

State of Ohio seeks to deny ballot status for SEP presidential ticket

The Editorial Board
13 September 2004

In a flagrant attack on the democratic rights of the Socialist Equality Party, its candidates and supporters, a spokesman for the Ohio Board of Elections told the SEP September 9 that county registrars had disqualified more than half the signatures on the petition filed last month to place Bill Van Auken and Jim Lawrence on the ballot for president and vice president.

The SEP filed nearly 8,000 signatures on August 18, well above the 5,000 required by state law to win ballot status for an independent presidential ticket in Ohio. Those signatures were distributed to county officials to be checked by September 7. The county registrars eliminated more than 4,000 signatures, reporting figures back to the state which totaled only 3,811 valid signatures.

The Ohio Board of Elections made no effort to inform the SEP or its candidates that it intended to deny ballot status to Bill Van Auken and Jim Lawrence. The SEP initiated the phone call September 9, the day after the state panel made its initial determination of ballot status.

The SEP now has six days—from the time of notification until a deadline of 5 p.m. on September 15—to double-check the challenged signatures and seek to validate enough of them to meet the requirement of 5,000. This procedure itself makes a mockery of democracy, since the state and local authorities in Ohio, with hundreds of paid employees, had 16 days to examine and challenge signatures, while the SEP has only six days, with only its own resources, to counter the challenge.

SEP supporters were required to request and pay for photocopies of all the petitions from Columbus, as well as to request CDs containing the lists of registered voters from the dozens of counties where signatures were collected. They then had to begin the painstaking task of comparing the disputed signatures with the thousands of names contained in these databases.

The Ohio SEP campaign won a strong response in working class neighborhoods of Cleveland, Columbus, Toledo, Dayton, Cincinnati and Warren, as well as at college campuses. There was a particularly strong response to the

SEP's call for an immediate and unconditional withdrawal of troops from Iraq.

The attempt of the Ohio authorities to keep the SEP's presidential candidates off the ballot comes on the heels of their effort to exclude David Lawrence, the SEP's candidate for Congress in Ohio's 1st Congressional District, from the ballot. In April and May, Lawrence and supporters gathered the signatures of 2,660 voters from the district on nominating petitions to place his name on the ballot, far more than the required number.

However, the state refused to accept the signatures, citing a March 1 deadline. A US district court and the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals have upheld the arbitrary filing deadline, nearly six months earlier than the deadline for presidential candidates. This court-sanctioned blow against democratic rights has encouraged state officials to go further, attempting to deny ballot status to the SEP's presidential candidates, although there was no question of missing deadlines or other legal technicalities.

Initial reviews of the challenged signatures demonstrate the gross abuse of power and political bias involved in this attempt to deny the SEP ballot status. In Cuyahoga County, which includes Cleveland, at least 40 percent of the challenges are bogus—the rejected signatures are either clearly valid on their face, or had minor errors in the street addresses (transposed digits, for instance), or were block-printed by the signers in an effort to be legible.

Statewide, hundreds of signatures were marked “not genuine” because of such block-printing. Many more were marked “illegible” even though the addresses are clearly marked and state law requires that local registrars use the address to attempt to decipher the name of the voter. Another large number of rejected signatures are those of voters who have moved and not yet re-registered at their new addresses. All these signatures represent voters who agreed to sign the petition to place Bill Van Auken and Jim Lawrence on the ballot, and whose wishes are being denied by the state and local governments on the basis of arbitrary technicalities or outright fraud.

A preliminary review of the rejected signatures gives a clear indication of political bias. In Franklin County, which includes Columbus, and in the dozens of counties which comprise the rural and small-town portion of the state, more than 60 percent of the SEP signatures have been found to be valid. In five other urban counties—Cuyahoga (Cleveland), Lucas (Toledo), Montgomery (Dayton), Hamilton (Cincinnati) and Trumbull (Warren)—the rate of valid signatures supposedly drops to as low as 40 percent.

This disparity cannot be explained by any difference in registration figures. The statewide registration rate is well over 60 percent, and in urban areas, even the poorest, more than half the adult population is registered to vote. The reason for the difference is apparent: Columbus and rural Ohio are administered by local officials loyal to the Republican Party; the other five large urban counties are heavily industrialized areas, long dominated by the Democratic Party through its alliance with the trade union bureaucracy.

Both the Republicans and the Democrats are implacably hostile to socialism and to the democratic rights of socialist and working class parties. But the Democrats are undoubtedly more concerned about the immediate impact on their political fortunes from the presence of socialist candidates on the ballot—and more generally, over the growth of socialist political influence in the working class and among young people.

The claim that the SEP did not file enough signatures to qualify for ballot status is absurd on its face. A random sample of state residents would find 70 percent registered to vote. Yet state and local officials claim that the SEP, in a petition drive in which each signer was asked beforehand whether they were registered to vote, produced a registration rate of barely 45 percent.

The attempt to deny the SEP candidates ballot status flies in the face of past state history. The predecessor of the SEP, the Workers League, placed its presidential candidate on the ballot in 1984 and 1988, each time submitting about the same number of signatures as the SEP did in 2004. The percentage of state residents registered to vote has actually increased since the 1980s, but nonetheless, the SEP petition supposedly fell short.

The attack on the SEP in Ohio is part of a national pattern in which the Democratic Party has sought to exclude any third-party campaign that might attract working-class voters and those opposed to the war policies espoused by both Bush and the Democrats. The Democrats have successfully denied ballot status to independent presidential candidate Ralph Nader in nearly a dozen states—most recently in Virginia and Florida.

Ohio is one of the most critical and hotly-contested states

if the 2004 presidential contest remains close. A poll released Sunday by the *Columbus Dispatch* found 46 percent for Bush, 46 percent for Kerry and 2 percent for Nader. The outcome of the election could thus be determined by a few thousand or even a few hundred votes in Ohio.

With this in mind, the Democratic Party machine launched an all-out effort to deny Nader ballot status in Ohio. Nader's supporters filed 14,573 signatures, nearly triple the 5,000 required. County registrars eliminated more than 8,000 of these signatures as invalid, but this still left 6,464 marked valid, and the Ohio election board accordingly declared that Nader's name would appear on the ballot.

In that context, the grotesque distortions revealed in the disqualification of SEP petition signatures have a logical political motive: if the Democrats intended to claim that Nader, with nearly 15,000 signatures, failed to meet the 5,000 requirement, they could hardly permit the SEP, with 8,000 signatures, to obtain ballot status for its candidates.

The SEP presidential campaign is already certified in four states: New Jersey, Colorado, Iowa and Washington. SEP supporters plan to submit petitions for the presidential ballot in Minnesota by the September 14 deadline. They have already collected well over the 2,000 signatures required in that state. Three SEP congressional and legislative candidates are on the ballot in Maine, Michigan and Illinois.

At the center of the SEP campaign is the struggle to build an independent mass political movement of the working class. We tell working people the truth: American democracy is a fraud. The purpose of the myriad rules and procedures that govern the US electoral process is to exclude and disenfranchise millions of people. The right to vote—itself frequently denied to minority workers and the poor—means nothing when the ruling elite controls the process of candidate selection and allows only its pre-approved nominees to appear on the ballot where voters make their “free choice.”

The SEP calls on all readers of the WSWs and all supporters to demand that the Ohio Board of Elections halt its attack on our democratic rights and place Bill Van Auken and Jim Lawrence on the statewide ballot. Send e-mail messages of protest to:

Kenneth Blackwell
Ohio Secretary of State
www.sos.state.oh.us

Please send copies to editor@wsws.org



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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