

Gerrymandering in the South: The working class and the defense of democratic rights

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Across the South, Republican state legislatures are redrawing congressional district lines to eliminate seats held by black Democrats for more than three decades. Legitimized by the Supreme Court's decision in *Louisiana v. Callais* and accelerating in Louisiana, Tennessee, Alabama and other states, this gerrymandering offensive is an attack on the democratic rights of the working class as a whole, of which the assault on black voters in the South is one element.

The immediate mechanism is the dilution of black votes in majority-minority districts, which are being broken up and folded into majority-white districts gerrymandered for Republican advantage.

Tennessee's legislature is carving up Memphis's compact black-majority district into three rural-anchored seats—one stretching more than 200 miles toward Nashville—potentially handing Republicans a clean 9–0 House sweep in a state they already dominate. In Louisiana and Alabama, lawmakers would undo the second black-majority districts recently created, leaving each state with just one such seat despite large black populations, while new maps in South Carolina and Mississippi could eliminate the districts of veteran black congressmen Jim Clyburn and Bennie Thompson. Across the Deep South, as few as seven majority-black seats would remain out of 42—even though African Americans make up over 30 percent of the region's population.

To oppose the Supreme Court ruling and the Republican elimination of majority-minority districts does not mean giving political support either to the congressmen whose districts are being broken up or to the Democratic Party as a whole. No less than any other section of the Democratic Party establishment, the congressmen targeted by Trump are intransigent defenders of American imperialism and the capitalist system.

Clyburn was the third-ranking leader of the Democrats in the House, and his intervention into the 2020 presidential campaign was critical in securing the nomination for Biden, the most right-wing of the major candidates. Thompson headed the House Special Committee investigating the January 6, 2021 attack on the Capitol, which made a limited exposure of Trump's role in the coup but covered up the role of the Republican Party and the military-intelligence apparatus.

Far from representing the heroic, self-sacrificing traditions of

the civil rights struggles, the black Democrats are run-of-the-mill capitalist politicians, frequently selling their services to the highest bidder, just like their white and Republican counterparts.

The current gerrymandering campaign, however, must be understood within the broader crisis of American democracy and, in particular, Trump's effort to establish a presidential dictatorship. Redistricting is being combined with proof-of-citizenship and voter-ID schemes, attacks on mail-in voting such as the Save America Act, threats to have federal agencies usurp the role of local authorities in the administration of elections, and preparations for the use of armed federal agents and even the military at the polls, under the pretext of combating fraud or disorder.

The attempt to eliminate districts with significant black majorities therefore has a dual character. It draws directly on the long history of black disenfranchisement in the South, from Jim Crow to the gutting of the Voting Rights Act. But it is not merely an attack on black voters. It is an attack on the democratic rights of the working class as a whole, directed especially against urban, poor, immigrant, minority and young people whose votes stand in the way of the fascistic Republican Party and Trump's authoritarian project.

The *Callais* decision is itself the culmination of a decades-long assault on the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the most significant legislative product of the mass civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. This legislation put teeth in the largely unenforced 15th Amendment, passed after the Civil War, which guaranteed the right of the freed slaves to vote.

Under the Jim Crow system of segregation in the South, black voters were almost entirely disenfranchised, partly through legal restrictions such as poll taxes and literacy tests, partly through straight-out terrorism, as blacks who sought to register and vote were routinely subjected to violence and intimidation by local police and the Ku Klux Klan. The South was effectively a one-party state, dominated by the Democrats, who had been the party of the slave owners and remained the party of the wealthy aristocracy that controlled the South.

The Voting Rights Act provided for federal oversight of elections in those parts of the United States with a history of voter suppression, including not only the segregated South, but

also Arizona and Alaska, for discrimination against Hispanic, Native American and Alaska Native voters, and scattered counties in many other states.

Black voter registration and turnout skyrocketed across the South, but initially led to the election of only a handful of African Americans to Congress. The vast majority of African Americans now vote for the Democratic Party, crediting it for the reforms of the civil rights era. Racist Democratic politicians in the South shifted en masse to the Republican Party, which made increasing gains in the region.

After the 1990 census, however, black Democratic leaders reached an agreement with the Republican Party to create more than a dozen new majority-minority districts in the region. These would provide safe seats for black Democratic politicians, and in 1992 the number of black representatives from the South jumped to 20.

At the same time, by concentrating large numbers of minority voters in a small number of seats, the Republican Party expected to gain the vast majority of Southern congressional seats through race-based appeals to white voters. This cynical deal—spearheaded by Republican strategist Lee Atwater and Representative Newt Gingrich of Georgia—was the culmination of what Richard Nixon had dubbed the “Southern strategy.” It contributed significantly to the Republican takeover of the House of Representatives in the 1994 elections.

In the three decades since, the Republican Party cemented political control of the Southern states, with the sole exception of Virginia. Side by side with the consolidation of Republican political power in the South, the Republican-dominated U.S. Supreme Court has steadily dismantled the Voting Rights Act, not overturning it explicitly but gutting the enforcement powers through which the federal government and civil rights groups could take action against blatantly discriminatory actions.

The *Callais* decision completes the process, as the minority dissent written by Justice Elena Kagan argued, of rendering the Voting Rights Act “all but a dead letter.”

The Democratic Party’s response to the mounting threats to democratic rights combines reactionary politics and impotent theatrics. There has been much howling about Jim Crow 2.0, but no action proposed beyond filing lawsuits, staging protests, and—inevitably—voting for the Democrats in the midterm elections in November ... if they even take place.

The Democrats have presented the redistricting campaign entirely in racial terms. They use minority districts as electoral props, while they have presided over austerity, police violence, inequality, war and the decay of the cities where much of their minority electorate lives. They have also initiated their own redistricting efforts, particularly in California and Virginia, to create more Democrat-controlled seats. Both parties look upon the great majority of the population as an object of manipulation.

There is no significant constituency for the defense of democratic rights within any section of the American ruling

class. The Republican Party has been transformed into the political instrument of a fascist would-be dictator. The Democratic Party blocks any serious struggle against mounting authoritarianism, because it fears a movement from below from the working masses, far more than it does the actions of Trump.

The defense of democratic rights now falls to the working class. It must not only defend voting rights but fight against the entire anti-democratic framework of American elections: the Electoral College, the Senate, the Supreme Court, ballot access laws that exclude independent and socialist candidates, the domination of money over elections, the monopolization of the media and political power by the corporate elite.

The vehicle for such a struggle is the building of a mass independent political movement of the working class, based on a socialist program. The working class must break with the capitalist two-party system and set out on the road of political struggle against the profit system. This requires the building of new organizations, rank-and-file committees in every workplace, school and working class neighborhood, independent of both the corporate-controlled trade unions and the corporate-controlled Democratic and Republican parties.

The defense of democratic rights is a central focus of the struggle for socialism. Democratic rights are both a necessity for working class politics within capitalism, and the indispensable basis for the future socialist reorganization of society, which will put working people, not a handful of financial aristocrats, in control.



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