

SEP campaign in Illinois reaches minimum signature requirement

Tom Carter
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Supporters of the SEP campaign to place Joe Parnarauskis on the ballot for state senate in the 52nd senate district of Illinois have now gathered more than 3,000 ballot access petitions, surpassing the minimum requirement of 2,985 set by the state of Illinois. However, supporters will continue to gather signatures to reach the goal of 5,000 by June 26, to create a buffer of signatures against the challenge the SEP will likely face from the Democratic Party.

In 2004, the Democratic Party attempted to disqualify the signatures of hundreds of legally registered voters in the Champaign-Urbana area in an effort to keep SEP candidate for state representative Tom Mackaman off the ballot. Michael Madigan, the head of the Illinois Democratic Party, spearheaded the challenge and made illegal use of state employees to review the petitions. Local Democrats, who were used as “petition checkers” by the Champaign County Democratic Party, were instructed to challenge every signature on Mackaman’s petitions, regardless of clear evidence that the signatures were valid and matched the voter registration information. During this court battle, the validity of the signatures was challenged on the most frivolous grounds—the Democrats even went so far as to challenge the validity of Mackaman’s own signature!

The Champaign County Democrats dropped their challenge after the SEP conducted a legal fight and waged an international campaign, during which readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* flooded the county clerk’s office with letters from around the world demanding that Mackaman be put on the ballot. Mackaman received 1,466 votes in the election, or 3.5 percent.

Supporters of the SEP have received information indicating that the state Democratic Party machine will do its best to exclude third parties from the 2006 ballot as well. This year, rather than using state employees, the Democratic Party is apparently already hiring and training supporters to carry out another challenge.

Supporters of the SEP in Illinois have achieved this goal of 3,000 signatures in the face of huge obstacles, which have been erected by both the Democratic and Republican parties. In order to exercise their First Amendment right to vote for a candidate and party of their choosing, supporters of Joe

Parnarauskis are required by Illinois state law to circulate ballot access petitions. Given that on private property such as retail stores and malls the circulation of petitions is often prohibited, the only place where this activity is protected is on public property such as libraries and post offices.

However, supporters of the SEP were even asked to leave the parking lots of public libraries in both Champaign and Urbana, where they had gathered hundreds of signatures and received a warm response from workers and youth. At both locations, “library policy” rules have been established that directly illegalize the circulation of petitions, and equate constitutionally protected political activity outside the library with loud or obnoxious behavior inside the library.

The Democrats and Republicans on the city board that sets library policy are themselves appointed by the city mayor. SEP supporters pointed out to Urbana library administrator Debra Lissak that the exclusion of ballot access petitioners from the library parking lot was an act of political censorship and was directly in line with the reactionary moves by the Bush administration to monitor library visitors’ Internet usage and ban “controversial” books. Lissak replied that, in her view, petitioning on public property was no more guaranteed than it was on private property and suggested inanely that SEP supporters gather the thousands of signatures required by state law by obtaining permission to petition on the doorsteps of private residences. According to Lissak, constitutional rights have even less weight on public property than they do on private property!

The attorney who represented the SEP in its 2004 ballot access struggle in the area, Andrew Spiegel, wrote letters to the mayors of Champaign and Urbana demanding that the library policy in question be immediately overturned. “The right to vote is one of our most precious rights. The right to petition on public property has been clearly established for decades,” he wrote in a letter to Urbana mayor Laurel Prussing. Spiegel indicated that he considered the ban on petitioning on library property to be “nothing less than an attack on the democratic rights of supporters of third party candidates.”

The hostility of public authorities to the SEP campaign is directly proportional to the level of interest of workers and students in the issues at the forefront of the SEP campaign.

Whenever petitioners have had an opportunity to speak with workers and students in the area, they received a warm response to the party's opposition to the war in Iraq, the attacks on democratic rights and working conditions, and the failure of the two parties to express any of the interests of ordinary people.

A retired worker who stopped to sign the petition outside the Urbana Free Library said she was disgusted with the Democrats. "They asked me to work for them during these elections and I said no. Half of the Democrats voted for this war. They protect the corporations just like the Republicans."

Another worker expressed anger at the Democratic Party's attempt to intimidate and confuse its membership in Champaign. She said that the co-chair of the Democratic Party in Champaign, Al Kline, told his membership that signing third-party ballot access petitions is "selling out your party," suggesting that this was tantamount to support for the Bush administration. Far from it—it is the Democrats who have worked hand in glove with the Bush administration in the "war on terror," the implementation of the Patriot Act and other attacks on democratic rights and the assault on workers' jobs and living standards at home. The more the right-wing policies of the Democrats have repelled their former supporters, the more the Democrats have strove ruthlessly to keep genuine opposition from finding expression in the elections.

Cara, a University of Illinois student, stopped to discuss the campaign with Parnarauskis as he was campaigning in downtown Champaign. She said that she was "searching for an alternative to the Democrats and Republicans" and was concerned about the destruction of the environment by big corporations. She said she was sympathetic to socialism because it placed human needs first.

In the course of campaigning, SEP supporters challenged the anti-immigrant campaign by both parties and their claims that "illegal aliens" were causing the loss of jobs, cuts in social programs and the lowering of wages. When an SEP campaigner explained to a former auto worker that economic insecurity was caused by the corporate elite, not working people from Mexico and other countries, the worker nodded his head in agreement and acknowledged that the scapegoating of immigrants was similar to previous efforts to divide black and white workers in America.

A worker who retired from a General Motors foundry before it closed its doors in the early 1990s added, "The Republicans and Democrats haven't done a nickel's worth of anything for working people. They told us the war was to stop Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and they haven't found anything. This is a war for billionaires—the ones who control the energy industry and other big corporations."

A graduate student from the University of Illinois Spanish Department said, "It's awful the way the government is blaming immigrants. I attended several protests by immigrants in Champaign. I was impressed that people weren't scared to

speak out. These are workers who do the really tough jobs. Big business is taking away jobs and working people are being blamed for it. It's ridiculous."

A postal worker from Danville said the city of 37,000 people had suffered a devastating decline in the last three decades, having lost thousands of jobs to the shutdown of plants by GM, Hyster and other manufacturers. "I can hardly describe to my daughter what the city used to be like. There were factories working overtime, theaters downtown and crowded streets. Now there is nothing but loan companies and temporary job agencies."

A coal miner employed at a non-union Peabody Coal mine said that hundreds of miners had lost their jobs over the years and that only 200 remained. He blamed the lack of safety inspections by the Bush administration for the rash of deaths in the coalfields this year.

The campaign has also generated interest in the local media. On June 10, the *News Gazette*, the local newspaper in Champaign, published an article on the SEP campaign, entitled, "52nd District Senate Race Could Gain a Third Candidate."

"The Socialist Equality Party is opposed to both the Republican and Democratic parties, which it believes are parties of 'the ruling elite and big business,'" the article stated.

The newspaper noted that Parnarauskis's Senate campaign was a continuation of the 2004 campaign to elect Tom Mackaman, and that, in addition to the cities of Champaign and Urbana, Parnarauskis would bring his campaign to Danville and other hard-hit industrial towns in Vermillion County, to "build an independent political party of the working class." The article concluded by providing the Internet address of the *World Socialist Web Site* and noting that the SEP was expecting a fight against a challenge to its petitions just as it did in 2004.

The SEP calls on all workers, students and youth to oppose the undemocratic methods of both big-business parties and join the campaign to place Joe Parnarauskis on the ballot.



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