

Illinois Democrats seek to disenfranchise voters to bar SEP from ballot

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Representatives of the Democratic Party repeatedly sought to toss out the signatures of legally registered voters Monday on the first day of an official review of the nominating petitions submitted by the Socialist Equality Party to place its state legislative candidate, Tom Mackaman, on the ballot in Illinois' 103rd District.

On June 21, the SEP turned in 2,003 signatures, far more than the 1,325 signatures required to put Mackaman on the ballot. A week later Geraldine Parr, a vice chairperson of the Democratic Party of Champaign County, filed an objection against 1,021 signatures—more than half the total—claiming that they were invalid.

The challenge was part of an all-out effort by the Democratic Party machine to silence a socialist and anti-war candidate and prevent any challenge to incumbent State Representative Naomi Jakobsson. The day after the SEP submitted its petitions they were copied and reviewed by Liz Brown, a state employee on the House Democrats' staff, and Brendan Hostetler, a state employee on staff of House Democratic Speaker Michael Madigan. The use of state employees, who are paid by the taxpayers, for partisan efforts is illegal under Illinois law.

The vast majority of challenges filed by the Democrats were baseless. This was quickly revealed at a hearing held on July 6, when the Champaign County Electoral Board rejected several false assertions made by the Democrats—including their claim that blank lines on the petition were “invalid signatures” that should be subtracted from the total number of valid signatures collected by the SEP. Rejecting the Democrats' demand that Mackaman be summarily removed from the ballot, the board ruled that it would examine the validity of every signature challenge.

A preliminary examination of the objections by the SEP revealed their arbitrary character. It is hard to believe that the Democratic operatives bothered to seriously examine the registration records of the voters they were seeking to exclude.

Perhaps the clearest example of the Democrats' bad faith in filing their objection was their challenge to the signature of Tom Mackaman himself, on the grounds that he was not registered at the address that appears on the nominating petition. Unfortunately for the Democrats, Mackaman's current address is the same as the address that appears on his

registration form, and both his name and address are printed on every petition sheet that was circulated in the district.

This process of reviewing the challenged signatures began Monday morning with employees of the County Clerk's office comparing names on the petition sheets to records on their database of registered voters. After the signer or address was identified, a representative of the SEP and one from the Democratic Party declared whether they agreed the signature was either valid or invalid, or whether they could not come to an agreement that the objection should be denied or upheld.

All of the challenged signatures that remain in dispute between Mackaman and his Democratic objectors will be reviewed and decided upon by the County Clerk's office, which will then report its findings to the Champaign County Electoral Board. The electoral board has set a hearing date for July 27, when it will issue its ruling either upholding or rejecting the challenge to Mackaman's ballot status for the November election.

From the pattern that emerged at Monday's signature-checking proceedings, it was clear that the representatives of the Democratic Party were instructed to uphold the objections, even where the validity of signatures was indisputable.

The first representative was Brandon Bowersox, the secretary of the Champaign County Democratic Party and a close associate of Geraldine Parr. In the face of indisputable evidence, Bowersox continued to repeat, “We uphold the objection.” When challenged by the SEP to explain the basis for his objections, he declared, “I don't have to have a reason for each line. It's my understanding that I can object to everything.”

At one point, the clerk mistakenly examined a signature that had not been challenged by the Democrats and found that the person was properly registered at the correct address. Nevertheless, Bowersox said he would uphold the objection. When it was pointed out that the Democrats had not challenged the signature, Bowersox simply said, “Okay, we aren't objecting to that one.”

Bowersox later claimed that the “burden” was on the SEP to disprove the objections—an assertion without any legal foundation. This claim only underscored that the Democrats were engaged in what is known as a “fishing expedition,” i.e.,

throwing up as many obstacles as possible, regardless of their validity.

“Election interference,” as defined by the Illinois Election Code, is a criminal violation. According to the code, anyone who knowingly uses “deception” to prevent any other person from “supporting ... the nomination or election of any person for public office ... shall be guilty of a Class 4 felony.”

As long as the Democratic representatives felt they could do so with impunity, they continued to arrogantly reject one valid voter after another. After several hours in which the Democrats conceded only one signature, the county clerk instructed both sides to state the reasons for either rejecting or upholding a challenge. This changed the dynamic, and the Democrats began desperately looking for some pseudo-legal cover for disenfranchising voters.

In one case, a Democratic representative—a low-level union official from the Association of Academic Professionals, an affiliate of the Illinois Education Association—complained that a signer had printed his name on the petition sheet instead of signing in cursive. This in itself is not a sufficient reason, under Illinois law, to exclude a signature. Nevertheless, even after the voter’s signature was pulled up on the computer screen, revealing that he has also printed his name on the registration card, the Democratic Party representative insisted the signature was invalid because it was printed.

There was one exception to the ham-fisted and bullying comportment of the Democratic observers. The last one, a senior citizen and local election judge, who evidently held certain democratic sentiments, decided not to uphold objections to most of the signatures that were clearly valid. In the space of two hours, she conceded that 23 of the Democrats’ objections were clearly without foundation and allowed them to be overturned. This compared with an average of only six signatures per hour conceded over the previous five hours.

In one revealing exchange with Tom Mackaman, who was then checking signatures, the woman stated, “Why have they objected to all of these signatures?” After Tom replied “It’s because they want to keep me off the ballot,” she said, “It sure looks that way.”

At the end of the first day—after the painstaking review of only 216 of the more than 1,000 signatures that were challenged—the Democrats conceded only 53. If the current rate continues, it will take at least a week to complete the review, bottling up the County Clerk’s office’s resources.

Signature checking will continue Tuesday, with a break on Wednesday, when the Green Party, which is also being challenged by the Democrats on anti-democratic grounds, begins its own process of reviewing objections.

After the end of the first day, Tom Mackaman told the WSWs: “The attempt by the Democratic Party to remove my name from the ballot is not only an assault on my rights and the rights of the SEP to field a candidate, but on the voters of Champaign and Urbana, over 2,000 of whom signed our

petitions.

“It shows that the Democratic Party deeply fears a socialist alternative. They have no record to stand on and nothing to offer the workers and students of this district, so they resort to cowardly and backhanded attempts to deny the voters of this district their most basic democratic right: the opportunity to vote for a candidate and a party of their choosing.

“Today, I watched Democratic Party functionaries reject one registered voter after another in the district—citizens whose names were clearly signed and then identified on the county clerk’s voter rolls. I could not help but remember the disputed results of the 2000 presidential election in Florida, where the Republican Party resorted to nefarious means to block the legal counting of votes and thereby facilitated the installation of George Bush as president.

“The Democratic Party has adopted similar tactics and deployed them against us and other opponents of the war in Iraq. The meaning of this is clear: the Democratic Party will spare no effort to ensure that opposition to the war, worsening social conditions deepening and inequality will not be heard in the 2004 election campaign. Apparently illegal methods are being employed—including utilizing the services of state employees—to mount their objections. This flies in the face of state law and is a burden on the resources of the state government.

“What is taking place in the Champaign-Urbana area, with a population of over 100,000, illustrates the rot of the entire political system, which cannot tolerate any genuine political debate. The SEP will continue to expose the obstructionist methods of the Democratic Party and fight to uphold the basic rights of all working people.

We call on all those who defend democratic rights to flood the County Clerk’s office with emails demanding that the Democratic Party’s objections be overturned and that the SEP be placed on the ballot.”

Send all emails to County Clerk Mark Shelden at: mail@champaigncountyclerk.com

Please send copies of emails to the *World Socialist Web Site* at editor@wsws.org.

Make a financial contribution to support the SEP campaign—donate online.



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