

SEP candidate Parnarauskis addresses meeting at University of Illinois

23 September 2006

On September 20, the SEP candidate for state Senate in Illinois 52nd District, Joseph Parnarauskis, addressed a meeting of the Students for Social Equality on the campus of the University of Illinois. Jerome White, the SEP candidate in the 12th Congressional District in the Detroit suburbs, also spoke at the meeting.

The meeting took place on the eve of the decision of Illinois State Board of Elections to certify Parnarauskis for the November 7 ballot, following weeks of bad-faith efforts on the part of the Illinois Democratic Party to block him from ballot access. (See "Illinois election board certifies SEP candidate for November ballot") It was attended by journalists from the Champaign-Urbana radio station WEFT and Channel 15 news, as well as students from the university interested in the SEP campaign.

Parnarauskis's report will be broadcast in full this Saturday and Sunday, September 24, from 10 a.m. to 11 a.m. on WEFT radio. Below we print his remarks to the meeting.

Good evening and thank you for coming to this meeting. I also want to thank the Students for Social Equality for their kind invitation. This is the first meeting of my fall campaign, and the first meeting in the three-month-long struggle against the Democrats to have my name placed on the November ballot.

Not so long ago, many of you in this room signed my nominating petitions to place me on the ballot as a candidate of the Socialist Equality Party. A lot has happened since then, and I think it would be worthwhile to review the experiences of my campaign over the past several months.

Our campaign began in April, when circulators began the daunting task of trying to gather 5,000 signatures from registered voters in the 52nd District for a candidate nobody had heard of. It was not easy. It was well before the election, and we were regularly thrown off of grocery store parking lots and public areas.

As you may remember, on June 13, library officials at both the Champaign and Urbana public libraries threw some of my petitioners off of the public sidewalk in front of these libraries. In response, we asked students, workers and readers of our web site to send letters of protest to the mayors of both cities. City officials, including Mayors Prussing of Urbana and Shweighart of Champaign, of course, stalled until well after the June 26 deadline to file my nominating petitions to answer our complaints.

In their responses, by the way, these officials indicated that we were mistaken to believe that a library was a forum for First Amendment activity, or for the exchange of ideas.

Then, on June 17, one of my election workers was threatened by a Champaign police officer while he was petitioning on the public sidewalk on Green Street. The officer took down his name and physical description, and called in his driver's license. When the petitioner replied that he was required by law to petition in order to exercise his First Amendment rights, the officer shouted repeatedly, "Don't argue with me!"

On June 26, after a lot of sacrifices and hard work, we filed nearly 5,000 signatures with the Illinois State Board of Elections, well in excess of the legal requirement of 2,985.

While we were out petitioning, we found that people in this district are ready for a change. A lot of people recognize that we have had Republican politicians, and we have had Democratic politicians, and in real terms wages keep declining while costs keep rising, no matter which of these parties is in office. In addition, there is widespread opposition to the war, which both the Democrats and the Republicans support.

However, even after we filed a huge stack of petitions with the State Board of Elections in Springfield, I knew this was just the beginning of our struggle to get on the ballot. Following my experience as campaign manager for Tom Mackaman in his 2004 race for state legislature, I fully expected a bad-faith challenge from the Democratic Party.

Two years ago, Democratic Party functionaries waged an unsuccessful bid to remove Mackaman from the ballot, even after he had submitted more than enough valid signatures to run for state representative in the 103rd District. The challenges to his petitions were based on arbitrary and frivolous objections to the signatures of hundreds of legally registered voters, and were orchestrated from the office of the Illinois speaker of the house, Michael Madigan, one of the most powerful powerbrokers in the state Democratic Party machine.

The Democrats dropped their challenge in 2004 only after legal action was taken by the SEP and scores of readers of the WSWS e-mailed the Champaign County Clerk's office demanding that Mackaman be placed on the ballot. Mackaman received almost 4 percent of the vote in 2004.

True to form, the Democrats began their attack on my rights the day after I turned in the petitions. On June 27, Jim Rogal of Springfield copied all the sheets we submitted. Rogal is an employee of the Illinois Senate Democratic Fund, a political action committee that raises money for state Democratic candidates. The following day, June 28, Liz Brown, a staff worker for the House Democrats in the Illinois House of Representatives, copied the petitions as well.

On July 3, the deadline for filing objections, Michael J. Kasper, the general counsel and treasurer of the Illinois Democratic Party, filed objections to nearly half of the signatures gathered in support of my candidacy. The objections were filed in the names of John Dreher and Gregory Lietz—two Democratic Party committeemen from Danville. The objection was nothing more than what is known as a fishing expedition; the Democrats objected to as many signatures as possible in order to place a massive administrative and financial burden on my campaign and, if possible, eliminate enough signatures to place me below the legal requirement.

A cursory review of the objections revealed clear matches of voters' signatures on my petitions with the information in the voter registration database. Names of workers and students in the 52nd District had been crossed off arbitrarily, without any consultation with the records.

On July 11, at the first hearing before the State Board of Elections, I said that the assumption should be made that the Democrats are following the same pattern of bad-faith and frivolous challenges long carried out by this party. The board ignored my motion to throw out all of these bogus objections.

On August 1, the election board began a “records examination” or “binder check” of the objections, at which election officials painstakingly ruled on each and every objection. At the time, my campaign contacted a number of people who signed my petitions to let them know what was taking place, and those whose names had been crossed off responded with anger and outrage.

When we met Gregory Lietz, one of the Danville objectors, at the binder check, we asked him if he was carrying out the objection on behalf of the Democratic Party. He replied no, that he was just a friend of Mike Frerichs, my Democratic opponent, and that he actually didn’t know the details of the objection that he supposedly filed.

SEP supporters spent hundreds of hours fighting the binder check every step of the way. In the end, it was determined that we had at least 3,229 valid signatures. Many of the some 1,500 signatures that were disqualified were thrown out because the address on the petition did not match the address in the voter registration database. In other words, the voter was denied his democratic rights because he had moved—as students and poorer people often do.

The Democrats responded to our rising totals by making more and more desperate demands. They demanded that the names that were printed instead of signed be thrown out, and then that 44 sheets listing the office I sought as “State Senator” instead of “State Senator—52nd District” be thrown out as well. The Democrats were represented in court by Courtney Nottage and Michael Kasper, two high-powered lawyers working for House Speaker Michael Madigan and Senate President Emil Jones.

Finally, David Herman, the board’s own hearing examiner, found in a report following the August 17 hearing that I had 3,229 valid signatures on my nominating petitions. Herman also concluded that the Democrats’ arguments that I had “misled” voters by putting just “State Senator” in the office box were unsupported by any evidence or previous case law.

At its infamous August 31 meeting, the election board voted to certify every candidate in every district throughout the state of Illinois except for me. They delayed a ruling on my certification until September 7. However, when September 7 rolled around and it was time to place me on the ballot, the four Democrats blocked the majority vote required to amend the August 31 certification to include my name. At the various further meetings—September 7 through September 18—the board remained deadlocked four to four along party lines, with the four Democrats hoping the ballots would be printed without my name on them.

Two of the election officials preparing to print the ballots in the 52nd District have close connections to or were directly involved with the Democratic Party officials who conspired to bar me from the ballot. The director of the Danville Election Commission, Barbara Dreher, for example, is the wife of John E. Dreher, the Democratic precinct committeeman who filed the original objection. Lynn Foster, the Vermilion County Clerk, was part of the Democratic Party team that scrutinized my petitions during the binder check.

In other words, the individuals entrusted with guaranteeing free and fair elections in the district are the same ones involved in the antidemocratic effort to exclude a candidate from the ballot.

As the September 25 deadline for the mailing of overseas absentee ballots approached, it became clear that the Democrats were going to block me until November. On September 12, I filed a court case in Springfield suing the board to place me on the ballot immediately. The judge, Patrick Kelley, gave the board until September 18 to vote one way or the other, and then heard our case after the board deadlocked again on the 18th.

Yesterday, Judge Kelley ordered the Illinois State Board of Elections to amend its certification to include me on the November 7 ballot, and gave the election board until 2 p.m. tomorrow to certify me or face being held in contempt of court. Judge Kelley also ordered the elections authorities of Champaign and Vermilion counties and the city of Danville not to print

their ballots until the election board complied with the judge’s ruling.

Thank you for your patience as I described the sordid details of this saga. But I assure you, it was much more excruciating to have experienced it firsthand.

In the final analysis, what our case has shown is the real state of democracy in America, and the completely undemocratic nature of the entire political system.

The population of America just surpassed 300 million. On a geographic area embracing millions of square miles, with one of the world’s most ethnically and culturally diverse populations, with an enormous chasm between wealthy and poor, with extreme levels of wealth concentration—all of this is supposed to find expression in no more than two political parties, which do not disagree on very much.

In virtually every country with some sort of parliamentary system, there is a kaleidoscope of political parties. Even in the few where this does not exist, like England, even there, ballot access is simple and straightforward. In Australia, 75 signatures were required to place our sister party’s nationwide slate of candidates on the ballot.

In Germany, a political system established by the US military in the aftermath of World War II, a party that gets 5 percent of the vote gets parliamentary representation.

In California during the 2003 recall election—the first time the ballot was opened up for democratic and public use in recent US history—135 candidates entered the race.

The state of Illinois’ massive signature requirements are some of the highest in the country, and for that matter, the world. And, as we found out, even if you meet them, the two parties simply proceed to throw up additional requirements. They wage a concerted and cynical campaign aimed at keeping you off the ballot, and even if you prevail, ultimately, after countless administrative and judicial hearings, you have exhausted enormous resources. The operative function of the American political system is exclusion, not inclusion.

It’s worth pointing out that the US invades countries all over the world, claiming that they hold undemocratic elections. The US State Department was not too long ago in the news ranting about violations of democratic rights in the Ukraine and Belarus. For that matter, the invasions and occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan have been justified on the basis of bringing the citizens of these countries “freedom” and “democracy.” However, few self-described democracies maintain a more undemocratic system than what the United States maintains at home, right here in the 52nd District.

The Socialist Equality Party is not in any way part of the two-party consensus. We advocate a massive redistribution of wealth in the US, and a vast expansion of democratic rights. We oppose the militaristic foreign policy of the United States, and call for the immediate withdrawal of US troops from Iraq and Afghanistan. We oppose the draft, which either of the two parties may introduce in the very near future. We also oppose a war against Iran, which would be on a scale that would make Iraq look like a tea party.

Throughout my campaign, I have pointed out that there are plenty of resources, both locally and nationally, to meet social needs. With technology and productivity at levels higher than ever before, humanity now has the means to eliminate hunger and poverty, as well as to provide housing, education, and healthcare for all.

The Democrats have long postured as the party of working people, and their defenders urge voters to vote Democrat merely because Democrats are the “lesser of two evils.” The Democrats are basically telling workers, “You have to vote for us, because we’re the best you can get. You don’t have any other alternatives.”

At the same time, the Democrats pursue the same policies as their erstwhile opponents, the Republicans—attacking the jobs and living conditions of working people and lining the pockets of their corporate

masters, and working hand-in-glove with the Republicans to prosecute the so-called “war-on-terror.”

For this reason, when any alternative does emerge to their left, the Democrats find their entire base of support under threat. This is why they have fought so hard to keep the Socialist Equality Party off the ballot. We threaten to expose them to the working class.

My Democratic opponent, Michael Frerichs, has proposed a statewide minimum wage increase of \$1.00, to \$7.50 an hour—a totally inadequate raise that would still leave a family of four well below the official poverty line. The most prominent Democratic big-city mayor, Richard Daley of Chicago, recently vetoed a measure that would have increased the minimum wage paid by large stores to \$10 an hour by 2010, saying that it was too much, and would drive jobs out of the city. In reality, \$18 an hour is a minimum wage to afford an apartment in the Chicago area.

Thousands of people have signed my petitions, and have expressed to me their concerns. In Vermillion County, unemployment is 6.4 percent, and in Champaign it is 4.3 percent. In the city of Danville, near where I live, unemployment is now 8.4 percent. The median household income is a meager \$30,431. To walk down Main Street in Danville is to walk through a crumbling city that is literally falling down.

I reject with contempt the claims by the Republicans and Democrats that preside over the ruins of my hometown that “attracting more business” or raising minimum wage by a dollar will solve anything. They each had their chance to run this district, and they took turns devastating it.

Economic security is a basic human right, not a privilege to be enjoyed by the few who are rich. The SEP calls for the organization of economic life to guarantee all working people a comfortable standard of living.

The only way students and workers in the 52nd District can stop the loss of jobs and the lowering of their wages is to break with the Democratic Party and build a genuinely independent political movement of the working class, based on a socialist program.

The Democratic Party in Illinois knows that millions of students and working people are fed up with the Democrats’ claims to represent them when, in fact, they are the second party of big business. That is why the Democrats have expended tremendous resources to keep my name off the ballot—because I fight for a program that advances the interests of working people, and not the profit interests of corporate America.

I urge voters in the 52nd District and throughout the state to oppose the effort to keep me off the ballot, actively support my campaign, and vote for me in November. Consider our program and make the decision to join and build the Socialist Equality Party as a socialist alternative to the two capitalist parties.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact