

Va. gubernatorial race spotlights Bush machine

by Nancy Spannaus

Just as the Commonwealth of Virginia was at the center of the 1994 Senate races, with the contest between Oliver North and Sen. Charles Robb, so the off-year gubernatorial race of 1997 represents a bellwether of the coming era of U.S. politics. On the one side is Bush-man James Gilmore, the former state Attorney General, seeking to succede his Republican cohort, incumbent Gov. George Allen, who is not allowed, by law, to hold an immediate second term. On the other side, is the incumbent Democratic lieutenant governor, Donald S. Beyer, representing a Democratic Party which is more besieged than on the attack against the Conservative Revolution atrocities of the Republicans.

Virginia is one of two states in the United States having gubernatorial elections this year, the other being New Jersey. Given the record of Governor Allen, as one of the most radical representatives of the Republican deconstructionists of government, the race will give an indication of whether the Democratic Party can get together an appropriate counterattack, on the road toward taking back the Congress, and the nation, from the Gingrichite disaster that has befallen it.

The Allen-Gilmore record

Republican Governor Allen should be an easy target for an aggressive Democratic Party which is dedicated to advocating the interests of working people, minorities, and independent, owner-operator farmers. Of course, the governor can point to terrific statistics on the economy, showing low unemployment, dramatic reductions in welfare rolls, and even a surplus in the state coffers. But such statistics aren't any more persuasive on the state level, than they are on the Federal level, to anyone actually looking at the living standards, wage rates, and overall conditions of life in the state.

In his four years in office, Governor Allen has dedicated himself to what he calls the "devolution" of government—in every area but the prison system. He has built prisons at breakneck speed, beyond even the immediate "demand." ("Virginia is for prisoners," might be his campaign slogan.) He has slashed state government departments, particularly in areas which serve the helpless, like the mentally ill. He has given huge tax breaks to cheap-labor corporations to come

into the state; opened up the prisons to private corporations, offering inmate slave-labor; and made a grandstand play to allegedly improve educational standards, at the same time that he has ignored the economic needs of teachers and school facilities.

Under Allen, Virginia has become number two in the nation for executing prisoners—including those, such as Joseph O'Dell, with colorable claims to innocence. The administration has also set a standard of draconian treatment for prisoners, ending parole, removing educational opportunities, and otherwise chiseling on living conditions.

This is the record that Gilmore, who was Allen's Attorney General until spring of 1997, is running on. In addition, Gilmore is reaching out for support from every member of the corrupt Bush machine that he can find—from Bush himself, to televangelist Pat Robertson, to House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.), and Oliver North, that Son-of-a-Bush himself. Given the known connections of these creatures to crimes such as drug-trafficking, these close associations create quite a vulnerability.

The Democratic dilemma

So far, however, the Beyer campaign has not taken advantage of these weaknesses. After a kickoff statement indicating that he was going to present a vision for rebuilding Virginia, Beyer retreated into a "no-tax" pledge. And when Gilmore began a populist campaign around eliminating the personal property tax (a Virginia tax on cars, boats, and similar items), Beyer countered with his own property tax cut—a more responsible version of the same appeal.

The central thrust of the Beyer campaign is improving Virginia's commitment to education, including increasing teachers' salaries, reducing class size, and the like. He has put to one side, because of cost, the enormous need for school construction (over \$8 billion). Beyer can be expected to vociferously attack Gilmore for seeking to undermine the commitment to public education—a charge which can be supported.

The problem is that, to win the election in this state, Beyer must mobilize poor and working people to come out in large numbers. This won't happen if he puts himself forward as simply a more reasonable supporter of Gilmore's thrust on crime, taxes, and the economy. Unlike former governor Mary Sue Terry, Beyer is not contaminated by arrogance toward working people, an anti-labor record, and personal involvement in the political persecution of Lyndon LaRouche. But a lack of defects won't help him win the election, in the home state of Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell.

The issues of restoring justice, including for the five associates of Lyndon LaRouche still in prison in the state, and actually rebuilding the economy, are going to have to be faced by the Virginia Democrats if they want to win this election. If they don't, it won't be just Virginia that will suffer.