

Democratic "outsider" exploits popular anger over budget cuts

## Celebrity lawyer wins Michigan primary

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Millionaire attorney Geoffrey Fieger won the Democratic primary for governor of Michigan August 4 and will face incumbent Republican John Engler in November. Fieger won by a margin of 41 percent to 37 percent over his principal opponent, former East Lansing mayor Larry Owen, who had the backing of the United Auto Workers and AFL-CIO. A third candidate, former state senator and Clinton administration official Douglas Ross, trailed with 22 percent.

Fieger is a celebrity in Michigan as the lawyer for assisted-suicide advocate Dr. Jack Kevorkian. He spent \$1 million of his personal fortune and took advantage of widespread disaffection with the Democratic Party establishment and the UAW bureaucracy, especially among workers and minority people. Fieger appealed in a demagogic way to popular hatred of Engler's right-wing policies, without ever advancing an alternative program.

Despite being endorsed by only a handful of local black Democratic clubs in Detroit and opposed by Mayor Dennis Archer, Fieger carried the city easily, winning over 50 percent of the vote. He led his two rivals in the Detroit suburbs as well, especially in the predominantly working class suburbs in Wayne County. Fieger carried the Oakland County and Macomb County suburbs more narrowly, and also led Owen and Ross in outlying cities such as Ann Arbor, Jackson, Kalamazoo, Grand Rapids and Port Huron.

This outcome was an embarrassing defeat for the trade union bureaucracy, which endorsed Owen and campaigned heavily for him. Owen is the first UAW-backed candidate to lose the Democratic nomination for governor of Michigan in the 60 years since the union was established. He carried only the smaller auto industry centers of Lansing, Saginaw, Bay City and

Flint, and Flint only by the narrow margin of barely 3,000 votes.

An unsuccessful candidate for the gubernatorial nomination four years ago, Owen was hand-picked by the trade union bureaucracy to run this year. UAW President Steven Yokich, a long-time personal friend, endorsed him publicly nearly a year ago, and the state AFL-CIO and the Michigan Education Association followed suit. But Fieger led Owen among union voters overall, according to election day polling.

The other losing candidate, Doug Ross, campaigned as a 'new Democrat' of the type made familiar by Clinton. His message of more tax cuts for business and less spending on social programs attracted little popular support, but Ross collected the endorsement of virtually every newspaper in the state.

Despite a heavily contested three-way race, the primary election turnout demonstrated the continuing lack of popular enthusiasm for either party. Only 1.3 million people voted, 19.3 percent of registered voters and only 17 percent of the voting age population. Even in Detroit, where turnout was swelled by a squalid dispute over the awarding of casino gambling franchises, less than a quarter of those eligible to vote went to the polls.

Fieger launched a series of populist attacks on the record of the Engler administration, targeting his appeal to working class and minority voters. His self-financed campaign flooded the airwaves with television commercials which portrayed blacks, young people and workers denouncing the Republican governor for cuts in social spending, the closure of state mental health facilities, the neglect of roads and other infrastructure, and the decline in living standards for the younger generation of the working class.

Since he came to statewide prominence through his

aggressive representation of Kevorkian, Fieger has taken many high profile police abuse cases, filing suits on behalf of victims of brutality or false arrest, many of them minority youth, and winning multi-million-dollar judgments. He played on his reputation as a no-holds-barred advocate, contrasting himself to his two rivals, both colorless and largely unknown politicians, and advertising himself as 'A fighter for you.'

These appeals to the genuine anger among working people and their desire for an alternative to the existing political structure unquestionably evoked a response. According to exit polls published in the Detroit newspapers, Fieger's biggest margins were among black and minority voters, among young adults aged 20 to 29, among those with some college education but not a degree, and among those who did not identify themselves with either the Democratic or Republican parties.

That being said, Fieger's campaign served to obscure rather than illuminate the political issues confronting working people. He pitched his political appeal on an extremely low and even vulgar level, demonizing the Republican governor and frequently using campaign appearances to launch into a tirade of coarse personal abuse.

This type of appeal is a dangerous diversion. Engler's right-wing policies, which include the cutoff of welfare and other social programs, are not his individual invention. They represent the consensus of both big business parties. Engler has done nothing more at the state level than the Clinton administration and Fieger's Democratic Party colleagues have done at the federal level.

The kind of emotional tub-thumping which Fieger employs has a long and pernicious history in America. Whether the practitioner is a right-wing racist like George Wallace, a 'centrist' like billionaire Ross Perot or a liberal like Fieger, demagoguery is the worst enemy of the working class.

The principal political problem confronting working people is the development of an understanding that the working class must challenge the entire existing socio-economic order, and that, in order to do so, it must organize itself as an independent political force. Demagogues like Fieger promote the illusion that, with the election of a particular individual or the adoption of a specific policy nostrum, the existing system can be

made to work in the interests of the people.

Fieger serves the ruling class as a lightning rod, diverting popular anger away from a conscious break with the whole structure of big business politics. That is why, whatever their differences with his methods and tactics--which may flare up again between now and election day--the Democratic Party establishment has moved quickly to cement its relations with Fieger, and he has responded in kind.

Within hours of the polls closing, the nominee was feted by the Democratic Party establishment at a 'unity breakfast' presided over by former Governor James Blanchard. Owen, state Democratic Party chairman Mark Brewer and other leading Democrats immediately rallied round the primary victor.

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