

A travesty of democracy

SEP campaign in Illinois proceeds to records examination

Tom Mackaman
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On Monday, University of Illinois Students for Social Equality sponsored a press conference at the Illini Union for Joe Parnaruskis, Socialist Equality Party candidate for state senate in Illinois' 52nd District, in Champaign-Urbana.

The press conference was called to draw attention to the upcoming records examination, the latest stage in the ongoing effort of the Illinois Democratic Party to bar the SEP from the ballot. This process, which will begin at the election board's offices in Springfield on Tuesday, will require comparing the signatures and addresses of thousands of voters who signed SEP petitions to place Parnaruskis on the ballot to voter registration data maintained by the Illinois State Board of Elections.

Even though Parnaruskis and his supporters gathered nearly 5,000 signatures—far more than the 2,985 required—hundreds of these signatures were frivolously objected to by Democratic Party functionaries in an effort to remove the SEP from the ballot and force it into a long and costly struggle before the State Board of Elections.

Sarah Redd-Ilyes, a retired teacher, whose name was struck from the SEP petitions, issued a statement condemning the attempt to remove her name from the ballot. "I am a legally registered voter in Champaign but my name has been struck from the petition for the Socialist Equality Party candidate Joe Parnaruskis' nominating petition. There is no valid reason for this and I want it reinstated.

"It is my right as a legally registered voter to sign such a petition. This right should not be denied any citizen. The two-party system may be convenient for the Democratic and Republican parties, but these do not always fairly represent the voters. Other options are legal and should not be illegally stopped."

In his remarks, Parnaruskis indicted the Democratic Party's actions as symptomatic of a political system that can brook no real opposition.

"This week the names and addresses of thousands of citizens from Champaign and Vermilion counties who signed our petitions will be put under a legal microscope because they dared to say there should be another choice on the ballot besides the Democrats and Republicans. We have already proven that the Democrats objected to the signatures of hundreds of perfectly legitimate voters.

"In the coming days the names and addresses of these citizens will be scrutinized by high-paid Democratic Party attorneys who have all suggested that thousands of signers may have presented false information on legal petitions or even forged their names. In addition to their immediate effort to exclude us from the ballot, such methods are aimed at having a chilling effect on voters to make them think twice before signing a petition for a third party candidate in the future.

This is the real state of American democracy in 2006.

"The objection by the Democratic Party has nothing to do with seeking out the truth. It is a politically motivated effort to bar me from the ballot and silence the mass opposition to the war, the attack on democratic rights and the unrelenting assault on the jobs and living standards of working people.

"We are very familiar with the unscrupulous methods used by state Democrats against third party candidates because we defeated a similar attempt to prevent our state legislative candidate, Tom Mackaman, from attaining ballot status in 2004. That same year, the Illinois Democratic Party also conducted a dirty tricks operation against independent presidential candidate Ralph Nader to keep him off the ballot. A month-long legal and political fight forced the Democrats to drop their bad-faith challenge against perfectly legitimate voters who had signed Mackaman's petitions. Champaign County Clerk Mark Shelden later denounced the 2004 challenge as a 'purely harassment objection' and said he would have awarded Mackaman attorney's fees if there had been a legal provision to do so.

"The Green Party is also being subjected to a Democratic Party effort to exclude its statewide slate of candidates, including its gubernatorial candidate Rich Whitney, from the ballot. Michael Kasper, the general counsel and treasurer of the Illinois Democratic Party, has personally directed the effort to exclude the SEP and the Greens from the ballot. Kasper can only be described as a political thug with a law practice, who has repeatedly demonstrated his contempt for the democratic rights of third party candidates and Illinois voters.

"A partner in a leading Chicago law firm and the former attorney of Illinois House Speaker Michael J. Madigan—one of the most powerful Democratic machine politicians in the state—Kasper has developed an expertise in using the basest means to exclude any third party challenges to the Democrats and Republicans. He led the legal effort to bar independent presidential candidate Ralph Nader from the Illinois ballot in 2004. Notwithstanding such antidemocratic activities, Kasper teaches courses on Voting Rights and on Elections and the Legislative Process at the John Marshall Law School.

"Representing the two Democratic operatives who filed this objection is Courtney Nottage, an attorney from Kasper's law firm and the former chief of staff of Illinois Senate President Emil Jones, the second most powerful state Democrat.

"These people are involved in a high-level conspiracy to violate the rights of the people of Illinois and deprive them of the right to vote for a candidate of their choice.

“This challenge transcends the 52nd Legislative District because it reveals the real state of democracy in America. While the US claims to be bringing democracy to Iraq and other countries, by any objective standard one cannot say that there is a democracy here.

“The measure of a democracy is the way it treats those who are not in power, not those who control all levels of state authority. With restrictive ballot access laws and a hundred other means of stifling dissenting voices, Democrats and Republicans keep political debate to the lowest possible level and safely within the channels of what is acceptable and beneficial to American’s financial and ruling elite.

“Elections are supposed to be about putting diverse programs before the people and letting them decide which ideas serve them best. In America—a country of 300 million people with the most diverse social, regional and political interests—there are just two political parties that, at best, have the most minor differences. They are both financed by corporate America and both do its bidding. Far from encouraging a discussion on the most pressing needs of working people—peace, economic security, health care and education—both parties single-mindedly pursue policies that serve the narrowest segment of society—the multimillionaires and billionaires that make up the richest one percent of the population.”

Parnaruskis challenged the news media to provide coverage of the flagrant abuse of democratic rights about to take place in Springfield, and promised that the SEP campaign would continue to educate working people on the real state of democracy in America.

“I am here today to call on the people of Illinois to set in motion a political movement against this thoroughly undemocratic structure to disenfranchise tens of millions of working people. These restrictive ballot access laws must be repealed and the political playing field opened up to all parties. I am urging the news media to carry out its responsibility to the people of this state by going down to Springfield to expose this travesty of democracy. No longer should the two parties have the ability to conspire behind close doors against the rights of voters in this state.”

Representing the Green Party was Joe Futrelle, candidate for county board in Champaign County. Futrelle has been involved in the records examination for the statewide slate of the Green Party currently taking place in Springfield, where he has witnessed some of the Democratic Party’s methods first hand.

“When you check all the signatures,” Futrelle said, “you see very quickly how random the Democrats’ objections are. They objected to our candidates’ signatures. They objected to our petitioners’ signatures. They objected to the signatures of sitting city council members.... They didn’t have any real claim that there was something wrong with any of these signatures; they just had a certain percentage they had figured they needed to object to, and they objected to that many—never mind which ones.”

Futrelle himself signed the SEP’s nominating petitions—and the Democrats objected to his signature. “When I signed Joe’s petition I was already running for county board, I’d lived and been registered at my current address since 1998 and I’ve voted in every election that I’ve lived here. But it doesn’t surprise me that the Democrats have challenged my signature on Joe’s petition, because I’m a Green, and the Democrats are doing this to us, too.”

SEP examiners have already uncovered hundreds of cases of blatantly false objections by the Democratic Party. In the records examination, the SEP will fight to defend these voters. SEP supporters have contacted a number of these signers to let them know what is taking place. The response from local voters has been one of outrage.

An SEP supporter read statements from legally registered voters whom the Democratic Party has attempted to disqualify. Jen Guiliano, a University of Illinois graduate student, said, “As a tax-paying citizen and registered voter in Champaign County, I am dismayed by efforts to disqualify my participation in the vital process of democratic elections in the State of Illinois. No matter our political affiliation, it is our right and obligation as citizens to fully participate in open and free democratic elections. This is the cornerstone of American democracy.... I would ask that the Illinois Democratic Party explain to me, and the 2,536 others, exactly why our signatures have been challenged.”

Al Weiss, a university employee, said, “I am appalled that my name has been struck from the petition to place Socialist Equality Party candidate Joe Parnaruskis on the ballot. Having been registered at my current address for more than three years and having been a regular at the polls, there is no excuse for my name to have been removed from the petition. I am more disturbed by the Democratic Party operatives who have contempt for the most basic constitutional freedoms. Without the right to run for office, the right to vote is meaningless. By trying to block third party candidates from running for office, the Democratic Party is attacking the very basis of representative democracy—the right to vote for the candidate of your choice.”

Michele O’Brien, a teacher, wrote, “I spoke with the Illinois state Democratic Party folks and they could give me no concrete answer for the challenge to my signature and my right to participate in the democratic process ... funny, considering the name of the party should remind them of such things. Politics as usual.”

The local media, which has covered previous SEP press conferences well, was represented only by a reporter for the local daily, the *News-Gazette*. That the local media has joined the major outlets of Chicago and Springfield in the media blackout of the mounting violations against the right to vote demonstrates a dawning awareness that the issue is potentially explosive. By its silence, the media is complicit in the behind-the-scenes attempt to obstruct the 2006 election in Illinois.

Working people will be outraged and radicalized when they discover that their most basic rights—including the right to vote—have been subject to an ongoing attack by the financial oligarchy, operating through its two political parties.

The SEP and the *World Socialist Web Site* vow to expose these abuses before the widest international audience possible, to draw out the crucial historical lessons for working people, and to mobilize the working class in defense of the Parnaruskis campaign and the right to vote.

The SEP and the *World Socialist Web Site* call on all supporters and readers to donate to the SEP election fund to defray the costs of this struggle (Make a donation today!), and to continue to write letters of protest to the Illinois State Board of Elections at webmaster@elections.state.il.us. Please send copies of all messages to the WSWS.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact