SEP candidate for West Virginia House District 16 files petitions

Our reporters
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On July 28, Naomi Spencer, the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for West Virginia House District 16, filed petitions with the Secretary of State's office in Charleston. Spencer submitted more than 600 signatures—well over double the number required to get on the ballot.

The state will review the petitions over the next several weeks before determining whether the SEP's candidate is eligible for the election.

Over the past month and a half, SEP campaigners have spoken to thousands of people in state House District 16—an area encompassing most of the city of Huntington, eastern Cabell County, and northern Lincoln County. The campaign has been run entirely on a volunteer basis.

The response to the campaign was overwhelmingly positive, both from residents and those unable to sign from nearby towns in Kentucky and Ohio.

"Across all generations, occupations, and walks of life, the working class has been radicalized by the economic crisis, endless wars, and attacks on democratic rights," said Naomi Spencer. "The petitioning process revealed this clearly here in West Virginia, a state routinely slandered as hopelessly backward. People are moving to the left, and they are looking for an alternative to the Democratic and Republican Parties.

"We have seen this anecdotally, as well as statistically, in our efforts," Spencer noted. "The oldest person to sign our petitions was born in 1914. The youngest was born in July of 1998. We have gained the support of self-described conservatives, liberals, independents, and have met more than a few people who considered themselves socialists.

"Students, unemployed, retirees, industrial workers, teachers, health care professionals, call center workers, retail and hospitality employees, and many others have expressed their support for this campaign and the SEP's presidential ticket. The program advanced by the Party's presidential and vice presidential candidates Jerry White and Niles Niemuth is being welcomed by thousands of workers and youth in this area. We are excited to fight for socialist consciousness, for internationalism and political independence among the population."

Clement remarked: "Over the course of the six-week petition campaign, we did not encounter any of the other six Democratic and Republican candidates who are also vying for the district's three seats. This is not surprising, actually. To the extent that these candidates campaign at all, it is in appeals to the local business community and civic organizations, not the district's thousands of workers, students, and youth."

"Moreover, these vetted candidates of the bourgeoisie are not required to collect the hundreds of signatures we received through our campaign," Clement said. "Given the level of disgust with the two big business parties that we encountered, it is questionable whether the Democratic and Republican candidates could even meet the undemocratic requirements we were forced to fulfill.

"The workers and youth we spoke to in the campaign largely welcomed our focus on the major political issues of the day: the fight against war, the defense of democratic rights, the political independence of the working class, and internationalism and socialism. It was striking that no one would stop you and ask, 'Yes, but what does that have to do with District 16?'"

"I think the response by workers, youth and retirees shows a changing of attitude within the mass mood generally," noted Euan. "At the surface, it is evident there is immense frustration over politics as a whole.

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While this is significant, it can also pose a roadblock. However, workers are beginning to see the difference between the 'politics' of the officialdom and our politics.

"There is, above all, a growing interest in a socialist program to solve the burning questions we face today. When we explained who we were and what we stood for, even if people didn't quite understand yet, even if they didn't agree with us entirely, they deeply respected our efforts. It seemed evident that we stood out from all other political tendencies. We have principles. We have a worked out program. We are earnest in our appeals to the oppressed masses."

Phyllis campaigned over the July 4 holiday weekend. "One of the most important things I found was the class conscious response," she said. "I met workers in their homes, their cars and on the streets. There was support for an independent socialist candidate."

Many residents have been involved in recovery efforts after the devastating floods that hit the state in June. SEP campaigners have sought to draw out the class issues, particularly social inequality and the priorities of the capitalist class, revealed in the disaster. When campaigners spoke to a man whose sister had lost everything in the flood, Phyllis noted, "the petitions were being passed around and signed by his adult children. One of them said, 'capitalism sucks' under her breath."

"I believe that is the general sentiment," Phyllis added. "We tapped into this with a progressive program that challenged the pro-war, pro-capitalist candidates of Clinton and Trump."

On July 23, campaigners gathered signatures during the annual boat race on the Ohio River, the Huntington Classic Regatta. Henry, part of the campaign team that day, noted, "We met Trump supporters, Sanders supporters, Clinton supporters, and people who were disillusioned with capitalist electoral politics, and had decided not to vote at all."

"I was most surprised by the support we received by Trump supporters," he said. "The big business media, and specifically the identity politics industry, has worked hard to paint Trump supporters as a rabble of racist xenophobes. This goes double for the workers of West Virginia, who have been maligned for decades as backward, racist brutes.

"Some Trump supporters no doubt hold backward sentiments, but the ones we spoke to agreed with proposals for a massive public works program, and an end to the wars overseas. I had long suspected that the majority of the working class Trump supporters, many of which likely experienced a barbaric decline in their living standards after the crash of '08, support him despite his racist and xenophobic rhetoric, not because of it."

Henry stated, "the experience demonstrated that there is a strong sense of basic democratic principles in working class populations. Some people signed the petition without even asking details; they simply believed that anyone should be able to run for office.

"It showed that there is mass disaffection with the status quo. Trump, Sanders, and Clinton supporters all seemed a little less than enthused about their candidates. The working class is ready for fundamental change."

In the months leading up to the November 8 election, SEP campaigners are planning public meetings, mass leafleting and canvassing initiatives in the area. We encourage supporters to get involved in the campaign. Contact us today at SEP2016.com.

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