

Petitions filed to put socialist candidate on ballot

SEP stand against Iraq war evokes strong support in Maine

Jerry White
2 June 2004

The Socialist Equality Party candidate for US Congress in Maine's 2nd District, Carl Cooley, delivered petitions bearing the signatures of 2,250 registered voters to officials in the state capital of Augusta on Tuesday to place his name on the ballot for the November elections.

SEP supporters gathered a total of 3,000 signatures during the two-month campaign, which ended May 25, receiving support from hundreds of workers, students and professionals seeking an alternative to the two big business parties.

Due to Maine's peculiar ballot procedure, the SEP first had to have local officials in the scores of cities and towns where petition signers lived verify their voter registrations. Of the petitions submitted, election officials in Augusta acknowledged that 2,250 were from registered voters, well above the 2,000 required to achieve ballot status. The Democrats and Republicans have five days to present any challenges.

Carl Cooley would be the first candidate to qualify for ballot status in the SEP 2004 election campaign. Cooley, 77, a retired auto worker from the North Tarrytown, New York, Chevrolet plant and a former New York City public school teacher, moved to Maine in the late 1970s. He is running against incumbent congressman Michael Michaud, a longtime Democratic state legislator and paperworkers union official, as well as businessman Brian Hamel, the Republican challenger.

Campaigners had to overcome many obstacles, including the size of the district and its sparse population, undemocratic ballot restrictions, as well as prohibitions against petitioning in shopping areas. (See "Maine: SEP campaign faced arcane ballot requirements, private property restrictions" 2 June 2004).

During the petitioning campaign, Cooley and his supporters explained that the SEP was demanding the immediate withdrawal of US troops from Iraq and an end to the criminal war and occupation. They called for redirecting society's resources to meet the needs of masses of people for decent paying jobs, health care and housing.

Cooley told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "I'm running for US Congress as a socialist antiwar candidate, calling for the immediate withdrawal of all troops from Iraq. This was the most resonant introduction that I used in collecting signatures.

Many people were just happy to hear someone in politics who sounded like them and expressed their real concerns. There was frustration at the lack of an antiwar voice, but they were also curious and were not frightened by the word socialist. They were looking for real answers to the problems they confront: war, the destruction of jobs, the lack of a future for the youth."

The popular response to these demands underscored the growing opposition to the war and the discrediting of both the Bush administration and Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry, who has pledged to continue the occupation. Particularly striking was the response of the relatives and friends of soldiers, many of whom signed petitions immediately once they found out the SEP was demanding that US troops be withdrawn from Iraq.

With the loss of tens of thousands of higher paying jobs in the lobster and fishing industry, as well as paper production, timber, textiles and other manufacturing industries in Maine, thousands of young people have opted to leave the state or join the military to get a college degree and escape a future of low-paying telemarketing or retail jobs. Some 60 percent of the US Army and National Guard reservists in Maine are now in Iraq—and at least 11 soldiers from the state have been killed. At any given supermarket one could see a bulletin board with the names and photos of five or six employees currently in Iraq.

A Marine just back from Iraq told an SEP campaigner, "There is no reason to be there. I agree we should get out." A young woman who stopped to sign the SEP petition in Waterville said, "I have two sisters in Iraq. They only joined the military because there is no future for young people here."

This tragedy facing working class families was underscored by one event during the campaign. On May 15 the widow of Chris Gelineau, a National Guard reservist who was killed by a roadside bomb in Iraq, was awarded a degree for her husband by the University of Southern Maine. Gelineau had attended the college until he was called up to go to Iraq, one month before completing his studies. When his name was read out by college officials the audience stood up for several minutes to applaud. Following the ceremony the dead soldier's mother told the local newspaper, "He wanted to go to college and graduate,

that's why he joined the Army National Guard."

"They lied to us about Vietnam and they are doing it all over again," said a retired postal worker in Bangor who served two tours of duty in the Vietnam War. "This is for oil and power. Bush and Cheney are liars and criminals."

While Maine's scenic Atlantic Coast is a destination for the wealthy to build multimillion dollar homes, the vast majority of people in the state are facing increasingly difficult conditions. Median income is well below the national average, with nearly one out of every five households earning less than \$15,000, according to the 2000 census.

The population is also increasingly aging—with 30 percent of households receiving Social Security and an average income of \$11,492. With little or no future for young people Maine was ranked 42nd among the 50 states in its proportion of youth in 1995, and in 2025 is expected to be ranked 49th.

The SEP campaign won particular support in old mill towns like Lewiston, Auburn, Waterville and Bangor. Lewiston, the site of 19th century labor struggles against child labor and 14-hour work days in the woolen mills and shoe factories, is littered with abandoned factories, shuttered storefronts and decaying wooden-framed public housing.

Lisa, a pre-school director in Waterville, said, "People in Maine are known for their resourcefulness and willingness to make do with what they have. But the situation is getting desperate for many. Some people are now involved in bartering their skills to each other; 'I'll do your carpentry work if you do my plumbing.'

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"Here in town they are shutting down a hospital. For people in the rural northern counties this is going to mean tacking on an extra hour or two to drive to Augusta to get proper health care."

Social conditions in Maine are a refutation of the media and most politicians who present poverty as chiefly a problem of African-Americans and immigrants. The state is 98 percent white. Yet, like many areas of Appalachia and the South, one can find families living in homes with dirt floors or packed into decaying trailer homes.

These conditions have been exacerbated by the loss of 24,000 manufacturing jobs over the last decade. Manufacturing accounted for one in three Maine jobs in 1978, but only about one in eight in 2004.

A critical episode in this assault on the working class took place in 1987-88, when International Paper, the world's largest paper producer, initiated a union-busting drive against 1,250 workers at its Jay, Maine, plant. The 16-month strike was isolated and betrayed by the United Paperworkers International Union and the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, which limited the struggle to public relations gimmicks and the campaign for then Democratic presidential nominee Michael Dukakis.

In the decade that followed the smashing of the International

Paper strike, investors in the eight publicly traded paper companies that do business in Maine saw an average of 44 percent overall return on stock investments, adjusted for inflation, according to an investigative report by The Portland Newspapers. Chief executive officers of those companies overall saw an average 65 percent increase in cash compensation over the same period. During the same period, hourly wages for Maine paperworkers increased only by 1 percent and employment declined by 17 percent.

The wholesale destruction of jobs in the paper industry, which has continued unabated over the last decade, is of particular significance in Maine's 2nd Congressional District. Unemployment in Millinocket and East Millinocket is 32 percent and rising, due to the closing of the Great Northern Paper mills in the area in 2002-2003.

Democratic Congressman Michael Michaud, a former board member of Local 152 of the United Paperworkers International Union (now the Paper, Allied-Chemical and Energy Workers International Union—PACE) at the East Millinocket plant, did nothing to stop the plant closings, which is estimated to have lead to the loss of some 5,000 jobs.

The AFL-CIO's support for the Kerry and the Democratic Party is once again being justified with the claim that these "friends of labor" will end the assault on workers' jobs and living standards. The record in Maine—where the Democrats control the state legislature, governorship and both Congressional seats—proves the opposite.

Summing up this record, one paper worker signing the petition for Carl Cooley said, "I can't believe the union is pushing the Democrats. They have done nothing to save our jobs and stop the shutdown of the mills."



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