SEP files petitions for presidential ballot status in Ohio

A WSWS reporting team
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On August 17, the Socialist Equality Party filed petitions bearing more than 7,900 signatures with the Ohio secretary of state's office to place its candidates Bill Van Auken for president and Jim Lawrence for vice president on the statewide ballot. The total is far above the minimum requirement of 5,000 signatures.

Ohio is the fourth state where the SEP has filed to place its presidential ticket on the ballot. Van Auken and Lawrence are already certified in New Jersey and Colorado. The SEP filed in Iowa last week, and petitioning is still under way in Washington state and Minnesota.

The Ohio petition drive succeeded in the face of a determined campaign by the Democratic Party to vilify left-wing opponents of its nominee John Kerry as allies of President George Bush. However, in neighborhoods hard-pressed by layoffs and jobs cuts, the SEP received a strong response to its call for the construction of an independent political party of the working class. The SEP found that the Democrats' arguments have made little headway, except among a layer of more affluent liberals.

Over the previous two weeks, petition circulators campaigning in Cleveland, Warren, Columbus, Toledo, Dayton and Cincinnati collected more than 5,000 signatures. Workers in these cities have suffered from drastic losses in manufacturing jobs over the last five years. According to a report published by the nonprofit research institute Policy Matters Ohio, total nonagricultural employment declined by 244,000 jobs between November 1999 and November 2003. Ohio, with 3 percent of the US population, accounted for 20 percent of the total US job decline during the Bush administration.

Working people and young people responded enthusiastically to the SEP candidates' call for the immediate withdrawal of US troops from Iraq and the conversion of war production to provide civilian employment and meet social needs.

In Cleveland, the SEP collected more than 500 signatures in a single day. Cleveland has one of the highest unemployment rates in the state of Ohio, 12.7 percent according to recent figures, well above the national average of 5.6 percent. The city lost 43,700 manufacturing jobs between November 1999 and November 2003.

Workers voiced skepticism about both the Democrats and Republicans. Some expressed palpable relief that someone was openly calling for an end to the war in Iraq. As one worker told an SEP supporter, "It seems like their main reason for the war in Iraq was to destroy the country so that American companies could build it up again and make money."

Dayton is the hometown of SEP vice-presidential candidate Jim Lawrence, who is well known among working people as a principled fighter. During the course of the campaign, SEP petitioners collected more than 1,000 signatures in Dayton, which has lost more manufacturing jobs over the past four years than any other city in the state except Cleveland.

One worker told petitioners, "I raised my kids and they left home; now I'm 44 and I can't find any work to support myself. They took my health care away, so now I'm afraid to go to the doctor or the hospital because they may not treat me. Why should I vote for Kerry if he's not even promising to provide everyone with at least that?"

Toledo, a former center of auto and glass manufacturing, has been devastated by plant closures. A large portion of the population is now employed in low-wage service jobs, paying few if any benefits.

SEP supporters collected hundreds of signatures at a

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food market in a working class neighborhood of the city where the manager had given them permission to set up a table. He told the petitioners, “This country is becoming more and more divided, and I can see it from the people who shop at the store. Working families are being squeezed and forced to cut back. I do not think your candidate will win the election, but you have every right to place his name on the ballot, and there need to be more choices than just the Democrats and Republicans.”

A Libby Glass worker said, “I feel somewhat fortunate because I am still employed and my pay and pension plan is fairly decent, but how long is that going to last? During the past number of years I have seen workers lose everything. Now you have the announcements by companies like United Airlines that they will not pay into the pension fund. I fear that by the time I retire, Social Security benefits will not exist. Kerry is not speaking for the little guys in this election, and I do not feel things will improve if he wins.”

Many signed without hesitation. Typical was a young mother who said, “I hate Bush but I don’t like Kerry. I work at a BP gas station and I can barely make it, I have eight kids.”

In Cincinnati, SEP supporters campaigned at the historic Findlay Market, a popular outdoor market, where they met workers and middle class people from the Cincinnati region. Several shoppers were incensed about the growth of low-wage jobs, with almost all signers agreeing that the real issue in the election was the war in Iraq.

After signing the petition to place the SEP on the ballot, one woman said she did not believe the latest terror alert announced by the Bush administration. “In my opinion they are all terrorists!” she exclaimed.

A number of people, primarily middle class, refused to sign on the grounds that the election was “too important,” arguing that a socialist on the ballot might draw votes away from Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry. A few became quite agitated.

By contrast, the sentiment among workers, and especially the more oppressed sections of the working class, was that the election offered little alternative. As one woman related, “We know both of them are no good—I don’t like Kerry, but I hate Bush. I feel something needs to be done about better jobs, health care and the schools.”

One ominous indication of the impact of the government’s recent terror alert was the refusal of several people to sign the petition citing fears that their signature would be reviewed by the Department of Homeland Security.

In Warren, a former center of the steel and auto industry, workers decried the drastic decline in the living standards. One man whose father and grandfather were steelworkers remarked, “It is hard to believe how much things have changed. There is a guy who grew up here I know who is coming back after 16 years. I told him to be prepared not to recognize a lot of things.

“There used to be good jobs here, but now almost everything is near-minimum-wage retail clerking. I have had to go to Columbus to find work. What kind of a place is it where the former Republic and LTV steel companies are threatening the pension of my 90-year-old steelworker grandfather?”

A Lordstown autoworker commented that while there were still 3,800 to 3,900 working at the assembly plant, the van plant had been shut down a few years ago, and thousands of jobs and tax revenue were lost. “I went to a city council meeting recently,” he said. “One of the big problems in the town are rodents living in abandoned houses. People lose their job or just can’t pay the mortgage, and they end up having to pack up and leave their houses.”

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