

Illinois SEP campaign reaches wide audience

Candidate Tom Mackaman to speak at Thursday evening meeting on University of Illinois campus

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Over the past two weeks, Tom Mackaman, the Socialist Equality Party candidate for state representative from Illinois' 103rd District (Champaign-Urbana), has participated in a series of debates, media appearances and other campaign forums with incumbent Democrat Naomi Jakobsson and the Republican contender, Deborah Frank-Feinen.

In his appearances, Mackaman has placed at the forefront of his remarks the SEP's opposition to the war in Iraq and its demand for the immediate withdrawal of all US and foreign troops from the country. He has explained that opposition to militarism and imperialism require a break with the two major parties of American big business and the construction of a socialist party of the working class.

Opposition to the war is inseparable, Mackaman has stressed, from a struggle against the attacks on jobs and living standards and the defense of democratic rights. He has warned that these attacks will be intensified, whichever of the two major parties wins the presidency.

On October 12, Mackaman participated in a question-and-answer forum with his opponents broadcast live on public television station WEIU in Charleston, Illinois, home of Eastern Illinois University. Although Charleston is outside the 103rd District, the broadcast range of the TV station encompasses a large swath of central and east-central Illinois.

The following night, Mackaman debated his opponents at a similar forum on the University of Illinois campus in Urbana. The event was sponsored by the Union of Professional Employees of the University of Illinois. Mackaman is a graduate student and teaching/ research assistant at the university, and a member of the Graduate Employees Organization, a union of university teaching and research assistants affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers.

On October 18, Mackaman debated Republican challenger Feinen before a group of some thirty students at the University of Illinois campus. After opening statements, the candidates fielded questions from the audience, most of which were directed to Mackaman.

On October 19, the SEP candidate appeared by himself before a political science class at the university, answering a number of thoughtful questions from the 35 students gathered there.

On October 20, Mackaman participated in a candidates' forum organized by the League of Women Voters. In addition to Mackaman and his opponents, three Republican state representatives from adjoining rural counties appeared. The three are standing for reelection unopposed by the Democratic Party. The forum will be aired on local public access television prior to Election Day.

The following day, Mackaman participated in another television debate against Jakobsson and Feinen, this time on the local Urbana-Champaign public television affiliate, WILL. The debate featured live telephone calls from viewers in the station's broadcasting range, which includes much of east-central Illinois.

In opening statements at all of his appearances, Mackaman defined the goal of the SEP campaign as laying the groundwork for the building of an independent party of the working class in opposition to the Democratic and Republican parties, explaining that the SEP campaign was directed toward the construction of a new socialist movement of the working class internationally.

Mackaman repeatedly pointed to the enormous hostility to the illegal war in Iraq felt by millions of Americans. This opposition, he stressed, finds no serious political expression in either the Democratic or Republican Parties, even at the local level. Mackaman noted that both of his opponents had remained silent on the war in the course of

the debates, despite the “death and injury of many young people from our local communities fighting in this war.”

Many questions from audiences and callers reflected concerns about the erosion of living standards: rising health care and education costs, environmental protection, women’s rights, pension and retirement benefits, and other pressing social issues.

The Democratic and Republican candidates repeatedly claimed there was no money to adequately fund social programs, and called for fiscal restraint. Republican candidate Feinen proposed reducing property taxes and raising income taxes on the top 40 percent of wage-earners statewide to assist in education funding, while Democrat Jakobsson reiterated her “no new taxes” platform.

Mackaman pointed out that neither the Democratic nor Republican parties supported the raising of funds for social programs by closing tax loopholes that allow many of the top Fortune 500 companies to escape taxation altogether. “The parties of big business cannot and will not carry out the measures required to end a decades-long cycle of wealth redistribution from the working classes and poor to a minority at the top of the ladder,” Mackaman said.

He noted the Democratic Party’s “continued movement to the right,” and said its differences with the Republican Party were largely tactical. “Only the socialist alternative offered by the SEP nationally and internationally offers a way out of a capitalist market system on the verge of collapse,” he added.

Mackaman stressed that there was more than adequate wealth to fund social programs, noting the “\$200 billion-and-counting being spent on an illegal war against Iraq that affects programs at the federal, state and local levels.” He also pointed to the enormous profits being monopolized by the wealthiest income-earners and largest corporations in the US.

Mackaman stressed the need for building a party of the working class to confront the growing power of multinational corporations and the impact of the globalization, on the basis of capitalism, of the world economy. “The challenges facing society today can be met only through the democratic control of the workplace by the working class,” he said.

The SEP candidate encouraged his listeners to read the *World Socialist Web Site* and donate to the SEP’s 2004 campaign.

The *Daily Illini*, the University of Illinois student newspaper, recently published a commentary by

Mackaman in which he condemned the university’s attempt to suppress free speech by issuing a citation against him for using his student email account to send out a press release for his campaign. (See: “Friday Forum: Attack on Speech”.)

College officials claimed that Mackaman had violated university rules and state employees’ ethics laws by “abusing” university property. No such rules existed when the September 1 citation was issued. Since then, the U of I has changed the rules on email use for university students and employees, without any input from student or employee groups, in an attempt to provide an ex-post-facto justification for their assault on Mackaman’s free speech rights. To this day, the university has not responded to Mackaman’s complaint opposing the citation and his request that it be reviewed.

A growing number of students and faculty members at the 40,000-student campus see the attack on Mackaman as part of an effort to squelch political dissent on US campuses. The campus organization Student Peace Action has scheduled a noon-time rally on October 27 at the University Quad to defend Mackaman.

Throughout Mackaman’s campaign, he and his supporters have heard workers and young people express anger and frustration over the two-party system that increasingly ignores their social needs and concerns. In working class, poor and minority neighborhoods canvassed by SEP campaigners, it has been difficult to find anyone who wholeheartedly supports either Kerry or Bush. Instead, there is a growing sense that working people have been disenfranchised and a heightened interest in learning about a political alternative to the two big business parties.

On Thursday, October 28 at 7 p.m., the Mackaman campaign and the SEP will hold a public meeting in 319 Gregory Hall on the University of Illinois campus.



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