

Socialist candidate Tom Mackaman addresses SEP meeting at the University of Illinois

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The Socialist Equality Party held a public meeting on the campus of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign on October 28 to support the campaign of Tom Mackaman, SEP candidate for state representative in Illinois' 103rd District.

The meeting was well attended by U of I students and working people from the area. Speaking alongside Mackaman were Jerry White, the SEP candidate for Congress from Michigan's 15th Congressional District, and David North, chairman of the editorial board of the *World Socialist Web Site* and national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party of the US.

"In the course of our campaign here in Champaign-Urbana," Mackaman told the meeting, "we have spoken with thousands upon thousands of working people and students. What we have found is that the social and political distance between the needs of working people and the two political parties is unbridgeable."

He explained that his opponents in the race, Democratic incumbent Naomi Jakobsson and Republican Deb Feinen, were running as fiscal conservatives, and that the Democrat, Jakobsson, was positioning herself to the right of the Republican, running on a program of no new taxes and cleaning up "government waste." The latter phrase, Mackaman said, was "a euphemism for slashing social programs." He added: "Such policies might have been plagiarized from a press conference held by Ronald Reagan!"

Mackaman continued: "Anger over the war in Iraq—particularly in the working class neighborhoods where family members are fighting and dying—is white hot." Despite this, in the course of 12 debates, neither Jakobsson nor Feinen had "let the word 'Iraq' fall from her lips."

The SEP candidate told the meeting: "A large majority of Americans now believe the war was wrong, and something approaching half wish to see all US troops withdrawn. But this enormous and bitter opposition to the war in the US and internationally has found no serious expression within the political establishment. Both Bush and Kerry promise to continue the war. And there is a growing drumbeat for further wars of aggression.

"The Iraq war's millions upon millions of opponents are, for all intents and purposes, politically disenfranchised. Bush and Kerry, Republicans and Democrats, promise only more war and militarism because these are the policies of the US corporate and financial oligarchy that controls both parties."

Mackaman said that the price paid for a war based on lies has been enormous. "Tens of thousands of Iraqis have been killed, and millions remain in abject poverty, with little food, without

electricity, water, sewerage service. Nearly 1,100 working class Americans, men and women, have now died—including youth from these communities—and thousands upon thousands more have been maimed."

Given all this, Mackaman asked, "What has become of the political leaders of the peace movement and the radical protest groups? The answer, I'm afraid, is that they have politically dissolved themselves into the pro-war Democratic Party. They have done so through the hollow perspective of 'anyone but Bush,' even though their man, Kerry, promises only more war and militarism.

"The Patriot Act, the attack on habeas corpus seen in the detention of US citizens and internationals, the concentration camp at Guantanamo Bay—which, taken together, constitute what is euphemistically known as the 'war on terror'—these are the shared policies of the Democrats and Republicans." To oppose these policies, he stressed, required breaking the stranglehold of the two-party duopoly through the creation of a mass party of the international working class.

Mackaman noted that the very right to vote was now under assault. "Right now," he said, "gangs of Republican operatives are being openly, indeed brazenly, organized to harass working class and minority voters at polling stations in states such as Ohio. This recalls the methods used to intimidate blacks and prevent them from voting in the old, Jim Crow South."

The SEP campaign in Champaign itself was the target of a disenfranchisement campaign—this time by the Democratic Party—to keep Tom Mackaman's name off the ballot. "We collected over 2,000 signatures in order to gain ballot status—far more than the 1,325 required," Mackaman related. Students and workers signing the SEP's petitions either supported the party's socialist program or "agreed that the democratic system is badly broken, and that new alternatives must be put before voters on the ballot."

The Democrats attempted to disqualify more than half of these signatures. But through a determined effort by Mackaman and his supporters, and at a considerable cost of time and financial resources, the SEP defeated this attempt to bar him from the ballot.

"However, our victory over the Democratic Party was not the end," he added. "I was later attacked for using my e-mail for 'political purposes,' first by a smear artist for the *Champaign News-Gazette*, Phil Bloomer, and later by the university itself. The university, realizing it had no legal basis to monitor students' e-

mail and discipline them for constitutionally guaranteed free speech, has since altered its administrative manual to forbid what it refers to as political campaigning. Students and university staff must fight to reverse this anti-democratic measure!”

Mackaman said these attacks were not of a personal nature. “They are an effort to silence debate on the issues most pressing to students and working people in Champaign—above all else, the war in Iraq.”

He said the assault on democratic rights has become a necessary policy for the ruling elite and its two parties under conditions in which their policies—war and the destruction of living standards—enjoy no significant popular support. “With millions of workers and students now moving into political life, the financial oligarchy can no longer rule by the old methods. Democracy must go.”

Mackaman concluded: “Working people and students require their own tool to fight for political power—that is, their own political party. What is required is the building of a political party of the international working class. We have stood in this election to help lay the groundwork for this necessary task, as well as to warn working and young people of the dangers that await them after November 2.”

Jerry White also addressed the attack on the right to vote. He said that the same methods used by the Democratic Party in an attempt to keep the SEP off the ballot in Champaign-Urbana were being used nationwide in an effort to block hundreds of thousands of newly registered voters from casting their votes on Election Day.

He explained how the Republican Party has responded to the groundswell of newly registered voters by threatening to send gangs of ‘poll watchers’ to voting locations to challenge their right to vote. “They seek to disrupt and delay the voting process, or create sufficient havoc and even violence to throw the whole election into question.”

White concluded, “Democracy is not compatible with a society so polarized by social inequality. Working people want health care, they want jobs at decent wages, they want peace. But the ruling elite needs war and tax cuts.

“The defense of democracy is bound up with the political struggle of the working class. This is not simply a defensive struggle, but an offensive struggle to democratize all aspects of society.”

David North, the final speaker, focused on the acute social polarization of American society that underlies the political tension reflected in the elections. He noted that the conflicting social interests and contradictions in the US were concealed by the media and both major parties, and found, by and large, no clear expression in the political consciousness of broad sections of working people. Indeed, the decades-long suppression of class questions had led to considerable political confusion.

“What accounts for the huge tension in this election?” he asked. “If you look at the programs of the two parties, there is virtually no difference, on either domestic or international policy.”

Bush and the Republicans are making cynical appeals to fear, he said. “In the guise of the ‘war on terrorism’ they are waging a war on democratic rights. The electorate is polarized, but it is not too

sure what it’s polarized about.”

North said there have never been such levels of wealth accumulated in the hands of a very small stratum of the population. “But the ruling class can’t go to the working class and say what they really want: more wealth, destruction of social programs, imperialist military conquest.”

Utilizing religion, the “war on terror” and talk of the “wars of the twenty-first century,” the ruling elite seeks to create a false national unity, when, in fact, US society has never been so polarized.

“Democracy cannot be reconciled with such massive accumulations of wealth,” North concluded. “The working class is politically handicapped. What is needed is the political organization of the common struggles of working people throughout the world.”

In the discussion following the reports, one student said that he came from Galesburg, Illinois, where Maytag was shutting down its refrigerator factory and moving operations to Mexico. He asked what could be done to fight such moves.

Jerry White said the conception that a national solution could be found to the transfer of jobs to low-wage countries was belied by the global mobility of capitalist production. He said the trade unions’ nationalist strategy had led to a disaster, and that the only solution was to unify workers on an international basis.

David North added, “Who owns these corporations? How are these resources used? How is it that vast sums of money are squandered on the military industrial complex?” Workers needed to unite to fight the common capitalist enemy in their respective countries.

A student asked what the attitude of the SEP would be, were it to become a large party, toward the right to vote and ballot access. The panel responded that the SEP was not in favor of any type of voter suppression, and would defend anyone’s right to run for office.

As the meeting wound up, discussion continued informally and a number of students took copies of the SEP 2004 Election Platform to distribute on campus and at polling locations on Election Day.



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