

Nassau County government passes fascist mask ban law in New York City suburbs

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9 August 2024

On Monday afternoon, legislators in Nassau County, the heavily populated suburban area of Long Island adjacent to New York City, passed the “Mask Transparency Act,” a fascist piece of legislation which effectively criminalizes the wearing of masks in all public places.

“No person or persons over 16 years of age shall, while wearing any mask or facial covering whereby the face or voice is disguised with the intent to conceal the identity of the wearer, enter, or appear upon or within any sidewalk, walkway, alley, street, road, highway or other public right-of-way or public property or private property without the consent of the owner or tenant,” the bill states. Maximum penalties for violation of the law include a fine up to \$1,000 and 1 year of imprisonment.

Sponsors of the bill claimed it had exceptions for people wearing masks for religious and health reasons, but it would be up to the cop on the street to decide whether to stop and compel someone to take off their mask if they claim such an exemption.

The bill was passed by a 12-0 margin in the legislature, which is currently dominated by the Republican Party. The Nassau legislature contains a total 12 Republicans and seven Democrats, representing 19 municipal districts in total. The seven Democrats abstained rather than vote against the bill.

The passage of the law is a component of the bipartisan crackdown on political opposition to war in the wake the US/Israeli genocide in Gaza, as well as of the breakdown of democratic forms of rule in the United States more broadly. Monday’s proceedings were themselves the scene of a fascist, mob-like atmosphere, along with a violent clampdown by police. A TikTok video, which has since been restricted by the poster, showed a disability activist wearing an N-95-type mask being forcibly dragged out of the hall by several local cops.

A X/Twitter video of another pro-mask speaker being harassed by police during the proceedings surfaced Monday, garnering nearly 270,000 views, 1,400 “likes” and 650 reposts in under 24 hours. The speaker against the bill was allegedly cut off by police promptly at the allotted, three-minute mark, while prior speakers in favor of the bill were allowed to go well over the time limit.

The Nassau County Republican Party is a bastion of support

for the Trump presidential election campaign. In March of this year, it “wholeheartedly” endorsed the ex-president and would-be dictator. The county government’s highest official, Executive Bruce Blakeman, is an ardent Trump supporter who has appeared at several major rallies and events for the Republican candidate.

The Mask Transparency Act was initially proposed by Nassau legislator Mazi Melesa Pilip. Pilip is a Republican Zionist, an Ethiopian-Israeli immigrant to the US and former paratrooper in the Israel Defense Force (IDF). She is a supporter of Netanyahu and the genocide in Gaza and has spent a significant portion of her political career to build ties with Israel among her constituency. Pilip contested and lost a US congressional seat last year in the special election called in the aftermath of the removal of Republican conman George Santos.

Drawing upon the slanderous equation of pro-Palestinian, anti-genocide sentiment with antisemitism, Pilip proposed the bill “after concerns over antisemitic crimes committed at protests across the country,” a local news source wrote.

The New York Civil Liberties Union criticized the law as “a dangerous misuse of the law the score political points and target protestors.” The Nassau County regional director of the group, Susan Gottehrer, issued a statement defending the right of demonstrators to wear masks, writing, “Making anonymous protest illegal chills political action and is ripe for selective enforcement, leading to doxing, surveillance, and retaliation against protestors.”

Representatives of both the NAACP and the Urban League voiced their support for the mask ban, citing the history of masked Ku Klux Klan violence against African Americans. In the context of the current attacks on anti-genocide demonstrators, however, such statements are a thin political cover for deeply reactionary policies.

According to the *New York Times*, “Marc Morial, president of the National Urban League, and Jonathan Greenblatt, chief executive of the Anti-Defamation League, said in a joint statement” that they were “encouraged that lawmakers in New York are concerned about the crisis of masked intimidation and are prioritizing this issue.” The statement urged passage of a statewide law banning masking on demonstrations.

Present at the Nassau legislative session was New York

Republican Congressman and former NYPD detective Anthony D'Esposito. Esposito spoke in support of the bill and slandered protesters. "It is vital that these protesters remove the masks, come out of the darkness and are shown in light, which I believe will deter them from committing violence," he said.

The group, Jews for Mask Rights, which sent speakers to Monday's proceedings to oppose the ban, recounted the following:

One co-writer of our Jews for Mask Rights open letter was booed during her testimony about her concerns about the bill and her struggle with Long COVID. The crowd yelled obscenities when she shared her fears about harassment – a valid fear, considering another co-writer had been harassed for masking in NYC just that morning. The irony of a group allegedly "opposing hate speech" and "concerned with Jewish safety" mocking a disabled Jewish speaker was not lost on us.

Notwithstanding the leading role played by the Republican lawmakers in the bill's passing and the opposition voiced by Democratic politicians, Monday's ruling would not have been possible without the bipartisan attack on freedom of speech and assembly that has been mounted in response to the global protests against the genocide in Gaza. Additionally, the systematic undermining of all public health measures since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, supported by both capitalist parties, has merely paved the road for the far right to advance this vicious assault on whatever measures remain available to the public to protect themselves against infection.

The seven Democrats in the county government who registered their opposition to the proposal by their abstention did so because they had intended initially to convince the Republicans to adopt a more "efficient" version of the same legislation.

Nassau County Democratic minority leader Delia DeRiggi-Whitton wrote in a press release, "[w]e call on the Republicans to adopt our proposal instead of their blatantly illegal, controversial, and flawed legislation, which will be overturned by the courts and will cost taxpayers significant amounts of money... Our approach ensures efficient use of police resources and fosters a better relationship between the community and law enforcement."

The proposed "fix" to the bill advanced by the Democrats would have issued harsher punishments for perpetrators of crimes who used masking to conceal their identity, as opposed to the current "blanket" legislation which prohibits the use of face coverings altogether. Absent in the Democrats' opposition, however, was any challenge of the basic lie that anti-genocide protesters represent a danger to the population, namely, the Jewish population.

In early-June of this year, Democratic New York Governor Kathy Hochul floated the reinstatement of a pre-pandemic law banning the use of face coverings on the city subway system in response to a right-wing campaign against masking aimed at demonstrators.

Hochul has on several occasions solidarized herself with the far-right in slandering anti-genocide protesters as antisemitic and calling for their suppression. In May, she commended the House Committee on Education and the Workforce's McCarthy-style hearings against leaders of major American academic institutions for their alleged failure to suppress antisemitism, threatening to withdraw public funding for New York state institutions which did not crack down.

This followed Democratic New York City Mayor Eric Adams' testing of the waters with respect to mask banning in March of this year. He called for New York City shopkeepers to insist on customers lowering their masks to reveal their identity or be refused entry. Both Adams' and Hochul's calls were made on the basis of combating violent crime. Adams, for his part, is a vicious supporter of Israel, and has denounced anti-genocide protests as antisemitic. Additionally, Adams played a critical role in the ending of mask mandates in New York City public schools following the deadly Omicron wave of the pandemic, under the guise of fostering a return to "normalcy."

The struggle against fascism, as well as the defense of public health cannot be left in the hands of the capitalist Democratic Party. The breakdown of social rights, including the erosion of democratic rights and the attack on the healthcare system, is bound up with the economic crisis of world finance capital, the root cause of the imperialist war. The WSWS calls for the formation of neighborhood and action committees, politically independent of both parties of big business and in alliance with the independent organs of struggle of the working class, as a means of carrying out the fight for these rights.

We urge those interested in carrying out this fight to contact the WSWS today.



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