

At the footsteps of historic Lincoln Hall

University of Illinois workers protest Democratic Governor Blagojevich

Tom Mackaman
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On Friday at noon, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign workers represented by American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Local 698 staged a protest aimed to coincide with a press conference planned by university administration and the office the Democratic Governor of Illinois, Rod Blagojevich, in front of the university's historic Lincoln Hall. The subject of the press conference was an announcement by the governor's office that \$3 million had been allocated to begin reparations on the decaying building.

In response to questions from reporters, University President Joseph White confessed that the money allocated barely begins to address Lincoln Hall's—let alone the campus's—desperate needs for infrastructure repair, comparing the \$3 million to the down payment a couple might make on a house. He further admitted that the state of Illinois has not offered adequate funds, and that a significant share of the money will be acquired through increases in student fees and tuition—some of which has already been levied through a mandatory “new infrastructure assessment fee” imposed on university undergraduates.

The union workers, who are now without a contract, expected the governor to be present. Though a podium placed between United States and Illinois flags stood ready, the governor did not attend.

The union represents library staff, nurses, agricultural workers and a bevy of other jobs at the university. Even though the workers have not seen a raise since 2004—even as the cost of living increases rapidly—the University of Illinois is demanding that the workers' accept a 2 percent pay increase next year, followed by increases of 1.5 percent over the next two years. Coupled with the preceding two-year pay freeze and inflation, the offer amounts to a de facto pay cut. The university claims that

it has no money, and in order to meet its operating costs it must impose pay cuts on its workers.

Approximately 100 workers picketed the sidewalk that faces outward from Lincoln Hall onto the university's quad just in front of the podium, and chanted, “What do we want? Contract!” and “No contract, no work!” In angry reference to the Democratic governor, picketers chanted, “We voted him in, he won't come out!” Shouts of “traitor!” could be heard from the crowd.

Referring to the newfound money for Lincoln Hall reparations, the workers also chanted, “Thank us, it's our pensions.” The chant referred to the looting of the state pension fund sponsored by Blagojevich and the Illinois Democratic Party in 2005. The money—which had been contractually allocated to the state employees' retirement benefits—was “diverted” in order to meet Illinois' budget shortfall, and at the same time maintain the Democratic Party's promise of “no new taxes” to the state's wealthy elite.

The Democratic Party controls both houses of the Illinois legislature as well as the governor's mansion. Largely under their watch, the University of Illinois has seen a steep decline in state funding, adjusted for inflation, over the past five years.

At the same time it betrays the hopes of workers, such as Friday's AFSCME picketers, and imposes new tuition and fees on university students, the Illinois Democratic Party is simultaneously attempting to remove Joe Parnaruskis, the Socialist Equality Party candidate for state Senate in Champaign and Vermillion Counties, from the ballot by disqualifying the signatures of scores of legally registered voters. Parnaruskis's supporters gathered nearly 5,000 signatures, far more than the 2,985 required by the already restrictive electoral laws of the state of Illinois.

The anger of the AFSCME workers toward the Democratic Party demonstrates why the Democrats feel compelled to remove Parnarauskis from the ballot, using illegal and bad-faith methods. Parnarauskis and the Socialist Equality Party campaign reject the lie that there is simply not enough money for working people to expect decent pay, health care, and a secure retirement. The claims that there is not enough money to maintain historic buildings such as Lincoln Hall is equally dishonest.

The two major parties have overseen the attack on the living standards of Illinois' working people, the crumbling of the state's infrastructure, and the rapid increase in tuition and fees that is pricing middle and working class families out of higher education. Their policies of fiscal austerity—expressed in the Illinois Democrats' proud motto of “no new taxes”—result from the ruthless profit drive of the state's and nation's wealthy elite, who control both the Democratic and Republican parties.

This reporter intervened at the rally, distributing copies of the *World Socialist Web Site* statement “Stop the Democratic Party's attack on third-party campaigns! Place SEP candidate Joe Parnarauskis on the ballot in Illinois!” (<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2006/jul2006/illi-j06.shtml>).

Commenting on the AFSCME rally, Joe Parnarauskis said, “I reject the claims advanced by the university administration and the state Democratic Party that there is simply not enough money. There is plenty of money, and it is being looted from working people and public funding in order to line the pockets of the state's and nation's growing number of billionaires and to fund the criminal war to colonize Iraq.

“It is not the case that Illinois can no longer afford its workers. Instead, Illinois workers can no longer afford the rich.”

“Our campaign gives voice to the most pressing needs of workers in Illinois and all over the world, above all else putting an end to the war in Iraq and the looting of public wealth by an oligarchy of billionaires. This is why Democratic Party functionaries, directed by the offices of Mike Madigan and Emil Jones and assisted by employees of the Illinois Senate, are attempting to remove the Socialist Equality Party from the ballot.”

University president Joseph White, who is compensated to the tune of \$600,000 annually, approached union representatives just prior to the press conference, and was able to convince them to disband the picket line with vague promises of “good faith” collective bargaining in

the future. The press conference announcing plans to renovate Lincoln Hall then proceeded. Among the speakers was Democratic state representative Naomi Jakobsson, who stood as an incumbent against the Socialist Equality Party campaign of Tom Mackaman in 2004, when the Democratic Party tried and failed to disqualify the signatures of hundreds of legally-registered voters.

With the exception of Jakobsson, the speakers stressed the historic importance of Abraham Lincoln, whose memory the building was meant to commemorate when it was dedicated in 1911.

The irony of highly-paid university officials and representatives of the Democratic Party claiming to defend Lincoln's historical legacy should be lost on no one. After all it was Lincoln who was the standard-bearer of the old Republican Party, the last party to successfully upset the prevailing two-party system, a political sea-change that presaged the Civil War.

Quotes from Lincoln—who practiced law in Champaign County—are inscribed all around the building. Among them can be read, “Free labor insists on universal education,” and “I believe the declaration that all men are created equal is the great fundamental principle upon which our free institutions rest.”

Nearly two centuries after the Great Emancipator's birth, a financial oligarchy has come to dominate American life. Through its two political parties it acts with impunity to impose wage cuts and pension reductions on working people, and raises tuition to such heights that “universal education” has become an impossible dream for growing numbers of youth. It has sent hundreds of thousands of American youth to fight, kill, and be killed or maimed in an imperialist war of plunder.

In order to protect the oligarchy's political monopoly and prevent workers from building their own party to fight these policies, the Democratic Party is attempting to remove the Socialist Equality Party and Joe Parnarauskis from the ballot.

We ask that workers and students continue to continue to send letters of protest to the State Board of Elections at webmaster@elections.state.il.us.



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