

An attack on democratic rights

Champaign, Illinois electoral board bars Green Party candidates

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The Champaign County, Illinois electoral board voted July 6 to exclude the entire slate of Green Party candidates running for county-wide positions in the area, which is home to the 38,000-student campus of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

The undemocratic decision was the culmination of a sustained effort, particularly by state and local Democratic Party officials, to block the Green Party from gaining ballot access. This included efforts to disrupt petitioners, intimidate students who decided to run as Green Party candidates and use pseudo-legal measures to raise the number of signatures required to attain ballot status and challenge the signatures that were collected.

The Illinois Democrats are using similarly unscrupulous methods in an effort to bar from the ballot Tom Mackaman, the Socialist Equality Party's state legislative candidate in the 103rd District. Geraldine Parr, the current treasurer and former chairperson of the Champaign County Democratic Party, has filed a series of patently false objections to signatures collected by SEP supporters in order to remove Mackaman from the ballot and prevent any challenge to the Democrat incumbent State Representative Naomi Jakobsson. (See "Stop the Democratic Party's attack on third-party campaigns! Place SEP candidate Tom Mackaman on the ballot in Illinois!".)

Regardless of our political differences with the Greens, the SEP fully supports their right—and the rights of all political parties—to gain access to the ballot. We condemn the actions to the Champaign County Electoral Board and urge our supporters to demand this undemocratic decision be overturned.

The SEP also welcomes the statement of the Prairie Greens of East Central Illinois—the local Green chapter in Champaign—to support Tom Mackaman's fight for ballot access. In a resolution passed on July 7, the group said it supported the SEP candidate's "right to be on the ballot" and condemned "the bad faith efforts by members of the Democratic Party to remove third party candidates from the general election ballot."

At a hearing Tuesday, July 6 in Urbana, the Democrats failed in their initial bid to block ballot status for Tom Mackaman. The election board decided to authorize County Clerk Mark Shelden to carry out a line-by-line check of the challenged

signatures, in the presence of representatives of both the SEP and the Democratic Party. The county clerk will report back to the board for a final ruling at a hearing July 27.

The same day the electoral board, made up of three local Republicans, ordered the Greens county-wide candidates off the ballot. The board decided to delay until July 27 a decision on whether four other Green Party candidates—running for seats on the Champaign County Board in four districts within the county—should be allowed to remain on the ballot. The board announced in that case that it would check the validity of signatures being challenged by Democratic officials in the county.

The Green candidates ordered off the ballot were: Ricky Baldwin, a candidate for Champaign County auditor; Jennifer Walling, running for circuit clerk; John Wason, a candidate for coroner; Melinda Brady, a candidate for recorder; and David Black, a candidate for state's attorney.

The board ruled that the 1,399 signatures collected by the Greens to put their slate of five candidates on the November 2 ballot were not enough to meet the statutory requirement of 2,715 signatures—or five percent of the number of people who voted in Champaign County in the 2002 election.

The five percent requirement for candidates running for county-wide and other local offices is one of the highest in the US, according to Walling, a University of Illinois law student and one of the excluded candidates. The hurdle placed by the state of Illinois for independent candidates running for such offices is on par with Georgia, a state with a long history of hostility to voting rights, particularly for minorities.

Under Illinois law the Green Party had only 90 days to collect the signatures and was also required to field a slate of candidates for every office on the ballot. Finding a slate took an entire month, Walling said, leaving just two months to complete the collection of the required signatures. In comparison, she said, a new party in Wisconsin is not required to field an entire slate of candidates and only needs about 500 signatures to get a local candidate on the ballot.

"Our Congressional candidate in 2002 received 9 percent of the vote in Champaign County," Walling said in a press

release, “sufficient proof that the Green Party has abundant support in the county. However, to become an established party in the county, not only do we have to collect ten times as many signatures as the Republicans and Democrats, but we must do it in ninety days and provide a complete slate of candidates for every position. This excessive burden prevented us from capitalizing on our support in the county, violating our right to equal protection under the US Constitution.”

Last December the electoral board ruled that the Green Party should not be granted established party status, an official ranking that requires collecting a significantly lower number of signatures to appear on the county ballot. The Greens argued that they deserved this status because their congressional candidate in 2002, Carl Estabrook, received 8.7 percent of the vote in Champaign County, well above the 5 percent legal requirement. The electoral board, however, along with Champaign County Judge Chase Leonhard, ruled that the law required Estabrook to get five percent or more of the vote in the entire 15th Congressional District.

Like the challenges to the SEP’s petitions, the objections to the Greens’ petitions were made by local Democratic officials and their close supporters. The challengers included Jane Williams, wife of current Champaign County board member Tom Betz, a Democrat; Alan Kurtz, husband of Democratic precinct committee person Linda Kurtz; and Susan McGrath, another Democratic precinct committee person and former Democratic member of the county board.

Like the objections to the signatures collected by the SEP the challenges to the Greens candidates—Ken Urban, Dave Sacks, Susan Rodgers and Zach Miller—are baseless and in large measure amount to distortions of election rules used to disqualify third party candidates.

Objections against Sacks and Rodgers were based on allegations that the two students of the University of Illinois are not eligible for office because they “do not reside at” their respective addresses. The Democrats claim that Rodgers really lives in El Cajon, California, and that the local address she gave, at Allen Hall on the University of Illinois campus, is currently closed for the summer.

In response Sacks stated, “The Democrats of Champaign County want students who return home for the summer to register to vote in Champaign County and to vote Democratic, but when it comes to those same students running for office, they suddenly have a problem.”

According to a press release by the Greens, the validity of campus voter registration for students who return home for the summer was upheld in court over 30 years ago. A person’s residence for purposes of voter registration is also his or her residence for purposes of political candidacy, the press release states.

Urban, a candidate for County Board District 7 and a professor at Parkland College, said, “It was discouraging to sit in the courtroom and watch as the lawyer for the Democratic

objectors argued that students do not have the right to run for office because dorms are closed for the summer. This is an incredibly shortsighted objection, one that will disenfranchise the student population if upheld, at a time in their lives when they should be encouraged to engage in civic responsibilities.”

The local Green Party is currently considering whether to initiate legal action to challenge the constitutionality of the measures used to bar their candidates from the ballot, including the unfair signature requirements.

In an interview with the WSWS, Green Party candidate and media spokesperson Jennifer Walling said, “When the Democrats filed their objections they had to state their reason as to why they were challenging our petitions. One of the objectors said they were only concerned with upholding the law. But that that’s not true: the entire Democratic machine was involved in the effort to keep us off the ballot.

“Tony Fabri, the chairman of the Champaign County Democrats, personally wrote to our student candidates telling them not to run because their candidacy ‘threatened the progressive coalition’ the Democrats supposedly had worked so hard to build.

“While we were gathering signatures at the farmers market in June two students dressed in green clothing were handing out flyers to dissuade voters from signing our petitions. The fliers, which had a picture on President Bush on them, said, ‘support the Greens, what’s the worst thing that can happen?’

“When we talked to them they claimed not to be working for the Democratic Party. But earlier in the day, before they began handing out the fliers, we approached one of them to sign our petition. The person responded, ‘I don’t know if I should or not, I’m working for the Democrats today.’ Later we saw them talking with Tony Fabri.

“This is an effort to destroy democracy. They claim they are progressive, but they are not progressive at all. This only affirms our need to run. They want us to join their ‘progressive coalition’ by bullying us. Then they say, ‘why don’t you run in the Democratic primaries?’ But like the Socialist Equality Party, we’re not Democrats. We don’t want to run in their primaries.

“What they are doing to Tom Mackaman is terrible. He has every right to run without the efforts of these two huge machine parties trying to block new entries in the race. What is happening is a sign that we have a very sick democracy in the US.”



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