

Readers protest University of Illinois attack on SEP candidate Tom Mackaman

8 September 2004

Below we post letters that have been sent to Dr. Richard Traver, the Ethics Officer at the University of Illinois, protesting the university's effort to intimidate and harass SEP state legislative candidate Tom Mackaman. On September 1, Mackaman received a "ticket" from the Director of Security Services and Information Privacy threatening him with "disciplinary action" for using his campus e-mail account to send out a press release about his campaign for the state House of Representatives in Illinois District 103.

[See SEP statement: "Defend free speech at the University of Illinois! Hands off SEP candidate Tom Mackaman!"]

The threat against Mackaman is the latest episode of a months-long campaign by the Democratic Party to obstruct the SEP candidate's campaign. On July 29, a leading official in the Champaign County Democratic Party was forced to withdraw a challenge to Mackaman's nominating petitions after a detailed review of the petitions by the county electoral board showed the vast majority of the signatures challenged by the Democrats were in fact valid and Mackaman had far more than the 1,325 signatures needed to appear on the ballot in November.

We urge students, workers, WSWs readers and all those who defend democratic rights to send letters of protest to Dr. Richard Traver at: rtraver@uillinois.edu

Please send copies of letters to: editor@wsws.org

Dear Sir,

I am writing to protest the treatment of Tom Mackaman, a graduate student and teaching assistant at University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana. I believe Mr. Mackaman is being unfairly persecuted by the university administration because of his desire to express his right to free speech. I cannot see any reason, legal or ethical, why this particular student employee should not be free to use a university e-mail account for the purposes of political organizing. Coming at a time when the two main political parties are doing everything in their power to curtail the level of political debate in the US, it is particularly worrying that a public university, supposedly a bastion of free speech and critical thought, would be in engaged in this type of McCarthyite behavior.

I hope that Mr. Mackaman will henceforth be able to engage in political activities without further harassment.

Yours,

James W. Illingworth
Graduate Student, History Department
University of California, Santa Cruz
6 September 2004

Dear Dr. Traver,

I am writing in response to an article I read regarding a "disciplinary action ticket" that was sent to Tom Mackaman for using his student e-mail account to send a press release that related to his candidacy for State Representative. Defining an e-mail as "University premises and facilities" is certainly a stretch of the university policy regarding political activity. I fear that this so-called disciplinary action borders on suppression of free speech. I am writing to ask that the University rescind its threat against

Mackaman, withdraw its "ticket" and uphold his right to conduct political activity without intimidation and censorship.

Thank you for your time and attention to this letter.

Regards,

Brent Barnes

7 September 2004

Dear Dr. Traver,

I'm writing to encourage you to support freedom of speech on the campus of the University of Illinois and discontinue harassment of Tom Mackaman. I understand that Mr. Mackaman, an outstanding teaching assistant, has been issued a "ticket" suggesting he may be punished for using his university e-mail account for political purposes. I can only wonder, however, if other students receive similar threats when expressing their political views. Do you pursue the College Republicans, College Democrats, or College Libertarians with equal ardor? I noticed that these student organizations all list UIUC e-mail accounts to conduct their political business.

Pursuing Mr. Mackaman with threats sends a troubling message to the university community. A university such as ours should encourage debate and the flourishing of ideas, not stifle them.

Yours for freedom and democracy,

Michael Rosenow

7 September 2004

Dear Mr. Traver,

I am a graduate student at the University of Minnesota. I have been following Tom Mackaman's political campaign, and it seems that the latest round of attacks against it has been launched from your office. The whole affair, from the smear published in the *Champaign-Urbana News-Gazette* to your own recent actions is sordid and reprehensible. I find it hard to believe that you fail to see the terrible implications and consequences of your actions. It seems more likely that the Democratic Party machine has found in your office a user-friendly tool to continue in its anti-democratic machinations.

Please note that I am also sending this e-mail from my student account. Would you care to police and censor my account as well?

Sincerely,

Emanuele Saccarelli

Ph.D. Candidate

Department of Political Science

University of Minnesota

7 September 2004

Your actions against Tom Mackaman can only be characterized as "despicable." This guy takes seriously his democratic rights. He decides to conduct a campaign for public office. Not having carte blanche access to the media, nor hundreds of thousands of dollars from corporate bigwigs, nor a vast personal fortune, nor the backing of either of the two big-business parties, he uses his own resources, including an e-mail account that is his alone, and that is paid for by him. Yet you have the gall to call this "using university premises and facilities for private purposes,

including political campaigning”! Suppose he used his internet account to log in to CNN or Fox News, in order to satisfy his personal craving for news—that would also be using university premises for “private purposes.” Suppose he decided to eat a hamburger in the university cafeteria—that would also be using university premises for a “private purpose.” Do you even realize how ludicrous, how absurd, how grasping-at-straws you appear to the outside world? It is also obvious that you are caving in to political pressure from the local Democratic Party machine. Cut the crap, leave him alone, and stop being a part of the censorship, anti-democracy, and repression that is taking over this country.

Robert Rotstein
6 September 2004

Dr. Richard Traver:
As a teacher of history in the New York City public school system and a delegate to the United Federation of Teachers, I find it indefensible that Tom Mackaman, a graduate student and teaching assistant at the University of Illinois, has had his democratic rights to run and campaign as the Socialist Equality Party candidate for the state House of Representatives in Illinois District 3 attacked by the university administration. As the “Ethics Officer” at the University of Illinois, I urge you to take an immediate and public stand to defend free speech, academic freedom and the rights of voters.

While the technical issue of Mr. Mackaman’s right to use his campus e-mail account, for which he has paid, to send out messages, including campaign press releases, is clearly within his rights of privacy, this attempt at political censorship is an outrageous revelation of the extent to which freedom in our time is being restricted. This is why I am communicating with you. How can an institution consider itself an institution of learning if it would restrict political discussion? Supposing Mr. Mackaman had merely forwarded a copy of a campaign press release of another candidate that he found of interest? Why should he not be able to send one of his own and that is of vital interest to the entire working class? The SEP is the only party in the presidential as well as congressional elections calling for US troops to be brought home from Iraq immediately. Devious political censorship is the method of those who cannot respond in the spirit of democracy.

If there are disciplinary measures to be taken, they should be against those who concocted or assisted or allowed the harassment of Mr. Mackaman and his campaign. The University owes an apology to Mr. Mackaman and the public.

Sincerely,
Harvey Lichtman
6 September 2004

Dear Dr. Traver,
I read about the notice that Tom Mackaman received, alleging that he has “abused” his campus e-mail account by engaging in political activity. If the university wishes to violate democratic rights, then it should at least do so consistently.

I bring your attention to the following campus e-mail account, the existence of which indicates that Mackaman is being selectively targeted for disciplinary action: democrat@uiuc.edu

I found this address on the website of the College Democrats (<https://netfiles.uiuc.edu/ro/www/CollegeDemocrats/>). This website resides on a university server and has the purpose of furthering the political goals of the Democratic Party. It also lists several other e-mail addresses that are being used for political purposes, such as:

- President Erin Janulis ejanulis@uiuc.edu - Vice President Sky Andrecheck andreche@uiuc.edu - Secretary Justin Cajindos cajindos@uiuc.edu - Treasurer Sarah Pittenger pittenge@uiuc.edu

Another website, called “Students for Kerry,” has also been established on a university server for political purposes (<https://netfiles.uiuc.edu/ro/www/StudentsforKerry2004/>). On the

“Contact the Campaign” page, the following e-mail address is provided: ejanulis@uiuc.edu. However, it is Mackaman who has been warned against using a campus e-mail account in order to “campaign for political candidates and organizations.”

These facts prove that the notice that the university sent to Mackaman has nothing to do with a broken principle or regulation. With the attack on Mackaman, the university itself has abused university resources for political purposes.

I have viewed the Ethics Officer website (<http://ethics.uillinois.edu>), where I noticed the quotation “Make each decision as if it were the one decision for which you would be remembered,” as well as the slogan “Always Thinking.” In light of the facts that I have cited, I hope that you will reconsider your reported assertion that Mackaman is guilty of “abusing university property.”

Sincerely,
Ron Golaszewski
6 September 2004

Dear Mr. Traver,
I am writing to request that you cease your absurd anti-democratic attacks on University of Illinois graduate student and SEP candidate Tom Mackaman. It is his fundamental right to use his e-mail service—which he pays for—for any legal purpose. To say otherwise would be an enormous encroachment on free speech, essentially allowing university officials to monitor and censor the private affairs and communications of its students. It is essential to recognize that Mackaman is being targeted for his views—for jobs, healthcare, and against the occupation of Iraq—rather than his actions. To call the use of an e-mail account for campaign purposes a violation but to ignore the enormously more significant attacks on democratic rights perpetrated by the two big-business parties would be the pinnacle of absurdist humor, if it were not so frightening. Americans need a new way forward, and we begin by demanding our basic democratic rights.

Sincerely,
Paul Enman
6 September 2004

Mackaman is standing in a political election and the University of Illinois officials reacts with spiteful political censorship and spurious charges against him. Hiding behind the university officials but still obvious are the cowardly and underhanded methods of the Democratic Party politicians including Democratic Governor Rod R. Blagojevich. Their Latin motto might read, “Free speech in an election—not a chance! Workers to have a say in society—not a chance! A socialist program—not a chance! There will be no opposition to war, poverty and the criminal destruction of all social services including the ‘higher places of learning’!”

I demand an end to these spurious charges and any disciplinary action against SEP candidate Mackaman.

John Christian
Australia
6 September 2004

Dear Dr. Traver,
I am shocked and dismayed at the attempts by the University of Illinois to restrict the right to free speech of Socialist Equality Party candidate Tom Mackaman.

According to reports on the *World Socialist Web Site*, you claimed that Mackaman was guilty of abusing university property. This strikes me as somewhat absurd; how does using an internet facility for political campaigning, which is paid for by the student out of his fees, constitute an abuse of university property?

Your feeble response that such matters be “left to a constitutional attorney” would be laughable if the matter was not so serious. It is clear that you were unable to muster any reasonable argument for the

University's decision to curtail Mr. Mackaman's constitutional right to engage in political activity.

One can further assume that the University has been monitoring student e-mails, without having the legal authorisation to do so.

You may be aware that Mr. Mackaman, like other third-party candidates, has faced a relentless campaign by Democratic officials and supporters, to thwart his electoral challenge. This latest move by the University of Illinois, an institution whose administration is dominated by Democrats, is of a piece with this underhanded campaign.

As the university's ethics officer, surely you should have sought Mr. Mackaman's side of the story before summarily issuing a "ticket."

It now appears that the University administration is doing the dirty work of the Democratic Party.

I urge you to withdraw the "ticket" issued to Mr. Mackaman and to take a stand in defence of Mr. Mackaman's right to engage in political activity.

Regards

Eric Goodwin

South Africa

6 September 2004

Dr. Richard Traver,

It has come to my attention that the University of Illinois has threatened disciplinary action against Tom Mackaman for using his student e-mail account for political purposes, even though the university has no rules that state what a student can and cannot write in their e-mails.

According to an article on the *World Socialist Web Site*, you said the decision to "ticket" Mackaman was made "after a security officer said a student-employee had been using his e-mail account for political purposes." Leaving aside the question of whether any correspondence can take place without a political purpose of one form or another, the action taken by the University of Illinois, if not publicly retracted, will set a dangerous precedent throughout this country as a whole, and academia in particular. The threats to Tom Mackaman are not only a blatant attack on constitutionally protected free speech, but a frontal assault on academic freedom as well, signifying a retrograde push back to the days of McCarthy.

What sort of constrictive atmosphere must there be at the University of Illinois this evening? I can only imagine. To censor somebody for their correspondence because it was written through the medium of the internet supplied by the university, but paid for by the student, it makes me wonder: what's next? Suspensions for having a political discussion in a dorm room, which is also provided by the university? Expulsions for members of clubs with a political bent that meet on campus property? I don't know the status of the student newspaper, but I imagine that it receives funding from the state as well. I shudder to imagine the caliber of paper that must exist there.

If these threats—which are politically motivated themselves—are allowed to stand, you may as well proceed to the next step: shutting down the student government, any faculty boards, not to mention the entire liberal arts department, as none of these can operate at all without private "political purposes" coming into play.

It is obvious to even the most casual observer that the actions of the university in respect to Tom Mackaman are not only undemocratic and authoritarian, but the fact that this action is unprecedented in the school's history demonstrates that they are politically motivated themselves. This is merely another political "dirty trick" instigated by a corrupt and dying party that you, as an ethics officer for the university, should not be an accomplice to. I demand that the political threats to Tom Mackaman be immediately and publicly retracted and his and every student and faculty member's right to free speech at the University of Illinois be reestablished.

Sincerely,

H. Rogers

Las Vegas, NV

6 September 2004

Dear Dr. Traver,

I insist that you respect Tom Mackaman's right to use his e-mail account to disseminate political information. I respect and admire him for his courage in standing on socialist policies against the stranglehold that the Democratic and Republican parties have on all political discussion in this country. These are treacherous times, and we deserve to hear intelligent debate about critical issues that affect us. Your behavior is particularly appalling on a campus of higher education. I am calling on you to stop your selective persecution of Tom Mackaman and respect his right to free speech.

Geraldine Clifford

Oakland, CA

6 September 2004



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact