

SEP candidate for US Senate wins support at Buffalo New York forum for disabled

Our reporter
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Wednesday and Thursday Bill Van Auken, Socialist Equality Party candidate for US Senate from New York, took his campaign to Buffalo where he addressed an SEP campaign rally of students and workers near Buffalo State College.

He also received a warm response when he spoke before more than 50 people at an October 18 candidate forum sponsored by the Western New York Independent Living Project in Buffalo. The family social service agency provides independent housing as well as numerous other services for the mentally and physically disabled. The agency has faced constant budget cuts from both the state government in Albany and the federal government.

Van Auken was the only candidate running for federal office who accepted the invitation to speak. Many of those in the audience have been particularly hard hit by the recent 18- inch snow storm that hit the city October 12 and 13. The early storm snapped thousands of trees, causing downed power lines.

More than 400,000 people in the counties of Erie, Genesee, Orleans and Niagara were initially without power. Nearly a week later, 100,000 residents still remain without power. There is an estimated 10 million cubic yards of debris throughout the area from fallen trees and branches. Due to failed sump pumps many homes have flooded.

Many residents are angry that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) did not arrive until five days after the storm. The FEMA damage assessment teams only arrived on October 18 to assess damage in the four counties and determine whether the area is eligible for federal public and individual assistance. Michael Beeman, FEMA's acting director of response and recovery, suggested that Washington is not likely to provide a disaster declaration that would trigger increased aid. "We do not have a catastrophic event here," he told the media.

Thirteen people have died as a result of the storm—the majority from carbon monoxide fumes due to improper venting of generators and space heaters. In addition, 170 people have been hospitalized due to heart attacks in the

effort to remove debris, carbon monoxide poisoning, and other injuries.

Members of the audience pointed out they were among those who could least afford this disaster, including even the purchase of a generator—an item that is a necessity for those requiring life support systems. Audience members also expressed concern over whether FEMA or any other agencies would reimburse them for the cost of replacing insulin and other medicines spoiled by lack of refrigeration during the power outage.

Van Auken's remarks began by addressing the situation in Buffalo, condemning the wholly callous and inadequate government response. He continued,

"I do not claim to be an expert on all of the issues confronting the disabled in the state of New York and nationally, which was one of the reasons I was grateful for the opportunity to come here and learn more from you.

"I do know enough, however, to understand that the federal government in Washington, the state government in Albany and on down to county and city governments have been relentlessly slashing what are already inadequate programs to assist the physically and mentally disabled as well as compensation for workers injured on the job and even care for the many thousands of soldiers who are returning from Iraq with serious wounds and mental trauma.

"As a socialist, I believe that the true measure of a society is not how many billionaires it can produce or how much wealth can be piled up by a financial oligarchy at the top, but rather how the most vulnerable members of that society—children, the elderly, the poor, the sick and disabled—are treated.

"The abysmal indifference shown by America's ruling elite and both major political parties to the conditions of all of these sectors is an indictment of a social order driven by private profit rather than human need.

"Again and again, the politicians, Democratic and Republican alike, claim that there is no money for decent public education, to fund health care, create jobs or support programs that allow the disabled to lead decent, independent

and productive lives.

“How is this possible? Since 1972, the GDP has grown 50 percent. In other words, there are substantially more resources to solve society’s pressing problems, not less. Yet in this same period, working people have seen their real incomes decline, while vital social programs are starved for funds. Where has the money gone? Since 1979, the top 1 percent of the US population has seen its share of the wealth more than double, to over 40 percent. Wages, meanwhile, now account for the lowest share of national income in 60 years, while profits are at their highest since the 1960s.

“This vast upward redistribution of wealth has been achieved through the tax cuts, budget cuts and subsidies to the corporations and the rich implemented by successive administrations—Democratic and Republican alike—over the past 25 years.

And, while the politicians claim that there is no money for social programs, they have no problem spending \$2 billion a week to continue an illegal war in Iraq, which is opposed by the great majority of the Americans. Indeed, as its last act before going home to campaign for reelection, the US Senate voted unanimously to approve another \$70 billion in war spending, Hillary Clinton among them.

“My party stands for fundamental change. While my opponent Hillary Clinton wants to continue the war in Iraq, we call for the immediate end to the war and the withdrawal of all US troops. This war is being fought not to further the security of the American people but to serve the interest of the oil companies. As long as the occupation continues, more lives will be lost.

“We stand for the defense of democratic rights against the most serious threats ever posed since the founding of the American republic. Democrats like Clinton decided to sit on their hands while Congress passed a law that allows the president to lock up anyone without charges on his sole say-so that the individual is an ‘enemy combatant,’ a term so vaguely defined that it could include any political opponent of the government.

“The SEP proposes concrete measures to promote social equality, starting with the repeal of all of the tax cuts implemented since the Reagan administration, raising taxes on the accumulated wealth of the super-rich and closing the loopholes used by the corporations to avoid paying taxes. The tax burden for the vast majority of working people should be significantly reduced.

“We call for the present capitalist setup, in which huge corporations and banks which determine the conditions of life for millions are privately owned, to be replaced by a socialist system of public ownership and democratic control of the economy. We advocate an economic system based on the principle of satisfying human needs, not the creation of

profit and the accumulation of vast personal wealth.

“Establishing social control over these corporations would provide the resources to ensure free universal, comprehensive medical coverage for all, state-funded housing construction to provide affordable homes and money for high quality public education.

“My opponent Hillary Clinton, needless to say, opposes such a solution, and for good reason. She reported a family income of over \$7 million last year and she is the biggest recipient of campaign contributions from the healthcare lobby, the drug companies and the Wall Street banks.

“The precondition for achieving any of the goals I have outlined—ending the war, the defense of democratic rights and the allocation of resources to meet vital social needs—is breaking the political monopoly exercised by the two parties controlled by big business, the Democrats and Republicans.

“This is the purpose of the Socialist Equality Party’s campaign in the 2006 election. We are in this election not merely to win votes, but to build a new political movement of working people, independent of the two big business parties, to fight for our interests and for the socialist transformation of society.”

Following the SEP candidate’s remarks, a number of questions were asked about the government’s response to the Buffalo storm, the position of the SEP regarding solar power, and low-income housing. The most discussion centered on opposition to the war in Iraq.

A worker in the audience declared, “In my opinion the war is with the Democrats and Republicans. They are waging a war here against us. While they spend billions of dollars for the military, people here do not have what they need. The Iraq war is based on lies.”

Many stayed to thank Van Auken for attending and took the SEP election program to study.



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