

Democratic lawmakers in Maryland push right-wing mask ban

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Democratic lawmakers in Maryland have introduced bills in both houses of the Maryland General Assembly that would make it a crime to wear a mask while “intimidating” another person. The move follows similar actions in other states like New York.

The “Unmask Hate Act,” introduced by five Democratic delegates and two Democratic senators, would prohibit “a person from intentionally harassing, intimidating, or threatening another person while hiding or concealing their face.” It would impose a fine of up to \$500 and up to 90 days imprisonment for first-time offenders.

The bill’s sponsors, a coalition of African American and Jewish Democratic lawmakers, claim that “masked intimidation” has increased since October 7, 2023, when Israel began its indiscriminate mass murder of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. They argue that protestors against the genocide have adopted what the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) has described as “KKK-style tactics” in wearing masks in order to conceal their identities.

One of the bill’s co-sponsors, state Sen. Jeff Waldstreicher of Montgomery County, said the bill “criminalizes utilizing masks to intimidate, menace, or harass folks, and it’s the same laws we had in place in the post-KKK era.”

Another sponsor, Del. Adrian Boafo of Prince George’s County, said, “Marylanders in general, not just Black Marylanders, but we turned our backs, even in silence, to our Jewish brothers and sisters [after Oct. 7]. That’s why this bill is so important. This is a law that says we’re trying to protect our communities and Marylanders.”

Cynically, Waldstreicher further claimed, “These two groups [blacks and Jews] have always worked together, hand in glove, to found the NAACP, during the Civil

Rights era in the 1960s, and now we can do so again. The folks who are intimidating African Americans behind masks are the same folks who are intimidating Jewish Americans behind masks.”

The obvious aim of the bill is to give police further justification for cracking down on protests against the genocide. Governments around the world have dealt harshly with pro-Gaza activists, from raiding the homes of students involved in Students for Justice in Palestine at George Mason University and suspending them from campus to arresting anti-genocide activists such as Montreal author Yves Engler.

Zionist provocateurs have, in fact, been the violent elements, as in the case of the 27-year-old man in Florida who opened fire earlier this month on two Israeli tourists. The individual had mistaken the two individuals for Palestinian Arabs, while one of the victims initially blamed “Arabs” for the attack, even though it was carried out by another person of Jewish descent.

The Maryland bill is similar to one introduced in the New York State Assembly as part of a campaign by the ADL and the Urban League.

As with that bill, supporters of the Maryland bill claim it will not affect people who wear masks for their own protection. But it would be up to a police officer on the scene to determine who fits that exemption. Furthermore, the bill places the burden of proof on the mask wearer to demonstrate medical need.

Aside from the bill’s aim to intimidate anti-genocide protestors and enable the police to arrest anyone for wearing a mask at these protests, the bill further undermines public health in the midst of spikes in multiple respiratory illnesses around the country.

Far from “protecting our communities,” as Del. Boafo claimed, the bill would discourage people from

wearing masks at a time when rates of the flu, COVID, RSV, H5N1 and other respiratory illnesses are on the rise in Maryland. Just over a month ago, the Maryland Department of Health issued a recommendation for universal masking in all patient care areas and any other healthcare setting.

Meanwhile, the first child to die of measles in the United States in 10 years passed away this week in Texas as that state reeled from a measles outbreak. Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., the Secretary of Health and Human Services under President Trump, responded to this extraordinary and tragic development by shrugging off the outbreak as a regular occurrence in the US. There have already been more than 13,000 adult and pediatric flu deaths in the 2024-2025 season.

Far from fascistic figures like Kennedy and Trump being alone in pushing destructive anti-public health messages, Democratic lawmakers at all levels of government have moved to the right on matters of public health. Philadelphia banned the wearing of ski masks earlier this year ostensibly to fight crime, while Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass last year called for a mask ban a week before testing positive for COVID-19.

In Maryland, too, Gov. Wes Moore is proposing \$2 billion in budget cuts across the state in the coming fiscal year. Moore has made it clear that closing the state's fiscal deficit is paramount in any budget discussion. Meanwhile, at the federal level, Congress is due to consider as much as \$880 billion in cuts to Medicaid later this year. This would reportedly increase Maryland's share of costs for its current program by \$1 billion per year or more.



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