

A working class fighter for socialism: Joe Parnarauskis, 1954–2025

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Joe Parnarauskis, a fighter for socialism, passed away on October 23 in Duluth, Minnesota, after a long struggle with an aggressive form of dementia. The immediate cause of death was COVID-19, which he contracted in the nursing home where he had resided for the last two years. He was 71.

Parnarauskis will be best known to long-time readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* for his run for Illinois State Senate in 2006. Parnarauskis and supporters of the SEP fought off efforts to keep him off the ballot by the Illinois Democratic Party—whose most prominent member was then-US Senator Barack Obama.

Parnarauskis and the SEP won that fight, and, with almost no budget, received 1,894 votes, or about 3.4 percent of the total votes cast in Illinois state district 52, which comprised Champaign, Urbana and the University of Illinois campus, as well as Danville—the location of an abandoned General Motors foundry—rural areas, and a strip of old coal mining towns that included his own hometown of Westville.

To achieve ballot status, Parnarauskis and his supporters gathered nearly 5,000 signatures. Democratic Party operatives attempted to falsely invalidate more than half of these.

That election campaign, and the campaign of the author of these lines for the Illinois State House in 2004, were important experiences for the SEP and the working class. They demonstrated that ferocious opposition in the ruling class to democratic rights was not monopolized by the Republican Party, whose victory in the 2000 Bush-Gore election had been based on the stopping of vote-counting in Florida. The campaigns demonstrated that the Democratic Party, as well, was prepared to trample over the democratic rights of thousands of petition signers in order to block socialist candidates from appearing on the ballot.

Parnarauskis was pivotal in both Illinois campaigns. As he put it in an address to his supporters after beating back the Democratic Party efforts to keep him off the ballot:

This fight involved crucial democratic principles. Does an ordinary citizen have the right to run for office to defend the interests of working people, or are only those who are personally wealthy or backed by large amounts of corporate cash eligible? Do the people have the right to vote for a candidate of their choice?

On the surface, the confrontation between the Democratic Party and the SEP might have appeared to be a mismatch. The Democrats have a powerful political machine at their disposal, millions upon millions of dollars, and high-priced lawyers.

[But] in conducting our fight we based ourselves on the interests of the vast majority of the population—working people and youth in Illinois, the US and around the world, who are politically disenfranchised by parties that speak for big business. We understood that despite their resources, these parties rest on an increasingly narrow social base, and their remaining support within the general population is being eroded by their pro-war and pro-corporate policies.

Our victory shows in microcosm the strength that the working class can wield when it bases itself upon a socialist and internationalist program. In the course of this fight, scores of protest letters were sent from Illinois, more than a dozen other states and countries, such as

Britain, Singapore, Australia, Taiwan, Japan, Canada, Germany and Sri Lanka.

Joseph J. Parnarauskis was born on March 15, 1954 in Danville to a working class family. His father, Joe Sr., was a World War II veteran who worked as a television repairman. His mother, Irene, worked as a Veteran's Administration nurse. His father's side of the family were Lithuanian coal miners who had settled in Illinois. His mother's side were Slovak iron and copper miners from Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Both regions were the scenes, in the first part of the 20th century, of historic class battles in which immigrants had figured prominently and where the influence of socialism was strong.

Joe brought something of these earlier generations to his understanding of the problems of his own time. Like many his age, Joe was radicalized by the Vietnam War—at one point he took over Westville High School's PA system to denounce the war to all the school's students, which earned him a suspension! But unlike many of that generation, Joe never lost his hatred of American imperialism and its war crimes.

After working in freight loading for a number of years, Joe trained to become a registered nurse, earning an associate's degree in 1984, and later a Bachelor of Science. He worked as a nurse beginning in 1984. For the last 27 years of his career he worked in the physically and mentally taxing field of psychiatric nursing, retiring from Provena Covenant Medical Center in Urbana in 2018.

Joe was a dedicated professional who was much admired by his co-workers. He often volunteered for night shifts so that nurses with young children could work during the day. A former all-conference football offensive lineman, Joe was frequently tasked with some of the most physically difficult jobs at the hospital. He often had to deal with patients suffering the brutal effects of drug addiction that affected so many rust-belt towns. The pressures of his work took their toll.

Joe also faced the difficulties associated with the anti-gay bigotry of the 1980s. His companion, Mark Haun, whom Joe often remembered as "the love of my life," died in the AIDS epidemic.

Joe briefly attended the University of Illinois, in nearby Champaign-Urbana, following his graduation

from high school in his hometown of Westville, Illinois, in 1972. There at the University of Illinois he was drawn to radical protest politics—a feature typical of American college towns. In the 1980s, he was active in opposition to Washington's "dirty wars" in Central America.

As time went on, Joe grew frustrated with protest and identity politics, which he recognized had solved none of the problems that he had been fighting.

Then the US invasion of Iraq once again radicalized him, and he became "reengaged" as he put it. Searching for perspective, Joe began regularly reading the WSWS in the lead-up to the invasion of 2003, making contact with the SEP that year, and deciding to join the world Trotskyist movement. This began an intense decade of political activity. Not only did Joe help lead the fight for SEP ballot status in Illinois in both 2004 and 2006. He actively intervened in strikes and leafleted workplaces and colleges, while regularly attending SEP national meetings, schools and aggregates.

Joe gradually drifted away from political activity shortly before his retirement from nursing in 2018. Not long after, he was diagnosed with dementia. He then moved to Cloquet, Minnesota, to live with his sister, Rita, who cared for Joe in his final years.

Joe will be remembered by his comrades for his dedication and fighting spirit, as well as his sense of humor, personal generosity and warmth.



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