

SEP launches presidential petition drive in Ohio

David Lawrence, Shannon Jones

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The SEP has begun collecting signatures in Ohio to place its candidates—Bill Van Auken for president and Jim Lawrence for vice president—on the ballot. Petitioners have already begun work in Dayton, Cincinnati, Toledo and other cities.

Ohio requires a minimum of 5,000 signatures of registered voters to place an independent presidential ticket on the general election ballot. The SEP aims to get well above that number in order to defend against attempts by the Democratic Party to challenge our petitions, as the Democrats have already done in Champaign, Illinois.

A major Midwest industrial state with a population of more than 11 million, Ohio has been a focus of both the Bush and Kerry campaigns. According to the *New York Times*, Bush has visited the state 18 times during his presidency, and Kerry has been to the state eight times since wrapping up the Democratic Party nomination.

Ohio is considered a cross section of America. It is home to 3 of the 50 largest cities in the United States—Cleveland, Columbus, and Cincinnati. Ohio is one of only four states (California, Texas, and Arizona) that have as many as three top-50 cities.

The SEP petition drive has already received a powerful response, particularly in relation to the SEP call for the unconditional withdrawal of US troops from Iraq.

Jim Lawrence, the SEP candidate for vice president, worked for 30 years at General Motors plants in Dayton, Ohio. He petitioned at the cultural festival in Dayton over the weekend. He told the WSWS, “The biggest response was to the war and the question of jobs and living conditions. The call for a public works program was very popular among unemployed young people.

“I told workers that the position of the Democratic

Party, which uses the slogan ‘anybody but Bush’ to justify keeping third parties off the ballot, is thoroughly antidemocratic. It goes beyond what the Republicans did in Florida in 2000 by refusing to count votes. It denies workers the very right to vote for the candidate of their choosing in the first place.

“Only the SEP offers a genuine alternative for workers and young people to the pro-war candidates, Kerry and Bush.

“I urge readers and supporters of the WSWS in Ohio to support the campaign of Bill Van Auken and myself by volunteering to circulate petitions.”

Mike, a volunteer campaign supporter in Portsmouth, told the WSWS, “Many people think we need more choices. Most people don’t think there is much hope with the two-party system we have. It’s surprising how Democrats are so resistant to allowing anyone else on the ballot. They don’t want us to have more than two choices. I tell people that Kerry wants to go farther than Bush by sending more troops to Iraq. To be forced into the lesser of two evils is very undemocratic.”

Many workers told an SEP team petitioning in Toledo on Saturday that they were concerned and angry over the continued destruction of decent-paying jobs. Once a major industrial center, Toledo is now dominated by low-wage and service sector jobs. The state of Ohio as a whole has lost 200,000 jobs since Bush took office, and it is ranked in the bottom tier of states in terms of personal income growth. Ohio’s current 5.6 percent (May 2004) unemployment rate is well above the 4 percent figure from December 2000.

According to the Ohio Job and Family Coalition, the May figures showed that Ohio was home to four counties with unemployment rates above 10 percent. Roughly 35,000 workers in the state have exhausted their unemployment benefits, a 176 percent increase

over two years ago. The Temporary Emergency Unemployment Compensation Program, enacted in March 2002 to ostensibly relieve those running out of benefits, has seen 52,000 people exhaust benefits.

A report titled “Failing the Unemployed”, produced nationally by the Economic Policy Institute, found that Ohio is among only eight states in the nation in which a minimum-wage worker employed 20 hours a week for an entire year does not qualify for unemployment benefits if laid off. Many part-timers who are unemployed cannot receive benefits if they seek part-time work. The report notes that only 35.9 percent of unemployed women in Ohio received unemployment benefits last year, compared to 50.8 percent of unemployed men.

Unlike some states, maximum benefits in Ohio are at least high enough to allow a family of three to live above the federal poverty level. Yet, Ohio’s benefit levels are by no means generous. A jobless worker with two dependents who had previously earned the state median wage would get only \$256 a week in unemployment benefits—less than the poverty line.

The only solution that either Bush or Kerry advances for the ongoing destruction of jobs is to encourage corporate investment by further slashing wages, pensions and benefits, lowering the standard of living of American workers. The logic of this policy is to drive down wages in the US—already lower than in western Europe—to levels comparable to those in the more impoverished countries overseas.

Since 1994, both state governments in Ohio have cuts taxes for business at a rate above the national average. While this has not produced any net increase in jobs, it has helped undermine state finances, resulting in a smaller unemployment benefits trust fund less able than most to withstand the payouts that accompany high unemployment rates.

David Lawrence, the SEP candidate for Congress in Ohio’s First District in Cincinnati, Ohio, is the son of SEP vice presidential candidate Jim Lawrence. He petitioned in Cincinnati over the weekend. A teacher in the Dayton public schools, Lawrence pointed out that both the Democrats and Republicans are responsible for the deterioration of education in Ohio and nationally.

Ohio is currently home to one of the largest concentrations of charter schools in the United States. The Ohio Education Association report, “Current State

of Ohio’s Charter Schools Program,” indicates that Ohio’s charter schools receive \$6,315 per student while a student in a traditional school receives \$3,194.

Cleveland has instituted a school voucher program, which is further undermining the decrepit public schools by diverting millions of dollars in public money for the support of private, predominantly religious schools.

The response to the SEP petition indicates the deep class polarization in American society and the fact that millions of workers are looking for an alternative to the Democrats and Republicans. In the coming weeks, the SEP plans to step up its petition campaign in Ohio in order to assure that we meet and exceed our goals.



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