Florida governor proposes state military force under his direct control

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On Thursday, Florida Republican Governor Ron DeSantis proposed the establishment of a 200-member Florida State Guard, a military force that would be under his direct control. In announcing the $3.5 million proposal, DeSantis claimed the force would be used to support "emergency response efforts in the event of a hurricane, natural disasters and other state emergencies."

The State Guard, a revival of the force established during World War II to replace deployed National Guard troops and disbanded in 1947, will undoubtedly serve as an auxiliary force of repression against protests and strikes of workers and youth.

DeSantis deployed over 1,000 members of the Florida National Guard to help suppress protests that broke out all over the state in response to the May 25, 2020, murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. On June 3, two days after massively armed military police, on Donald Trump's order, violently attacked protesters assembled outside the White House, DeSantis sent a further 500 guardsmen to Washington D.C. at the request of then-Defense Secretary Mark Esper.

Under Florida's "Military Affairs" statute, DeSantis could deploy the State Guard "to assist the civil authorities in maintaining law and order." And unlike the Florida National Guard the State Guard would be beyond federal control and could not be deployed by the US President. Currently 22 states and Puerto Rico maintain state defense forces which largely operate as auxiliaries for the National Guard.

DeSantis' call for the revival of a military force at his sole command is consistent with the fascistic strategy pursued by the governor. On April 29, the day before the verdict in the Derek Chauvin case was announced, DeSantis signed into law the "Combating Public Disorder" bill, stating that it was the "strongest anti-rioting, pro-law enforcement measure in the country." The bill contains a slew of anti-democratic punitive measures meant to intimidate people from exercising their rights to free speech and assembly.

That same day, DeSantis signed into law a series of anti-democratic attacks on voting rights. The changes will make voter registration more difficult, restrict the ability to provide snacks to voters waiting in line, restrict the time period during which a voter can remain on the state's vote-by-mail list, and restrict the availability of and access to secure ballot drop boxes.

This summer, in response to a request from far-right Texas Governor Greg Abbott and Arizona Governor Doug Ducey, DeSantis sent approximately 50 Florida National Guard troops to the Texas-Mexico border to arrest desperate migrants. At the time of the deployment, DeSantis proclaimed, in Trump-like language, "We are witnessing a catastrophe at the southern border under the Biden Administration. In recent months, we have seen people from the terrorist watch list, known sex offenders and a flood of fentanyl cross over the border. This is a national security crisis, and we must get it under control."

DeSantis, a close ally of Trump, has also been one of the leading proponents of the homicidal "herd immunity" policy of letting SARS-CoV-2 rip through the population without even minimal public health measures. As a result of this policy, Florida has one of the highest death tolls, on a per capita basis, in the country.

As the *South Florida Sun-Sentinel* remarked in late 2020, "DeSantis, who owes his job to early support from President Donald Trump, imposed an approach in line with the views of the president and his powerful base of supporters. The administration suppressed unfavorable facts, dispensed dangerous misinformation,

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dismissed public health professionals, and promoted the views of scientific dissenters who supported the governor's approach to the disease."

On July 30, DeSantis issued an executive order barring mask mandates for students in school and threatened to withhold funding from districts that implemented such measures. In late August DeSantis followed through on this threat, withholding funding from two school districts with mask mandates.

DeSantis has also sought to hide the true extent of the spread of COVID-19 in the state. When whistleblower Rebekah Jones, a Florida Department of Health employee, exposed attempts by the state to manipulate data, she was fired. Immediately, Jones launched an independent website, COVID Action, to monitor the spread of the disease in the state.

Last December, DeSantis responded to Jones' exposures by sending police to raid her home, with guns pointed at her husband and children. Police seized her phone, computers and other equipment used in maintaining the COVID Action website.

At the time of the raid, Jones tweeted, "This was DeSantis. He sent the gestapo. This is what happens to scientists who do their job honestly. This is what happens to people who speak truth to power."

In September, DeSantis appointed Dr. Joseph Ladapo as surgeon general of the state. Ladapo is a proponent of herd immunity, opposes mask mandates and has downplayed the effectiveness of vaccines, stating, "There is nothing special about them [vaccines] compared to any other preventive measures." He also undermined quarantine procedures for those exposed to the virus, issuing an emergency rule in allowing parents to decide whether their children needed to quarantine if exposed to someone with COVID-19.

On September 16, DeSantis awarded the Governor's Medal of Freedom to former CIA officer Felix Rodríguez, who directed the operations of the Bolivian army unit which captured and murdered Che Guevara in Bolivia in October 1967, participated in the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, and later trained South Vietnamese paramilitary units for Operation Phoenix during the Vietnam War, which killed over 80,000 people.

In awarding this criminal, DeSantis said, "Felix's life has been dedicated to fighting communism, to supporting freedom, to supporting liberty, and we appreciate Felix as a brave and courageous freedom fighter. From his service as a paramilitary officer with the Central Intelligence Agency during the Bay of Pigs Invasion to a Colonel in the United States Army at the height of the Vietnam War, Felix has marked his legacy as one of the bravest fighters for freedom in history."

Workers, facing dire economic and health conditions greatly exacerbated by the pandemic, are coming more and more into open conflict with the policies of the ruling class, epitomized by DeSantis' unabashed support for letting the coronavirus rip through the population. The Florida governor's latest move to create a military force under his command, to be deployed against protesters and strikers, is a serious danger to the working class and must be opposed.

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