

SEP reaches halfway point in Michigan petition campaign

Our correspondent

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With a big push over the Memorial Day weekend, supporters of the Socialist Equality Party in Michigan last week collected more than 1,000 signatures to place SEP candidate Jerome White on the ballot for US Congress in the state's 12th Congressional District. In all, SEP campaigners have now collected 2,600 signatures. The party intends to submit at least 5,000 signatures of registered voters by July 20, well above 3,000 signatures required by the state, to place White on the ballot against Sander Levin, the 12-term Democratic incumbent.

During the past week dozens of SEP members and supporters petitioned at community colleges, public events, and shopping centers in the working-class suburbs north of Detroit, including Southfield, Hazel Park, Ferndale, Oak Park and St. Clair Shores. Throughout these areas campaigners encountered popular anger against the war in Iraq and a deep resentment and hostility not only towards the Bush administration, but towards official politics in general.

The campaign has struck a chord among working people whose needs and aspirations are routinely ignored by Democratic and Republican politicians, who defend the interests of big business. Many signing the petition cited a need for more political parties on the ballot. Still others expressed more explicit support for the socialist alternative being presented by the SEP. In particular, we received a strong response to our call for the immediate withdrawal of US troops from Iraq and the reorganization of economic life on the basis of human need, not profit.

This response was particularly noteworthy in Hazel Park, a small city of 18,000 people located just across the Eight Mile Road border with Detroit, in Oakland County. The area is home to many people descended from Appalachian workers who migrated to the Motor City to find jobs in the auto industry and escape the Depression-like conditions that existed in the West Virginia and Kentucky coalfields during the 1950s. While workers in this area participated in many militant union struggles, politically they have long been susceptible to the nationalism promoted by the Democratic Party and, above all, the United Auto Workers union, both of which have opposed the influence of socialism among industrial workers. Patriotic illusions, combined with fewer and fewer economic

opportunities, have led many young people in Hazel Park, like so many other industrial small towns across America, to join the military in disproportionate numbers and fight in wars from Vietnam to Iraq.

While many American flags continue to hang above doorways in Hazel Park, the bitter experiences of the last three years have severely undermined the support for the war in Iraq. According to recent polls, nearly 70 percent of the population of Michigan disapproves of the way the Bush administration is handling the situation in Iraq, up from 58 percent in 2003. In areas like Hazel Park, where until recently families with military connections could not bring themselves to believe that the US government would use their sons and daughters to advance their own material interests, the realization that the war was launched on the basis of lies has had an all the more explosive impact.

One young man who signed the SEP petition reported that his neighbor had lost a son in Iraq and had then placed a ribbon around a tree that read, "President Bush killed my son." In many cases those who had relatives and friends in Iraq immediately signed the SEP petition, saying their loved ones were being put in harm's way for "nothing," or to only benefit the executives of Halliburton and other well-connected oil companies. There was also widespread acknowledgement that the Democrats were supporting the war and, after discussion with SEP campaigners, an agreement that this was because the Democrats defended the same corporate interests as the Republicans.

The case of one young man from Hazel Park who was recently killed in Iraq highlights the economic situation facing many families in this area. In November 2005, John Dearing, a 21-year-old Army National Guardsman, was killed when his vehicle was struck by an improvised explosive in Habbaniyah, Iraq. Dearing died instantly, while four other servicemen survived with severe burns.

Dearing, who grew up in the impoverished northern Michigan town of Oscoda before moving to Hazel Park in 2004, volunteered for deployment in Iraq after graduating high school and getting married. According to his young widow, Dearing's body was covered with 14 tattoos, most with patriotic themes. According to the local newspaper, the young man's father tried

to convince him to stay home and was angered that his only son had volunteered and was killed. “I wanted to keep him home,” the father said, “The world lost a perfect kid.” Recently laid off from a furniture store and unable to pay the \$7,000 to erect a monument at city hall to honor his son, Dearing’s father organized a fundraiser over the Memorial Day weekend to build a four-foot bronze statue.

The anger expressed against the war encountered by SEP petitioners went hand in hand with outrage over the worsening social conditions in the district. One retired General Motors auto worker, for example, told a campaigner that the mass layoffs and wage-cutting being conducted by corporations like auto parts maker Delphi meant that younger workers would never attain the wages and living standards that he and other workers of his generation had achieved. Another worker pointed to his daughter, saying with disgust that although she was about to graduate from college, there were no decent jobs available for her.

An article in the *Detroit Free Press* last week highlighted the economic distress that pervades in the district. It noted that a statewide telephone survey of 800 Michigan households, conducted May 1-8, found that 29 percent of Michigan families identified rising utility bills as a “major problem,” with 24 percent of respondents saying they were on some kind of payment plan with their utility company and another 15 percent saying that they had borrowed money this year to pay their energy bills. On the basis of interviews with families from Eastpointe and other towns in the 12th Congressional District, the article noted that despite a relatively mild winter, households saw the costs of natural gas jump as much as 59 percent over the previous year; many families, including those suffering layoffs, have to pay a winter bill of over \$1,200. More than half of those who sought assistance in paying their utility bills last winter were turned away.

The SEP campaign in Michigan has already encountered deep anger within the working class towards the two-party system and the profit system that it defends. This is precisely why the political machines of both parties do everything they can to prevent third-party candidates, and in particular socialists, from gaining ballot access. Not only do the authorities impose arbitrary and burdensome signature requirements, they create conditions that make it almost impossible to gather enough signatures to meet these demands.

It is well known, for example, that public spaces where large numbers of people congregate, such as downtown areas or workplaces with public access, are virtually nonexistent in Michigan and other states. The privately-owned mall or shopping center, dominated by retail giants like Wal-Mart, are the new “town centers.” The owners of these areas, however, prohibit petition gathering or any other expression of constitutionally-protected political activity. The US Supreme Court has repeatedly upheld rulings that in these places, private property trumps free speech and freedom of association.

SEP campaigners have repeatedly been asked to leave retail areas where thousands of potential petition signers congregate. In many cases a store manager presents us with a Catch 22: “You have to get permission from company headquarters to petition.” When asked whom one should call to get permission, the manager invariably responds, “The company’s policy is not to give permission.”

In addition to the obstacles at privately-owned retail areas, in the past two weeks officials at two publicly funded community colleges in Macomb County and Oakland County attempted to remove SEP campaigners from the campuses. These officials simply claimed that petitioning was not allowed on the premises. On top of this, police in Hazel Park, citing complaints—apparently made by a Hazel Park city councilman himself—asked campaigners to leave a public park, delivering the novel justification that the entire park had been leased to a private amusement company running a carnival.

Once the SEP threatened to take legal action to protect the rights of its members and supporters, officials in all three cases backed down and acknowledged that no restrictions on petitioning in public locations existed. Nevertheless, the authorities have deliberately disrupted our efforts and there is no doubt that we will continue to face such challenges in the future. The SEP also knows from experience in previous campaigns that state authorities do everything in their power to deny us access to the ballot even after we have gathered more than the requisite number of signatures, usually by means of arbitrarily declaring a substantial percentage of the signatures “invalid.”

These undemocratic efforts are underscore the fear felt by both parties that an interest is growing within the working class for a socialist alternative to the two big business parties. Despite the obstacles, the SEP intends to intensify its efforts to reach workers and young people and we urge our supporters to join this important political campaign.

To participate in the SEP election campaign, click here.



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