Party to challenge early filing deadline

Petition drive completed for SEP congressional candidate in Ohio

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Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party completed a petition drive last week to run SEP congressional candidate David Lawrence as a candidate for US House of Representatives in Ohio's First Congressional District. In order for Lawrence to qualify for the November ballot, however, the SEP must first conduct a legal struggle against a discriminatory filing deadline in the state and compel election officials to accept petitions to place the SEP candidate on the ballot.

Citing the unfair restrictions, board of election officials in Cincinnati on June 4 refused to accept nominating petitions bearing more than 2,500 signatures, well over the minimum 1,695 required.

Lawrence, 37, is a teacher in the Dayton, Ohio public school system and is a graduate of the University of Cincinnati. He is the son of Jim Lawrence, the SEP candidate for US Vice President.

SEP supporters conducted the petitioning with the knowledge that Ohio's deadline for independent congressional candidates is currently March 1. The SEP is planning to launch legal action to overturn this deadline, which is patently unfair. The filing date, more than eight months before the general election, would require prospective candidates to conduct petitioning in the middle of winter. Moreover, the SEP did not even announce its intentions to enter the congressional race in Ohio until late March.

The courts have found against Ohio in previous challenges to its early filing deadline. A 1983 Supreme Court ruling in the *Anderson vs. Celebrezze* case forced Ohio to advance the previous March 1 deadline for independent presidential candidates to August 19, saying the previous deadline had placed an "unconstitutional burden" on the candidates and their supporters.

In a 5-4 vote the majority ruled that "A burden that falls unequally on independent candidates or on new or small political parties impinges, by its very nature, on associational choices protected by the First Amendment, and discriminates against those candidates and voters whose political preferences lie outside the existing political parties."

Lawrence will be represented in his challenge to Ohio's early filing deadline by Robert Newman, a Cincinnati civil rights attorney, who successfully overturned the deadline for an independent congressional candidate during an election in the 1980s. State officials, however, did not permanently extend the deadline at that time.

Newman told the WSWS that the early filing deadline was patently discriminatory against third parties, because, among other things, it forced independents to petition and file before the major parties had even selected their candidates. "As it stands, there is no opportunity to challenge these major parties," Newman declared.

"I look forward to the SEP candidate getting on the ballot and participating in the debates with Congressman Steve Chabot."

A final petition drive by SEP supporters netted 1,100 signatures over the Memorial Day weekend. Petitioners received a strong response at the "Taste of Cincinnati" festival, in particular to the demand for the immediate withdrawal of US troops from Iraq. There was interest in several other aspects of the SEP program as well, including issues such as access to health care, the high cost of college education, the lack of decent paying jobs, and police brutality. Signers included a broad cross section of the population — black, white and immigrant, urban and suburban.

Another team of petitioners campaigned at University Plaza, near the University of Cincinnati. They encountered students and working people from adjacent

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suburbs as well as the impoverished Over-the-Rhine neighborhood, scene of rioting in April 2001 sparked by the police murder of an unarmed black teenager.

Following the completion of petitioning David Lawrence told the WSWS, “The response to my campaign has been overwhelming. The level of enthusiasm and excitement is great. In some areas virtually everyone signed. Many saw the war as illegal because it was based on lies and criminal because of the recent revelations about the torture carried out by US troops. Many people sense the war was taking money away from urgent social necessities in this country; that the cost of this war will be borne by the working class through the destruction of social programs.

“The campaign has confirmed our position that given an opportunity to express their interests, workers will respond. There is an enormous disconnect between what the media portrays and reality. They claim there is still strong support for the war, but we didn’t see it. In both working class and suburban areas we saw a lot of concern about the consequences of the war. One young lady who signed my petition said her father had just been sent over to Iraq. A lot of workers raised Bush’s business interests, especially Halliburton, the company connected with Vice President Dick Cheney.”

The First Congressional District, which includes Cincinnati and surrounding suburbs, is starkly divided between wealth and poverty. Indian Hill, a suburb of Cincinnati, is one of the wealthiest enclaves in the state, while the city of Cincinnati contains some of the poorest inner city neighborhoods in the United States.

The incumbent First District congressman, Republican Steve Chabot, is running for his sixth term. Chabot was a House Manager during the impeachment trial of President Clinton. He is an enthusiastic supporter of the big business tax cuts, the Patriot Act, and the illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq. A supporter of the religious right, he was the sponsor of the bill, recently struck down by a federal court, banning the procedure known as partial birth abortion.

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