

Florida Governor signs bill banning classroom instruction and employee training on race, sexuality and nationality

Alex Johnson
25 April 2022

On Friday, Florida's far-right Republican Governor Ron DeSantis signed repressive legislation for public schools and businesses that bans the introduction of what Republicans call "woke indoctrination" on concepts related to sexism, racism or nationality in classroom teaching and employee training programs. The latest bill, otherwise called the "Stop Woke Act," is the latest in a wave of reactionary laws pushed through the Republican-led legislature as part of brutal attacks against democratic rights.

The language of the Stop the Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees (Stop W.O.K.E.) act mirrors similar laws that have been passed in at least a dozen other Republican-led states that aim to eliminate teaching on historical struggles against racial and sexual discrimination and for social equality, under the guise of a fight against Critical Race Theory (CRT) and other "divisive concepts." Florida's anti-Woke law builds on legislation passed in the summer of last year that banned classroom instruction of Critical Race Theory and the *New York Times'* 1619 project in Florida's schools.

A goal of the bill is to eviscerate protections for academic freedom and free speech in K-12 schools and universities, as many educators already report refraining from covering topics on civil rights history or other courses related to racial issues out of fear of provoking reprisals and sanctions.

Jeremy Young, senior manager of free expression and education at PEN America, argued that the law has ominous implications for academic freedom of education in K-12 schools and public colleges and universities. Young told *Time* magazine, "it prohibits the promotion of these ideas by public university faculty, it is almost certainly unconstitutional."

In January, Florida's Osceola County school district canceled a workshop for teachers about the civil rights movement "in light of the current conversations across our state and in our community about critical race theory." The history professor, Michael Butler, who was scheduled to lead the seminar, said his presentation was not about critical race theory, the Associated Press reported.

The purpose of the legislation is to whitewash and erase significant portions of American history that concern the legacy

of social inequality and national and racial oppression. Furthermore, an overriding aim of suppressing free speech is to ensure no discussion is held among students and workers which might encourage dissent that challenges the status quo. A precedent for this was set last summer when DeSantis signed into law several reactionary education bills aimed at vilifying socialism, with the fascistic governor denouncing communist and left-wing beliefs as "evil" ideologies.

The same anti-democratic restrictions also apply to training, workforce education and other diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) programs. The bill would prevent companies from subjecting "any individual, as a condition of employment ... to training, instruction or any other required activity that espouses, promotes, advances, inculcates or compels such individual to believe" a long list of concepts related to race or sexual orientation. It also prohibits employers from teaching concepts that suggest an individual should feel "guilt, anguish, or other forms of psychological distress because of actions committed in the past" by other members of the same race, color, sex or national origin.

The bill amounts to a reversal of many of the significant gains won through years of bitter struggles during the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, whose mainspring was the striving for greater racial and gender equality and working class solidarity.

In a news release last December announcing the law, DeSantis declared: "We won't allow Florida tax dollars to be spent teaching kids to hate our country or to hate each other." Florida Lieutenant Governor Jeanette Nuñez said: "As the daughter of Cuban exiles who fled from Marxist ideology, I am proud to stand alongside Governor DeSantis and support this proposed legislation that will put an end to wokeness that is permeating our schools and workforce."

The campaign towards censorship in schools also intensified earlier this month when state education officials banned 41 percent of textbooks reviewed for student use due to their supposed inclusion of critical race theory (CRT) and other race-related educational material. A news release by the Florida Department of education on April 15 noted that 54 of the 132

reviewed textbooks were “impermissible with either Florida’s new standards or contained prohibited topics.”

The driving force behind the Republican’s fascistic campaign is to exploit the hostility towards the racist and identity politics of the Democratic Party and pseudo-left, which seeks to pit workers and youth against each other to derail a united fight against capitalism. The anti-CRT campaign was motivated in large part as a reaction of the far-right faction of the US ruling class led by Donald Trump to head off the widespread multiracial and multi-ethnic protests that erupted in the summer of 2020 following the murder of George Floyd. The police murder of this African American man, caught on cellphone video, triggered massive demonstrations among millions of workers and youth in opposition to police killings.

A central focus of the Democrats was diverting such popular opposition along racial lines, out of fear the protests would inspire a far broader movement of the working class that threatened the interests of the capitalists.

In fact, despite denunciations by the Democrats of DeSantis’ right-wing assault on free speech, the liberal section of the ruling class and purveyors of racial politics have spearheaded their own filthy attacks on history through the *New York Times*’ 1619 project. Its author, Nikole Hannah-Jones, proclaims that racism against blacks “runs in the very DNA of this country,” while she falsely characterizes the American Revolution as a movement aimed at defending slavery.

In recent weeks, DeSantis has spearheaded a far-right agenda based on imposing the most ferocious and retrograde attacks on the democratic rights of the entire working class.

Earlier this month DeSantis signed into a law a bill that bans abortions after 15 weeks of pregnancy, a move aimed at massively restricting the constitutional right to the procedure. The new law does not allow any exemptions for pregnancies that arise from rape, incest or human trafficking. Instead, it contains exemptions only if the abortion is seen as necessary to save a mother’s life, prevent injury or if the fetus has a fatal abnormality.

Another far-right assault came from the signing of HB-1557, commonly referred to by opponents as the “Don’t Say Gay” bill, which banned classroom instruction by school personnel or third parties on sexual orientation or gender identity in kindergarten through grades 3 in primary schools. HB-1557 allows for parents to sue school districts over alleged violations of the policy, while the broad language in the bill regarding what is considered “age-” or “developmentally-appropriate” education effectively bars any teaching or discussion of sexual orientation or gender identity. This leaves already greatly underfunded public schools further at risk of suffering financial losses due to politically motivated lawsuits.

Just days prior to the signing of the anti-Woke bill, the Florida State Senate passed by a party line vote of 24-15 a new congressional map drawn by DeSantis to strengthen Republican control over the Florida delegation to the US House of

Representatives in national elections. The new map, heavily partisan and racist, would violate the state constitution’s Fair District Amendment, which bans intentional partisan gerrymandering and the diminishment of voting power for minorities.

The new map would carve up two congressional seats traditionally held by African American Democrats and districts with substantial black voters, including a north Florida district that runs from Tallahassee to Jacksonville, represented by Rep. Al Lawson. DeSantis’ map would dissolve the seat into several Republican districts and also diminish the African American voting population in another district with a significant number of black voters, currently represented by Val Demings of Orlando, now a candidate for the US Senate. That would leave the state with just one majority-black voting district.

DeSantis advanced a new map after he vetoed a version approved in March by state legislators that would have added two Republican seats and subtracted just one from the Democrats. The new proposal would create 20 seats that favor Republicans and 8 for Democrats, resulting in the G.O.P. (“Grand Old Party,” Republican Party) likely holding 71 percent of the seats. Clear evidence of the right-wing and anti-democratic character of these Republican plans is that Donald Trump carried Florida in 2020 with 51.2 percent of the vote.

The new map is also intended to personally benefit DeSantis, as he has emerged as one of the Republican Party’s leading figures and has not ruled out challenging Trump for the party’s 2024 presidential nomination.

In response to the redrawn map, Democratic lawmakers shut down the state’s special legislative session for more than an hour with a pray-in and sit-in inside the House chamber. A fight against the far right, however, cannot be waged under the command of the Democratic Party, which has refused to hold Trump and his Republican co-conspirators, including Florida Representative Matt Gaetz, politically and criminally responsible for their efforts to overturn the 2020 presidential election during the January 6 insurrection, a fascist attempted coup aimed at blocking the certification of Joe Biden.



To contact the WWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wws.org/contact