

Anti-immigrant measure passed in California

By Martin McLaughlin
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A ballot referendum to put an end to bilingual education was adopted in the state of California, in the most significant result of primary election voting conducted in eight US states on June 2.

The anti-immigrant measure, Proposition 227, was placed on the ballot after a petition campaign financed by computer millionaire Ronald Unz. It mandates a one-year limit on bilingual instruction, after which children with limited English proficiency will be forced into classes given in the English language.

California has 1.4 million children with limited English proficiency, more than half the national total, with 700,000 alone in the huge Los Angeles Unified School District. More than three-quarters of these children are Spanish-speaking, although California schools provide bilingual instruction in another 20 languages spoken by significant numbers of children.

Proposition 227 passed by a margin of 61 percent to 39 percent, with a narrow majority of black voters and a substantial majority of Hispanic voters opposing the antidemocratic measure.

Black and Hispanic civil rights groups announced immediately after the vote that they would file suit to block enforcement of the new law on the grounds that it violates federal constitutional protections. Similar lawsuits have so far blocked enforcement of an earlier anti-immigrant measure, Proposition 187, which was adopted by referendum vote in 1994.

A second controversial referendum, Proposition 226, went down to defeat by a margin of 46 percent to 54 percent. It would have limited the ability of unions to use dues money for political purposes, by requiring unions to obtain a signed authorization from each individual member each year when dues money was used for anything other than collective bargaining.

Proposition 226 was placed on the ballot by extreme right-wing groups who have passed or introduced similar measures in at least a dozen states, and are

seeking a federal law as well. The purpose is to attack the AFL-CIO bureaucracy's ability to funnel money into political campaigns, largely on behalf of the Democratic Party, as it did in 1996.

The national and California AFL-CIO, the California Teachers Association and other union groups poured nearly \$20 million into a massive advertising campaign against Proposition 226. By contrast the total money spent opposing Proposition 227--very little of it from the unions--was only \$3.2 million.

Also significant was the attitude of the California Chamber of Commerce and other state business associations, which were either officially neutral or spent little or no money promoting the initiative. The Chamber of Commerce reportedly agreed to adopt this position after the state AFL-CIO agreed not to support limits on corporate campaign contributions.

The California Democratic and Republican primaries saw an unprecedented avalanche of money spent largely by millionaire candidates on behalf of themselves. The three candidates who spent the most money--Democratic gubernatorial hopefuls Alfred Cecchi and Jane Harman, and Republican Senate candidate Darryl Issa--all lost. The total spending in the Democratic gubernatorial primary was \$65 million by three candidates who received a combined total of 3,225,193 votes, about \$20 for each ballot cast.

Only one incumbent officeholder was defeated in the eight states where voting was held June 2. California Republican Congressman Jay Kim lost his bid for renomination in a campaign where he was unable to set foot in his district because he was under house arrest in Washington, DC after a felony conviction for receiving illegal campaign contributions. One-third of the Republican primary electorate voted to return him to office anyway.

The lack of turnover was presented by the big business media as proof that the great mass of the

American people are contented and complacent. The *New York Times* claimed, "the overwhelming message was one of relative satisfaction." But it would be more correct to say that the predominant mood expressed was one of indifference, confusion and alienation from the whole electoral process, as voter turnout fell in state after state.

In California the referendum campaigns and the enormous outlays on advertising failed to boost the statewide turnout significantly. Some 5.6 million people voted, 38.3 percent of registered voters and only 26.5 percent of all those eligible to vote. There has been a steady downward trend in California primary voting, reflecting the declining support for the two big business parties, from 46.7 percent in 1978 to 29.1 percent in 1990 and 26.2 percent in 1994.

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