

SEP candidate for Congress addresses forum on disability issues in Maine

A reporter
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Carl Cooley, the Socialist Equality Party candidate for Congress in Maine's 2nd Congressional District, addressed a candidate forum held by the Disability Rights Center of Maine on August 26. The meeting, attended by about 75 people, took place in the auditorium of the Pine Tree Arboretum in the state capital of Augusta. The candidates from Maine's 1st and 2nd Congressional Districts were invited to address the forum, but Cooley's Democratic Party opponent, Michael Michaud, did not attend, sending a representative instead. A slightly edited version of Cooley's remarks to the forum follows.

"I'd first like to thank you for the opportunity to address this forum. I cannot claim to know all of the issues confronting the disabled in the state of Maine. The situation is complex, sometimes I suspect intentionally so. A search that I carried out on the Internet, however, looking for the words 'disabled' and 'budget cuts,' came up with scores of articles about state governments throughout the US slashing programs for the blind, the deaf, the mentally ill and people with other handicaps, as well as for injured workers, disabled veterans and the elderly. This included severe budget cuts in Maine.

"As a socialist I believe that the value of a society can be judged in large measure by its treatment of its most vulnerable members: children, the elderly, the sick and the disabled. The scandalous treatment of the physically and mentally ill is an indictment of the social order in America and the two political parties—the Democrats and Republicans—that preside over it. The disabled are stripped of their dignity and shunted into the corners of society. Many end up in homeless shelters or in prisons, which in many cases are the biggest deliverers of mental health services.

"The SEP believes strongly that the disabled should not be hidden, warehoused or exploited for cheap labor, but that it is society's responsibility to guarantee that disabled people have all that is necessary to lead a decent, humane and, if possible, independent life. Facilities, programs, medicines and highly trained medical and support personnel must be

provided for all, regardless of their ability to pay.

"Instead, programs are being slashed in state after state. Here, the Maine-care program has been cut. Time and time again, Democratic and Republican politicians claim there is no money for the disabled, just like they say there is no money to improve public education, provide health care for the uninsured or create decent-paying jobs.

"How can these politicians claim that the richest nation of the world does not have the resources to provide what the disabled need? The truth is that society's resources are being squandered each day to enrich the wealthiest 10 percent of the American population, those who control both big business parties. The Democrats and Republicans base their decisions not on what ordinary American people need and want, but what the corporate CEOs and the wealthy Wall Street investors demand. All that increases their profits is acceptable while anything that cuts into multimillion-dollar pay packages and stock portfolios is not.

"Under capitalism all social needs are subordinated to the private accumulation of wealth. Tax cuts and other subsidies to the rich implemented by the Bush administration with the support of the Democratic Party have starved state governments of vitally needed funds. There is also a direct connection between the war in Iraq and the cutting of spending for social programs, including those for the disabled. The current cost of the war has surpassed \$200 billion, yet both parties are committed to continue it because the big oil companies want to seize the second largest oil reserves in the world.

"My Democratic opponent Michael Michaud is now touring Maine to promote the election campaign of John Kerry. Kerry has already announced he will continue the war in Iraq, which was launched on the basis of lies to the American public. The continuation of the colonial-style occupation of Iraq will guarantee that billions more will be slashed from social spending. It also means that our sons and daughters will continue to die or come back physically and mentally scarred. At the same time, the government is slashing funds for veterans. This war is a colossal waste of

the human and financial resources of society, but in this election working people are confronted with two big business politicians—Kerry and Bush—who are committed to continue this war although tens of millions of Americans want it ended now.

“The SEP is calling for the immediate withdrawal of US troops from Iraq and an end to this criminal war. We are calling for an end to the massive tax cuts granted to the wealthy by both big business parties and the establishment of a truly progressive taxation system, which raises taxes sharply on the richest segments of the population and reduces it greatly for working people. In 1970, the top 1 percent of American households owned 20 percent of the nation’s wealth. By 2000, after three decades of union-busting, budget-cutting and tax giveaways to the rich, the top 1 percent controlled 40 percent of the national wealth.

“If the proportion of the wealth were simply reduced to the level of 1970—hardly the golden age of social equality—this would make available resources more than sufficient to meet such urgent social needs as universal health insurance, quality public education, college education for all who desire it, and the rebuilding of our country’s crumbling infrastructure.

“I can remember growing up in the Great Depression, before the days of Social Security and disability insurance, when companies threw elderly and disabled workers into the streets if they could no longer produce a profit. The working class conducted great struggles to guarantee a decent standard of living to those who could no longer work. It was never given to us out of the goodness of the hearts of the wealthy or the Democratic and Republican politicians.

“Today, however, corporate America feels it can turn the clock backwards and throw millions of disabled and elderly workers onto the scrap heap. The wealthy feel they can do this because the unions have abandoned any serious struggle to defend working people. Instead, the AFL-CIO has joined big business and the Democratic Party to force workers to pay for the crisis of American capitalism. In the past, unions pressured companies to make concessions to workers.

“Today, with companies traveling the globe to find the cheapest source of labor, the unions pressure workers to give up all of their hard-won gains to make US companies more ‘competitive’ against their global rivals. Everywhere they demand a more ‘business-friendly environment’—in other words, lower taxes, less health and safety regulations and a continuous erosion of workers’ living standards. If workers refuse, the companies simply pack up and go, like the giant paper mill companies that have destroyed thousands of jobs in Maine.

“In Europe, in Asia and on other continents, workers are facing the same assault on their wages, pensions and other

benefits, the same as we are in America. In Germany last week, thousands of workers marched against new legislation to gut unemployment and pension benefits. The SEP is fighting to unite the working class internationally and put an end to the race to the bottom to see who will work for the lowest wages and worst conditions.

“To defend and expand benefits for the disabled, workers in Maine must unite with workers throughout the US to demand the rollback of the tax cuts to the wealthy and an end to the war in Iraq, so that billions can be committed to the needs of the disabled, and for education, health care and decent housing.

“The working class cannot take a step forward while it is tied to the Democratic Party. We reject all claims that a Kerry administration would fundamentally change the course pursued by Bush. Kerry speaks for the wealthy elite, not the working class. It is time that working people build a political movement of our own, which places our interests first, not the wealthy elite. This party must be based on a socialist and internationalist program that fights for genuine democracy, social equality and peace.

“I encourage you to read our election platform and the *World Socialist Web Site*, and to make a class-conscious decision to vote for me in order to take forward the struggle to build a new political party of the working class.”

SEP candidate Carl Cooley’s remarks were followed by several questions on the nature of socialism. The socialist candidate was warmly received. A number of workers present condemned “politics as usual” and expressed satisfaction at hearing the socialist viewpoint. The SEP candidate spoke to several people who expressed interest in the campaign and asked for further information.

Carl Cooley will be speaking at a forum at the University of Maine-Orono on September 16 on the topic of “Marxism, militarism and 2004 elections.”



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