

Illinois SEP candidate Joe Parnarauskis addresses retired state workers at candidates' debate

Tom Carter
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At a debate hosted by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) on Wednesday in Urbana, Illinois, retired state employees angrily confronted the Democratic candidate over cuts in social programs and the diversion of money from their union pension fund. The debate was between the state Senate candidates for the 52nd Legislative District: SEP candidate Joe Parnarauskis, Democratic candidate Michael Frerichs and Republican candidate Judy Myers.

The workers received Parnarauskis warmly and applauded his remarks. They listened attentively to his call for an end to the war in Iraq, the repeal of the Bush administration's anti-democratic measures, and socialist policies to provide decent-paying and secure jobs, quality health care and education for all, and a secure and comfortable retirement for older workers.

The SEP candidate's insistence on the need for a break with the Democrats and the two-party system resonated in a meeting dominated by workers' bitter reproaches against the Democratic Party and its right-wing policies. About a dozen workers shook Parnarauskis's hand and several indicated that they remembered when Tom Mackaman, the SEP's candidate for state legislature in the 103rd District in the previous election, addressed the same forum in 2004.

Midway through the debate, the official format broke down when workers in the audience began shouting and interrupting the Democratic candidate, Frerichs, demanding to know why the Illinois Democrats had raided their pension fund and why funding for social services such as education had been slashed.

The debate began with opening remarks from the three candidates, followed by questions from a moderator.

Both of Parnarauskis's opponents claimed that their number one priority was education, blaming low funding for downstate schools on the relatively higher funding for suburban schools in the Chicago area. Attempting to pit downstate workers and farmers against workers in Chicago is a long-standing ploy in southern Illinois politics, and the Democratic and Republican candidates sought to outdo one another at this game.

"We need to focus on downstate, not Chicago," said Myers. She said that while she opposed "tax hikes that would drive businesses away," she thought that 51 percent of new state revenues should go to education. In order to come up with more money for education, she said, we need to "get our house in order" and "tighten our belts."

Frerichs, for his part, said it was a "question of fairness," citing the nearly \$20,000 annual expenditure per pupil in certain Chicago suburbs in comparison with the \$5,100 expenditure downstate.

Education, he said, would drive economic development and attract more business. In his proposal for "more equal schools," he called for a small statewide raise in the income tax—which must be a flat tax according to the Illinois constitution—and for those funds to be distributed exclusively downstate.

In his opening remarks, Parnarauskis, spoke to the issues confronting working people in the election, advancing the socialist perspective of the SEP and referring to the three-month struggle the party waged to gain ballot access.

"This forum gives voters a chance to hear a candidate the Illinois Democrats spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to try to keep off the ballot. They did not want a socialist candidate in the elections—a candidate who would give voice to the popular opposition to the war, the attack on democratic rights, and the pro-big business policies pursued by both the Democrats and Republicans.

"This debate takes place only days after two watershed events in American history—events that demonstrate the bipartisan consensus in favor of war and social reaction. On Thursday of last week the US Congress voted to make torture the official policy of the United States.

"Under the Military Commissions Act of 2006, the president can identify a person as an 'unlawful enemy combatant.' That person can then be arrested, tortured, and jailed indefinitely without legal recourse.

"Then, last Friday, the US Senate voted 100-0 to approve an additional \$70 billion to finance the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Not one senator—not one—Republican or Democrat, voted against this bill. It should be clear to everyone, following that vote, that the Democratic Party, no less than the Republicans, is a party of war, which is willing to defy the will of the people in order to further the imperial aims of the United States.

"The 100-0 vote last Friday demonstrates that behind the Democrats' complaints over Bush's handling of the war, they are committed to continuing the illegal occupation of Iraq—an occupation that has already cost the lives of 100,000 Iraqi people and more than 2,700 US soldiers. Moreover, hundreds of billions of dollars have been squandered on the war that could have been spent to meet the needs of working people: for jobs, health care, education, housing.

"I am the only one at this debate who rejects entirely the framework of the so-called 'war on terror,' which has nothing to do with the protection of the American people. The events of 9/11 were used as a pretext to implement long-standing strategic aims—aims to further the interests of corporate America and crack down on political dissent at home.

“If the US government was so interested in the security of the American people, why are tens of millions without economic security? Why did they turn their backs on the people of New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina?”

“Or for that matter, in Danville, near where I live, thousands are without jobs, health care, decent schools. The unemployment rate is officially 8.4 percent, but we all know that in reality it’s even higher. The median household income is a meager \$30,000.

“The Democrats’ pitch to you has always been that you can’t do any better—that the Democrats are the lesser of the two evils. But under the Democrats, we’ve had plant closings, mass layoffs, cost-cutting, wage-slashing—just like with the Republicans.

“When your union donates money to the Democratic Party, what do they use the money for? Your dues go to pay the legal fees of lawyers who try to keep genuine workers’ candidates off the ballot. Lawyers for the Illinois Democrats, Courtney Nottage and Michael Kasper, were paid more than \$300,000 for their 80-day legal effort to keep my name off of the ballot. By one estimate, the Democrats spent close to a million dollars overall.

“I say, the priorities of economic life must be radically changed, from the further enrichment of corporate executives and wealthy investors to meeting the needs of ordinary people, and that requires transforming the basic levers of the economy into public utilities under the democratic control of ordinary people.

“Voters of the 52 district: make your vote count this November! Vote for the Socialist Equality Party!”

Republican candidate Myers left midway through the debate, citing a prior engagement, leaving Parnarauskis and Frerichs. At this point, the event assumed more the character of a debate between the workers in the room and the Democratic candidate. AFSCME, part of the AFL-CIO, has officially endorsed Frerichs, but the hostility to the Democrats on the part of rank-and-file union members was clearly demonstrated in the balance of the debate.

One retired worker asked a question from the floor, prefacing his question by pointing out that he had voted Democrat in every election since 1952. “Now, he said, “when the pension system was raided, the Democrats controlled the governor’s mansion and both houses of Congress. What assurances do I have that voting for a Democrat is going to protect the pension system?” He was referring to the decision made by the Illinois Democrats to remove over a billion dollars a year over the past two years from the state employees’ pension fund to pay for other state expenses.

Frerichs attempted to defend himself by saying, “This has gone on under Republicans and Democrats. Both parties have done it.”

Parnarauskis pointed out that this was not much of a defense, and was a good reason for workers to break with the two-party system. The SEP candidate added, “My position, and the position of the Socialist Equality Party, is that there are plenty of resources, given today’s level of productivity and technology, to meet all social needs and dramatically raise living standards. I view a comfortable standard of living, job security, retirement, health care, housing, and education to be basic social rights.

“I reject the claims of the Republicans and Democrats that decent-paying jobs, pensions, health benefits and social services have become unaffordable. In reality, they are being sacrificed to provide ever more obscene levels of personal wealth for the top one percent in American society.

“I would never vote for a pension raid, or any similar attack on the living conditions and wages of working people. I would expose to the

voters of Illinois any senator making such an attack. I propose the creation of a guaranteed annual income, indexed to inflation, to provide a comfortable standard of living for all.”

Subsequently, a school bus driver, at the top of her voice, told Frerichs of the increased difficulties for school bus drivers under the Democrats. Her route had been expanded, she was expected to complete it in less time, and she was expected to pick up mentally handicapped students along with other students, which poses a safety risk.

Frerichs had to shout over the workers to deliver his response, which was to reiterate his desire to raise income taxes a few percentage points in order to provide additional funds for downstate schools. He tried to distance himself from the state’s governor, Rod Blagojevich, and the Chicago-based Democratic Party leadership. “The only good thing about Blagojevich,” Frerichs said, “is that he won’t be running for reelection” after this year’s vote.

One worker asked Frerichs about the attempt to reinvest a portion of the state pension fund that was invested in Coca Cola, which is notorious for union-busting and low wages overseas. Frerichs responded that he was opposed to investing money “in countries that are really, really bad to their people, like the Sudan, where there’s a genocide.”

The worker interrupted, “The Sudan? What about Halliburton in Iraq? They are making so much money over there they don’t know what to do with it!”

Frerichs responded that he agreed, and the federal government was “spending millions where they didn’t need to be spending it.” At this point, another worker interrupted: “This has been going on for more than four years! The Democrats are doing it just as much as the Republicans!”

Frerichs was on the defensive for the rest of the debate, and Parnarauskis had a number of opportunities to clarify the program of the SEP.

“Fundamentally,” Parnarauskis concluded, “the differences between the Socialist Equality Party and both big business parties come down to one basic difference of principle: should economic life and the allocation of resources be determined by social needs and the common good, or should they be subordinated to the profit system and the profit requirements of big business? I insist that social needs take precedence.”

Following the forum, Jane, a retired AFSCME worker, followed Parnarauskis out of the room and indicated that she would vote for the SEP. “I agree with you,” she said. “You are right in what you say.” She took a copy of the SEP election program to share with her family.

In addition to the AFSCME debate, Parnarauskis participated in the American Association of University Women’s debate in Danville on Monday, as well as the Champaign Women’s Club debate on Tuesday. At each he was approached by workers afterwards who indicated their support for the SEP campaign and pledged to vote socialist in November.



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