

Los Angeles Residents Fight Proposed Jail Tax

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Los Angeles is planning to arrest and incarcerate more Angelinos. Measure A, labeled as “The Jail Tax” by opponents, is a ballot initiative in Los Angeles County that seeks to raise \$500 million a year in order to hire more cops and increase the county’s jail capacity through a regressive, half-cent sales tax increase. Under this measure, the poor will pay twice: first, by paying a disproportionate share of their income for more cops and jails, and second through increased harassment, abuse, racial profiling and imprisonment by the state. This plan is being proposed while Los Angeles is in the process of closing the only trauma center in Watts, (seemingly, there is no money to keep its doors open) and despite the fact that crime rates in L.A. have been in decline for nearly a decade. With a majority of Californians in favor of cutting prisons and jails over other budget items such as healthcare and education, and with two-thirds of Californians in favor of rehabilitation and treatment over locking more people in cages, it is no surprise that the proponents of the jail tax major are relying on racist appeals and deliberate deception.

Birth of a Prison Nation

Proponents of Measure A have produced perhaps the most racially offensive campaign commercial since the infamous “Willie Horton” ads. The Measure A commercial is set in a suburban house at night. You hear the sound of a window breaking and the white woman in the house cowers in her bedroom, frantically dialing 9-1-1. While huddled beside her bed, she pleads for the police to hurry. As the shadow of an unseen figure is seen creeping up the stairs towards the woman’s bedroom, a voiceover using misleading statistics emphasizes the “vulnerability” of Angelinos to crime due to “under policing.”

The Measure A commercial has all of the subtleties of DW Griffith’s *Birth of Nation: Vote for Measure A or white women will be raped*. The race of the intruder in the commercial need not be shown. The archetype of the myth of the “Black rapist” assaulting white women is deeply rooted in the collective imagination of white society. The image not only invokes racism but patriarchy as well and the need for white men to “protect” white women through collective violence against Black men—either through lynch mobs or the state. Rather than hide from the critique of cops and jails as institutions of racial oppression, the Yes on Measure A ads embrace it in order to garner more votes.

Racism is big business and that is precisely who is funding the jail tax measure. Billionaires Eli Broad, chairman of AIG Sun America and Jerrold Perenchio, CEO of Univision, are financial backers of Measure A. The food company Compass Group North America and the telephone giant SBC, both of whom stand to make a killing by providing services to an expanded LA jail system, are also contributors. So far, close to \$2 million dollars has been raised by proponents of the jail tax. It has also been endorsed by LA County Sheriff Lee Baca and LAPD Chief William Bratton who also stand to benefit directly by putting more people into cages.

Despite its \$2 million dollar budget, billionaire backers, high profile cop-bureaucrats, and appeals to the racism of white folks, the Yes on measure A campaign still had to resort to lying. According to the Los Angeles Times, the campaign for Measure A used fake headlines on its website to make the false claim that the crime rate in Los Angeles is at a record high: “The opening page of the campaign website at midday Monday showed a newspaper article with the headline: ‘Crime rate at an all-time high. More police needed on streets.’ Next to that image appeared another headline: ‘L.A. Streets no longer safe for children.’” The main problem, the

Times articles notes, was that these headlines were completely fabricated and never appeared in any newspaper. In fact, major crime rates in Los Angeles have dramatically fallen over the past decade. Rick Taylor, consultant for the campaign described the lies as “graphics” and “not a big deal.”

Birth of a Movement

A number of anti-prison groups have seized on the threat of Measure A to agitate against the further expansion of jails in Los Angeles. A new coalition organized around the principle of “No New Jails in Los Angeles County,” has formed. Rather than using the election as an end point for its organizing efforts, the No New Jails Coalition (NNJC) is using it as a starting point, and is working to capitalize on the increased attention to criminal justice issues that Measure A has brought to Los Angeles County in order to broaden the public discussion of the role prisons and police play in our society and to build a stronger movement to oppose the continued expansion of police and jails in our community. The No New Jails Campaign turns the arguments for Measure A on its head. While Measure A proponents argue that Los Angeles is under police, the NNJC argues that Los Angeles is over-policed and over-incarcerated.

In January of 2004 Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger proposed the formation of a commission to study the potential for California to close state prison facilities and the California Youth Authority (CYA). The commission was composed entirely of the people who oversaw and enabled California’s massive prison expansion in the first place. Critics of the California Department of Corrections and the CYA were deliberately excluded from the commission. In response to this, a statewide coalition of over forty organizations, Californians United for a Responsible Budget (CURB), formed a shadow commission to conduct its own hearings. The first hearing was held in Sacramento earlier this year and focused on the prison problem at the state level. CURB has joined forces with the No New Jails Coalition in Los Angeles. The two groups held a second statewide CURB hearing at the Watts Labor Community Action Center in Los Angeles in late October in order to address the problem of jails at the local and county level. Testimony was heard from representatives of community organizations about how they would spend the \$500 million to make Los Angeles safer and more hopeful by doing the work they are already doing: fighting for healthcare, jobs, and environmental and social justice. Organizers estimated over 100 people were attendance. The continuing budget crisis in Sacramento combined with declining crime rates may force the state’s hand and reforms may be implemented to reduce the state prisons population. At the same time, local governments are gearing up to incarcerate more people at the county level. Anti-prison activists will need to adjust their political strategies and tactics in order pre-empt these efforts.

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