

Socialist Equality Party campaign makes gains in Iowa, Ohio, Michigan

A reporting team
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The Socialist Equality Party has completed petition drives to win ballot status in three key midwestern states over the past week. The efforts in Iowa, Ohio and Michigan represent a major advance for the socialist campaign, coming in the face of intensive campaigning and heavy commercial advertising by the Democratic and Republican presidential candidates and a concerted media blackout of third-party candidates.

The Midwest region, once home to a powerful labor movement rooted in heavy industry, is characterized now by industrial decline and spreading economic blight, both urban and rural. It has been a major focus of both the big business parties, which regard Ohio, Michigan and Iowa—along with Wisconsin and Minnesota—as among the most critical “battleground states” in the November 2 vote.

In Iowa, the SEP campaign filed petitions August 12 to place the SEP’s presidential and vice-presidential candidates, Bill Van Auken and Jim Lawrence, on the ballot as independents. State election officials confirmed that the total number of signatures was nearly 1,750, well above the 1,500 required.

Iowa does not require that those who sign a nominating petition be registered to vote. Any resident of the state who is eligible to vote—i.e., at least 18 years old, a citizen, and not barred by a felony conviction—may sign, whether registered or not. The state has one of the most liberal ballot-access laws in the US, and no third-party petition has been challenged in Iowa in at least a dozen years.

The signatures for Van Auken and Lawrence were collected in a petition drive beginning in June that was concentrated in Des Moines, the state’s capital and largest city, but also included efforts in Davenport, Ames, Mason City and Council Bluffs, among other towns. In all, signatures were collected from residents of 41 of Iowa’s 99 counties.

Seven Iowa voters, distributed across the state’s five

congressional districts, agreed to serve as electors for the SEP campaign. They included two from Des Moines and one each from Ames, Cedar Rapids, Council Bluffs, Danville, and Davenport. An unemployed worker in Des Moines who was approached to sign the petition decided to join the campaign and participated in petitioning for the final two weekends.

SEP campaigners found overwhelming opposition to the war in Iraq, both in working class areas and among farmers and rural families, as well as among students at Iowa State University (Ames) and Drake University (Des Moines). The antiwar sentiment was particularly strong in working class areas, whether in Des Moines or in smaller towns like Mason City and Davenport, where a very high percentage of those approached by petitioners agreed to sign.

A large number of Iowa families have sons or daughters mobilized for the Iraq war, and some soldiers’ relatives initially expressed reservations about backing a petition for a candidate opposed to the war. But in most cases, when the SEP’s analysis of the war was explained, including our call for immediate withdrawal of all US and other foreign troops, they agreed to sign.

In one incident, the mother of a soldier refused to sign while her adult daughter, who was shopping with her, insisted on adding her signature to the petition. The mother warned her daughter, “Don’t you know that the FBI is going to go through every name on that petition! They’ll see your name on it and they will connect you to my son!” The SEP petitioners explained that this concern, while understandable, was itself an indictment of the US political system, where any alternative to the two established bourgeois parties is treated as subversive.

Another feature of Iowa—one that is relatively new in the state’s history—is the large and growing number of immigrant workers who have lived in the US long enough to become citizens. Among those signing the SEP petition

were Spanish-speaking workers and immigrants from Bosnia who speak Serbo-Croatian.

In the state of Ohio—the most populous state where the SEP is seeking to place its presidential candidates on the ballot—party campaigners collected over 1,200 signatures August 14-15 in a weekend drive that included teams in Toledo, Dayton, Cincinnati, Cleveland and Warren. The SEP has collected over 8,000 signatures to place Bill Van Auken and Jim Lawrence on the ballot, far more than the requirement of 5,000. The deadline for filing the petitions is Thursday, August 19.

The last two weeks have seen an outpouring of support for the Ohio SEP campaign in the wake of the display of militarism and chauvinism at the Democratic National Convention. Nearly 5,000 of the 8,000 signatures in Ohio have been collected since the end of the convention, which shattered illusions among many opponents of the war in Iraq that Kerry represents an alternative to Bush.

The SEP's emphasis on the struggle for social and economic equality has evoked a strong response in a state that has lost 159,700 manufacturing jobs since the start of the last recession in March 2001. Unemployment remains high in former manufacturing centers. For example in Cleveland it stands at 12.7 percent, according to recent figures, well above the national average of 5.6 percent.

A large portion of the signatures gathered in the final weeks of the campaign were in working class neighborhoods devastated by years of plant closings and mass layoffs, including former centers of automobile production like Toledo, Cleveland and Dayton, and steel centers like Cleveland, Warren and Youngstown. Most working people in these areas expressed hostility to the war in Iraq and President Bush, but showed little if any enthusiasm for Democratic nominee John Kerry.

Only in liberal middle class areas—particularly around Ohio State University in Columbus—did SEP petitioners encounter significant numbers of people who expressed opposition to the war in Iraq but refused to sign the petition to place the SEP candidates on the ballot. These professed opponents of the war claimed that it was necessary keep the antiwar SEP candidates off the ballot to insure the victory of the prowar candidate Kerry as the lesser evil to Bush.

But even among this layer, there has been a noticeable weakening of support for the “anybody but Bush” position, in light of Kerry's most recent statements, declaring that he would have voted for the resolution authorizing Bush to invade Iraq, even knowing that the claims that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction

were false.

Finally, in Michigan, the state's Election Division has made a preliminary determination that the SEP has met the requirement for ballot status for its candidate for Congress in the 15th Congressional District, Jerry White. SEP campaigners filed over 4,500 signatures last month to put White on the ballot as an independent candidate, well over the 3,000 signatures required under state law.

In response to inquiries from the campaign, an official of the Election Division called the SEP office August 10 to confirm that his office had completed its review of the petitions and found there to be sufficient signatures. This recommendation will be placed before an upcoming meeting of the State Board of Elections for formal ratification.

The state government's election web site has begun listing Jerry White as a candidate and White has already received his first invitations to election campaign forums scheduled for the fall. White is challenging incumbent Democrat John Dingell, the longest-serving member of Congress, in a district that includes Ann Arbor, Ypsilanti, Monroe County, and the southern and southwestern portions of Wayne County.

White is the third SEP congressional or state legislative candidate to win ballot status, following Carl Cooley, who is the party's candidate for Congress in Maine's Second Congressional District, and Tom Mackaman, the SEP candidate for state legislature in the 102nd district of Illinois.

A fourth SEP candidate, David Lawrence, is awaiting the ruling of a federal district judge on a civil rights lawsuit filed to compel the state of Ohio to place him on the ballot in the 1st Congressional District (Cincinnati). Lawrence's supporters filed more than 2,500 signatures, well over the total required, but collected after the state's March 1 deadline. Lawrence is seeking a court order to overturn the deadline as unfair and arbitrary.



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