

SEP California campaign holds meetings as petitioning enters final month

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The Socialist Equality Party (US) held two public meetings—on Thursday, July 13, in South Pasadena and Monday, July 18, in Altadena—as the petitioning drive to put John Burton on the ballot for California’s 29th Congressional District entered its final month. Supporters of the SEP also organized a staged reading of a play as part of a fundraising drive for the party’s campaign.

At the two meetings, Burton explained the basis of his campaign to workers and young people in the area and appealed for support in overcoming the extremely anti-democratic ballot access laws in California. Petitioners have gathered well over 5,000 signatures from residents of the district so far, and aim to gather at least 4,500 more signatures in the final weeks in order to surpass the 8,442 signatures required by the state.

The meeting in South Pasadena on Thursday was also addressed by David North, national secretary of the SEP and chairman of the editorial board of the *World Socialist Web Site*. At both meetings, many of those in attendance volunteered to circulate petitions and contributed funds to the SEP campaign.

In his remarks, North highlighted the extreme state of decay of democracy in the United States, pointing in particular to a recent decision of the Supreme Court overturning the military commissions set up by the Bush administration to try prisoners held at Guantánamo Bay. In that case, four of the justices took a position that amounts to a legal justification for presidential dictatorship.

North noted that the argument of the Bush administration—supported by the three justices who dissented in the case, as well as Chief Justice John Roberts, who did not vote because it was his earlier decision while on a lower court that was being appealed—is that anyone “can be picked up, tried and executed at the will of the president, who also has the power to determine the method of execution.” Democratic forms of rule, North said, are “hanging by a thread,” noting that one of the justices who ruled against the administration, John Paul Stevens, is 86 years old.

To illustrate the profoundly antidemocratic character of the ruling, North cited a ruling of the Supreme Court 140 years ago in *Ex parte Milligan*. In that case, the Supreme Court overruled a military trial and death penalty decision made against a

supporter of the South who was captured in a Northern state during the American Civil War. In essence, the Court ruled that military tribunals were not lawful under conditions in which civilian courts still operated.

In rejecting the argument that a state of war invested in the president extraordinary powers, the Court wrote, “This nation, as experience has proved, cannot always remain at peace, and has no right to expect that it will always have wise and humane rulers, sincerely attached to the principles of the Constitution. Wicked men, ambitious of power, with hatred of liberty and contempt of law, may fill the place once occupied by Washington and Lincoln; and if this right is conceded, and the calamities of war again befall us, the dangers to human liberty are frightful to contemplate. If our fathers had failed to provide for just such a contingency, they would have been false to the trust reposed in them. They knew—the history of the world told them—the nation they were founding, be its existence short or long, would be involved in war; how often or how long continued, human foresight could not tell; and that unlimited power, wherever lodged at such a time, was especially hazardous to freemen.”

“How is it possible, 140 years after *Milligan*,” North asked, “that there has been such an erosion of democratic consciousness? The fascistic arguments of Supreme Court Justices Thomas and Scalia must have more profound social roots,” he said. “The extreme concentration of wealth in the United States is incompatible with democratic rights. Those who have this wealth are determined to keep it and will stop at nothing to this end, even if it means the complete abrogation of the Constitution.”

In his remarks at both meetings, John Burton addressed the basic issues that the SEP is seeking to raise in his campaign and nationally: opposition to US militarism and the occupation of Iraq; opposition to the attacks on democratic rights; and the fight for social equality. He argued that only through the campaign of the SEP—through the struggle to build an independent party of the working class based on a socialist perspective—could a solution to the present crisis be found.

Burton noted that many people the SEP has encountered while petitioning support the basic positions that the party has made central in its campaign. However, many also question

why opposition to the Bush administration should not be channeled behind the Democratic Party, the nominal opposition.

In responding to this position, Burton noted that the Democratic Party fights with far more vigor against challenges from the left than it does against the Republican Party. The SEP has had to repeatedly fight against attempts by the Democrats to keep SEP candidates off the ballot, particularly in Illinois, where Democrats have launched a bad faith effort to keep SEP candidate for State Senate Joe Parnarauskis from achieving ballot status.

“There is a reason for this,” Burton noted. “The Democrats stand first and foremost as defenders of the current political set-up, which is directly responsible for launching the most brutal wars of aggression since the end of World War II, installing reactionary judges in our judicial system who are systematically shredding our constitutional liberties, and presiding over unprecedented concentrations of wealth, exceeding even those of the gilded age.”

Because the Democratic Party defends the social system at the root of war, social inequality and the attacks on democratic rights, it has repeatedly helped facilitate the policies of the Bush administration, which express the policies of the ruling oligarchy in the United States, Burton said.

At both meetings, the opening presentations were followed by an extensive period of discussion. At the South Pasadena meeting, one person in attendance agreed with the presentation, but asked what gave the SEP hope that the assault on democratic rights could be reversed and a new society created.

In response, North said that there “are no guaranteed happy endings in history. Mankind made it through the twentieth century by the skin of its teeth,” he noted, “and the danger of the present situation is extreme.” Hope came from the fact that “contained within the problem is also its solution. There has been a colossal development of the productive forces and international integration of human society,” he said, “but this development occurs within a social form that subordinates everything to the accumulation of profit and private wealth.”

The development of human productivity provides the possibility for a new social organization, in which production is organized rationally, on an international basis, and in the interests of human need rather than private profit. “We know from history that similar types of conflicts have existed in the past and have been overcome,” North said, pointing in particular to the existence of slavery in the United States. During the 1850s, it must have appeared hopeless to abolitionists that the institution of slavery could be eliminated, he said, but within a decade it had been completely overturned.

At the meeting in Altadena, discussion centered for some time on the question of immigration. In response to questions about the SEP’s positions, Burton repeated the party’s call for full rights for all immigrants and the building of a united movement of workers of all nationalities on the basis of their

common class interests. (See “SEP Candidate in California: Extend full rights to all immigrants!”)

On July 13, screenwriter and playwright Robert Litz presented a dramatic reading of his play, *The Rachel Variant*, in benefit of Burton’s campaign. Actors and SEP supporters Adriano Gonzalez and Raoul Rizik performed the play’s two roles. The dramatic reading took place at the home of Naomi Greene in Beverly Hills, and was received with enthusiasm by the audience, largely composed of actors, directors and producers.

The play deals with the confrontation between a government assassin and a microbiologist, now retired, suspected of having unleashed the anthrax attacks in the United States five years ago. While the play builds as the characters spar toward the end, the ethics and danger of biological war become the central themes.

The audience stayed after the play to hear Burton speak on the world political situation and the SEP’s perspective. The audience received Burton’s speech with enthusiasm and asked a series of questions that maintained people at the event until almost midnight. Close to \$400 was raised to help with the finances of Burton’s campaign.

In reaction to the event, Litz said, “Political fundraising in Hollywood has become the stuff of right-wing scorn, almost a punch line in the barbed sparring that passes for political debate of late. The Democrats and Republicans usually throw big parties to tease money from the pockets of the rich and famous and from those addicted to career networking. This event, even though it was hosted in Beverly Hills, had a completely different spirit. It introduced a number of politically astute theatre and film artists to the SEP and to John Burton.”

The SEP appeals for all residents of the area to help during the final period of the campaign to get Burton on the ballot.

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