

SEP launches presidential petition drive in Washington state

Noah Page, Corey Maxwell
4 August 2004

Members and supporters of the Socialist Equality Party in the Pacific Northwest have made considerable progress on a petition drive launched a few weeks ago to place its candidates—Bill Van Auken for president and Jim Lawrence for vice president—on the Washington state ballot in November 2004.

In this state of 6.1 million people, SEP petitioners are more than halfway to a goal of 1,500 signatures. We are working in Seattle on Puget Sound, an area in which some 100,000 jobs have been lost in recent years (to a large extent because of massive layoffs by the Boeing aircraft company, which has only recently started to hire back some workers), contributing to one of the nation's higher unemployment rates.

According to figures announced by the state's Employment Security Department, Washington's statewide unemployment rate was 6.1 percent in June. As is typical, some counties take a large brunt of the recession: in Yakima, unemployment was 8.6 percent; Ferry County had the worst jobless rate in the state, at 11.2 percent, down from 16.2 percent in April.

Recent changes in elections rules for ballot access, to a certain extent, work in favor of the SEP. Previously, it was necessary to collect only 200 signatures, but that only guaranteed ballot access for third-party presidential candidates in the primary election.

General election ballot access was previously guaranteed only if, during the primaries, a third-party candidate polled a minimum of 1 percent. Under the new rules, Van Auken and Lawrence will appear on the November ballot if the SEP's petition drive can file 1,000 valid signatures. A later filing date also gives petitioners six weeks, rather than one, to work the streets.

However, unlike nominating petitions in most states, which allow for several names and signatures

(sometimes up to 20) on a single page, in Washington only one signature is allowed per page—a format that prevents people at first glance from seeing that, in fact, many others are expressing their support for putting the SEP's candidates on the ballot. This can have an intimidating effect on potential signers, some of whom have declined to sign out of fear that these single sheets could be used to “blacklist” them.

Some of the more restrictive electoral laws were not changed and pose the greatest challenges to our efforts. Independent parties must publish a notice in a public newspaper, announcing the locations of all “nominating conventions” (i.e., petitioning locations) at least 10 days before the “convention” starts. This leaves independent parties restricted to the specific convention locations as publicized, which cannot be shifted if other petitioning opportunities arise.

Earlier this year, the Green Party in Washington almost failed to get ballot access for a statewide candidate on the grounds that one notice was published less than 10 days before the “convention” began, which resulted in 400 signatures being invalid. This would mean that even though 400 people were able and willing to sign the petition, their signatures would be considered invalid because the notice, which goes mostly unseen, was delinquent.

In spite of these onerous restrictions, however, the relative ease with which SEP petitioners have collected more than 800 signatures is simply one more indication of the dissatisfaction of broad layers of the population with the daily realities of their lives, as well as their lack of faith in the two major political parties to address these problems.

The lengthy analysis, “The State of Working America” for 2002/2003, published by the Economic Policy Institute, offers a glimpse of Washington

showing that national trends are reflected at the regional level as well.

During the 1980s, for example, the income gap in the United States between the top 20 percent and the bottom 20 percent, according to the study, expanded from a ratio of 7.4 to 9.3, a growth in inequality of 1.9 points. From the late 1980s to the late 1990s, inequality in Washington state grew by 1.6 points. The report also indicates that from 1979 to 2001, the percentage of workers earning poverty-level wages grew from 18.7 percent to 21.7 percent.

Other signs of struggle among working-class families abound. Between July 2001 and July 2002, residents requiring some sort of food assistance topped 1.2 million—nearly a fifth of the state’s population. In mid-July, the Wenatchee Aluminum Trades Council, representing some 400 smelter workers, rejected Pittsburgh-based Alcoa’s demand that employees take on a greater share of the costs for their health care benefits, leaving the fate of those jobs in question.

In late July, meanwhile, an article in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* reported that for the more than 3 million Washington state residents who have no dental insurance or rely on Medicaid, dental care has “become a luxury afforded only after the rent has been paid and food put on the table.” The list goes on.

SEP members cite their interaction with the public as one of the most important aspects of their political work in several Seattle neighborhoods. Many people have been very enthusiastic and sign the petitions based on the basic principle of supporting democratic rights and promoting ballot access to third parties. “I may not agree with your party,” one individual said, “but I say, let the people choose.”

However, petitioners have had to counter sentiments expressed by some that “Anybody but Bush” is preferable to the present administration. Some common remarks have included: “We’ve got to get Bush out,” “Bush has to go,” and “Not this time.... This election is too important.”

After repeatedly hearing the “Anybody but Bush” slogan and related comments as people streamed by one day refusing to sign, one petitioner said it was refreshing to hear a man in the Capitol Hill neighborhood say, “Anyone but those two men [Bush and Kerry].” Others have expressed their appreciation and support for the work the SEP is doing to challenge

the two-party system, and the party’s commitment to providing a real alternative for working people.

While the Republicans, Democrats, and media continue to lie and pretend that the war in Iraq is not a significant issue to masses of Americans, a number of people have expressed their desire to see candidates in the election challenge both parties and force a genuine debate on the issue.

One 22-year-old man who signed a petition said he was being sent to Iraq in the fall. When asked how he felt about having to go he paused and said, “I can’t imagine that there is anyone out there who would be happy to go.” At Westlake Park, the wife of a marine signed the petition and exclaimed, “I’m signing because I don’t want my husband to have to go,” knowing that both the Democrats and Republicans are pro-war.

We have successfully collected over 800 signatures, and will use the next few weeks to meet our goal of 1,500 by August 24 to ensure that our party’s candidates are on the Washington state ballot in November. We are calling on our readers and supporters in Washington to contact the SEP and get involved in the campaign.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact