

Following mass shooting in Nashville, fascistic Tennessee Republicans expel two Democratic lawmakers

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7 April 2023

Less than two weeks after three nine-year-old schoolchildren and three education workers were massacred at a private Christian school in Nashville, Tennessee, two recently elected Democratic state representatives who helped lead a peaceful protest of thousands of students demanding gun reform were expelled by the Republican supermajority in the lower Tennessee House.

In a completely undemocratic action that will leave some 130,000 Tennesseans without a representative, the gerrymandered Republican state legislature expelled Justin Jones (Nashville) and Justin Pearson (Memphis) in party-line votes for alleged “disorderly conduct” within the Capitol building.

Democratic Rep. Gloria Johnson (Knoxville) also faced expulsion, but the resolution seeking her ouster failed by one vote after seven Republicans joined all Democrats in rejecting the measure. Only one Republican, Charlie Baum (Murfreesboro), voted against expelling Jones, Pearson and Johnson.

The expulsion of Jones and Pearson is a symptom of the intensifying political crisis within the United States more than two years after former President Donald Trump’s failed coup. The political crisis, which did not lessen with the election of Biden and the Democratic majority in 2020 and has only intensified following the Republican takeover of the House of Representatives in the 2022 elections, is intersecting with the massive social crisis that underlies the epidemic of mass shootings.

The Covenant school shooting last month is just one of at least 144 mass shootings in the United States this year, according to GunViolenceArchive.org (GVA). Its research shows that 455 children have been shot to death so far this year—nearly five a day—with over 1,100 injured. Last year, GVA recorded 1,676 children killed in gun-related deaths in the US, the highest number the researchers have ever tabulated.

Unlike the aspiring dictator Trump, who was not removed

from office after leading a violent insurrection, neither Democratic representative who was expelled on Thursday was accused of committing a crime or attempting to overthrow the government. Instead, Jones and Pearson were expelled for approaching the well on the floor of the House out of turn and speaking on the need for gun reform without being recognized by Republican House Speaker Cameron Sexton. This action was characterized by Republicans as a grievous breach of “House decorum.”

A week prior to Thursday’s vote, on March 30, three days after the mass shooting at Covenant School, thousands of students, parents and teachers peacefully protested at the state Capitol in Nashville, demanding that the legislature take action to restrict access to guns, including military grade weaponry such as the AR-15. Audrey Hale, the 28-year-old Covenant shooter, was armed with an AR-15-style rifle, the same weapon used in the Uvalde, Parkland and Newton massacres.

During their protest, demonstrators, overwhelmingly children and students, held up signs, sang songs and chanted in a non-violent fashion while Republicans largely ignored them.

Instead of presenting a facade of “democracy,” Republicans sought to “move the agenda forward” and block debate, preventing Reps. Jones and Pearson from speaking on behalf of their constituents. After being denied a chance to speak, Jones left the House chamber and spoke with student supporters protesting outside. Once he returned, Reps. Jones, Pearson and Johnson approached the well and began to speak in the microphone, requesting action on gun reform.

As soon as Jones began to speak, Speaker Sexton cut off the microphone and gavelled the House out of session for roughly an hour before business resumed. Despite the peaceful character of the student demonstration, Sexton took to right-wing media following the protest and ludicrously compared the actions of the Democratic lawmakers and

student protesters to the January 6, 2021, attack on the US Capitol by armed Trump supporters, acting at Trump's direction.

Speaking on a conservative talk-radio show last week, Sexton said, "Representative Jones and Representative Johnson have been very vocal about January 6 in Washington D.C., about what that was, and what they did today was equivalent, at least equivalent, maybe worse depending on how you look at it, of doing an insurrection in the Capitol."

The absurd comparison underscores the blatantly undemocratic and authoritarian character of the Republicans' actions.

According to a 2019 report by the Tennessee attorney general, there were only three times in the state's history when the state legislature expelled members: in 1866, following the Civil War; in 1980, after a member was caught taking a bribe that influenced his vote; and in 2016, when Republican Rep. Jeremy Durham was expelled after the Tennessee attorney general accused him of sexually harassing 22 Capitol Hill women during his tenure. Unlike the three previous occasions, Thursday's expulsions were not bipartisan, as no Democrats voted in favor.

Sexton's comparison to January 6 is also notable because one of his Republican colleagues, former Republican state Rep. Terry Lynn Weaver, admitted to being at the US Capitol on January 6 in support of Trump's coup. On January 6, 2021, as the Capitol was being overrun by Proud Boys and neo-Nazis, Weaver tweeted from her account: "Epic and historic day gathering with fellow Patriots from all over the nation DC."

Weaver added on Facebook later that night, in a now-deleted post, that "one word" to describe January 6 was "Absolutely Epic and Historic." Weaver claimed that 3.2 million "PEACEFUL patriots" marched on the Capitol and that "Antifa" did the "damage."

Despite her admitted and documented participation in the coup, no Republican or Democratic Tennessee House member put forward a resolution for Weaver to be expelled. Nor have any Democratic members requested that Speaker Sexton be expelled, despite the fact he and 65 other Tennessee Republicans signed on to a letter following the November 2020 election backing Trump's bogus claim that the election was tainted by "voter fraud and malpractice."

Instead of warning of the growing danger the Republican Party represents to the democratic rights of all workers and students, immediately following Thursday's votes members of the Democratic Party, including the expelled legislators, joined with the capitalist press to frame the actions of the Republicans within a racial prism, presenting the votes,

including the non-expulsion of Johnson, a white woman, as a textbook example of "white supremacy."

Speaking on MSNBC on Thursday night, Democratic Tennessee state Sen. London Lamar called the expulsion of the two black representatives a "political lynching." Lamar said she was "absolutely pissed at the mass display of racism that you just experienced, the expulsion of two *black men* who were sent here by their district, overwhelmingly, for speaking out."

Seemingly arguing in favor of expelling her fellow Democratic colleague, Lamar added, "Yet they [the Republicans] kept the white woman [Gloria Johnson] in office, who was just as guilty of speaking out against gun violence and has displayed multiple acts of disruption and civil disobedience throughout the years that she has been here."

While racism may have played a role in the outcome, it was not the primary factor.

Emboldened by the fecklessness of the Democratic Party and Joe Biden, who have done nothing to hold Trump and his accomplices in the failed coup accountable more than 27 months after the fact, the Republican Party is increasingly rejecting any election it loses as "illegitimate" and any challenge to its authoritarian policies as treasonous.

Prior to Thursday's vote, the Democratic Party did nothing to organize its supporters against the planned expulsion of elected representatives, instead accepting it as a *fait accompli* for which there was no recourse beyond "remembering in November."

Joe Biden and the rest of the national Democratic Party were silent on the imminent expulsions until after the lawmakers were removed, at which point the White House released a perfunctory statement calling the Republicans' actions "dangerous," while urging Congress, led in the House by fascists like Marjorie Taylor Greene, to pass "commonsense gun safety reform."

The expulsion of the two Tennessee lawmakers is further confirmation of the ongoing breakdown of the entire political setup in the United States. In the over 20 years since the Columbine Massacre, neither bourgeois political party has proven itself capable of addressing the real cause of rampant gun violence, which is endemic to American capitalist society and the inequality it produces.



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