

Ballot access specialist, Green Party members speak out against Democrats in Illinois

David Walsh
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In Springfield, Illinois, on Wednesday the Socialist Equality Party completed the records examination of its petitions to place Joe Parnarauskis on the ballot in November as SEP candidate in the 52nd Legislative District in Illinois. This time-consuming process involved going through each of the 2,500 or more objections leveled by the Illinois Democratic Party against signatures on the Parnarauskis petitions.

Although the SEP has established that it has considerably more than the 2,985 valid signatures necessary, various bureaucratic entanglements still remain, including more likely challenges by the Democrats and further efforts by the SEP to “rehabilitate” rejected or unresolved signatures.

The process of gaining access to the ballot in Illinois, and in most US states, is a tortuous one. It is by no means a “level playing field,” but one tilted sharply toward the Democrats and Republicans, with countless arbitrary, picayune and even arcane aspects.

The State of Illinois Candidate’s Guide 2006 reveals the structurally undemocratic character of the election process. Established party candidates (i.e., those of the Democrats and Republicans) for the Illinois state senate (the position for which Parnarauskis is seeking to run) are only obliged to submit the names of 1 percent, or 1,000, whichever is greater, of the qualified primary electors of the candidate’s party in the district in order to be eligible for the ballot.

New party candidates have to submit signatures totaling not less than 5 percent of the number of persons who voted at the last general election in the appropriate district—a task *five times* more difficult—and independent candidates are required to submit not less than 10 percent of the number of voters in the last election—an undertaking *ten times* as burdensome. And this is demanded of organizations with a fraction of the money and resources of the “established parties.”

All this, however, is only the immediately undemocratic character of the process. Once a new party or independent candidate ventures into the process, a variety of pitfalls (deadlines, petty restrictions, endless forms) lie in wait. The process is constructed not to facilitate the intervention of new parties, but to make life as difficult as possible for them. A single misstep may result in disqualification.

Election officials and legal counsel in most cases, and all the members of the State Elections Board itself, are affiliated or beholden to either the Democratic or Republican Party, with a

vested interest in preserving their dominance. Not only do individuals with such affiliations hold the levers of political power at every level—local, state and national—they possess perhaps the most precious commodity of all, an intimate knowledge of the intricacies of the process. This is what a third party is up against.

One of those who guides third parties and independent candidates through the process in Illinois is Christine Tobin, a 25-year-old resident of Chicago. Ms. Tobin was helpful to the SEP in surmounting many of the bureaucratic hurdles in Illinois. The WSWS spoke to her about some of the issues involved.

“The purpose of the present ballot access laws in Illinois, and elsewhere,” she explained, “is to benefit the two-party monopoly. I’ve never seen the Democrats and Republicans so friendly except when it comes to avoiding choice. Ballot access laws are about eliminating choice. There are no free and equal elections in Illinois.

“The claim is that ballot access laws are meant to reduce ‘voter confusion.’ People would be ‘confused’ by more than two choices? It’s ridiculous. Do most Americans know about these restrictions? Absolutely not, they don’t know.

“The electoral process is very complicated, there are many technicalities. If you came unprepared, these people would eat you alive. I’m telling you, they would eat you alive. It’s a nasty thing to be involved in. You can’t trust anyone, you have to be discreet.

“My role is to assist third parties defeat the ballot access laws. We have to work together on this. Otherwise you end up banging on a closed door.

“This process doesn’t only drain the resources of third parties, it wastes taxpayers’ money. What is the cost of weeks and weeks of state election board employees working on these objections?

“It infuriates me that law firms with powerful political connections send interns to do the dirty work of attempting to exclude third parties from the elections. It happened to a friend of mine from high school. They told him that it was the Republicans trying to get on the ballot, when it was the Greens. They were all interns from a big, well-connected law firm, and they were told they *had to* go do this.

“One intern was in a wheelchair. He was told that he should come and object to signatures because the Republicans don’t support stem cell research. It wasn’t the Republicans he was objecting to. He didn’t want to do it, he was very upset.

“We have to raise the awareness that there’s no difference between the Democrats and Republicans. From my perspective,

they're equally bad.

"I've been out of the country for a year and a half. There's a lot of anger against America. I hate to say it, but I'm embarrassed to be an American. I don't go out of my way to tell people I'm American. The Bush government is hated worldwide. In the US too, 60-70 percent oppose him. I'm happy that Americans are becoming more aware, more open-minded.

"I have a cousin in Iraq, in the military. He's very angry to be part of this. In my generation, there's a lot of anger. People signed up for the military, never expecting to be part of this in Iraq, something they feel hatred for. These feelings are growing by the minute.

"I don't make a living out of this ballot access activity. I'm helping a cause I believe in. Look, on the other hand, the Democrats have to force people to do this, interns from law firms, and also union members, I've been told. That's who they are, state employees, interns and union members, brought in by the Democrats. But for me, this is my passion, creating fair and equal elections. I look forward to the future."

We also spoke to Green Party members, who were engaged in an effort to place their statewide slate of candidates in Illinois—for governor, lieutenant governor, attorney general, secretary of state, comptroller and treasurer—on the November ballot. The minimum number of signatures required to validate such a slate is 25,000 signatures. The Greens, in fact, gathered some 39,000 names, of which the Democrats challenged 23,000.

The Socialist Equality Party has fundamental political differences with the Green Party, which seeks to reform the capitalist system. However, the SEP defends the Greens' right to be on the ballot and has opposed the systematic efforts by the Democrats to exclude them, in Illinois and elsewhere.

Eric Much was one of the leaders of the Green Party campaign to defeat the Democrats in Illinois. We spoke to him in Springfield.

"It's been an enormously time-consuming process," Much explained. "The Democrats objected to 23,000 of our signatures. We've spent every day for three weeks on this, first in Chicago, and now in Springfield.

"It's totally frivolous. This is how I imagine it was organized. They got these law firm interns and told them, 'Come up with objections.' They must have told them, 'Look at the petitions and, first of all, object to anything that looks messy.' And after that, it seems to have been completely random. They just randomly assigned objections, 'out of district,' for example, when there is no 'out of district.' It's a statewide slate.

"This costs the taxpayers hundreds of thousands of dollars. Perhaps \$700-\$800,000. For what? In order to disenfranchise citizens. The right to petition is subverted by a lawyer somewhere filing a motion. We've been in Springfield alone for two solid weeks, and we're not quite finished. We expect to go over the 25,000 threshold today, which is the minimum number we need. The Democrats could withdraw at that point, but they won't.

"Their purpose is to exclude parties. This is a closed two-party system; they're like two kids in a sandbox, who won't let anyone else in. It's completely undemocratic.

"We've got to get across to the public how difficult this process is. Some of the media have covered this, in southern Illinois, in

Carbondale, Peoria. In Chicago, next to nothing. They're intimidated by the Democratic machine.

"We know that interns for big law firms associated with the Republicans have helped in the campaign to object to our petitions. They're helping the Democrats. Are there two parties, or one?"

At a press conference August 2 to announce the Greens' success in achieving the goal of 25,000 valid signatures, Green Party candidate for governor Rich Whitney called the Democratic objections "frivolous and ill-conceived." He noted that the Democrats had challenged his own signature on a petition sheet, and that the objection was sustained.

Whitney called on the Democrats and Republicans to permit him to take part in all the gubernatorial debates. He noted that the two parties are insisting that a candidate must have a certain standing in the polls before he or she would be admitted. In response to a question, Whitney called this a "Catch 22." It's difficult for a party to win support from the public without receiving media attention, he commented, and the Democrats and Republicans want to make media coverage dependent on public support.

Whitney also noted that "new parties have to collect five times the signatures of the two major parties, which is one of the most undemocratic aspects of the process." Enormous amounts of time and money were consumed by the objection process, and, for the most part, major media outlets refuse to cover the issue, he said.

At the end of the press conference, Whitney introduced SEP candidate Joe Parnaruskis, who spoke briefly about the SEP's effort. Most of the media got up and left, on the grounds that the Parnaruskis's campaign issues were for the "Champaign media" [Champaign, Illinois, is in the 52nd Legislative District] and wasn't a "Springfield story." In this reaction, it was difficult to tell whether political hostility, provincialism or indifference predominated.



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