

Bad-faith Democratic Party effort further exposed

Examination of SEP petitions begins in Illinois

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The examination of objections by the Illinois Democratic Party to petitions filed by the campaign of Joe Parnarauskis, Socialist Equality Party candidate for State Senate in Illinois, began August 1 at State Elections Board headquarters in Springfield, the state capital.

The Illinois Democrats filed their objections July 3, challenging more than half of the nearly 5,000 signatures submitted by the SEP; the signatures of 2,985 registered voters are required to place an independent candidate on the ballot. Parnarauskis is running in the 52nd Legislative District, containing Champaign, Urbana and Danville in east central Illinois, against Democrat Michael Frerichs and Republican Judy Meyers.

The objection was filed last month by two local Democratic Party precinct committeemen from Danville—Gregory Lietz and John Dreher. However, behind Lietz and Dreher stands the Illinois Democratic Party machine, determined to prevent any challenge to the control of the political process by the two big business parties.

In the first day of the so-called records examination, during which approximately one-third of the Democratic objections were reviewed, a sufficient number were overturned to further expose the entire effort as a bad-faith attempt to suppress democratic rights and deprive the population of a political alternative.

The process at the State Board of Elections (SBE) headquarters is a time-consuming one. Seated at computer terminals, election board clerks are flanked by one observer each from the SEP and the Democrats. Objection by objection, using the latest data bases, the names on the petitions are checked, to see if they belong to registered voters, and, if so, if the address the latter put down on the petition matches the address in the SBE data base. The clerks do their job honestly and fairly, making a genuine effort to discover real human beings behind the signatures.

The entire process, however, is profoundly antidemocratic. The notion, for example, that an individual who turns up on the elections board records as a registered voter should be disqualified as a signatory because his or her address on the petition doesn't match that on the data base—merely indicating that he or she has moved since registering to vote—is patently absurd. There is no possible justification for such a regulation, which discriminates in particular against the poor, more likely to be signatories for the SEP, and, of course, students, notoriously mobile individuals, who constitute a considerable portion of the population in Champaign-

Urbana (site of the principal campus of the University of Illinois).

Even beyond that, standing on street corners, outside libraries, at markets and special events and even canvassing going door-to-door, the SEP gathered nearly 5,000 names in a single state legislative district, not an insignificant feat. No one can possibly suggest that the names were forged. To any objective observer, that successful petitioning process *alone* would reveal a broad-based popular desire for an alternative. If the SBE and its officials were oriented toward accommodating the will of a significant portion of the population, the Democratic Party objections would be thrown out as the obviously dishonest project they are.

Instead, SBE officials, as part of the political establishment, largely facilitate the effort to exclude alternative parties and individuals, making use of technicalities, bureaucratic obfuscation and every other method, while pontificating about the need to meet statutory criteria.

How preposterous and disgraceful! As the SEP records examination got under way August 1, the Green Party of Illinois, one floor below at the elections board offices, continued its laborious process of verifying the validity of tens of thousands of signatures objected to by the Democrats. The state Greens gathered some 39,000 signatures for a statewide slate (governor, attorney general, comptroller, etc.) and have already spent three weeks, in Chicago and Springfield, at five or more computer terminals, in an effort to recover enough to pass the required minimum of 25,000. They have very nearly reached that target.

Immense obstacles are placed in the path of independent parties at every stage of the process, while every consideration is given to the Democrats and Republicans, organizations with enormous resources. The SEP records examination, for example, was delayed for two and a half weeks, thus shortening the period of time during which Parnarauskis would be able to campaign, because the Champaign County records had not been updated in Springfield.

SEP supporters arrived in Springfield July 31 only to be told that the transfer of the Champaign data base had not been completed. Scanned signature cards were not downloaded onto the computers at SBE headquarters. Thus, in cases where addresses of petition signatories matched those on the data base, but the signatures on the petitions were obscure, Democratic objections might be upheld. If, however, an image of the signature was available and matched that on the petition, it would be possible to overturn the

objection on the spot.

When the SEP protested, insisting that this put the party at a distinct disadvantage, SBE General Counsel Steve Sandvoss belittled the impact this would have and indicated that he was determined to proceed as scheduled, although the responsibility for the incomplete data base—and the SEP's disadvantage—lay entirely with the elections board.

Only after a flurry of telephone calls during the course of the evening of July 31 from the SEP's attorney and a call the following morning from David Herman, the hearing examiner, to Sandvoss, did the latter agree to guidelines stipulating that in cases where a signature would be a determining factor, Democratic objections would not be sustained, but set aside for further review. It is necessary to fight in this fashion every step along the route.

Moreover, what was termed an immense technological problem, the transfer of the scanned signature cards from Champaign to Springfield, which could not be accomplished, the SEP was told, until August 9, began to be overcome the very same afternoon, after this serious protest was lodged.

The Democratic objectors are not a prepossessing crowd. Their leader is Lietz, the Danville attorney and one of the original objectors to the SEP petition. How serious any of the five Democrats are about this process is dubious. When asked a question at one point about the process, Lietz demurred, "I'm not that familiar with the objection."

When a WSWs reporter asked Lietz for an interview, so that he could give the "other side" of the story, the attorney refused, on the grounds that, first of all, he was not a representative of the Illinois Democratic Party, simply "a friend of [Democratic legislative candidate and Parnarauskis' rival] Mike Frerichs," and, second, he preferred not to say anything in case there might be "future litigation."

Since Lietz arrived with his group of observers in a Cadillac Escalade SUV decorated with bumper stickers for Democratic Governor Rod Blagojevich, as well as Frerichs, and bearing the license plate "VC Dems 1," one is permitted to be skeptical about his lack of intimate connection to the Illinois Democratic Party.

When pressed by the WSWs reporter to speak to the larger political questions, the democratic or undemocratic nature of the process, Lietz again begged off. He did, however, make certain comments, even while attempting to avoid a discussion. Lietz suggested that the Democratic effort was merely an attempt to make sure that each candidate was meeting his or her statutory obligations. Everyone, he suggested, Frerichs and Parnarauskis alike, had to meet the appropriate criteria. This is absurd, as the entire process essentially guarantees the presence of Democrats and Republicans on the ballot, while making the access of third parties to participation in the elections as onerous as possible.

The WSWs reporter noted that some would argue the entire process was designed to exclude alternative parties, Lietz replied, "I don't agree with that," but broke off the conversation.

Other Democratic Party observers explained that they were merely "volunteers." One young woman admitted that she did not know the name of the party to whose candidate the Democrats were objecting. This is not something new. In 2004, when the Democrats were attempting to block the candidacy of Tom

Mackaman, SEP state legislative candidate in Champaign, one Democratic observer revealed that she thought she was checking petitions submitted by independent presidential candidate Ralph Nader's supporters or the Greens.

A prominent article appeared in the *Champaign News-Gazette* August 1 ("Democrats draw fire for petition challenges"), describing a press conference organized by the SEP and attended by representatives of the Greens. The piece cited the comment of Parnarauskis that the Democrats' objections amounted to a "high-level conspiracy to deny the people of Illinois the right to vote for a candidate of their choice."

News-Gazette reporter Paul Wood also quoted Joe Futrelle, a Green Party candidate for the Champaign County Board's District 8, who said "he was in solidarity with the Socialists. 'It doesn't surprise me that Democrats have challenged their petitions; I'm a Green and the Democrats have done that to me,' he said." The article noted that "Frerichs could not be reached for comment."

Springfield is adorned everywhere, to the point of excess, with the image of Abraham Lincoln, who began his law career here in 1837 and served four successive terms in the Illinois House of Representatives. Lincoln made his first protest against slavery in the Illinois House, declaring that the institution was "founded on both injustice and bad policy."

The irony of the Lincoln iconography everywhere is no doubt lost on the Democratic Party functionaries attempting to exclude the Socialist Equality Party, as well as the Green Party, from a position on the November ballot.

The State Board of Elections headquarters is located only a few blocks from the impressive state capitol building, in a residential, working class neighborhood. Modest homes sit across the street from the elections board offices. A boarded-up store, characteristic of every American urban center, with an aging sign, "Asian Food Market," is only a block away. One wonders: how many of the neighborhood's residents, and residents of neighborhoods like it across the country, are aware that the electoral process in the US, acclaimed the "most democratic" in the world, is in fact monopolized by two parties, who ruthlessly struggle to maintain their dominance?



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