

House holds hearing on threat to voting rights in Texas as Democrats abandon fight against it

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The House Committee on Oversight and Reform held a hearing this Thursday on efforts by the Texas state legislature to pass restrictive voting laws. The hearing, which was held by the sub-committee on Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, featured testimony from several Texas Democratic state legislators appealing for a new federal law to protect voting rights.

The Texas Democrats had walked out of the State Senate chamber in an effort to prevent the Republican majority from passing the restrictive bill. When Republican Governor Greg Abbott issued an order for a special session of congress ensure a vote, the Texas Democrats walked out again with at least 51 of the 67 representatives fleeing the state to Washington D.C.

During the hearing, the Democratic representatives highlighted the dangerous and restrictive aspects of the Texas Senate Bill 1 (SB1).

A key provision in the bill would enact stricter regulations on absentee ballots, requiring voters to record the last four digits of their Social Security number or driver's license, thus giving the state ample opportunity to reject ballots if voters make a mistake.

Additionally, the bill would ban drop boxes for mail-in ballots, drive-through voting and 24-hour voting locations, as well as make it a felony for election officials to distribute unrequested absentee ballot applications.

An even more dangerous provision of the bill is its protections for partisan poll watchers. SB1 would make it a crime for an election official to reject a poll watcher who meets the basic requirements, make it illegal to obstruct the view of a poll watcher, and ensure that poll watchers are "entitled to sit or stand near enough to hear or see the activity."

Poll watchers are still supposedly barred from directly watching voters cast their ballots, but these provisions will provide near unrestricted access to voters and election officials at all other times. And the nearness and aggressiveness of the poll watchers are likely to have an intimidating effect.

The bill will also empower poll watchers to sue election officials they have deemed to have obstructed their work, and the House version of the bill, HB3, includes an additional clause that prevents poll watchers from being removed for violating election law unless they have already been warned. Such a provision would grant free rein to far-right poll watchers to intimidate voters with just a slap on the wrist.

Unable to stop the passage of SB1, Texas Democrats fled the state to halt the vote. According to Texas congressional rules, legislation cannot be passed without a "quorum", which in Texas requires a two-thirds majority of representatives to be present in order to conduct business. The intention of the Democrats is to delay the passage of the voting bills as long as possible.

However, the walkouts are little more than a political stunt to promote the passage of the two federal voting bills sponsored by the Democrats, the For the People Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act.

The WSWs has noted that these bills are entirely inadequate in dealing with the threat to democratic rights posed by the Republican Party. As limited as they already are, many of the provisions that would actually expand voting rights are currently being negotiated out of the bills, and the remaining contents will serve only to advance the electoral interests of the

Democratic Party.

This farcical parade of empty talk on voting rights has been all the more exposed by the actions of Democratic Senator Joe Manchin, who met with the Texas Democrats only to inform them that he would not support voting rights legislation unless it were backed by substantial numbers of Republicans.

The Texas Democrats will eventually have to return home empty handed, where many await arrest warrants issued by the Texas House of Representatives that will enable state police to escort them back to the State Capitol. The warrants only possess legal force within the state of Texas, but Governor Abbott has sworn to “call special session after special session after special session—all the way up until the election next year.” He continued, “As soon as they come back to the state of Texas, they will be arrested. They will be cabined inside the Texas Capitol until they get their job done.”

Despite the clear threat to voting rights, the national Democratic Party has largely dropped the issue, in favor of bipartisan talks on infrastructure, because of unanimous Republican opposition in the Senate, which would require overturning the filibuster rule to defeat.

At a CNN town hall last week, President Biden reaffirmed that he would not support any action to curb the filibuster. Aside from the usual complacent statements from congressional Democrats about the need for federal legislation, little to no serious effort has been made to pass either of the Democrat’s two voting rights bills.

In fact, the Democrats appear prepared to scrap the main provisions from both bills. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer met with several Senate Democrats on Wednesday, including Manchin, to discuss plans for a revised version of the For the People Act designed to appease the Republican Party.

No political party that actually defended democracy would hold voting rights hostage to the very party attempting to undermine the right to vote. Such a political move is entirely unprincipled and a demonstration that the Democratic Party, despite all its blustering about civil rights, is a fundamentally right-wing party.

The details of Schumer’s “compromise” bill have yet to be announced, but it is likely that it will bear strong similarities to Joe Manchin’s proposed version of the bill which stripped away key provisions such as

returning the right to vote to former felons, replacing them with a reactionary national voter ID requirement. Manchin also proposed changes to the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act which would weaken the authority of the Department of Justice to rule that state and local voting laws are discriminatory.

It is also worth noting that nowhere in Manchin’s, nor the original bills, is there any language that would strike down Texas’ laws empowering partisan poll watchers. Nor would they stop efforts from states like Georgia to grant judges and partisan officials the authority to overrule the results of an election.

The working class needs its own, independent solution to the assault on voting rights. The Republican Party has acted to dismantle the few democratic rights the working class has, while the Democratic Party is terrified that any mobilization of the working class, even to defend its own electoral interests, would quickly grow out of its control.

This is reflected by the turn in strategy of the Biden administration, which is now promoting the idea that it can “out-organize voter suppression,” by which it means organizing votes for Democratic candidates in the next election, ignoring the fact that it is current Democrats—senators Kyrsten Sinema and Joe Manchin—who stand in the way of passing voting rights legislation.

There is no constituency left within the ruling class for the defense of democratic rights. The working class must take the fight against these fascistic assaults on voting into its own hands, as part of the struggle for socialism and a truly democratic society.



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