

## Republicans Attacking Right to Vote

By Lee A. Saunders  
AFSCME Secretary-Treasurer

There is no right more precious in our nation than the right of citizens to cast a ballot on Election Day. That is why generations of Americans have sacrificed and even died in efforts to expand the right to vote. Yet across the country, powerful corporate interests and the right-wing politicians who do their bidding are working hard to make it more difficult for citizens to vote. In more than two dozen states this year, bills have been introduced to restrict the right to vote; and in several states where Wall Street-backed Republicans control both houses of the legislature, governors have signed these fundamentally misguided measures into law.

As a result of these cynical attempts to turn back from the progress America has made in expanding voting rights, millions of voters are in for a surprise when they go to the polls. They will find new requirements that have never before existed, requirements that have been put in place to keep particular voters – students, minorities and senior citizens – from having their voices heard in our democracy.

In Ohio, for example, Gov. John Kasich and the Republican-con-

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trolled Legislature pushed through a measure that limits early voting and places new burdensome requirements on absentee ballots. "I think it is very calculated," said State Sen. Nina Turner of Cleveland. The corporate-backed restrictions on voting are designed to reduce the ability of low-income and minority voters to cast a ballot, particularly by forcing boards of elections to close their

voter suppression laws. In Florida, Gov. Rick Scott pushed through a vast set of new and burdensome regulations that are designed to restrict the ability of working middle-class voters to cast a ballot. The period for early voting shrinks dramatically, and voters who have moved to a new county or have married and changed their names in the months prior to an election will not have their ballots counted on Election Day. Since the 1960s, Florida voters have been able to change their address or name at their precinct during early voting or on Election

they are able to cast a vote. Hundreds of thousands of Badger State voters will be denied their right to vote. A study conducted by the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee determined that this change in Wisconsin's law will have a serious impact, particularly on students and minorities. More than 50 percent of the African-American men and 49 percent of African-American women in the state do not have a driver's license or passport. More than three out of every four young African-American males in the state lack such state-issued identification.

That shouldn't surprise us. While most adult Americans have a driver's license, it is not necessarily true for large groups of Americans. Students, other young people and the working poor living in metropolitan areas often rely on mass transit, rather than own a car. Senior citizens living in nursing homes or with their families often give up driving. The blind and others with physical disabilities don't drive. All of them will be affected by these new restrictions.

Proponents claim that these changes are necessary to protect against voter fraud, but as a detailed study published by the Brennan Center for Justice notes: "By any measure, voter fraud is extraordinarily rare." Former Pres.

'There has never been in my lifetime – since we got rid of the poll tax and all the Jim Crow burdens on voting – the determined effort to limit the franchise that we see today'

— Former President Bill Clinton

doors on the weekend before Election Day. Voters whose jobs, family responsibilities or disabilities make it difficult for them to stand in long lines, often for many hours, will now find it harder to exercise their fundamental right to vote.

Ohio is not alone in enacting

Day. But now they will only be given provisional ballots which may or may not be counted.

In Wisconsin this May, Gov. Scott Walker and his corporate-backed cronies in Madison enacted a law that will require every voter to show a government-issued identification card before



Bill Clinton got to the heart of the matter in early July when he summed up the efforts made to restrict the right to vote: "There has never been in my lifetime – since we got rid of the poll tax and all the Jim Crow burdens on voting – the determined effort to limit the franchise that we see today."

That is why they are attacking the right of seniors, minorities and workers to cast an unfettered vote. Voters have every right to be angry about these cynical efforts. We need to hold accountable the politicians who took these radical steps the next time we vote, before they eliminate our voice at the ballot box completely.

## MILLIONS ARE ON THE BRINK OF STARVATION



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Photos by Jake Lyell

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## America's Racial Wealth Gap Grows to the Largest on Record

By Charlene Crowell  
NNPA Columnist

In the 25 years since the federal government began publishing demographic data on wealth, the worst disparities emerged for 2009. A newly-released analysis by the Pew Research Center found that the median wealth of white households is 20 times that of Blacks, and 18 times that of Latinos – a gap that nearly doubled in size for these same three racial groups more than 20 years ago.

Further, when Pew compared wealth gaps for 2005 to those of 2009, the clear conclusion was that the combination of the housing market bubble and the subsequent recession were the underlying causes for these record disparities.

By 2009, all three groups lost wealth; but Black median net worth was less than half of that recorded for 2005: \$5,677; Latinos families were only slightly better at \$6,325. Yet for white households, the median net worth decreased to \$113,149.

According to Pew, household wealth is determined by subtracting all debts owed from the accumulated sum of all assets, including real estate, cars, savings and checking accounts, retirement accounts, stocks, etc.

Since the report was released, much of the extensive news coverage has omitted a key finding. From 2005 to 2009 the number of families with either zero or negative worth grew dramatically as well. For Black families, the percentage grew from 29 percent to 35 percent; for Latino families, the negative wealth grew from 23 percent to 31 percent. Yet for white families, negative wealth went from 11 percent to 15 percent.

More plainly stated, African-Americans

are becoming poorer at a faster rate than any other race or ethnic group in the country. Our forefathers may have worn the shackles of slavery. But this generation is wearing shackles of a different kind: poverty and debt.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), America's Black unemployment level is double that of white America. After comparing unemployment data to that of Core Logic, a private research firm, among the nation's top states for underwater mortgages – states with homeowners owing more than their house is now worth – the top five of those states also have the nation's highest unemployment.

If these trends are allowed to continue, America's 'haves' and 'have nots' will

35 percent of Black Americans have zero or negative wealth --  
-- White American wealth 20 times that of Blacks

move even further towards the two separate Americas first warned by the Kerner Commission Report in the 1960s. Named for then-Illinois' Governor Otto Kerner, the report told a tale of two Americas were emerging – one Black and the other white. In 2011, the divide is not just about race but wealth as well.

All of America should feel uncomfortable about the growing concentration of poverty in Black and brown communities, who together represent 28 percent of the nation's population.

It is time for leaders – public and private – to stand up and insist that our nation create new and sustainable jobs with incomes that lift this country's poor into self-sufficiency.