

Michigan SEP candidate addresses high school, college students

Our reporter
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Socialist Equality Party congressional candidate Jerome White spoke to hundreds of Michigan high school and community college students last week, explaining the need for young people to take up a political struggle for socialism against war, the attacks on democratic rights and the growth of social inequality.

White was invited to discuss the SEP election campaign by several government and civics class teachers at Oak Park, Southfield-Lathrup and Centerline high schools. The schools are located in the 12th Congressional District in Detroit's northern suburbs where White is challenging the 12-term Democratic incumbent congressman, Sander Levin. Student government and faculty members also set up a speaking engagement for White at Monroe Community College, in the neighboring 15th District, near the Ohio border.

Among the students there was widespread anger over the war in Iraq and a general distrust of politicians from both big business parties. They also expressed concern about the danger of a military draft, the high costs of college education and the limited prospects young people confront once they join the job market. The SEP candidate was warmly received and students asked many serious questions about the causes of the war and the economic and political structure of American society. Several teachers also expressed anger over the inadequate funding for education, the lack of sufficient school supplies and the attack on teachers' working conditions and living standards.

At all of the visits, White began with a brief overview of the SEP program and how the election campaign was laying the foundation for a break with the Democratic Party and the building of a powerful socialist party of the working class. While the SEP was seeking to win many votes, the most essential goal of the SEP election campaign, White said, was to politically educate workers and youth and prepare them for the struggles that would follow the November elections.

At Oak Park High School, where White addressed several classes on October 23, the discussion centered on the social and economic interests the Democratic and Republican parties served and why working class people needed to build a political party of their own.

Both parties supported the launching the war in Iraq, tax

breaks to the wealthy and cutting public education and other social programs, he said, in order to defend the wealthy elite, at the expense of working people. White presented several graphs showing the enormous gap that had opened up between the richest 1 percent of the population and the bottom 90 percent, noting that America was run by a financial "oligarchy"—a word students said they were familiar with, since they had just studied ancient Rome.

The SEP candidate challenged the notion that the people had any serious democratic control over the direction of the country, asking the students, "Did you or your parents get to vote on launching the war in Iraq? Did they vote on cutting educational programs or whether or not Ford and GM would lay off 60,000 workers? No. These decisions were made by the rich, who control the wealth and both political parties in America." In order to establish genuine democracy, White said, working people would have to take control of economic and political life and reorganize it to meet the needs of the masses of people, not the wealthy elite.

During the discussion the teacher described conditions in Oak Park High School—which, although already badly under-funded, has seen its student population approach 2,000, as hundreds of students from Detroit's impoverished schools transferred during the recent teachers strike. The teacher explained that he had once taught in the affluent Oakland County suburb of Birmingham where every student was given a laptop computer. In Oak Park, he explained, students were lucky to have two dilapidated desktop computers per class.

When White arrived at Southfield-Lathrup High School to address students on October 25, the staff member greeting his campaign team at the door was wearing a button reading, "Working Without a Contract." She explained that Southfield teachers have been working without a contract since last year.

White received a warm reception from the ninth grade civic class students, who gathered in the school's auditorium to hear the SEP candidate. When he asked students why they thought the Bush administration had begun the war, one student responded, "oil." Many agreed with this assessment.

White asked the students whether they thought the Democratic Party was opposed to Bush, Dick DeVos (the Republican candidate for Michigan governor), and other

representatives of the wealthy. One student answered, “I think the Democrats are more for the lower class and the Republicans are for the rich.”

In response, White explained that while they Democrats presented themselves as a party of the workers and minorities they defended the same corporate interests as the Republicans. “The Democrats have supported the decades-long assault of working people, which has enriched the few at the top,” White said, and “they voted to support Bush’s launching of Iraq war and the continual squandering of hundreds of billions of dollars to fund it.” He added, “The Democrats even more so than the Republicans are pushing for reinstituting the draft. Are you going to have the right to vote on that?”

The issue of the draft provoked a deep concern among the students. One student commented, “I don’t think that’s right that they can come into your home and send you off to fight in a war that you don’t agree with.”

After pointing to the enormous concentration of wealth in America, White said, “it is a lie to claim there is not enough money for decent paying jobs, public education and health care for the nearly 47 million without medical insurance.” When he noted that public school teachers had just been forced to go on strike in Detroit and that Southfield teachers were without a labor agreement, the students burst into a spontaneous round of applause for their teachers.

Another student asked, “If there are so many people disgusted with the Democrats and the Republicans, why don’t they support the socialists?”

White responded that organizations like the unions and the civil rights establishment, which claim to represent working people and minorities, in fact support the Democratic and Republican parties and the capitalist system they defend. They have betrayed their struggles, always trying to channel the anger of workers and youth back into the two-party system. Workers and youth were beginning to look for an alternative to the two big business parties, he said, but they required a new leadership based on socialist policies.

“Your generation is going to be involved in great struggles,” White said, pointing to mass demonstrations that had broken out around the world over the past year. “Workers and young people in France were demonstrating in defense of immigrant rights, and people in this country held mass protests in defense of immigrant rights right here.”

Time ran out with many students still having questions. White encouraged them to read and study the SEP election statement and to visit the *World Socialist Web Site*.

White also spoke before two classes of seniors at Centerline High School in Macomb County. The war was uppermost in the minds of the students, including one young woman whose brother was completing his third tour of duty in Iraq. After hearing White explain that the US had conquered a small nation in order to seize its oil resources, one youth, who had a “US Army” book bag at his feet, commented, “Bush is doing what

Hitler did in World War II.” White pointed to the fact that the Nazi leadership had been convicted after the Second World War for launching an unprovoked war, and said that Bush should be tried for a war crime that had led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and nearly 3,000 US soldiers.

The students in this class—who were made up of black, white, Hispanic and Asian youth—responded powerfully to the SEP’s fight for the unity of the working class against all forms of racism and nationalism. White explained that both the Democrats and Republicans were attempting to divert anger over the lack of educational and job opportunities by pitting working people against each other on the basis of race or ethnic origins.

At Monroe Community College White addressed a lunchtime meeting at the student union. After explaining the election campaign many students asked questions about the party’s program, the war in Iraq and the devastating economic conditions in Michigan, which has one of the highest unemployment rates in the US, second only to hurricane-ravaged Mississippi.

One student asked whether imposing high taxes on the wealthy would undermine businesses and lead to further unemployment. White explained that corporate CEOs and wealthy investors at Delphi and Northwest Airlines had actually driven their companies into bankruptcy in order to meet their short-term goal of boosting share values. While thousands of workers lost their jobs, medical care and pensions, the top executives rewarded themselves with multimillion-dollar pay packages and retirement benefits. In order to guarantee economic security for workers and high-quality and low-cost products for consumers these industries had to be transformed into public enterprises, White said.

Afterwards, several students, including two exchange students from Holland and France, came up to White to thank him for the presentation and for being the first at Monroe Community College to present a socialist alternative to the politics presented by the Democrats and Republicans.



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