

US Senate passes Emmett Till Anti-Lynching Act

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The U.S. Senate unanimously passed the Emmett Till Anti-Lynching Act on Monday named after the black teenager whose brutal killing helped to spark the mass civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. The bill criminalizes lynching and makes it punishable by up to 30 years in prison. Introduced by Representative Bobby L. Rush (Democrat, Illinois) in the House and senators Cory Booker (Democrat, New Jersey) and Tim Scott (Republican, South Carolina) in the Senate, it is now headed to President Joe Biden’s desk for signature.

An estimated 4,700 lynchings took place in the United States from the last two decades of the 19th century through the first half of the 20th. Lynching was part of the system of racist terror that accompanied Jim Crow segregation. Nearly three-quarters of its victims were blacks, mostly but not entirely in the former Confederate states of the South.

Efforts to make lynching a crime go back more than 120 years. In 1900 a congressman from North Carolina, then the only black member of Congress, introduced a bill which went nowhere. Anti-lynching bills have been regularly introduced since then. In 1918, Leonidas Dyer, a white Republican from St. Louis, was able to secure passage of the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill in the House of Representatives, but it was halted by a filibuster by Southern Democrats in the Senate, who declared lynching a states’ rights issue.

Subsequent efforts were repeatedly blocked by Southern Democrats. Later, after the passage of civil rights legislation in the 1960s, the Republicans took over the task of defending “states’ rights.” The passage of the bill today is largely symbolic, given the almost complete disappearance of this form of brutal racist vigilantism.

Emmett Till was a 14-year-old boy from Chicago who spent part of the summer of 1955 visiting his great-

uncle Mose Wright in the Delta region of northwest Mississippi. He was brutally beaten and shot to death on August 28 of that year for the “crime” of allegedly whistling at a white woman. His murderers, Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam, were quickly tried and acquitted by an all-white jury, less than a month later.

The murder of Emmett Till drew international news coverage and outrage and exposed the brutal reality of Jim Crow, particularly after the courageous decision of Till’s mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, to show the gruesome consequences of her son’s murder in an open-casket funeral.

Why has the anti-lynching legislation finally made it through Congress? The reasons have nothing to do with the interests of the working class, including a genuine fight against all forms of racism and prejudice.

Both capitalist parties have their reasons for posturing as opponents of lynching today. For the Republicans, it’s a cheap means—especially since the mass multi-ethnic protests against police killings after the murder of George Floyd in 2020—of clothing themselves in the mantle of anti-discrimination, even as they appeal to racist elements, and Donald Trump openly welcomes the support of white supremacists.

For the Democrats, invoking the name of Emmett Till is a cynical maneuver to shore up their voting base in the midterm elections. The Biden administration and the Democrats are hemorrhaging support because millions who were told that their hatred of Donald Trump made it necessary to pull the lever for the Democrats have been bitterly disgusted by the consequences.

Rush, the co-sponsor of the legislation, issued a statement Monday evening declaring that “lynching is a longstanding and uniquely American weapon of racial terror that has for decades been used to maintain white

hierarchy. Unanimous Senate passage of the Emmett Till Anti-Lynching Act sends a clear and emphatic message that our nation will no longer ignore this shameful chapter of our history and that the full force of the US federal government will always be brought to bear against those who commit this heinous act.”

Rush’s pompous words are belied by the fact that fascists, anti-Semites and white supremacists, openly encouraged and supported by one of the two major capitalist parties, are on the rampage, as evidenced by the recent killing in Portland, Oregon, and last year’s murders in Kenosha, Wisconsin.

On the other hand, the Democrats have long sought to utilize identity politics to retain their dwindling support among minority workers. At the same time, racialist politics is used to promote divisions and obscure the common class interests of all sections of the working class against all the politicians of big business, Democrat and Republican alike. Rather than taking action on the genuine grievances of workers and youth of all races and ethnicities, the proponents of identity politics defend the privileged sections of the upper middle class and, above all, the interests of the big bourgeoisie.

A flagrant example of this was Vice President Kamala Harris’ recent attempt, in a March 6 speech marking the anniversary of the Bloody Sunday march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, in 1965, to compare the brave struggle taken up by millions in the civil rights movement to the war in Ukraine. Standing on the bridge made famous by the 1965 march, Harris said, “Today, the eyes of the world are on Ukraine and the brave people who are fighting to protect their country and their democracy. ... At this moment, we are faced with a choice, a choice that we have faced many times before: Do we stand or do we fight? Gathered at this bridge, reflecting on its history, yes, I know the path forward is clear.”

This outrageous attempt to draw a straight line between the suffering of the Ukrainian people and the civil rights battles of the mid-20th century ignores the fact that the war in Ukraine was instigated by the US itself. It is Harris and her superior in the White House who are primarily responsible. One must add that the US government did not provide billions in military aid to the civil rights activists who were facing beatings and death. Now Biden and Harris invoke the memory

of civil rights martyrs to stoke the imperialist war drive.

The legacy of past injustice finds present-day expression in higher US poverty rates and social ills among African Americans and other minorities, as well as in a disproportionate number among those killed by police. This is a product of the capitalist system and the class oppression upon which it is based.

The true lessons of the history of lynching and the struggle against it include the need to fight the imperialist war drive that Harris represents. The working class of all races and ethnicities, including its most vulnerable and oppressed sections, must be united on the basis of a socialist program against the capitalist system and its political representatives.



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