

Protests mount against harassment of SEP petitioners in Illinois

24 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 city attorneys of both Champaign and Urbana have sent letters to Andrew Spiegel, the attorney for the SEP, upholding the ban on petitioning outside the libraries. This is a direct attack on legal electoral activity and a violation of the First Amendment rights of speech and political expression.

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.

To date, dozens of letters of protest have been sent from across the US and from other countries. The WSWS posted some of these letters on June 20 and June 22. Below we are publishing additional letters that have been forwarded to the WSWS.

I am a political science major at the University of Nevada, Reno, and I am disgusted with your actions towards the SEP and their candidates for office. Democracies are supposed to be free and fair, with open and competitive elections. It is no longer a democracy when the citizens have to choose between two parties that have the same political, economical, and social beliefs.

It is a sad day for American democracy when politicians like you and towns like yours deny third parties any viable chance. How can you say you represent democracy when you place restrictions on it and stab it in the back?

It is bad enough that third parties must collect signatures to be placed on the ballot, while the pro-corporation, war-loving parties are automatically placed on. But denying them access to public areas is a massive violation of what this country is suppose to represent. Give your citizens the right to actively participate in their democracy. Give them the right to choose! Stop banning third parties from the process. What are you so afraid of?

Sincerely,

Renee Park

Reno, Nevada

22 June 2006

Dear Mayors Schweighart and Prussing,

I'm writing to express my disgust with the political suppression in Champaign and Urbana to keep the Socialist Equality Party's candidate Joe Parnarauskis off of the ballot. I'm absolutely appalled and angered by

the antidemocratic measures being taken against the SEP in order to stonewall and suppress their campaign from reaching the signature requirement.

The suppression of the SEP campaign in is a glaringly obvious attack on the democratic rights of working people. Banning the SEP petitioners from municipal sidewalks outside of libraries shows that freedom of speech and political expression, ideas the framers of the Constitution valued and defended with their lives, means nothing to the two major parties in office today—unless, of course, it'll augment their profit. Hopefully these clearly unconstitutional violations of First Amendment rights will cease before the deadline has arrived, lest the constituents wake up to these attacks on democratic rights and take action.

Respectfully yours,

Phillip Gioan

Mercer, Pennsylvania

22 June 2006

Mayor Schweighart and Mayor Prussing:

I wrote two years ago concerning what was to me a major bit of political education: the transparent attempts in your state to prevent Tom Mackaman from legitimately earning a ballot berth from which he could democratically compete for electoral office.

You've done it again.

Your colleagues and functionaries have essentially obliterated the concept of the public sphere—that space where people can come together and dialogue politically. With laws mandating a petition process for ballot access but no legitimate mechanism for actually conducting petitions (at least for those unpopular with those in power) the process ceases to be a hallmark of democracy: it has become a farce.

Jane Jacobs called sidewalks “the main public place of a city”—its “most vital organs.” Oddly enough—the original Constitution's ratification by the states was postponed until the compromise agreement for the addition of the Bill of Rights was added—Jefferson's vision of democratic protections through the rights of public demonstration, singing, and distribution of political pamphlets. When did the states become instead the center of political reaction and the enemies of democracy?

End these preposterous obstructionist political shenanigans. You've made your state and your region's leadership appear as hooligans or worse.

Don Barry, Ph.D.

Dept. of Astronomy,

Cornell University

22 June 2006

To Mayor Schweighart and Mayor Prussing,

I am writing to express my deep disappointment at the actions of your local authority in attempting to prevent supporters of the Socialist Equality Party from petitioning to place candidate Joe Parnarauskis on the ballot for state Senate in the 52nd district. The actions of library staff as well as the police in ordering campaigners away from public property, citing claims of public health and safety, are a gross violation of the

American citizens' right of free speech and pose a grave danger to democracy in your country.

These actions, taken in a country which claims to be the world's greatest democracy, cannot be justified under any circumstance. They resemble a spectacle which would be more associated with a dictatorship or police state, not a democratic society. These violations have not gone unnoticed by both national and international observers and everything will be done by supporters of the American peoples' right to free speech to have this ban lifted.

I urge you to use your powers to lift these draconian measures in your local areas and allow the free discussion of politics and gathering of signatures guaranteed under the Constitution to take place.

Sincerely,

Jordan Smith

Scotland, United Kingdom

22 June 2006

To Mayor Prussing:

June 26th is the deadline for submitting nominating petitions for the candidacy of Joe Parnarauskis. As I understand it, your office has decided to allow the banning of collecting of signatures for that candidacy outside of the Urbana Public Library to remain in effect at least until that deadline.

To my knowledge, library officials did not justifiably ban the collecting of signatures outside of the library, as this was taking place on municipal property (that is, paid for by the public) and the petitioners were not in any way restricting use of the library by the public.

While the vast military might of the United States is being dispatched to the ends of the Earth, ostensibly for the purpose of availing other peoples in exercising their democratic rights, one would expect that our governing officials would be bending over backwards to allow ordinary citizens in the US to express their views and vote according to their beliefs. When grass roots democracy is subverted by those in positions created for the promotion of the public welfare, this tells us that something is rotten in Denmark.

If the United States truly is the shining beacon of democracy in the world, then you should immediately remove the ban on the collecting of signatures for Joe Parnarauskis' candidacy and have anyone seeking to restrict that right arrested.

Sincerely,

Peter Lehmann

Rockport, Maine

22 June 2006

Mayor Jerry Schweighart:

The USA: land of the brave and the free—not quite. Brave SEP members petitioning and gutless coppers giving them a hard time. Why don't you put your brave and free into practice and allow these good people freedom of movement?

Kevin Watkins

Perth, Australia

22 June 2006

Mayor Jerry Schweighart and Mayor Laurel Prussing,

It is with profound dissatisfaction as an American that I read of your antidemocratic actions of late in destroying through a campaign of intimidation the right of Champaign County citizens to petition for the placement of a third party on the ballot for upcoming elections.

It is with even more profound dissatisfaction that I read also that you are purposefully delaying your responses to the Socialist Equality Party's attorney on this illegal issue so as to defeat the petitioners' chance to find 5,000 signatures before the deadline is up. A legal delay of any sort when a deadline is in question amounts to nothing more than an abuse of power: a reliance on the red-tape of bureaucracy to stifle progress. When I read of these actions of yours, I wonder if your constituents are encountering

similar underhanded approaches from your offices in other matters of importance.

I also wonder if perhaps it is because the Socialist Equality Party is offering a socialist alternative to the two-party system that further inflames your reticence to cooperate in an honest and timely manner. Epodunk.com shows that the average income of both the Champaign and Urbana townships are below the national average: this naturally proves that mayors from the major parties have a lot to lose on a socialist alternative.

But socialism, gentlemen, is an old and successful idea, in the state of Illinois particularly, and you would do well to immediately reconsider your course of action in removing petitioners from public properties such as libraries and colleges. You cannot hope to win in your repressive campaign: all you may do is inflame public opinion against you, which I'm sure is the last thing you want.

Already your actions are attracting international attention. I am from the state of Maryland myself, and can vouch for the fact that the news service of the Socialist Equality Party is accessed religiously, every day, not only by members of the selfsame party but by progressives of many different stripes, all across the world. And today the records of your actions were the TOP story. I will also be sending a copy of this letter to the *News-Gazette* in Champaign county.

Sincerely,

Kevin Southern

Newark, Maryland

22 June 2006

Dear Mayor Jerry Schweighart and Mayor Laurel Prussing,

One of the things our country sorely needs is more participation in the voting procedure, and that effort would be greatly helped by having more parties from which to choose ... to hear their platforms and to make informed choices. We have too long been held hostage by the two major parties, neither of which seems to regard our welfare as a priority. Competition makes for better opportunities, as it does in business.

It is repugnant, then, to hear about attempts to stifle our democratic freedoms, especially at a time when we claim to be attempting to spread freedom throughout a sizeable portion of the world. All progress, like charity, begins at home.

Certainly, we, the people, have a right to expect a better example than what has been happening in Champaign-Urbana.

Sincerely,

Cora Spencer

Maine

22 June 2006

I want to tell you that I am outraged—but, sadly, not in the least surprised—that people working to place Socialist Equality Party (SEP) member Joe Parnarauskis on the ballot for the November elections as a candidate for state Senate in the 52nd district have been prevented from collecting signatures for him while standing outside of local public libraries.

The attempts to invoke concerns about "public health and safety" as the reason for suppressing the right of people to engage in petitioning designed to get their preferred candidate on the ballot are a transparent fiction; we all know that, in 2004, state Democratic Party functionaries expended considerable efforts trying to deny SEP candidate Tom Mackaman the right—also earned through the organizing of a petitioning campaign—to appear on the November ballot on your district.

In cases such as these, a little bit of honesty is highly desirable. You will look for any excuse whatsoever to prevent the people of your district from having the opportunity to hear and (formally support through voting) the egalitarian, antiwar and genuinely pro-democratic political program advanced by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP).

Under no circumstances would I deny your right to disagree with the

program advanced by the supporters of this party; however, using the police and the courts to shut down a perfectly legitimate attempt to give the people of your district the opportunity to vote for a party whose core principles differ fundamentally from the militarist, slavishly pro-corporate and more and more authoritarian policy stance endorsed by the Democrats and Republicans alike is emblematic not of the normal workings of a “typical” and “healthy” democratic political system, but rather of the way in which right-wing police-states function.

I demand that you enable the people who are conducting petition drives for Mr. Parnarauskis to go about their business—normal in, and frankly, absolutely vital to the healthy development of a truly democratic political regime—unimpeded and unharassed by the police. Your refusal to do so would instantly expose as totally fraudulent your claims to be truly “democratically-oriented” politicians.

Sincerely,
Ari Weinstein
22 June 2006
Dear Mayors,

How gratifying it must be to yourselves to spread the Illinois names Champaign and Urbana beyond an ocean for the obstacles presented to the SEP in fielding a candidate for election, and in front of a PUBLIC LIBRARY, of all places: they at least had a good name in view of some librarians’ commendable refusal to spy on citizens on behalf of an ever more policing-state.

I look forward to either:

Hearing that these unattractive machinations cease;

Or being able to cite this in particular to citizens of Eastern Europe, where I am soon to go once more, as evidence of the true face of “democracy” in the “land of the free.”

Thank you,
D. Grewal
Coventry, UK
22 June 2006

Sir:

Your attempts to prevent the Socialist Equality Party from petitioning near your public library are most distressing to me. This threatens the greatest achievement of American democracy, the Bill of Rights. As an Illinois citizen, I am reminded of Illinois’ greatest son, Abraham Lincoln. He was the standard bearer of a new party at the time he ran for president, the Republican Party. It is shameful that you are trying to prevent the voters from having a socialist choice in the upcoming election. Of what are you so afraid?

Sincerely,
V.S.D.
Illinois, USA
21 June 2006



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact