

California gubernatorial debate exposes 2 factions of the same ruling class

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Last Wednesday, Democrat Xavier Becerra and Republican Steve Hilton faced off for 60 minutes in the first head-to-head debate of the 2026 California gubernatorial general election at CNN's studio in Burbank, California. Last June, the two candidates emerged as the top two vote-getters, although neither reached 30 percent of the vote. As of this writing, the three most recent independent polls give Becerra an average lead of roughly 58 percent to 35 percent.

The debate, notwithstanding the bitter insults and personal attacks, showed two factions of the same ruling class, ready to do anything to defend the profit system that has produced California's social catastrophe.

The major issues facing workers and youth were not dealt with in any serious manner. The criminal US-Israeli war against Iran was mentioned only in relation to gas prices, and even then, Becerra's reference to the "illegal war in Iran" was only a criticism to the form, not the crime itself. The genocide in Gaza was not mentioned at all. Nor was the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine.

California has become a cost-prohibitive state, and the debate was dominated by the cost of living. Hilton presented tax cuts as the solution to easing the cost of living, proposing to eliminate state income taxes on the first \$150,000 and cut the gas tax. Becerra attacked the plan as a giveaway to the wealthy, arguing that Hilton would give "the richest Californians, millionaires and billionaires, a 40 percent tax cut" at the expense of schools, healthcare and housing. Yet Becerra himself declared he would vote no on a proposed 5 percent wealth tax on billionaires.

Housing is an existential problem in California. Hilton proposed capping government fees and regulations on a new home at \$50,000, arguing that "the quickest way to reduce the cost of housing is for the government to stop making it more expensive." Becerra countered that the state must at least double the rate of housing construction, expand down-payment assistance and prevent Wall Street investors from outbidding workers.

Although through different mechanisms, Becerra through regulation and Hilton through deregulation, both candidates leave housing within the market. The debate never questioned why access to a basic human necessity should depend upon

workers' ability to purchase or rent property at prices determined by landlords, developers, banks and investors.

On homelessness, Becerra promised to clear encampments and expand treatment and housing assistance. "We will make sure the encampments are cleared," he said. Hilton attacked Becerra for giving Gavin Newsom an "A" on homelessness and declared that California needed "a plan to change policy on homelessness, not more of the same failed policy."

But neither addressed the social forces that continually reproduce homelessness: the enormous concentration of wealth alongside mass poverty.

The sharpest exchange came over immigration. Becerra denounced mass deportations declaring that "immigrants lift up our state. They build it every day." Yet he simultaneously insisted on "an immigration reform" determining "who stays and who goes."

Becerra accused Hilton of welcoming "immigrants who look like you but deport immigrants who look like me." Hilton called the remark "disgraceful" and insisted that his objective was to "lower the temperature," while advocating deportation of immigrants who commit dangerous crimes. Ultimately, both parties have deported millions of immigrants, and both exploit the vulnerability of immigrant labor.

On artificial intelligence, Hilton wants to attract AI investments and rejects excessive regulation. Becerra stressed corporate accountability and "guardrails," citing his lawsuits against major technology companies. But neither addressed the fundamental social question posed by AI: who owns and controls the technology, and who benefits from its enormous productive potential? Workers will lose jobs, yet the debate treated AI as an instrument for corporate growth, whether regulated or encouraged.

Both candidates supported expanding California's film and television tax credit program allegedly to stem the loss of roughly 50,000 production jobs in entertainment since 2022. Becerra declared, "We've got to fight to keep Hollywood in Hollywood," while Hilton promised to "reduce the bureaucracy and the red tape." In reality, tax incentives have proven to be a boon for corporations, not workers.

Becerra's response to California's educational crisis was similar. "We don't see our education system well-

coordinated,” he said, promising to reduce “overcompliance” and provide tutoring. Hilton demanded phonics, greater accountability for teachers and schools and attacked the teacher unions. Neither addressed the broader dismantlement of public education through decades of bipartisan austerity.

Cynically, both candidates used the mythology of the “California dream.” Hilton declared California “the most amazing state in the most amazing country on Earth,” before attacking “this bloated nanny-state bureaucratic government.” Becerra invoked his parents’ arrival with \$12 in their pockets and concluded: “We need to make sure we don’t forget that, and we fight to keep the California dream.”

The debate revealed that both candidates fight for the private ownership of the banks, the energy industry, the tech monopolies or the housing market. There was no reference to expropriating a single dollar of the wealth that the working class produces. Both accept the framework of a system in which nearly 182,000 Californians experience homelessness on a single night (2025) while billionaires finance their campaigns.

The class character of both candidates is well documented. Becerra’s career is that of a professional capitalist state manager. A Stanford graduate, he spent 24 years in the House of Representatives, four years as California attorney general and four years as secretary of Health and Human Services under Joe Biden.

As California attorney general, Becerra routinely defended capital punishment and death sentences against habeas appeals and regulated the terms of workers’ exploitation, imposing penalties on corporations that violate the law but preserving the corporate system that produced it. When his office sued Uber and Lyft for misclassification of employees, the companies retained their business models and continued to expand their revenues and profits at the expense of workers.

As HHS secretary, he did not dismantle the Trump administration’s Global and Professional Direct Contracting model, another pilot designed to introduce private, profit-seeking entities into traditional Medicare. It was just rebranded as “ACO REACH,” a scheme that authorizes private equity firms and venture capital-backed startups to manage care for Medicare beneficiaries. These are often assigned automatically without their consent, and companies are permitted to retain leftover funds as profit.

Becerra also oversaw the Office of Refugee Resettlement during the 2021 surge of unaccompanied migrant children. HHS’s expedited placements with sponsors put children at risk. Investigations documented migrant children being exploited in dangerous jobs, including slaughterhouses, construction and manufacturing. Vulnerable children were processed rapidly into the labor market and exploited.

Hilton’s record is equally revealing. He was director of strategy to British Prime Minister David Cameron and was the architect of the “Big Society,” under which the state gutted the UK welfare state. It also shifted the cost of social reproduction

onto unpaid voluntary labor and opened public services to private contractors. Several studies have linked that austerity program to hundreds of thousands of excess deaths.

Hilton then relocated to Silicon Valley, co-founding the venture-capital-backed Crowdpac. He spent six years hosting *The Next Revolution* on Fox News, attacking public health mandates and promoting Trumpist policies. His 2026 campaign is financed by tech billionaires like Sergey Brin, Chris Larsen, John Doerr, Joe Lonsdale and Garry Tan.

Both candidates belong to the privileged layer they serve. Becerra is a millionaire landlord with several million dollars in assets. His 2024 joint income with his wife, a physician, was approximately \$490,000.

Hilton is a multi-decamillionaire, with an estimated net worth between \$50 million and \$100 million, and a 2024 joint income of roughly \$7.5 million, including \$6.7 million from his wife’s Silicon Valley executive compensation.

Becerra has raised over \$33 million in campaign finance, backed by independent committees funded by Meta, Airbnb, Chevron, McDonald’s, DaVita Dialysis, the California Association of Realtors and the Pechanga Band of Indians. The “labor” support he touts comes from the Laborers Pacific Southwest Regional Organizing Coalition PAC, an institutional union bureaucracy that disciplines the workforce in exchange for incremental concessions.

Hilton, for his part, has raised roughly \$21 million and has personally contributed \$190,000.

What the debate showed is that the two candidates are competing over how to best administer the exploitation of California’s working class. For workers, this is no contest. Neither candidate represents the interests of the millions of workers, youth and unemployed who face unaffordable housing, soaring living costs, collapsing public services and the threat of war and dictatorship.

The working class must reject the entire capitalist political establishment and build its own party, on the basis of a socialist program, to fight for the expropriation of the banks and corporations, the reorganization of production to meet social need and the international unity of the working class against war and dictatorship.



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