

California Governor Newsom picks long-time Democratic Party operative Laphonza Butler to replace Senator Feinstein

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On Sunday, California Governor Gavin Newsom announced that he would be appointing Laphonza Butler, 44, to the Senate seat held by the late Dianne Feinstein. Butler, a long-time Democratic Party operative, union bureaucrat, and lobbyist for Uber and Airbnb, is representative of the social type, and interests, that constitute the modern Democratic Party.

While Newsom claimed he would not pick a replacement for Feinstein who would seek election to the open Senate seat next year, saying it would be unfair to the three Democrats already campaigning for the party nomination, Butler has not confirmed if she will run in 2024. As of this writing, three House members from California—Adam Schiff, Katie Porter and Barbara Lee—are all running.

The deadline to declare candidacy is December 8, 2023. Butler currently lives in Maryland with her wife, Neneki Lee, who is the current National Division Director for Public Services at the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). Following her appointment, Newsom’s office confirmed that Butler also owns a home in California and will be re-registering to vote in the state.

Prior to being chosen by Newsom, Butler was the president of EMILY’s (Early Money Is Like Yeast) List since 2021. The highly influential political organization spent \$4.4 million in the 2022 midterm election cycle and is dedicated to electing pro-choice female politicians, nearly all Democrats. It was founded in 1985 by Ellen Malcolm, an heir to the IBM fortune. The multimillionaire Malcolm served as the co-chair of Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign in 2008 and was president of EMILY’s List from 1985 to 2010.

On October 2, Butler released a statement through EMILY’s List announcing that she was stepping down and that “Sen. Dianne Feinstein’s leadership and legacy are immeasurable. I will do my best to honor her by devoting my time and energy to serving the people of California and the people of this great nation.”

In a video released by the Newsom administration following the announcement, Butler is presented as someone who “will continue the work of her predecessor ... breaking barriers and glass ceilings and ensuring Californians have a fighter in Washington D.C.”

As the WSWWS reviewed last week, Feinstein’s “legacy” is that of an imperialist warmonger and defender of Wall Street. By “breaking barriers” Newsom, the Democrats, and their supporters in the press are referring to the fact that Butler is not only an African-American woman, but also a lesbian. These “qualifications”—in reality, ticking boxes of race, gender and sexual orientation to satisfy the obsession with identity politics—are being trumpeted by the Democrats and the media to provide a progressive gloss to Butler in order to obfuscate her right-wing and anti-working class record.

Butler’s appointment is a window into the cynical and reactionary upper-middle-class politics of the Democratic Party. After appointing Alejandro “Alex” Padilla in 2021 to the Senate seat vacated by Vice President Kamala Harris, Newsom came under fire from Democratic Party racialists for not appointing a black woman to replace Harris. At the time, Newsom pledged that should Feinstein leave her seat before the 2024 election, he would appoint a black woman.

In addition to having the appropriate gender and skin color, Butler was chosen by Newsom because she is a trusted agent of the financial oligarchy and the Democratic Party. Her nearly two decades at the highest levels of the union bureaucracy, Democratic Party, and key institutions of the capitalist state, prove that she is a vetted and capable agent of the bourgeoisie.

Butler was born in Magnolia, Mississippi. Her mother was a certified nursing assistant while her father was a small business owner who died when she was 16. After graduating from Jackson State University in 2001, a historically black college, Butler, in an interview with *Elle*, said her first salary job was an “organizer-in-training” for which she was paid \$24,000 in 2001, roughly equivalent to \$42,000 today.

Within five years of graduating from Jackson State University with a bachelor’s degree in political science and government, Butler was named the national division director and campaign director for the SEIU in Washington D.C., a position she held from 2006 to 2009.

Despite never working as a nurse or as an in-home care provider, in 2010 Butler became the president of the SEIU United Long Term Care Workers in California. As president until 2015, Butler claimed to represent some 180,000 nursing home workers throughout California, making the unit the second largest SEIU local in the nation.

In 2015, Butler became president of SEIU Local 2015, which was created in 2015 to bring together some 325,000 nursing home and healthcare workers under a new local. SEIU Local 2015 is the largest union in California. While Barack Obama was still president, Butler was named a “Champion for Change.”

Beginning in May 2016, Butler became a senior adviser on the “Hillary for America” campaign. In 2018, then-Governor Jerry Brown appointed Butler to the University of California Board of Regents. At the time, the WSWS wrote that Butler’s “greatest asset for the ruling establishment is her perceived ability to corral the poorest paid workers within the ranks of the union and behind the Democratic Party. As a black woman, Butler rides the coattails of identity politics, raking in a yearly salary of over \$230,000 while posing as a champion of the poor by advocating a \$15 an hour statewide minimum wage, a

paltry \$31,200 a year full time.”

We added, “Before entering the leadership of the SEIU, Butler was the Director for the Board of Governors of the Los Angeles branch of the Federal Reserve System. The inclusion of Butler, a union bureaucrat, on the Board of Regents further confirms the right-wing and anti-working class character of the SEIU and other organizations like it.”

Butler served on the UC board until 2021. However, while on the board Butler was named a partner in SCRB Strategies, which has since been renamed Bearstar Strategies. Previous clients of Bearstar include both Hillary and Bill Clinton, Jerry Brown, Newsom, Harris and even former Los Angeles mayoral candidate and billionaire Rick Caruso.

While working at SCRB, Butler lobbied on behalf of Uber to prevent drivers from being classified as “employees” as opposed to “contractors,” in order to protect Uber from having to provide certain benefits and protections.

While fighting for the rights of tech companies to exploit so-called “gig” workers, Butler, together with political consultants Ace Smith, Sean Clegg and Juan Rodriguez, the rest of the names that comprise the acronym SCRB, helped manage Kamala Harris’s 2020 presidential campaign, with Butler being the senior adviser.

Following the campaign, Butler left SCRB, and in September 2020, was named a director of Airbnb. Butler told *Politico* at the time that she was excited to begin working on “economic empowerment,” presumably for herself.

After a year at Airbnb, Butler became president of EMILY’s list. During the 2022 midterms, according to *OpenSecret.org*, Nevada Senator Catherine Cortez Masto received the most from the organization, \$537,000, while Senator Maggie Hassan of New Hampshire got \$470,000.



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