

SEP campaign in California turns in remaining signatures for ballot status

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On Friday, John Burton, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) candidate for US Congress in California's 29th District, turned in the last of the signatures gathered to place him on the ballot as an independent candidate. August 11 was the deadline for submitting the 8,442 signatures required to gain ballot status.

Burton handed in 466 petition sheets with approximately 4,500 signatures. Including the signatures already submitted in July—816 sheets with 7,587 signatures—supporters of the SEP gathered a total of more than 12,000 signatures during the 15-week period that began on April 28.

"The number of signatures our campaign has been able to gather under difficult circumstances is truly extraordinary," Burton said. "I would like to thank the individuals who dedicated so much time to petitioning and aiding the campaign in other ways."

The thousands of signatures demonstrate the enormous discontent for government policy within broad sections of the population. Signers responded particularly strongly to the SEP's call for an immediate end to the US occupation of Iraq and, during the final weeks of the campaign, to the SEP's opposition to the US-Israeli assault on Lebanon.

Burton said that it is particularly noteworthy that each signer received a leaflet with the slogan "Put a socialist candidate on the ballot." Burton added, "We did not run simply on the basis of opposition to the occupation of Iraq, but explained that opposition to war can succeed only as part of a broader movement against the social system that created it. Throughout the campaign, we fought to explain that the only way forward is through a break with the Democratic Party and the building of a independent party of the working class, based on a socialist perspective."

The campaign highlighted the complicity of the

Democratic Party in supporting the occupation of Iraq, the attack on democratic rights and the growth of social inequality. The position of the Democrats is clearly expressed in the actions of the incumbent in the 29th District, Adam Schiff, who was a co-author of the Patriot Act and played a critical role in passing the October 2002 authorization to use military force against Iraq.

In gathering signatures, SEP supporters spoke to tens of thousands of people and distributed close to 100,000 leaflets in English and Spanish. By the end of the campaign, many residents had met and spoken to petitioners multiple times, and expressed strong support for the SEP campaign. Some helped to gather signatures themselves.

The effort to place Burton's name on the ballot as an independent candidate is not over. On Tuesday, the campaign received notification by Los Angeles County Registrar's Office that of the nearly 7,600 signatures turned in by July 25, only 4,001 were determined valid. According to the registrar's office, some who signed were registered to vote in a different congressional district, while others were determined to be "not registered," including names that were illegible. Several hundred were invalidated because the signers were registered to vote in the district, but put down an address that differed from the address on file.

The SEP expects that the final figure of valid signatures given by the LA County Registrar's Office may be fewer than the 8,442 signatures required. In this event, the campaign will seek to recover as many signatures as possible through independent checks of those ruled invalid.

In addition to giving expression to the enormous opposition that exists within the United States to the policies of the political establishment, the SEP

campaign also directly confronted the various mechanisms set up in an attempt to ensure that this opposition does not find expression through the election process. The hurdles put in place to prevent independent or third-party candidates from achieving ballot status are particularly onerous in California.

“The two parties of big business have erected a fortress—the ballot access laws—to protect their political monopoly,” candidate Burton stated. “Even calling them ballot access laws is misleading, since they are designed not to provide access, but to block it.” Prima facie evidence for this, Burton noted, is the fact that in the past 30 years only two independent candidates have qualified for ballot status in Los Angeles County. One of these was a representative of the Workers League, the predecessor of the SEP.

The number of signatures required for independent candidates in California is among the highest in the country. In almost every state in the country, the number of signatures gathered by the SEP in California would easily exceed the number required to get ballot status. This is true even for many states with very restrictive ballot laws.

The districts of Los Angeles County are highly gerrymandered, having been carved up to ensure “safe seats” for one or the other of the two big-business parties. As a result, communities are split up and boundaries are highly irregular, making petitioning for signatures within a particular congressional district much more difficult. For this reason, many individuals who signed the SEP petition are registered to vote outside of the district.

The requirement that signers put down the address at which they are registered to vote is another burden. The requirement has the effect of discriminating against students, poorer workers and others who move frequently.

In Los Angeles, one of the most significant barriers is the fact that a very high proportion of potential residents could not sign the petition because they are not US citizens and therefore cannot vote. The SEP campaign has made the demand for full rights for all immigrants one of its central issues.

Whatever the results of the ballot fight, the SEP plans on waging an aggressive campaign during the coming months to present its perspective to residents in the district and throughout Southern California. “Through

this petition drive,” Burton said, “we have made enormous strides. We have laid the foundations for the development of a genuinely independent and socialist political movement in this area, which will form an important component of the SEP’s campaign on a national and international level.”

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