

Florida Governor DeSantis signs reactionary bill criminalizing demonstrations against police violence

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Florida governor Ron DeSantis signed into law Monday an “anti-riot” bill aimed at suppressing and criminalizing popular protests against police violence. The bill asserts the false equivalence Republicans across the US have sought to draw between peaceful anti-police violence protests and looting and property damage that has sometimes coincided with demonstrations.

The law was passed ahead of the verdict in the trial of police officer Derek Chauvin in the murder of George Floyd. Chauvin’s killing of Floyd triggered a wave of anti-police marches throughout the nation last summer, including in cities across Florida. The draconian legislation is the latest in a series of measures Republican state legislators nationwide have taken to repress social opposition and attack democratic rights.

In presenting the law, the so-called “Combating Public Disorder” bill, the Republican governor asserted that it was the “strongest anti-rioting, pro-law enforcement measure in the country.” While the vast majority of demonstrations over the summer remained peaceful, DeSantis claimed that the law was needed to stop “rioters,” which in reality means cracking down even further against any opposition to police brutality under conditions where workers and youth continue to protest the uninterrupted wave of police killings.

After signing the bill, DeSantis said that the legislation would introduce new protections for police officers and put “an end to the bullying and intimidation tactics of the radical left.” It grants police districts and state officials the right to appeal if a municipality or county seeks to reduce its local police budget.

The bill also contains a slew of anti-democratic and

punitive procedures aimed at emboldening the police and punishing discontent. It allows authorities to detain arrested protesters until they make their first appearance in court—preventing them from immediately posting bail.

It enlarges the penalties for any damage to property or other forms of violence during protests. The law also penalizes mass public demonstrations, characterizing them as “mob intimidation” and makes it a crime to “dox” police officials, hampering the ability of protesters to record and expose instances of violence from law enforcement officials during protests.

Protestors could now face longer prison sentences of up to 10 years for targeting public memorials or historic structures, such as the dozens of Confederate monuments, dedicated to those who fought to defend slavery during the Civil War, that were either removed or rebranded last year.

In supporting and carrying the reactionary bill into the state senate, Republican senator Danny Burgess said, “rights have limits, and violence is where the line is drawn” and the bill is “about preventing violence.”

Legislation targeting protests is only one of several other initiatives being launched by Republican state officials to erode key democratic rights. A bill introduced in recent weeks, known as S.B. 90, imposes new voting restrictions in local and federal elections. The legislation adds stringent requirements for absentee voting, expanded powers for voting observers overseeing vote counts, limits on drop off ballots and new requirements for voters requesting absentee ballots.

The bill was approved by the Senate Rules Committee by a margin of 10-7, with only one

Republican joining every Democrat in opposing it. The committee approval sets up a possible floor vote on the legislation in the coming weeks. Republicans have falsely claimed that the bill is necessary to ensure the state's elections are secure, citing unsubstantiated allegations of voter fraud during Florida's 2020 elections.

The restriction of voting rights is being repeated in countless states throughout the country, with the Republican Party promoting the fraudulent claim first proclaimed by former President Donald Trump that the 2020 presidential election was "stolen," which was the political pretext for the mobilization of fascist forces during the January 6 insurrection aimed at overturning the victory of President Joe Biden.

According to a report released by the Brennan Center for Justice in February, Florida is among 33 states where lawmakers with dominant Republican control are pursuing legislation to massively restrict voting. The report found that around 165 of such bills had been filed up until then, compared to just 35 in February 2020. DeSantis and Florida republicans have been among the most ferocious in their campaign to alter state voting laws.

These changes include raising the threshold for passage of a referendum to alter Florida's constitution from 60 percent of ballots to around 67 percent and lowering the donation caps for political action committees sponsoring constitutional amendments, rendering it far more difficult for petitioners to place amendment proposals up for votes.

Florida's Democratic Party has responded to the brazen attacks on democratic rights with their usual rhetorical posturing. Democratic Senate leader Gary Farmer called the proposals a "suppression campaign" not seen "since Jim Crow days." U.S. Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz of Broward County said the Republicans were making "deceitful claims" about elections and using "manufactured fears of fraud."

Florida Democrats earlier in the year went out of their way to solidarize themselves with the Republicans in praising the relative smoothness of the state's November 2020 elections in contrast to the contentious national presidential outcome. This was despite the Democrats encountering major electoral defeats, including losing five state representative seats, increasing the Republican's control over the lower

house of the legislature.

The Democrats have used their platform to make criticisms of the Republican's policies while making no serious attempt to oppose the latter's undemocratic maneuvers, by above all refusing to mobilize popular opposition against the bills out of fear of provoking a greater social upheaval. State Democratic officials, in lockstep with their nationwide counterparts, have gone out of their way to maintain bipartisan unity with their Republican "colleagues," by combining whimpers of opposition with utterly feckless claims that nothing can be done to stop the descent towards authoritarianism.



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