Illinois SEP candidate speaks at forum on public education

Tom Carter
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On Tuesday, September 26, Illinois SEP candidate Joe Parnarauskis attended a candidate forum hosted by the Illinois Association of School Boards, a nonprofit lobby group, to discuss political issues in the Illinois education system. He was given the opportunity, along with a number of other candidates, to make a statement and respond to questions from the audience.

The meeting was attended by around 70 board members, administrators, lobbyists, local businessmen and several school teachers. Also present were Parnarauskis's opponents in the 52nd District, Judy Myers (Republican) and Michael Frerichs (Democrat), as well as Rex Bradfield (Republican) and Tom Abrams (Green), candidates for State Representative in the 103rd District, which covers much of the same area. Representative Chapin Rose (Republican), from the 110th District, arrived for the last 15 minutes of the debate.

Addressing the meeting, Parnarauskis said, "My position, and the position of the Socialist Equality Party, is that education has a fundamental democratic significance. It is not merely a means of access to wealth and status, but a good in itself, a necessary part of the development of a fully human personality. I think that every human being has a democratic right to be educated to the level required for life in a modern, technologically advanced society, which means college-level education for everyone."

"Throughout my campaign, I have argued that, contrary to the claims of the two major parties, there are plenty of resources to pay for decent jobs, healthcare, pensions, and housing for all. Indeed, the same is true for education.

"However, the priorities of economic life must be radically changed, from the further enrichment of the top 1 percent to the satisfaction of human needs.

"I've lived in the 52nd District all my life, and I'm a graduate of Westville High School. The Republicans and Democrats have each had decades to show how they run things here, and I've watched as they have taken turns devastating the area.

"With only about $5,100 per pupil coming in from the state, teachers nowadays make daily sacrifices just to give local kids the basics. It's not at all unheard of for teachers, out of their own tiny salaries, to pay for such things as paper, pens, pencils and tissue paper for the classroom, or even a child's lunch.

"Conditions are made even more difficult for teachers by the area's worsening economic depression, with the median income now only $30,000, as well as rising unemployment, which is now officially 8.4 percent in Danville. Children simply can't come to school prepared to learn, or get help with their homework, when at home parents are scrambling to come up with the money just to put bread on the table.

"A genuine improvement of the state of education in the United States requires massive public investment in primary, secondary and tertiary education. All schools must be supplied with the funds necessary to provide a quality education to all. Teachers must be paid more, class sizes reduced, school buildings improved, and economic security guaranteed for everyone. Quality education at all levels should be provided, free of cost and as a basic democratic right, to anyone who wants it."

Questions from the audience centered on the dearth of education funding in Illinois, which is ranked 50th in the nation in funding distribution, producing vast disparities between wealthier and poorer school districts. The responses by the two major parties were entirely predictable. The Democrats and Greens called for a small statewide income tax increase as a substitute

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to property taxes, which account for much of the inequity between districts. The Republicans, in response, complained of the lack of "fiscal responsibility" and "accountability" in the previous Democratic state administrations.

Myers, a Republican, complained that "three men wrote this budget"—referring to Senate President Emil Jones, House Speaker Michael Madigan, and Governor Rod Blagojevich, all Democrats, who collaborated on last year's budget. The Democratic candidate Frerichs, who himself has close ties to Emil Jones, agreed that this was "bad," but proposed to work "independently within the system" to get local budget concerns addressed.

Without any serious proposals to increase funding from the representatives of the Democrats, Republicans and the Greens, Parnarauskis insisted there were plenty of resources to drastically improve the state's public education system. "The claims by the two major parties that there is not enough money to pay for education are ridiculous. The cost of the war in Iraq is rapidly approaching $400 billion. Of this, taxpayers in the state of Illinois have paid almost $18 billion.

"This $18 billion, more than double the fiscal year 2006 appropriation for the Illinois State Board of Education, could have paid a comfortable wage to 300,000 new teachers in Illinois, or sent 800,000 kids through college for free." He said the war should be ended and resources redirected to improve education and meet other social needs.

"We've seen what the two parties can do, and they have had control of our education system for decades. What is needed is a bold move for a change," Parnarauskis concluded.

Another question from the audience concerned the payment of decent wages to school janitors, who make around $6.50 an hour, the state's minimum wage. The Republican Rex Bradfield offered no wage increase, saying that the problem was not wages, but education. He then said the janitors were important, because "they show kids the true meaning of working for a living."

The Democrat Frerichs reiterated his proposed minimum wage increase to $7.50, a paltry one dollar higher than the state's minimum. Tom Abram, the Green candidate, said it was "disgusting" and "morally reprehensible not to pay someone enough to live on," and then suggested that the janitors should be paid at least $8.00 an hour!

In response, Parnarauskis pointed out that while his opponents were "generous" enough to offer $7 and $8 an hour, such a wage would leave a family of four in dire poverty. "In fact," he said, "it would take $10.50 an hour just to get above the government's official poverty line. I think there is plenty of money to pay a much higher wage to provide a comfortable living standard for school staff; the question is society's priorities."

At other parts of the debate, the Republicans and Democrats both attempted to play the "upstate" versus "downstate" card, pitting urban—and in many cases more minority and immigrant students—in the Chicago area public schools against the more rural and white population in the southern 52nd legislative district. The Green candidate also adapted himself to this, blaming upstate schools for the lack of funding downstate.

Parnarauskis rejected this attempt to divide the working class, saying, "We've heard this all before. I don't call for lowering the level of education in Chicago to pay for schools here, but for the raising of the level of education everywhere."

Parnarauskis was warmly received at the meeting, and many schoolteachers and school board members expressed an interest in his campaign and approached him before and after the meeting. One administrator indicated that there had been bitter fights inside the school board association over whether or not to invite Parnarauskis. The membership had been following closely his attempt to get on the ballot, and in the end the majority had expressed a desire to hear him speak and present a socialist platform on education.

Nick, a schoolteacher, spoke with Parnarauskis after the forum. "I think what you said about Iraq was just right," he said. "These politicians can come up with $18 billion at the drop of a hat. Who are they fooling? We know there's enough money to take care of us."

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