

More letters protest harassment of SEP petitioners in Illinois

22 June 2006

On June 12, officials from the Urbana Free Library ordered Socialist Equality Party (US) petitioners to leave the front of the library where they were collecting signatures to place SEP candidate Joe Parnarauskis on the ballot for state senate in Illinois' 52nd District. This was part of a campaign of harassment against SEP petitioners that has included a similar ban on petitioning at the Champaign Public Library, and an incident on June 19, in which an SEP campaign worker was threatened by a Champaign police officer while petitioning on a busy street corner near the University of Illinois.

The WSWS calls on our readers to step up their emails to the mayors of Champaign and Urbana demanding that the ban on SEP petitioners at the public libraries be immediately lifted and all threats and harassing actions be halted.

Champaign Mayor Jerry Schweighart can be emailed at jerryschweighart@ci.champaign.il.us. Urbana Mayor Laurel Prussing can be emailed at llprussing@city.urbana.il.us.

Below we reprint some of the letters sent to the mayors' offices so far.

Dear Mr. Schweighart and Ms. Prussing,

This letter is in regards to the supposed legal right of the government to prevent American citizens from requesting signatures for a petition on public property. Specifically, I am referring to your policy of preventing petitioners for Socialist Equality Party candidate Joe Parnarauskis from obtaining signatures on the public grounds surrounding a public library.

It does not take a law degree to realize that something extremely petty, abusive and disrespectful of the American people is going on here. Not to mention the fact that the standpoint you are supporting is blatantly unconstitutional.

The fact that you call on one of the lawyers in your cadre to seek "anything" that even resembles the right of the government to prevent people from petitioning on public grounds, says much about your moral fiber. It is, therefore, not surprising that your lawyer (Deputy City Attorney Trisha Crowley) seeks to equate acquiring signatures for a petition with sales techniques and advertising—what the American election process has descended to.

And this is exactly the situation that the Socialist Equality Party is running against. Hopefully, your constituents will be aware of this. The world certainly is.

Sincerely Yours,

John Russey

American citizen living in Belgium

20 June 2006

I write to express my revulsion at the undemocratic and unprincipled manner your officials have attempted to prevent the Socialist Equality Party from gathering signatures to challenge the two-party system in the coming elections.

Andrew Linder

Toronto, Ontario, Canada

20 June 2006

Dear Mayors Schweighart and Prussing,

Outside my local public library, there are almost always a few petitioners waiting to collect signatures, and to engage citizens in their campaigns of interest. These campaigns may focus on any of a wide variety of environmental and political issues. When I see these petitioners, equipped with their flyers and brochures, sometimes I stop to inquire about their issues; sometimes I do not. But in either case I'm always aware that there's something admirable and important in these petitioners' having and exercising their right to take their issues to the public. Though on a local and modest level, in a very real sense it's democracy in action.

If such activity is a vital element of democracy, then suppression of this activity must be seen as dangerous and antidemocratic. It would of course not be terribly difficult for library or local city officials to contrive one or another pretext, to block these petitioners from exercising their constitutionally protected rights to try to win public support for their views. But were they to do so, it would reflect a decay of democracy; a kind of local-scale defeat of a grand principle.

Now in your area, the Socialist Equality Party is attempting to gain ballot status for Mr. Joe Parnarauskis for the office of state senator in Illinois' 52nd District. With dismay and alarm, I have read that your public library officials have tried to stop SEP petitioners from gathering signatures on library property, portraying their stance as a matter of concern for public health and safety. Furthermore the Champaign Deputy City Attorney Trisha Crowley has claimed that it would take until "the middle of next week" to study the First Amendment aspects of this situation—even while the deadline for submitting petitions is June 26! In other words, city officials want to "study the issue" until it's too late to make any difference!

If I read about such a thing occurring in a foreign country, I'd think to myself, "Well, that's what happens when democratic rights are not seriously respected by local officials. You get shenanigans, pretexts, and transparently absurd excuses offered—and the public winds up being denied potentially valuable alternatives!"

I urge you both to recognize that the main issue here is not, for example, concern for "public health and safety." Rather, it is the constitutionally-protected right of third-party candidates to bring their ideas before the public, without any harassment or impediment from local officials. Please use your power to handle this matter as though democratic rights in your area depended upon it—because they do.

Respectfully yours,
Richard Mynick
Berkeley, California
20 June 2006

Dear Mayor Schweighart and Mayor Prussing,

I am not a little bit shocked and disgusted by your cities' blocking of the SEP in its efforts to obtain signatures in order to advance the candidacy of Socialist Equality Party ("SEP") candidate Joe Parnarauskis on the ballot for state senate in Illinois' 52nd District.

These efforts are blatantly undemocratic and must cease.

Be assured that these occurrences are being closely monitored by many outside of the district, both nationally and globally.

The eyes of the world are upon your cities and we intend to make sure that the right of Mr. Parnarauskis and his representatives toward collection of signatures is honored and not blocked.

Sincerely,
Stu Zimny
Albuquerque, New Mexico
20 June 2006

To Mayors Prussing and Schweighart:

I was profoundly concerned to hear that efforts are being made by the cities of Champaign and Urbana to restrict petition-gathering efforts on the part of third party candidates for state senate, and more specifically, Joe Parnarauskis, the candidate representing the Socialist Equality Party.

If the reports I've heard are true, your offices have expressed uncertainty as to whether or not this restriction is a violation of free speech, or to put it another way, whether or not restricting the ability of an individual to speak freely is really a restriction of free speech!

I seriously doubt that you are even partially ignorant of the various laws surrounding such a fundamental right but that this is part of a larger plot on behalf of the Democratic and Republican establishments to restrict ballot access to third parties, based on the implicit assumption that voters are not intelligent enough to vote for the "right" candidate if given too many choices. If the platforms of your respective parties are indeed valid and compelling, then surely they have nothing to

fear from a third party challenge.

Sincerely,
Dan Conway
Northridge, California
20 June 2006

Dear Mr. Schweighart and Ms. Prussing,

Whether or not you agree with the views of the Socialist Equality Party, it is both undemocratic and unconstitutional to allow the police to disrupt the supporters of a third-party candidate in their attempt to gather signatures of support. It is well within the rights of any third-party candidate to gather signatures, and in a country whose populace is increasingly dissatisfied with the choice of two parties—a choice that to many hardly seems much of a choice at all—not allowing the citizens of Illinois the opportunity to hear an alternative perspective is a dangerous violation of their rights. It is a hugely damaging impediment of social progress to allow only two parties the opportunity to express their views. In the United States Mr. Parnarauskis's supporters have a right to be heard, and I sincerely hope you will intervene on their behalf and that the police will cease their harassment.

Regards,
Kris S. Kincaid
20 June 2006

To Mayor Schweighart,

Today I read that the deputy city attorney of Champaign has affirmed the right of officials of the Champaign Public Library in banning the collecting of signatures for the purpose of placing a candidate on the ballot in Illinois. That candidate to be is Joe Parnarauskis of the Socialist Equality Party or SEP.

The fact that Deputy City Attorney Crowley cited a legal precedent (*The U.S. vs. Kokinda*) in support of the ban that in fact protects the activity of petitioning in the given circumstances says a lot. From the federal government to the local government, the officialdom would seem to think that any flimsy justification of governmental policy is suitable when addressing the so-called electorate.

Suppression of petitioning by the government of the city of Champaign stands in glaring contrast to the democratic traditions of the United States. Irregardless of the basis of these acts by library officials and the office of the City Attorney, please do reconsider what the long-term effects of this suppression of our democratic rights will mean.

Sincerely,
Peter Lehmann
Rockport, Maine
20 June 2006



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact