

SEP election meeting in Cincinnati discusses attacks on voting rights

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30 October 2004

With only days remaining until Election Day, the Socialist Equality Party 2004 campaign held a meeting at the University of Cincinnati (Ohio) on Wednesday, October 27. Speaking at the meeting were SEP vice presidential candidate Jim Lawrence and David Lawrence, the party's candidate for Ohio's 1st Congressional District, who are both running as write-in candidates in the state. They were joined by Jerry White, SEP candidate for US Representative in Michigan's 15th Congressional District.

The meeting was well attended by both students and working people. The reports and discussion focused on the growing social inequality in the US, the Bush administration's criminal war in Iraq and reports that Republican Party operatives have made plans to disrupt voting at polling locations on November 2.

The Republican Party's latest threats to disenfranchise voters are of particular concern in Ohio, where 3,600 "poll watchers" have been recruited by the Republicans to challenge the credentials of tens of thousands of newly registered voters in several urban centers.

This attack is the latest in a series of anti-democratic measures used to deprive voters of their right to select a candidate of their choice. Election officials in the state, led by Republican Secretary of State Kenneth Blackwell, have also waged a months-long attack to bar SEP candidates from the ballot.

David Lawrence, a high school mathematics teacher in Dayton, addressed Wednesday night's meeting. He explained how supporters of his Congressional campaign gathered 2,400 signatures of registered voters to place him on the ballot. "Most people we spoke to didn't have any allegiance to the two big business parties," he said. Lawrence and his supporters filed petitions bearing these signatures in June, challenging the state's discriminatory election laws which required third-party candidates to submit petitions by March 1, eight months before the general election and more than five months before the deadline to file petitions for presidential candidates.

The SEP's legal challenge to the early congressional filing

deadline was struck down by the courts. Lawrence said he saw why the Democrats and Republicans systematically sought to repress any third-party candidates who challenge the policies of the two major parties. "I have seen first-hand workers and young people trying to get by. Conditions in Dayton are continually getting worse. We've seen petroleum, home heating and health insurance costs rise. Seniors on Medicare will see their costs rise."

Lawrence said that these sharpening conditions of social inequality were pushing working people to look for an alternative. "I am running as a write-in candidate," he said. "A vote for me will not be wasted, but will be a vote for a socialist political platform."

Vice-presidential candidate Jim Lawrence, a retired General Motors worker from Dayton, is also running as a write-in candidate. Supporters of Lawrence and SEP presidential candidate Bill Van Auken gathered the signatures of close to 8,000 registered voters to place them on the ballot, well over the 5,000 required. Election officials from both parties disqualified more than half of the signatures, the vast majority of which were proven valid by an exhaustive SEP review.

Lawrence concentrated his remarks on the collaboration of the Democrats and Republicans in the illegal war in Iraq. "Kerry is preparing the slaughter of tens of thousands of Iraqi people," he said. "The Democrats have co-signed for every policy of the Republican Party. The people have no representation."

"Every question you face is both a political and international question," he continued. "We have a globalized economy. The US is the world's biggest debtor nation and the ruling elite seek to solve their economic problems through military might."

"John Kerry has repudiated the only honorable thing he ever did. Returning from the Vietnam War, he said the Vietnamese were defending their homeland. You will never hear him say that about the Iraqis."

Lawrence addressed the students in the audience: "Most young people went into the military to have a job and an

education. They didn't go in to fight. They are forced to risk their lives in order to live."

He noted that workers throughout the world were facing a common attack on jobs and living standards and pointed to the recent announcement by General Motors that it was destroying 13,000 jobs in Europe and the US. In response, workers struck GM's Opel operation in Germany and held a mass demonstration involving auto workers from Britain, Sweden, Germany, Poland and other countries. This, he said, expressed the desire of workers to break through the nationalist policies of the labor bureaucracies and social democratic parties and unite their struggles against the global corporations.

"If workers and young people carry out an international struggle they will not pick up arms against each other in a new imperialist war for capitalism," Lawrence concluded.

Congressional candidate Jerry White spoke of the implications of the present attack on the right to vote, the experience of the SEP's Ohio election campaign and the crucial issues facing working and young people, both now and following November 2.

"What is the state of the US on the eve of Election Day?" he asked. "The Bush administration is prosecuting a criminal war. At the same time, the Democrats and Republicans are engaged in a bipartisan effort to disenfranchise workers in Ohio and across the country."

He said that the same tactics used against the SEP and other third party candidates to bar them from the ballot were now being utilized against the voting population as a whole. "The Republican Party is preparing to challenge and intimidate working class and minority voters at the polls in Cleveland, Dayton, Cincinnati and other locations. These methods of intimidation are the same as those used in the Deep South in the days of Jim Crow laws to deny blacks the right to vote."

According to the ruling establishment, White said, "voting is a privilege and not a right, and voters will be compelled to prove that they are worthy of voting." Throughout American history, he said, working people have struggled for the right to vote. After the American Revolution only propertied whites had the vote; it took the Civil War for blacks to gain voting rights. "It was not until 1920 that women finally were able to vote, and not until the 1970s that 18-year-olds, who were being sent off to fight and die in Vietnam, gained the right to vote."

White said that behind the assault on the right to vote is the social inequality that characterizes every aspect of society today. "If the will of the people were expressed," he said, "it would come into direct conflict with the privileges of the existing wealthy elite."

In conclusion, White said, "What can we anticipate in the

aftermath of the election? Kerry will continue to attack democratic rights. He will continue the war. Millions are going to the polls to stop what Bush is doing. But these aspirations—for jobs, health care, a decent standard of living—will come into direct conflict with a Kerry administration, if the Democrat is elected.

He explained that democratic rights could only be assured if the economic and political power of the ruling elite were broken and genuine social equality established. This could only be done by the working class building its party that would fight to place power in its own hands in order to reorganize the economy to meet human needs, instead of a wealthy elite.

The discussion and questions following the reports expressed a wide range of concern over the social conditions facing working people, the right to vote, and the strategy for building a revolutionary alternative to the two-party system.

One person asked what steps could be taken to defend voters' rights at the polling booths against attempts to disenfranchise them. The SEP speakers said working people should be prepared to challenge any such efforts because the Democratic Party and trade union bureaucracy could not be entrusted with this responsibility. Those present were urged to send in reports on these occurrences to the *World Socialist Web Site*.

One student who had attended meetings of the International Socialist Organization (ISO) on campus asked why there weren't more efforts to consolidate with other groups who call themselves socialists.

Jerry White pointed out that the ISO has endorsed independent presidential candidate Ralph Nader, who has stated he is running to pressure the Democrats and shift them to the left. The ISO, therefore, was helping to foster illusions that this big business party could be made to defend the rights of the working class. White added, "We need to tell workers the truth: if Kerry is elected they will find themselves in a direct struggle with his administration. The only way to stop war and address the social crisis in America is to break with the Democrats and build a political party of the working class."



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