

SEP Congressional candidate Jerome White speaks on children's health issues

Our correspondent
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Socialist Equality Party Congressional candidate for the 15th District in Michigan, Jerome White, spoke on September 30 at a forum for candidates on children's health. The forum was held at the University of Michigan C.S. Mott Children's Hospital in Ann Arbor, which is part of the 15th district. Over 100 people attended the event.

White—who is running against Democratic incumbent John Dingel—was the only candidate from his district speaking on his panel. The panel also included three candidates from the 7th district: Republican Joe Schwarz, Democrat Sharon Renier, and David Horn, representing the right-wing US Taxpayers/Constitution Party. Each of the candidates was asked two questions, for which they had three and a half minutes to respond. The questions were drawn from a list provided to the candidates beforehand.

In his answers, White sought consistently to draw out broader issues, explaining that the crisis of health care for children is bound up with social inequality, poverty and the disenfranchisement of the broad majority of the population. He was the only candidate to mention the war in Iraq and explain the war's connection to social problems in the United States.

The first question addressed mercury contamination of Michigan lakes. A recent study conducted by the Environmental Protection Agency found that 100 percent of fish caught in Michigan are contaminated with mercury, with over half exceeding government regulations for women of childbearing age. Exposure to mercury at the fetus stage can lead to serious health problems for children, including learning disabilities.

While the Republican and Democratic candidates promised mild reforms to deal with the issue, White explained that the problem of pollution and environmental degradation is inseparable from broader

questions of social organization. "The problem of clean water in Michigan," he said, "is one of the sharpest expressions of how the economic and political system we live under subordinates human needs to the profits of the largest corporations."

White pointed out that the current administration is completely beholden to energy corporations, that it has just launched a war in Iraq on the behalf of energy conglomerates, and that it has appointed corporate polluters to key positions in the Environmental Protection Agency and other regulatory bodies. The Democratic Party, White said, is incapable of dealing seriously with the enormous environmental problems we face because it is ultimately beholden to the interests of corporations as well.

"It is not possible to reconcile the needs of millions and millions of people for a good environment and decent healthcare in a society in which the richest 400 people in America have a net worth of \$1 trillion."

The second question addressed the issue of health care for children. Over 200,000 children in Michigan are without health care. The question asked what were the candidates' prescriptions for improving children's access to health care.

In responding, the position of the Democratic candidate Renier was particularly noteworthy. While making some mild calls for the rich to "pay their fair share," she placed particular emphasis on the need to "cut the fat" out of the system. Expressing the enormous gulf between her and the broad sections of the population who face substandard medical care, she said that part of the problem was that people are getting too much medication, rather than that people are unable to pay for what they need. She also blamed migrant workers, many of whom are engaged as agricultural laborers in Michigan. "Let's look at the fact that we

have many, many migrant workers—illegal people who are working in our community—who don't pay into the system but are treated."

In contrast, White again placed blame squarely at the feet of the pharmaceutical and insurance companies. "The lack of health care for children is a national scandal," he said, calling for the provision of free medical care to everyone. "When my opponent Dingell entered Congress 50 years ago, there was talk about universal health care in the United States. That was 50 years ago. There has not been a single serious social reform in the United States for three decades. When President Clinton advanced an absolutely mild health care proposal—which was actually supported by the Big Three [auto companies] and much of corporate America—he was virtually drummed out of office. Kerry is going out on the limb with a proposal that will leave some 20 million people uninsured in the United States..."

What explains the fact that despite the enormous advances in technology and medicine over the past several decades, so many people are deprived of the basic right to health care? White rejected the claim that so-called illegal immigrants are to blame. "Time and time again, he noted, "the pharmaceutical companies, the HMOs, the insurance companies, have scuttled any effort to address this massive social problem."

White also sought to connect the enormous health problems confronted by many in the United States to the character of American society. There are numerous studies, he noted, "that show that although America has the most advanced technology, even if there were greater access to health care, the enormous social problems—social inequality, the lack of decent nutrition, the lack of education—contribute directly to the lack of good health. Neither the Democrats or the Republicans are addressing the vast problem of social inequality that characterizes American society."

"We believe there should be a radical redistribution of wealth in the United States. We should increase taxes sharply on the richest 10 percent of society, lowering taxes for the poor. The \$200 billion that is being squandered on a criminal war in Iraq has to be utilized to meet human needs, not the interests of the wealthy few."

White ended his remarks by urging those in attendance to support the SEP campaign. He called

attention to the anti-democratic attempts by the two parties of big business to bar the SEP and other third party candidates from the ballot in many states. This has the effect, he said, of disenfranchising the majority of the population, so that issues such as children's health, social inequality and the war in Iraq cannot be seriously addressed.

At the conclusion of the event, a number of people came up to White to express enthusiasm for his remarks and thank him for raising issues that the other candidates refused to address.



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