DeSantis joins Republican presidential race, challenging Trump from the right

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Florida Governor Ron DeSantis formally announced his candidacy for the 2024 Republican presidential nomination Wednesday evening in an audio-only appearance on Twitter Spaces hosted by the billionaire owner of the social media company, Elon Musk. This was followed by interviews on Fox News and several ultra-right podcasts.

The corporate media has focused its attention mainly on the technical problems in the initial program, which forced Musk to shift to a different Twitter Spaces feed and cost DeSantis two-thirds of his audience. There has been little examination of the significance of the ultra-right program advanced by the candidate, who is opposing the fascistic Donald Trump almost entirely from the right.

The decision to announce his campaign arm in arm with one of the richest men on the planet was highly significant. DeSantis was making it clear that despite his occasional fascistic sallies against the Walt Disney Company and other supposedly "woke" corporations, he is a dedicated defender of the capitalist system. And he is signaling to his rivals for the nomination, including Trump, that he will have ample financial backing for his campaign.

According to opinion polls, Trump is the frontrunner, leading DeSantis by a margin of two-to-one, with all other candidates, announced or prospective, trailing far behind. The two combined have nearly 80 percent of the Republican voters who have responded to the polls, demonstrating that the vast majority of this party are supporting candidates who advocate fascist authoritarianism and the overturn of what remains of democratic forms of rule in the United States.

Trump bases his campaign on the claim that the 2020 election was stolen by Biden and the Democrats, making him the rightful claimant of the White House. He openly defends the thugs who attacked the Capitol on January 6, 2021, seeking to block the certification of Biden's victory and keep Trump in office.

DeSantis is running on his record as the would-be Mussolini of Florida, who has imposed the full wish list of the Christian fundamentalist right, using the large Republican majority in the state legislature to ride roughshod over democratic rights. This includes a ban on abortion after six weeks of pregnancy, severe restrictions on discussions of race, gender and sexual orientation in the public schools, and the firing of local prosecutors who show the slightest inclination to restrain police violence against the working class.

One of his signature issues is Florida's early exit from any form of lockdown or mitigation measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. DeSantis has criticized Trump for "turning over the country to Dr. Fauci" by initially going along with lockdowns and launching a program to speed the development and mass distribution of vaccines.

Florida was one of the first states to reopen schools and went even further, effectively barring school districts and businesses from imposing mask mandates or requiring staff to be vaccinated. As a result, nearly 80,000 residents have lost their lives, and Florida has the second highest death rate as a percentage of the population among the 10 largest states.

DeSantis embraced the criminal quack theories put forward by the authors of the Great Barrington Declaration, the manifesto of the "herd immunity" advocates, and one of these, Jay Battacharya, participated in the campaign launch and asked a few fawning questions of the governor. DeSantis appointed another quack, Joseph Ladapo, as the state surgeon general, putting him in charge of spearheading the attack, not on the coronavirus, but on any local officials who sought to maintain any form of mitigation.

This is what the *Wall Street Journal* praised as his "greatest achievement," writing that "Mr. DeSantis did

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his own homework on Covid health risks and the costs of economic and school lockdowns." In other words, he weighed lives against profits and came down decisively on the side of profits.

The newly announced presidential candidate, despite his right-wing populist rhetoric, is a product of the top levels of the Ivy League, graduating from Yale, followed by a Harvard law degree. He went immediately into the Navy as a legal adviser, first supervising waterboarding and other torture at the Guantanamo Bay prison camp, then in a tour of duty with SEAL Team 1 in Iraq, an elite unit engaged in assassinations and other top secret missions.

His ultra-right views were first expressed in a book published in 2011 under the title, *Dreams from Our Founding Fathers*, a play on the Obama autobiographical best seller, *Dreams from My Father*. This volume—a screed that aligned DeSantis with the extreme right "originalist" wing of the Supreme Court—accompanied his first campaign for Congress in 2012, when he won a seat on Florida's Atlantic Coast left open by redistricting. He joined the Freedom Caucus, the ultra-right faction among House Republicans.

The Orwellian twist to his concept of "freedom" became evident after DeSantis won a narrow victory in the Florida gubernatorial election in 2018. It was the freedom of the Christian fundamentalist right to take away everyone else's freedom, including the right to an abortion, the right to public education, the right of teachers to teach, the right to demonstrate, the right to vote, even the right to survive a deadly pandemic.

The WSWS has detailed many of the state laws adopted during the five years DeSantis has occupied the governor's mansion. These were not the result of any great leadership on his part, but the product of top-heavy Republican majorities in both houses of the state legislature and the utter spinelessness on the part of the Democratic Party, the unions and the official bourgeois civil rights and civil liberties groups.

As his poll numbers and campaign contributions rose among Republicans, DeSantis pushed through increasingly provocative laws useful to his political aspirations as gestures and gratuitous demonstrations of cruelty: allowing non-unanimous juries to impose the death penalty, banning therapy for transgender youth, suppressing all teaching about sexual orientation and gender identity in K-12 education, outlawing the teaching of critical race theory (which was not being taught) in state-supported colleges. Last fall, the Florida state government flew migrants from Texas to Massachusetts and released them on the island of Martha's Vineyard.

There are only two issues where DeSantis has held back. He has not repeated Trump's lies about the "stolen election" in 2020, in part, presumably, because declaring Trump the rightful winner in 2020 would make it more difficult to deny him the nomination in 2024. He has, however, fervently supported the thugs who attacked the Capitol, claiming they are the victims of persecution by the FBI and the Biden Justice Department.

On the war in Ukraine, he initially declared it a "territorial dispute" that did not involve vital US national security interests. When this led to denunciations by Republican warhawks in Congress, he fell silent, apparently not wishing to choose between the isolationist and interventionist factions within the party. It is virtually certain, however, that as his campaign develops, DeSantis will have to align himself with the war drive of American imperialism—in which he previously played a criminal personal role.

According to the *New York Times*, the Political Action Committee established by DeSantis' wealthiest backers plans to spend $200 million, a staggering sum for a primary campaign, and hire thousands of field representatives to work in the four early primary and caucus states of Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina and Nevada in the hopes of overcoming Trump's apparent lead in the race.

His political criticism of Trump has largely focused on the former president's failure to accomplish his ultra-right goals. DeSantis claims that he will actually build a complete wall on the US-Mexico border, purge the federal bureaucracy, dominate Congress, outlaw abortion and wage war on the influence of cultural liberalism in every aspect of American life.

In his interview on Fox News, he criticized several of Trump's appointments, including Fed Chair Jerome Powell and FBI Director Christopher Wray, and called for an even more aggressive anti-China policy, including revival of the Monroe Doctrine in opposition to Chinese economic activity in Latin America.

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