

Mississippi House Republicans back controversial white-run court system for heavily black capital city

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In a move reminiscent of the state's racist Jim Crow laws of the late 19th and 20th centuries, Mississippi House lawmakers recently passed a bill allowing an all-white panel of state officials to appoint unelected judges and prosecutors to oversee the courts of the city of Jackson, an overwhelmingly black majority city. The Republican-led House debated the legislature, called House Bill 1020 (HB 1020), and passed it following an intense four-hour debate last Tuesday.

HB 1020 would expand the city's Capital Complex Improvement District (CCID), which includes the bulk of the Jackson downtown area and state government offices. This bill essentially gives the CCID a separate court system of unelected officials, including two judges, four state prosecutors, four public defenders and a court clerk. These officials are to be appointed by the Chief Justice of the Mississippi Supreme Court and the state attorney general, both of whom are white. The bill will also expand the state-run capital police force.

The population of the CCID area is over 50 percent black. Jackson's black Democratic mayor, Chokwe Antar Lumumba, complained that the bill would take away from these city residents the right to name their own judges and prosecutors and put the sole power to appoint these positions into the hands of white state officials.

This is true, and has a definite significance in Mississippi, given its long history as one of the worst bastions of racial oppression in the South. But as the recent murder of Tyre Nichols in nearby Memphis, Tennessee demonstrates, having black police and a black chief of police in no way changes the oppressive nature of the police under capitalism, which is based on the class role of the police as the defenders of capitalist

property relations.

Nichols, a young black man stopped for a routine traffic violation, was so savagely beaten by five black cops, and at least one white cop, that he died three days later. Black Democratic Party officials throughout the US, and their pseudo-left apologists, have sought to explain away the obviously non-racial character of the police violence, which explodes the "systemic racism" narrative that is used to conceal the brutality of class oppression in America.

There are both partisan and racial motivations behind the proposal to create a separately policed downtown district in the Mississippi capital. Jackson is a Democratic-run city with a black mayor, and this bill would place more power over the courts of this city in the hands of white Republican state officials. In fact, none of the positions that would have this appointing power under this bill has ever been held by a black person, even though African Americans make up 38 percent of the population, the largest proportion of any state.

One of the bill's sponsors, white Republican state Senator Trey Lamar, spoke in favor of the bill, claiming it will help address the crime issue in Jackson by expanding the CCID and the capital police force. "The people who voted for this bill are trying to make Jackson safer," he said. "That's all they're interested in, and if you're not committing crimes in Jackson, you really don't have anything to worry about." This is typical of the Republican effort to dress up racism in the guise of concern over "crime."

HB 1020 is only one of a series of efforts by the Mississippi state government to expand state authority over the handful of majority-black cities, in a campaign

that harkens back to the days of overt segregation, or Jim Crow.

Jim Crow laws, named for an offensive 19th century caricature of an enslaved black man from the South, were put in place in the decades after the end of the Reconstruction period, which followed the Civil War and the abolition of slavery in the Southern states.

Segregation between blacks and whites in the South was brutally enforced. For more than half a century after the bipartisan 1876 deal to allow the resumption of power in the South by the Democratic Party, the instrument of the former slaveowners, black residents of Mississippi were treated as second-class citizens, deprived of economic and political power, while state officials, police and Ku Klux Klan terrorism enforced harsh and unequal segregation policies. This system prevailed until the mass struggles of the 1950s and early 1960s, which compelled Congress to enact the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

While the racial element of HB 1020 has garnered the most attention, it is inevitably the entire working class of Mississippi who will suffer as its capital city adopts anti-democratic measures and the living conditions continue to fall across racial lines. Indeed this latest measure will essentially strip voting rights from the entire city and the ability for the working class to have any say at all in who will be in charge of its court system. As always, it will be the working class that suffers the most under such measures.

While the Republican-dominated state legislature claims the measure is motivated by concerns over crime rather than race, this is a transparent pretext. Moreover, there is little to no concern over the much greater social crisis in the city, the collapse of the water system, which has reduced the city's residents to using bottled water for months.

State leaders have used that crisis to place Jackson more and more under state control, including the water utility. The federal government has followed suit. Last November the US Department of Justice placed the water system of Jackson under the control of a third-party manager with the federal government only recently releasing \$600 million in funds to go directly into Mississippi's water and sewage system.

Mayor Lumumba himself is the son of a former mayor and longtime Democratic politician Chokwe

Lumumba Sr., who was associated with various black nationalist groups in the 1960s and 1970s. Both Mayors Lumumba represent a growing trend across the country where black and minority Democrats placed in charge of cities spout various identity-based, "radical"-sounding campaigns promising change while the working class, black and white, still struggle against stagnating wages and police repression.

Jackson itself is a city with a poverty rate of over 25 percent, with nearly 40,000 people living in poverty, across racial lines. The election of Lumumba has not seen any change in the objective conditions of the black or the white working class in Jackson.

Meanwhile, a year later, the water crisis in Jackson is still ongoing, with many residents still reluctant or unable to drink the city water. "I do not trust the water. I do not drink it. I haven't drunk that water in years. I always have bottled water for me to drink," said 69-year-old resident Glenda Barner to ABC News.

"There are days when you sit and just say, 'we shouldn't have to go through this.' And I think about it not just for myself but as a city. We shouldn't have to go through this. We really shouldn't. But what can we do? We rely on our officials to do what they need to do to fix it, and it's not getting done."

Following decades of mismanagement and neglect from both Democratic and Republican state leadership, the drinking water in Jackson has been mostly unusable still to this day, after the crisis came to a head after last year's flooding. Since then, partisan bickering has defined the management of the crisis with the federally appointed manager now in charge of distributing the incoming federal funding.

Lumumba has consistently blamed the state leadership for its thinly disguised racism, while Governor Tate Reeves attacks the city leadership as incompetent and state lawmakers introduce bills, such as HB1020 and Senate Bill 2889, which put the capital city's drinking water system under the long-term control of a board appointed by the governor and lieutenant governor.



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