

Passage of anti-democratic bill banning discussion of sexual orientation in Florida schools triggers student walkouts

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Student protests and walkouts have taken place at multiple Florida schools following last week's passage of a reactionary bill that bans classroom discussion of sexual orientation or gender identity in the state's primary schools.

The "Parental Rights in Education" bill, or HB-1557, was passed by the state Senate on March 8 in a party line vote of 22-17, following its adoption last month by the Florida House of Representatives. Republican Governor Ron DeSantis has said he will sign the bill into law.

The legislation, dubbed the "Don't Say Gay" bill by its opponents, is part of the Republican Party's fascistic campaign to whip up anti-gay and racial prejudice in the name of a crusade against Critical Race Theory and other forms of identity politics, which it falsely associates with socialism and Marxism.

At least 18 separate bills similarly targeting LGBTQ+ people are moving through Republican-controlled legislatures in nine states, including Georgia, Tennessee and Oklahoma. They are of a piece with bills passed in a growing number of states curtailing voter access to the polls, as well as laws virtually banning abortions.

DeSantis, who is positioning himself to challenge Donald Trump for the Republican presidential nomination in 2024, signaled his support for the measure earlier this year, calling it "entirely inappropriate" for teachers to be having conversations with students about gender identity.

The bill aims to forbid "classroom instruction by school personnel or third parties on sexual orientation or gender identity" in kindergarten through the third grade. Its language is designed to expand the prohibition to all grades, banning the teaching of any lessons "in a manner that is not age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate for students."

It also includes a provision allowing parents to sue

school districts if they feel the law is not being rigorously enforced.

Right-wing proponents of the legislation say discussions over LGBTQ+ issues are "not age-appropriate" for students in classrooms. DeSantis maintains, "The larger issue with all of this is that parents must have a seat at the table when it comes to what's going on in their schools."

Such claims of "parental rights" are being used as the pretext for seeking to remove books from school classrooms and libraries that are critical of American capitalism and its history.

More than 500 students participated in a massive walkout on March 7 at Winter Park High School in Orange County, Florida in protest against the anti-gay legislation. Students condemned the stigmatization of gay, lesbian and transgender children legitimized by the bill, which many believe will cause more bullying and suicides of victimized youth.

There were also walkouts at Pembroke Pines Charter High School, MAST Academy in Key Biscayne, Cypress Bay High in Weston and Coral Glades Senior High in Coral Springs.

At a rally last Sunday in Miami Beach, one student told a local news station, "Very scared and concerned, you know. It's really upsetting to know that our lawmakers and stuff like that don't even support the communities that make up so many cities in the state."

Opinion polls show majority opposition both in Florida and nationally to the anti-gay legislation. A poll taken last month by the Public Opinion Research Lab at the University of North Florida found that 49 percent of Floridians opposed the bill while only 40 percent supported it.

A nationwide poll conducted between March 11 and March 12 by ABC News and Ipsos showed that 62

percent of respondents disapproved of legislation like the Florida bill while only 37 percent approved. No age group expressed majority support for such bills.

A 2021 survey by The Trevor Project, an LGBTQ youth suicide prevention and crisis intervention group, found that 42 percent of more than 35,000 LGBTQ youth seriously considered attempting suicide in 2020. Ninety-four percent reported that recent politics negatively impacted their mental health, and 75 percent acknowledged that they had experienced discrimination based on their sexual orientation or gender identity at least once in their lifetime.

In Florida, large majorities of LGBTQ youth reported hearing homophobic remarks in school, according to a 2019 survey conducted by GLSEN. The same survey found that 69 percent reported being verbally harassed based on sexual orientation.

Democratic Party politicians, including Miami Beach Mayor Dan Gelber, have addressed protests against the bill. President Biden issued a statement denouncing it.

They do so from the standpoint of promoting identity politics, aimed at dividing the working class and covering up the fundamental class divisions in society. Meanwhile, they scrap all measures to limit the spread of COVID-19 and force students and teachers back into unsafe schools despite rising infections and deaths of children. Biden is overseeing a de facto NATO war against Russia that threatens to trigger a nuclear world war. The aim of both big business parties is to ensure corporate profits and stock prices, whatever the cost in human lives.

At the same time, the passage of HB-1557 has led to sharp fissures within business and political circles. Last week, Bob Chapek, chief executive of the tourism and entertainment giant Walt Disney, voiced public opposition to the proposed law in front of shareholders after being criticized for remaining silent on the legislation.

The multi-billion-dollar company accounts for a large part of the Florida economy and wields immense influence in the state government, having lavished substantial sums on politicians of both the Republican and Democratic Parties.

“We were opposed to the bill from the outset but we chose not to take a public position on it,” Chapek said. He also called the bill “yet another challenge to basic human rights” and claimed he had called DeSantis to convey Disney’s “disappointment.”

DeSantis, however, remained unyielding in his commitment to the bill last Thursday during a campaign stop in Boca Raton, where he lambasted the company for

endorsing “woke” ideologies. The far-right governor also condemned the company for its associations with China.

“Disney is in far too deep with the Communist Party of China and has lost any moral authority to tell you what to do,” DeSantis said.

The next day, Chapek pledged in a company-wide email that Walt Disney would stop donating to political campaigns in the state as a protest against HB-1557.

DeSantis, who is making an aggressive run for a 2024 Republican presidential nomination, has made it a mission to further solidify his credentials among the extreme right and ruling elite.

Florida’s state government has led the way in the nationwide push to rescind all pandemic-related lockdowns and restrictions aimed at slowing down COVID-19, including designing laws prohibiting mask mandates in schools and businesses. DeSantis is also poised to sign into law an anti-abortion bill that was passed by the Florida legislature earlier this month, which bans the procedure after 15 weeks.

In the fight against anti-gay measures and all other attacks on democratic rights, no confidence can be placed in the Democratic Party. Like the Republican Party, it is an instrument of the corporate-financial ruling class. It has capitulated to the Trumpite Republican right on every democratic issue, from voting rights to abortion rights to holding accountable the authors of the January 6, 2021 coup attempt. It will similarly capitulate on the defense of gay and transgender people.

Socialists oppose all such attacks on free speech and democratic rights more broadly, and oppose all forms of discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation. They do so on the basis of the unification of the working class in opposition to the entire political establishment and the capitalist system.



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