Campaigners win broad support to place SEP candidate on ballot in California

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Supporters and members of the Socialist Equality Party in the 29th District of California have won substantial support from workers and young people to put John Burton on the ballot for US Congress.

Thus far, the campaign has collected over 3,000 signatures from voters in the district, which includes parts of Los Angeles County: Pasadena, South Pasadena, Altadena, Temple City, San Gabriel, Glendale, Alhambra, and parts of Burbank. While this figure is an indication of broad support among the population for placing an SEP candidate on the ballot, it is only a third of the minimum required: 8,951. To ensure they are able to defeat any challenges to the signatures, supporters are seeking to gather at least 15,000 signatures by August 11, the deadline imposed by the State of California.

An independent candidate for the US House of Representatives in California must pay a filing fee of $1,621 or submit 3,000 signatures by July 27 to waive this fee. The signatures gathered so far will therefore allow Burton to waive this fee. All of these signatures can also be applied to the required signatures for ballot status.

While petitioning, supporters of the campaign have encountered general opposition to the US occupation of Iraq, particularly among the substantial working class communities in the district. There has been a strong response to the SEP's call for the immediate withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, as well as substantial agreement with the need for a new party of working people, opposed to both the Democrats and the Republicans.

Petitioners for the SEP have received different reactions from different social layers in the district. Gathering signatures has generally been very difficult in Old Town Pasadena, a shopping district that has many pedestrians, but most of whom come from more wealthy sections of the population or from outside the district entirely. In contrast, the SEP has won a significant hearing in working class areas, particularly in northern Pasadena, South Pasadena and Altadena, where petitioning in the first two months has been concentrated. Many signatures have also been collected from students attending Pasadena City College.

One incident gives a sense of the social polarization in the district and the contrasting responses to the SEP campaign. A petitioner asked a couple to sign and was quickly refused on the grounds that "everything is fine with how things are," and there was no need for a new political party. The next person the petitioner approached signed immediately after hearing the SEP's position on the occupation of Iraq and social inequality. Upon being told the response of the previous couple, the resident noted, "That's because they are wealthy and they want their wealth protected."

In the course of petitioning, SEP supporters have encountered several residents of the area who had relatives in Iraq or who themselves had been sent to Iraq. Few of these individuals have expressed opposition to the SEP's positions on the war. One woman said that she had two nephews in Iraq and that she would support anyone who called for the withdrawal of troops.

In total, of the more than 2,500 US soldiers killed in Iraq, 258 are from California, more than any other state in the country.

In raising the demand for the immediate withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, petitioners have sought to emphasize the support of the Democratic Party for the initial invasion and the continued occupation. This support is personified in the incumbent for the 29th District, Adam Schiff, who played a critical role in ensuring that the initial Congressional authorization to use military force was passed in 2003.

There is already deep disaffection with the two-party system, as revealed in the primary elections held in California early in the month. The turnout for the primaries, held to select the candidates of the officially recognized parties, was only 30 percent, a record low.

The Democratic Party in California has been working closely with the Republican administration of Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, as the two parties have come together on issues critical to the interests of big business. This situation has added to a widespread belief among working people that whatever the squabbling between the two parties, they are both corrupt and subservient to the interests of big business and the wealthy.

The struggle to expose the Democratic Party and raise the necessity for a new party of the working class has been the central issue in the petition-gathering process. Some workers retain hopes that the Democratic Party can offer some sort of alternative, or else do not believe that a new party will be viable. Others have become so thoroughly alienated from the political setup that they argue that all political organizations are corrupt, and they refuse to sign the SEP petition on these grounds. The attempt to gather the required signatures has therefore become an active process to fight for the development of a socialist perspective among working people against the two parties and the entire political and social system.

Another issue that the SEP has sought to raise prominently in the

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campaign is the extension of full rights for all immigrants. This perspective has received a strong response from Hispanic workers, who make up a substantial portion of the population of the district. In the spring, hundreds of thousands of workers, mainly Hispanic, marched in Los Angeles in opposition to right-wing attacks on immigrant rights. Petitioners have raised the need to connect the struggles of immigrant workers with the struggles of the working class as a whole.

One worker who has been in the United States for 27 years as a resident voiced concern over the growing attack on immigrant workers. “It’s never been like this before,” she said, referring to the atmosphere of hostility toward Hispanic workers promoted by the political establishment. She agreed very strongly with the SEP’s condemnation of both sides of the official political debate in Washington. On the one hand, a section of the Republican Party has sought to whip up national chauvinism in order to divide workers and channel discontent over social conditions behind the scapegoating of immigrant workers. On the other hand, the Democrats and a section of Republicans, including the Bush administration, have sought to implement a “guest worker” program, which would ensure a ready supply of cheap labor for US corporations. (See “SEP candidate in California: Extend full rights to all immigrants!”).

Though the resident could not sign the petition because she is not a citizen and is not registered, she took a number of pamphlets and statements to give to her relatives. The SEP has encountered many workers who wanted to sign the petition but could not because they are not citizens. Campaigners have raised the demand for the extension of full political rights to all workers in the US. No one should be denied the ability to participate in the political process.

Petitioners have countered the reactionary positions of the Democrats and Republicans with the struggle to build a unified movement of working people of all nationalities, throughout the US and around the world.

While campaigning, the SEP has had to confront the difficulty of finding good places to petition in order to meet the extraordinary burden placed on independent candidates seeking ballot status. The figure of 8,951 signatures comes from the antidemocratic requirement that candidates gather signatures from 3 percent of the registered voters of the entire district. Like many districts in California, the 29th District is gerrymandered in order to provide a “safe” Democratic seat. This means that many of the individuals who are willing to sign the petition actually reside outside of the district.

As a consequence, campaigners must speak to hundreds of thousands of people in order to get the requisite signatures, and must petition in all areas of the district.

To some extent, it is easier to find places to petition in California than in other states, due to a California Supreme Court ruling that some areas on private property—including shopping malls and large parking lots—function as public spaces with certain protections for free speech. In other states, such as Michigan, petitioners are routinely ejected from areas in front of stores and malls. In Illinois, city officials have sought to deny the SEP the right to petition in front of the public library.

However, in spite of these greater protections, SEP petitioners in California have still had many difficulties. Shopping malls will place restrictions on the area and manner in which campaigners are able to petition that make it difficult to speak to people. Stores will often demand that petitioners leave, either without giving any grounds for violating free speech rights, or claiming that the stores are isolated, with their own parking lots, and therefore do not constitute public spaces.

Two incidents in the campaign highlight the antidemocratic character of the whole ballot-access process. In one instance, campaigners were petitioning at a Trader Joe’s grocery store in Burbank when one person who signed the petition made the statement, “What you are doing is what America is all about.” Five minutes later, the managers of the store came outside and demanded that the petitioners leave.

In another incident, a resident argued in favor of the occupation of Iraq, on the grounds that it would bring democracy to the country. The petitioner pointed out that just in order to get on the ballot, the SEP required 9,000 signatures. The resident responded, “We don’t really have a democracy here in the US.” After some discussion on the contradiction of this position—that the American military could bring democracy to Iraq even as it was being eliminated in the US—the resident agreed to sign the petition.

While the SEP has won significant support, there is still an enormous number of signatures that must be collected in the coming weeks. To reach the goal of 15,000 signatures by August 11, supporters must gather an average over 1,500 signatures per week. This means a substantial increase in the current rate of signature gathering.

Getting on the ballot will provide the SEP with an important opportunity to fight for a socialist alternative for working people in Southern California. John Burton will be speaking at a public meeting in Pasadena on June 22, and we encourage all WSWS readers and supporters in the area to attend and help with the campaign in whatever way possible.

To contact the SEP and help with the campaign, click here.

*To donate to the SEP,*click here.

Visit the SEP Campaign web site at www.socialequality.com

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