

Draconian crime bill becomes law in Washington, D.C. as ‘law-and-order’ campaigns spread across the country

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18 March 2024

Washington D.C.’s local legislative body, the Democratic Party-controlled Council of the District of Columbia, voted on March 5 in favor of final passage of the Secure DC Omnibus Amendment Act of 2024. The bill combines several others that were proposed last year in the wake of a purported crime wave in the District. Democratic Mayor Muriel Bowser signed the crime bill into law on March 11.

The root social causes of crime—poverty and increased costs of living—are nowhere to be found in the bill, as the *World Socialist Web Site* noted last month during an initial vote within the city legislature. Instead, the bill advocates punitive measures to crack down on the poorest layers of the population.

Within days of its passage, the first of the bill’s measures was implemented. Several “drug-free zones” were introduced around the city, giving police enhanced jurisdiction to disperse and possibly arrest groups of two or more people merely on the suspicion that they are involved in an illicit drug sale.

Other provisions include the classification of theft for the reselling of merchandise as a felony, punishable by up to 15 years in prison; the drastic increase in length of pre-trial detention from a maximum of five days to 225 days; and permitting pre-trial detention of juveniles for many crimes, in spite of horrific conditions at the D.C. Jail.

Several other right-wing amendments were inserted upon final passage. Brooke Pinto, a Democrat and the bill’s sponsor, modified a previous amendment that would have given the police authority to collect DNA at the time of arrest. This invasion of personal privacy was mildly watered down, with the collection and analysis of DNA from people charged with violent

crimes and sexual abuse misdemeanors, receiving this additional treatment.

Significantly, an amendment that would have prevented the omission of police officers’ names from documents during adverse action proceedings was opposed by both Pinto and Democratic council member Matthew Frumin (D–Ward 3). Frumin, a frequent champion of the bill, previously campaigned on the platform of promising not to “double down” on law-and-order. He was endorsed by a number of unions and so-called “progressive” groups.

An amendment introduced by Democratic council member Janeese Lewis George reverted the threshold for first-degree theft to \$1,000 from a proposed \$500, with Pinto dissenting. First-degree theft is punishable by a maximum 15-year prison sentence.

The final bill was passed 12–0, with one individual voting “present.” The various “left” Democrats on the council, including those currently endorsed by the Democratic Socialists of America’s D.C. chapter, all supported the final bill.

Draconian legislation, such as the Secure DC bill, is part of a recent trend across the country by Democratic administrations seeking to impose law-and-order tactics and measures onto the working class and the poor. In New York City, state governor Kathy Hochul ordered National Guard troops to city subways to act as police, on the heels of Democratic mayor Eric Adams’ announcement last month that 1,000 New York Police Department cops would be deployed.

It also comes as the Biden administration attempts to pass an anti-immigrant bill with Republican support to unlock the flow of funds to the Ukrainian military. Such bills set the stage for a domestic crackdown on

democratic rights at home to complement America's wars abroad and the deepening of social misery at home.

"The D.C. Council... is likely to solidify its turn away from the liberal strategies it once trumpeted as lawmakers aim to pass new legislation that will impose harsher penalties for gun crimes and keep more people locked up as they await trial in the nation's capital," wrote the *Washington Post* in an article prior to the law's passage ("Inside the D.C. Council's turn away from progressive crime strategies"). The authoritarian turn occurs even as "Violent crime is down 10 percent and homicides are down by 31 percent in the early months of 2024."

The article makes it clear that political pressure is coming from "Dozens of national business trade leaders, including many based downtown, [who] wrote to [Democratic Mayor Muriel] Bowser and the council on Thursday, expressing alarm about 'random acts of violence.'"

Not content with the pivoting away from "liberal policies," various right wing interests have mobilized to remove council members viewed as insufficiently tough on crime.

The bill's passage comes in the wake of efforts to recall two council members, Brianne K. Nadeau (D-Ward 1) and Charles Allen (D-Ward 6), under fire by the recall authors for supposedly not doing enough to stem the tide of crime in the District.

The recall campaign against Allen, launched in January, is notable for its large fundraising, with Democratic Party insiders and lobbyists greatly contributing in favor of his recall. The recall campaign has raised over \$100,000.

Nadeau's recall effort was launched in mid-February by Diana Alvarez, owner of Lit City, a smoke shop in the Columbia Heights neighborhood; her store had been broken into four times last year. Alex Madison, a strategist at Targeted Victory who has worked on national Republican Party campaigns, has assisted the recall campaign.

In both instances, the campaigns stemmed from Allen's and Nadeau's support in July 2020 for a bill to slash police funding by \$15 million in favor of more money for social service programs, and opposing efforts to divert federal pandemic funds from social programs to the police.

Bowser lauded the passage of Secure DC, saying that the bill "is a critical step in the work to build a safer D.C. by rebalancing our public safety and justice ecosystem in favor of safety and accountability... we are a city that is committed to creating opportunity and that believes in second chances, but we will not tolerate violence and we will not tolerate criminal activity that disrupts our sense of safety and our ability to build thriving neighborhoods."

The US Attorney's Office for DC, representing the Biden White House's Department of Justice, also expressed their appreciation for the passage of the law, particularly expressing gratitude "that the Council listened to our arguments related to DNA collection and developed a compromise position that allows for the earlier collection of DNA..."

Critical to the bill's passage was the support of various "left" posturing Democrats allied with the DSA and various trade unions. As of this writing, there has been no comment by the Metro D.C. DSA regarding the Secure DC bill, although they have since tweeted multiple times about canvassing for council member George's re-election.



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