

# Police threaten Socialist Equality Party petitioners in Illinois

The editorial board  
19 June 2006

With the approach of the June 26 deadline to submit nominating petitions to place Socialist Equality Party candidate Joe Parnarauskis on the ballot for state Senate in Illinois' 52nd District, local authorities have mounted a campaign of obstruction aimed at preventing the SEP from meeting the signature requirement.

In the last week, SEP supporters have been banned from municipal sidewalks outside of public libraries. They were also harassed and threatened by local police while petitioning on a public street near the University of Illinois campus.

Supporters of the Parnarauskis campaign have already collected 3,500 signatures, well above the minimum requirement of 2,985 set by the state of Illinois, but they intend to collect 5,000 by June 26, in order to have an ample margin of safety in anticipation of an effort, especially by the state Democratic Party, to arbitrarily challenge valid signatures of registered voters.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on all readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* and all supporters of democratic rights to e-mail the offices of the mayors of Champaign and Urbana to demand that these violations of First Amendment rights cease, and that the Parnarauskis campaign be allowed to continue its petitioning free of political interference and police intimidation.

Efforts by authorities to hinder the SEP campaign testify to the widespread support it has generated among workers and students, and reflect the political establishment's fear that, should Parnarauskis be placed on the ballot, his candidacy will provide a rallying point for opposition to the war in Iraq and to the attacks on living standards and democratic rights.

Two years ago, Democratic Party functionaries waged an unsuccessful bid to remove SEP candidate

Tom Mackaman from the ballot, after Mackaman had submitted more than enough valid signatures to run for state representative from the Champaign-Urbana district. The challenge of the SEP's petitions, which was based on arbitrary and frivolous objections to the signatures of hundreds of legally registered voters, was orchestrated from the office of the Illinois speaker of the house, Mike Madigan, one of the most powerful Democratic Party power brokers in the state.

The Democrats dropped their challenge after legal action was taken by the SEP and scores of readers of the WSWs e-mailed the Champaign County Clerk's office demanding that Mackaman be placed on the ballot. Mackaman received 1,466 votes in the election, or 3.5 percent.

Now, as the SEP campaign to place Joe Parnarauskis on the ballot gains momentum, local authorities are once again trampling on democratic rights and voting rights laws in an attempt to prevent working people from having the option of voting for a socialist candidate rather than the candidates of the two pro-war parties of big business, the Democrats and Republicans.

Last week, SEP campaigners were ordered off city sidewalks outside of public libraries in both Champaign and Urbana. Library management at both sites offered flimsy and bogus explanations for their repressive actions.

Then, on Saturday evening, June 17, an SEP campaign worker who was circulating petitions on a busy street in the Campustown neighborhood was stopped by a Champaign police officer. The officer demanded the SEP volunteer's driver's license and social security number, and radioed the information, together with a physical description, to police headquarters.

The police officer repeatedly said that if she received

a complaint about the petitioning, she would force the campaign worker to leave. In response to his protestations, she said several times, “Don’t argue with me.”

Meanwhile, the mayors of Champaign and Urbana have failed to respond to a letter sent by SEP attorney Andrew Spiegel that raises the clearly unconstitutional nature of the cities’ actions in banning SEP petitioners from municipal sidewalks outside of libraries. City officials may be seeking to stall for time in order to maintain the ban until after the deadline for third-party petitions has passed.

A WSWs reporter contacted both mayors’ offices on Friday, June 16. According to Urbana Mayor Laurel Prussing, a Democrat, the city’s legal office cannot respond to the SEP’s demand to be allowed to petition outside the library until it has studied “conflicting legal precedents.” Prussing also claimed that her office had no authority over the library, despite the fact that as mayor she is the chief executive officer of the city.

The mayor attempted to avoid any discussion of the profound democratic issues raised by the library officials’ actions. When pressed, Prussing claimed that initially she thought the Parnarauskis campaign “should have the right” to petition outside public libraries, but that she also “understands the library’s position.” Prussing suggested that the SEP could approach local businesses and ask for their permission to petition, or that the campaign could go door-to-door. In other words, in Prussing’s opinion, there is no guaranteed right to petition anywhere on public grounds—at least not for socialists.

When contacted by phone, officials at the office of Champaign Mayor Jerry Schweighart, a Republican, claimed that no definitive decision on the legality of petitioning outside of the library could be reached until next week. One official equated petitioning for third-party candidates—a practice mandated by the state of Illinois and guaranteed by the First Amendment and local, state, and federal elections laws—with panhandling and vending.

The attempt to suppress the SEP campaign in Champaign and Urbana is a continuation of the assault by the two major political parties on the basic democratic rights of working people. If it is not legal to engage in political conversation outside of a public library, or on a city street next to a public university

campus, then freedom of speech and freedom of political expression have no meaning.

While cynically claiming to be defending democracy in Iraq and elsewhere, the two parties and their political representatives are systematically suppressing free speech and political activity within the US.

The effort to obstruct the SEP and keep Joe Parnarauskis off the ballot arises under conditions in which the credibility of the entire political establishment—the two-party system, the media, government at all levels—is eroding. The SEP campaign gives voice to the most pressing needs of the working class—an end to the war in Iraq, a redistribution of wealth from the rich and super-rich to the working people, and the defense and advancement of democratic rights—a political program that is opposed to the policies advanced by both major parties.

We urgently call on readers of the WSWs and all those who defend democratic rights to undertake the broadest and most intensive effort to defend the SEP and its campaign workers in Champaign and Urbana and demand a halt to the illegal actions of local and state authorities. At the same time, we call on our supporters to join the petition drive to complete our goal by June 26.

Send letters of protest to the offices of the mayors of Champaign and Urbana. Champaign Mayor Jerry Schweighart can be e-mailed at [jerryschweighart@ci.champaign.il.us](mailto:jerryschweighart@ci.champaign.il.us). Urbana Mayor Laurel Prussing can be e-mailed at [llprussing@city.urbana.il.us](mailto:llprussing@city.urbana.il.us).

Please send copies of all e-mails to the WSWs.



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**