

SEP candidate addresses retired workers at Illinois forums

By Joe Parks
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Tom Mackaman, the Socialist Equality Party state representative candidate for the 103rd District of Illinois, participated in two forums this week sponsored by organizations of local retired workers. The first, hosted by retired AFSCME members (American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees), was held at the Urbana Civic Center on Tuesday, August 31, while the second was sponsored by a local association of retired schoolteachers of Champaign and Urbana, and was held on Thursday, September 1. Approximately 30 workers attended the former, and as many as 100 the latter.

In both forums, Mackaman debated the Democratic incumbent, Naomi Jakobsson, and Republican contender Deborah Frank-Feinen. In the second debate, Republican State Representatives Chapin Rose from Illinois District 110 and Shane Cultra from Illinois District 105 also participated.

In his remarks to both audiences, Mackaman discussed the assault on the right to a secure retirement for workers under way in the US. He told the audience that United Airlines, based in Chicago, has this year “scrapped its pension obligations as part of its ‘financial restructuring.’” “This is not an isolated case, as examples from both the coal and steel industry have shown,” Mackaman pointed out. “Yesterday the *Financial Times* reported that the Pension Benefit Guarantee Corporation, the federal agency assigned to insure pension funds, is on the verge of collapse.”

Reminding the audience that Social Security is also under threat, Mackaman pointed to recent developments: “Last week, Alan Greenspan promised that Social Security must be overhauled. This week, at the Republican National Convention, privatization of Social Security stands as a central plank in that party’s platform.”

The SEP candidate continued by pointing out that the attack on retirement benefits “is part and parcel of the onslaught carried out by the US corporate elite against the gains the working class has made over the course of the twentieth century, a process which has been going on for the past 25 years and has been carried out by both Democratic and Republican administrations. The result of this offensive has been an enormous redistribution of wealth in the US from the working masses to the top 1 percent of richest Americans. The

basic drive of this financial oligarchy is to remove all restrictions and regulations on the accumulation of wealth. This calls for the privatization of Social Security and Medicare and for the dismissal of pension obligations. It has also brought about this year’s overhaul of regulations related to overtime pay—originally established by the Fair Employment Standards Act of 1938.”

Mackaman then asked, “Why can’t the US, the richest nation in the world, teeming with billionaires and multimillionaires, guarantee a secure retirement to those upon whose backs all of this wealth was created?” He continued, “According to the captains of finance and the two parties, there are too many retirees, too many benefits, and not enough money to support them. These are lies. The crisis of Social Security and private pensions in the US is not the product of some unchangeable economic reality. This country has \$200 billion to conduct an unprovoked war against a country that posed no threat to the US and had nothing to do with 9/11. The ‘crisis’ is an orchestrated political attack designed to meet the profit imperatives of US corporations, and it is but one further step in the destruction of the social safety net in the US.”

Mackaman finished both talks by discussing the SEP’s platform: “The Socialist Equality Party is intervening in the 2004 elections to offer an alternative to the two parties of big business and their shared agenda of war and the destruction of living standards, and to lay the groundwork for the building of the mass party of the working class.

“We reject the lie that there is not enough money for all Americans to expect a decent and secure retirement. We not only unequivocally defend all past gains of US workers, including Social Security, but we advocate an extensive expansion. Pensions for all workers, state and private, must be raised, and the ability of financiers to shirk their obligations to retirees must be outlawed. We call for universal health care for all, including access to free, high-quality life-saving medications. We fight for full employment, the reduction of the workweek at full pay, and the reduction of the retirement age. To carry this program forward, we call for the public ownership of all major industries under the democratic control of working people. The immense wealth of the US must be put to the use of society, not the further enrichment of the financial

oligarchy.”

In her remarks to the retired workers, Jakobsson attempted to conceal her reactionary policies by emphasizing her “working class roots.” To the AFSCME retirees she boasted that she was a “union daughter, a union wife, and now a union mom.” She told both audiences that her father was a steelworker, and from this she “learned the value of hard work, and that hard work should be rewarded.” She spent much of the remainder of her talks praising her audiences and proudly harping upon the handful of “town hall meetings” she has hosted in town.

In both of her talks, Feinen, the Republican challenger, primarily confined herself to emphasizing her local ties to the community, boasting that she was born and raised in the district.

Mackaman’s discussion was met with warm applause by both audiences. The retired public workers were particularly receptive to the SEP’s message, and clearly hostile to both parties of big business, as the question and answer period that followed the talk demonstrated.

The major concerns of the retired AFSCME workers were the defense of their pensions, the spiraling cost of medication and health care, the maintenance of state employment and state services, the war in Iraq, and federal and state tax breaks to the wealthy that had contributed to the chronic budget shortfalls in Illinois.

On fiscal policy, Jakobsson, the Democrat, is indistinguishable from right-wing Republicans. In her appearances and campaign literature, she proudly boasts that she has signed “no new tax” pledges. This promise encountered hostility and open anger from the retired workers. These low-income retirees, the majority of whom survive on pensions of under \$21,000 per year, complained of the injustice in the Illinois tax system, which excises a 3 percent flat tax on all incomes. Both Feinen and Jakobsson refused to consider raising revenue through an increase in taxes on the wealthiest of Illinois residents. Feinen stated that “hard choices must be made,” while Jakobsson claimed that not raising taxes is the most important issue to her constituents.

Mackaman, in response, pointed out that the budget crisis itself can not be accepted a priori as some immutable fact. He called for an end to the war in Iraq, a large increase in income taxes for the wealthiest residents of Illinois and an increase in corporate taxes, as well as the public ownership of large-scale business in the state. He pointed out that the claim that there was no money provided the politicians of both parties the excuse to roll back the social safety net.

The retired workers complained of the cost of medication, and raised questions about last year’s federal Medicare “reform.” Democratic Governor Rod Blagojevich’s proposal to begin the importation of cheaper drugs from Canada, Ireland and the United Kingdom was not supported by either Jakobsson or Feinen. Jakobsson claimed that she still needed more time to study the program, while Feinen stated that it was

“illegal” and “unsafe” to import drugs from foreign countries. Feinen said that she was unfamiliar with the federal Medicare reform, and Jakobsson said that she did not understand it herself, but that her office tries to assist retirees in its use.

The SEP candidate responded by pointing out that the legal monopolization of pharmaceuticals points to the absurdity of claims that a beneficial free market exists in the US. “A free market for whom?” Mackaman asked. “A free market for the giant pharmaceutical corporations and HMO’s to charge any price they want for medications that people need to live.” Moving on to the discussion of Medicare, Mackaman said that the “reform” enacted last year by both Democrats and Republicans was “reform designed by major corporations for the major corporations.” He reiterated that what was necessary was the reorganization of the economy to meet human need, not private profit, and that the first step towards this end was to break with the two parties of big business who act in the interests of the financial elite.

Mackaman pointed out that the budget crises at the federal, state, and municipal levels are a direct byproduct of the US war on Iraq and its escalating military budgets. This statement brought comments of support from the audience. None of the other candidates in either discussion even mentioned the war.

Because of time constraints, only two questions were fielded by the five candidates at the teachers forum. These related, once again, to the budget crisis and Illinois tax policy. As he had on Tuesday, Mackaman responded by pointing out that the budget crisis arose from definite policies enacted by both major parties that seek to create a “business friendly” environment in Illinois by eliminating all restraints on the wealthiest citizens and business of the state to accrue profits.

The right-wing consensus between Mackaman’s Democratic and Republican opponents underscored why the state and local Democratic Party waged a bad-faith effort to bar the SEP candidate from the ballot by challenging his nominating petitions. On July 29, the Champaign County Democratic Party official who filed the challenge was forced to withdraw her objection after a detailed review of the petitions showed that the challenge was baseless and that the SEP had collected far more than the 1,325 signatures required to put Mackaman on the ballot.

On Thursday, September 8, Mackaman will participate in a candidates’ forum sponsored by the Sierra Club addressing environmental issues.

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