod to the fascist Kyle Rittenhouse who is charged in the killing of two anti-police violence protesters in Wisconsin last August.

The Democrats have used this opportunity to posture as defenders of democracy but have unsurprisingly couched all of their criticisms in a racist outlook. Warren, in his critique, stated: “This bill creates a potential for widespread abuse. We know that abuse in the criminal justice system has historically disproportionately hurt minorities.”

Democratic House members spoke before a rally against the bill at the state Capitol in Tallahassee on March 2. Rep. Michelle Reyner of St. Petersburg called the bill “anti-Black, anti-Brown, and anti-LGBTQ,” and Rep. Angie Nixon of Jacksonville stated bluntly, “This bill is a racist bill.”

The Democrats have also appeared at rallies held by their allied activist groups in the wake of the passing of the bill in the House. Rep. Anna Eskamani of Orlando spoke at a rally Friday night, where she stated: “Though it passed the House floor y’all, the fight is nowhere near over,” referring to the fact that the Florida State Senate has not given HB 1 a hearing in committee.

The rally was held by March For Our Lives, and its

Florida Director Alyssa Ackbar spoke before the crowd, saying: “This bill is very much an attack on Black and Brown organizers and protesters in the state, because, you know, during the summer we saw a mass of people making their voices heard and that really scared elected officials.”

As the Socialist Equality Party stated last June the protests against police violence have been multiracial and multinational, bringing together young people and workers in mass demonstrations across the US and internationally. The political forces that currently dominate such protests are affluent sections of the middle class with close ties to the Democratic Party, which seek to impose upon the protest a racist narrative and block the emergence of the fundamental class issues.

Anger is mounting in the working class, and the Republicans and Democrats are only divided tactically on how to suppress a genuine working class movement—the former through strengthening the state and fascist forces to smash any sign of opposition and the latter through the promotion of divisive racial and gender politics that pit workers against each other.



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