

Organizers assemble conference to resist DeSantis, establish Emergency Committee to Defend the Tampa 5

written by Joe Nohava

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Tampa 5 defendants addressing the conference. Photo: FightBack! News

Tampa, Florida — On June 24, over 130 people packed the Maureen Gauzza Library in Tampa early Saturday morning to join in the fight to defend the Tampa 5, activists charged with felonies, some facing up to ten years in prison for exercising their free speech rights.

An aim of the conference was uniting progressive people and movements to fight for civil liberties in Florida and against the reactionary agenda of Governor Ron DeSantis.

Attendees joined three panel discussions titled: “Florida Students Fight to Save Public Education,” “Unions: A Worker’s Last Defense Against DeSantis,” and “Civil Liberties in the Age of Ron DeSantis.” These panels featured students, workers, union leaders, community activists, and members of the legal community, who urged resistance to attacks by Ron DeSantis and his reactionary cronies.

Frank Chapman, executive director of the National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression, keynote speaker of the conference, and political prisoner himself, made the point about the Tampa 5 defending themselves from a police assault, saying, “that’s what you’re supposed to do when someone attacks you – fight back.” He also vowed, “We’re gonna make the case of the Tampa 5 a national priority.” Summing up the theme of the conference, he explained, “We say the power of the people is greater than the people in power.”

The case of the Tampa 5 stems from a protest held on March 6, when a few dozen people led by Students for a Democratic Society at the University of South Florida held a protest against House Bill 999, which, among other things, is set to dismantle ethnic studies and mandate discrimination in higher education. Intending to meet with the president of the school, as is their right, they were instead met with police brutality, and lethal chokeholds. Four protesters were initially charged with felonies, and one retroactively charged later. Most of the Tampa 5 are facing up to ten years

in prison.

Chants of “Down with DeSantis!” and “Protesting is not a crime, justice for the Tampa 5!” electrified the crowd and exemplified the unity and resistance that these attacks on civil liberties have sparked.

Student panelists spoke about the attacks on educators and educational freedom, through political appointments at institutions like New College of Florida, as well as LGBTQ students and teachers, through both iterations of Florida’s “don’t say gay” bill, the firing of LGBTQ educators, and the whitewashing of history of the crimes of national oppression and slavery.

Panelist Isis Mack, of Black Lives Matter Grassroots, put it simply, “We’re going to get this education whether he [DeSantis] wants it or not.”

The labor panel struck a militant tone, emphasizing the interconnection of the student, progressive and labor movements, as president of the West Central AFL Labor Council Jim Junecko stated, “Political activism and labor activism go hand in hand.” He went on to say of workers’ rights, “Nothing was ever given, it was taken,” through that activism. Speaking of DeSantis himself, he pointed out, “He’s afraid of regular people uniting – he’s a coward.” Panelist Chrisley Carpio, one of the Tampa 5 herself and AFSCME member who was unjustly fired, said that the university tried to cut her off from speaking with her union, hoping to isolate her, and that if she hadn’t known her Weingarten Rights, she would not have known what options she had to fight back against the school’s attacks.

DeSantis, through his attacks on students, educators, workers, LGBT folks, reproductive rights, the Black Liberation Movement and immigrants, among others, had brought together this diverse coalition to oppose him and join the movement.

James Shaw, with the American Civil Liberties Union, spoke about how the

restriction of voting rights against felons dates back to the Reconstruction era, where African Americans were slapped with bogus charges and disenfranchised as a matter of course. Alice Moore of community group Florida Rising then pointed out that today, voting precincts are regularly moved around to make it harder for African Americans to vote, while Laura Rodriguez of Tampa Bay Community Action Committee talked about the ballot measure to restore voting rights to felons that passed in Florida, "We voted those rights back, and then a year later, the state turned around and said you have to pay every fine." Emphasizing other methods of struggle, Rodriguez also said, "Our main way of fighting back is by getting on the streets."

After the panels, solidarity statements from 27 different groups were read, many detailing other cases of political repression, from the case of USF Professor Sami Al-Arian given bogus terrorism charges, to the raid against the African People's Socialist Party and the pending case against the Uhuru Three, to the attacks on Tally 19 protesters, Minnesota abortion rights activists investigated by the FBI, charges against cop city protesters in Atlanta, the FBI investigation into anti-war activist Joe Lombardo, and grand jury and FBI raids directed against the Antiwar 23.

It was clear from these statements that the ruling class of the United States uses political repression regularly to try and crush peoples demands, but that people across the country have the backs of the Tampa 5.

Closing out the conference were resolutions, to demand freedom for and an end to all bogus political charges against protesters and activists, and to launch the Emergency Committee to Defend the Tampa 5, to make court dates for the Tampa 5 days of protest, starting with July 12 (the five's next court date), and to organize a speaking tour of the Tampa 5 to raise the profile of the case to drop the charges.

The battle against political repression might seem daunting, but in the words of

Duval Coalition of Rank and File Educators member Monique Sampson, “The flames of the peoples’ movement burn brighter than the fires of repression!”

Source: [FightBack! News](#)

