Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and his fascistic attacks against education

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Florida schools are opening this month in the wake of several anti-democratic education bills that went into effect this summer, which have coincided with a mass exodus of teachers and staff along with brewing hostility towards the far-right agenda being pursued by Governor Ron DeSantis.

Virtually all of the governor's fascistic and provocative policies have coincided with his elevation into a prominent demagogue within the Republican Party and a serious contender for the party's 2024 presidential nomination alongside Donald Trump.

Among the tranche of reactionary legislation enacted in recent months, DeSantis and Republican lawmakers have concentrated specifically on public schools, spearheading attacks against teachers, free speech and history education through an avalanche of bills and initiatives.

One of the more infamous is the so-called "Stop WOKE Act," or HB 7, which is aimed at eliminating curriculum which teaches about historical movements that fought against racial and gender discrimination and sought greater social equality. Another bill is the anti-democratic "Parental Rights in Education," or HB 1557, which bans classroom discussion of sexual orientation or gender identity in the state's primary schools.

One overriding goal of the Stop the Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees (Stop WOKE) Act is to gloss over or wipe away lessons about American history concerned with opposition against inequality or references to racial, gender and sexual oppression and discrimination. The law pertains to both classrooms and employment training, education and diversity programs.

The bill outlaws school instruction or workplace training that suggests individuals are "inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously"; that people are privileged or oppressed based on race, gender or national origin; or that a person "bears personal responsibility for and must feel guilt, anguish, or other forms of psychological distress" over actions committed in the past by members of the same race, gender or national origin. The law defines such training as discrimination.

The statute amounts to a repudiation of many of the democratic precedents set by the civil rights struggles of the 20th century. The vague language of the bill means that education about many of the court cases and laws that ended racial discrimination in workplaces and schools, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 or the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, can be flouted.

This applies similarly to any discussion of laws that ban gender inequalities, like the 1963 Equal Pay Act which prohibited sex-based wage discrimination between men and women performing the same job in the same workplace or the internment of some 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry during World War II.

The "Parental Rights in Education" bill declares that "classroom instruction by school personnel or third parties on sexual orientation or gender identity may not occur in kindergarten through grade 3 or in a manner that is not age appropriate or developmentally appropriate for students in accordance with state standards." The second portion, however, is a caveat that effectively bars any teaching or discussion of sexual orientation or gender identity in every grade, since what could be considered "age" or "developmentally appropriate" can be subject to the whims of arch-reactionaries and bigots.

Both HB 1557 and HB 7 bill will have ominous implications for classroom instruction and discussions, particularly for educators who will feel pressured to censor themselves or else risk sanctions from school officials or legal repercussions. Each bill builds on the Parents' Bill of Rights, a bill signed into Florida law last year which emboldens parents to file lawsuits against schools for alleged violations of any policy.

A recent CNN article quoted a pre-K teacher who expressed fear over whether a homophobic parent would complain if a student with two moms shared stories from home during class. Teachers on social media also expressed qualms over placing small LGBTQ flags or even wedding pictures on their desks out of fear that it will trigger lawsuits from parents.

In August 2021 Pinellas parent Renee Chiea filed a lawsuit against Brandt Robinson, a history teacher at Dunedin High School, who was accused of teaching false statements to students. Chiea denounced Robinson for imparting a "Marxist indoctrination of our youth."

In May DeSantis signed an anti-socialist "Victims of Communism Day" bill, otherwise known as CS/HB 395, that would require high school students enrolled in a US Government course to receive at least 45 minutes of instruction on "Victims of Communism," specifically focused on "topics of communist dictators and how the victims of communism suffered under these regimes."

The bill itself is layered in McCarthyite propaganda and red-baiting, slandering the Russian Revolution of November 1917 along with Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks as "communist dictators." The state holiday would require the Governor to annually issue a proclamation designating November 7 as "Victims of Communism Day" and calls for public schools to "suitably observe such day as a day honoring the 100 million people who have fallen victim to communist regimes across the world." The legislation was approved unanimously by Democrats and Republicans in the Senate and House.

The efforts of both capitalist parties to demonize communism doubtlessly reflects the visceral fear within the ruling class to the growth of socialist and anti-capitalist sentiment among students and workers. Less than a year ago Axios and Momentive released survey data confirming that 54 percent of Gen Z youth (ages 18 to 24) held negative views of capitalism, with just 42 percent of the younger generation viewing capitalism favorably.

In April, Florida's Department of Education rejected 104 out of 132 proposed math textbooks over what state officials deemed "impermissible" content, including lessons on critical race theory (CRT) in K-12 public schools and higher education. This came after Florida lawmakers proscribed the use of the *New York Times*' 1619 Project in

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school curricula last year, a move that echoed fascistic laws and other measures in several Republican-led states that banned the teaching of what they termed "divisive concepts" related to racism and sexism in public education and employee training programs.

As Marxists, the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has fundamental disagreements with the historical arguments of both CRT and the 1619 Project. But we also oppose their censorship and all antidemocratic attacks on free speech.

Amid this far-right rampage, the state is experiencing a desperate teacher shortage after two years of physical and mental stress, unlivable wages, sickness and death from the COVID-19 pandemic. A Florida Education Association report showed more than 9,500 teaching and support staff positions across the state of Florida are vacant going into the new school year.

Educators had to work under deadly conditions made possible by President Joe Biden and the Democrats' campaign to open schools up for in-person learning despite the raging spread of the virus. Teachers were constantly menaced by DeSantis and his far-right inquisitors over mask mandates on campuses.

Florida's education system is in such a state of total breakdown that DeSantis signed a bill last week directing the state's Department of Education (DOE) to allow military veterans to receive a temporary five-year teaching certificate while they earn a bachelor's degree. The legislation, SB 896, allows veterans that are not certified or trained or even possess a college degree to serve as teachers in public schools.

The announcement was met with a deluge of infuriated comments on social media. A spouse of an educator commented on Facebook: "[A] 4-year vet with no actual credentials can start in exactly the same role as my wife who's been teaching for 8 years AND that vet gets 5 years to teach without any actual expertise in their field. How does that even make sense?"

SB 896 was passed unanimously in the Florida House and Senate with the absolute support of the Democratic Party. This contrasts with the overwhelming opposition that exists among educators to the bill.

Teachers are being scapegoated for their unwillingness to endure chronic understaffing, miserable pay and anti-democratic education legislation and now face the threat of being replaced by unqualified veterans serving as scab labor. This further points to the complicity of the Democratic Party and teachers' unions who, like their counterparts nationally, have not raised a finger in defense of democratic rights or improvements in working conditions in the state.

The new Florida laws have been enacted against the backdrop of a feverish campaign by DeSantis and the extreme right to inject "patriotic" and chauvinistic concepts into school curricula and discussions. Earlier this year, Republican Florida Senator Rick Scott unveiled a "12-point plan" under a "Rescue America" initiative. The initiative calls for the bolstering of law enforcement, border security, "Judeo-Christian" ethics and "rugged individualism."

Scott is speaking for a section of fascist bandits fearful of the eruption of social anger, wishing to create a political climate where any opposition to the status quo is suppressed and all dissent crushed through different mechanisms of state repression.

Education is listed first on the "12 Point Plan" and its guiding strategy is to "inspire patriotism and stop teaching the revisionist history of the radical left." Among the Plan's proposals are to strengthen parental control in schools, force children in public schools to say the Pledge of Allegiance, stand for the National Anthem and "honor the American Flag" to foster "national unity" and eliminate teacher tenure at public schools. Another proposal declares schools will not be allowed to "discriminate against voluntary prayer or force children to check their faith at the door."

Scott, DeSantis and the far-right have been emboldened by a string of recent unconstitutional decisions made by the Supreme Court, including a decision in June ruling in favor of a football coach in Seattle, Washington, who held disruptive, provocative religious ceremonies at the 50-yard line after high school football games, during which he would surround himself with kneeling students.

These decisions demonstrate that major sections of the ruling class are prepared to eviscerate the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, part of the 1791 Bill of Rights, which enshrined the "separation of church and state" and prohibits government promotion of religious activity in schools.

This month, DeSantis spoke on his recent education bills at the inaugural summit of Moms for Liberty, a right-wing organization comprising women who have subjected teachers to incessant abuse over quarantining and mask mandates while promoting anti-scientific conceptions in opposition to COVID-19 vaccinations.

A central political demand of Moms for Liberty is greater parental rights in schools, which means the "right" of politically backward parents to despotically control what educators teach. According to CNN, the conference held in Tampa featured a slate of Republican speakers and included panels that "taught parents to monitor their kids' teachers and school staff on social media and provided tips for reviewing library books."

As part of DeSantis' right-wing crusade against "woke ideologies" and the "woke left" in schools, state education officials introduced a new statewide civics program designed to prepare students to be "virtuous citizens." More than $106 million was spent in 2021 to design a Civics Literacy Excellence Initiative (CLEI) program to reframe civics education.

The civics course is an amalgam of Christian nationalism and a grotesque revision of American history. According to Broward County teachers, trainers instructed them that the nation's founders did not desire a strict separation of state and church, downplayed the role the colonies and later the United States had in the history of slavery in the Americas, and peddled a phony judicial theory that argues the Constitution should be interpreted and applied solely in its original form, instead of as an evolving, contemporaneous document.

This interpretation of American history borrows heavily from the "originalist" argument concocted by former Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia. Scalia argued that essentially all modern civil rights are null and void simply because they were not "mentioned in the Constitution," since modern society did not exist when the Bill of Rights was ratified in 1791. This was the same legal argument made by Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito in his draft ruling in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, overturning the landmark *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973 that recognized abortion as a constitutional right.

The argument itself is fundamentally fraudulent, as the essential purpose of the Constitution was to confer to the government those enumerated powers that are listed in the Constitution, while reserving all rights by default to the people. The Ninth Amendment addresses this point specifically by stating: "The enumeration in the Constitution of certain rights shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people."

Scalia's formula has since been the political trademark of arch-reactionaries like Alito and DeSantis to roll back rights won through decades of political and social struggle and carry out new assaults against the working class.

Florida's DOE and the DeSantis administration organized the civics workshops alongside an array of far-right nationalist institutions. One of them is Hillsdale College, a private Christian liberal arts school in southern Michigan, which has become a political incubator for fascist and racist ideology.

The rural-based school is buttressed by prominent far-right figures and

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is being flooded with millions in funding to promote jingoistic and ultra-nationalist curriculum to youth. Among the tenets Hillsdale champions includes the homicidal “herd immunity” policy in the COVID pandemic, the abolition of public education through charter schools and vouchers, US military aggression and war with China, anti-immigrant xenophobia, claims that diversity is “unpatriotic” and that global warming is a hoax.

A fight must be waged against the far-right tendencies embodied by DeSantis, but this alone will not stop the growth of fascism within the political establishment and the destruction of democratic rights. What’s required is a struggle against both capitalist parties and the rotten system to which they are beholden. This is part and parcel with the struggle to defend public education, posing the urgent necessity of developing an independent political movement of the working class for socialism.

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