Town hall meeting on Social Security: Michigan Democrat seeks to contain popular anger

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Throughout the country, Congressmen from both the Republican and Democratic parties are holding "town hall" meetings on the Bush administration's plans for the introduction of individual private accounts to replace government-guaranteed Social Security pensions. The meetings—even those held by Republican politicians—have generally been an occasion for the venting of popular opposition to the reform of Social Security, the linchpin of the limited welfare system in the United States.

What was most noteworthy about the meeting held by Representative Sander Levin on February 24 was the contrast between, on the one hand, the deep hostility and concern about plans for Social Security reform coming from the audience and, on the other hand, the attitude of the Michigan Democrat. Levin, who is the leading Democrat on the Social Security Subcommittee of the House Ways and Means Committee, was more concerned about the possibility that the discussion might get out of hand—transcending the narrow boundaries in which he sought to contain it—than he was about the attack on pensions in the US.

The meeting was held at the Public Library in Southfield, Michigan, and was attended by about 300 people. Most of those who participated were middle-aged or older workers, although there were also a handful of young people.

Following Levin's initial presentation—in which he declared his opposition to the attempts by the Bush administration to "weaken and dismantle Social Security"—there was a lengthy period of questions from those in attendance. It was here that the real anger of the audience found some expression.

Many of those who asked questions or made comments voiced a desire to find some way to fight against the attacks, not only on Social Security, but all the policies of the Bush administration. One older woman worker declared, "Maybe what we need to do is converge en masse on Washington" to demand that Social Security be preserved. The Republicans, she said, were determined to destroy social programs in the US. "They have a plan in place.... If we lose Social Security, we'll return to what it was like during the depression, with people jumping off bridges because they have nothing to live on. People like the wealthy Republicans, the Bushes, they don't care" about us.

Others voiced similar conceptions, and the audience responded strongly to anyone who voiced such feelings. One individual declared, "We need to investigate Bush as a criminal." There was clearly a social character to the anger expressed by many participants. The opposition to Social Security reform is part of a broader opposition to what is seen as a right-wing policy of the rich to loot what is owed to working people and the poor.

An elderly woman called for the elimination of the cap on Social Security taxation, according to which only the first $90,000 of an individual's pay is taxed. There has been some suggestion from both Democrats and the Bush administration that the cap be raised slightly, which would result in an increased tax, mainly for middle class Americans. The woman in the audience declared that the cap should be removed altogether, so that the rich would pay taxes on all their income. "Make the rich pay as much as the poor," she said. Recent polls have shown that a large majority of Americans favor increasing taxes on the rich to pay for Social Security.

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Though many in attendance certainly had illusions that the Democratic Party would defend Social Security, some voiced a concern that the Democrats would not put up a fight on the issue. One audience member said, “Republicans are going to push, and the Democrats are going to fall all over themselves and compromise. This is the time for Democrats to go on the offensive.”

An elderly worker said, “Social Security was created for a purpose: for people who didn’t have jobs, for poor people. When you worked and [the companies] didn’t want to pay for [your retirement] you had something to count on. Why do you [Levin] let the Republicans steal our money?”

Levin’s response to all of these comments was an attempt to diffuse the hostility and evade answering any challenge voiced against the right-wing policies of the Democratic Party. In response to any strong statement made by a member of the audience, he urged repeatedly that the meeting not be turned into a “political rally.” He said that he wanted “to have an intensive, thoughtful discussion. This is not a conspiracy [against Social Security]. It is a difference of opinion.” Levin never once suggested that the attack on Social Security was motivated by the interests of corporations or the wealthy.

It was clear that Levin was not prepared to “go on the offensive.” The last thing that the Democrats want is the mobilization of mass opposition to the policies of the Bush administration. There is no doubt that Levin and the rest of the Democrats will prepare a compromise with the Republicans to avoid this.

Equally significant was Levin’s repeated insistence that the war in Iraq not be a subject for discussion at the meeting; that it was completely separate from the question of the privatization of Social Security. This conflicted with the desire of many in the audience to discuss the issue.

One woman, who said she was 60 years old, declared, “I don’t trust anyone [in the government].” Addressing not Levin, but the audience, she said, “I say no to the billions of dollars spent on the war in Iraq. What do you say?” The response was a unanimous and emphatic, “No!”

Levin insisted that the discussion not touch on Iraq because he is well aware of the enormous hostility to the war within his own constituency, a hostility that finds no expression in the Democratic Party. If Levin were to respond truthfully to the woman’s question, he would have to reply with an equally emphatic, “Yes!” Levin voted for the October 2003 bill that granted $87.5 billion for emergency spending on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. He also voted for the $418 billion defense spending authorization bill passed in June 2004.

In their support for the war, the Democrats expose the worthlessness of any promise they might make to defend Social Security. The innumerable wars launched and planned by the American government, the growing attack on democratic rights and the assault on Social Security and other programs that help ordinary Americans are part of a single policy. The attack on social programs is mandated by the need to force working people to pay for the wars planned and executed in the interest of the American ruling elite. It is impossible to oppose these attacks while supporting the war.

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