

Jerry White addresses students at candidates' forum in Dayton, Ohio

Our reporter
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Socialist Equality Party presidential candidate Jerry White attended a candidates' forum at Thurgood Marshall High School in Dayton, Ohio on Monday. White spoke before group of 150 high school seniors and presented a socialist alternative to Obama and McCain.

Dayton, an industrial city in southeastern Ohio, has been ravaged by years of plant closings and deindustrialization. Once a center of parts production for General Motors, *Forbes* magazine now lists Dayton as one of the ten fastest dying cities in America.



Jerry White speaking at Thurgood Marshall High School in Dayton, Ohio

Participating in the forum were White and Clayton Luckie, a second-term Democratic state representative, who spoke on behalf of the Obama campaign. The Republicans did not send a representative.

In his remarks, Luckie told the mostly black student audience that the election of Obama would be a vindication of the long struggle for civil rights by African Americans. Having made this assertion, however, he could not point to any significant measure Obama was proposing that would actually improve the lives of working people and youth—black or white.

Addressing the students—in a city where one of every three children under 18 is poor—Luckie boasted he had “made it” and the system would reward them too if they pulled themselves up by their own “bootstraps.” The Democratic politician was quick to refute McCain’s

charge that Obama wanted to “share the wealth.” The rich, he said, were not the problem.

Such an outlook corresponds to the aspiring layers of the upper middle class for whom Obama speaks. In addition to being a part-time legislator, Luckie is a director of JEC Paper and Related Products, one of the nation’s largest minority-owned companies.

In his remarks, White explained that the two-party system was designed to exclude the interests of the working class and any genuine voice of opposition to the corporate-controlled parties. As an example, he pointed to the bailout of Wall Street engineered by the Bush administration, with the full backing of the Democratic congressional leadership and Obama. The multitrillion-dollar transfer of public assets to the wealthy, he said, had been carried out without the slightest public debate.

White asked the students if they had been given the choice of how the trillions being handed to the banks would be spent. Several responded that the money should be used to improve public education and health care. “That’s why the American people were never asked,” White said.

It was natural, White said, that many young people who had grown up during the Bush years wanted to get rid of the Republicans. At the same time, many hoped the election of the first African-American president would lead to social progress.

However, he said, what would determine the policy of the next administration would not be the personality of the candidates, their campaign promises, or their skin color, but the crisis of American capitalism and the class interests served by both Obama and McCain.

White pointed out that Obama was already trying to dampen the expectations of voters because he would not be able to deliver his meager proposals due to the cost of the bailout, the economic downturn and the continued wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

He explained that the SEP was fighting for the building of a mass political party of the working class, independent of and opposed to the Democrats and Republicans. The purpose of such a party was to fight for a workers' government and the socialist reorganization of economic and political life.

White pointed to the enormous gap between the richest Americans and the rest of the population, noting that the wealth of the richest 1 percent of Americans totaled \$16.8 trillion—\$2 trillion more than the combined wealth of the lower 90 percent of the population.

White asked the students if they had a problem with “sharing the wealth” in the US. Almost without exception the students said that was a good idea. In response to a student’s question about improving conditions in Dayton, White said the auto industry and financial institutions had to be put under the democratic control of working people and trillions poured into rebuilding the cities, stopping foreclosures and evictions, and guaranteeing decent-paying jobs and high quality education for all.

State Representative Luckie acknowledged that the Ohio state legislature had already agreed to a 10 percent across-the-board cut in the state budget. In response to a student’s question about whether there would be Social Security when he was old enough to retire, the Democratic politician complained that people were living much longer than they were when the government-funded retirement program was established in the 1930s. Because of this, Luckie said, young people would have to pay more taxes to keep Social Security going. He added that they should not rely on Social Security anyway, and asked the students, “Has anyone ever told you how to invest your money?”

White interjected, saying claims there was no money for Social Security and other vitally needed programs was a fraud. He pointed to the trillions spent on the Wall Street bailout and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Insofar as the Democratic politician addressed in any way the issues of unemployment, failing schools, or decaying neighborhoods, Luckie sought to blame the problems on other countries and complained that people were buying cars from Japan instead of from US-based manufacturers. “We need to return to ‘Buy American’ and ‘Buy Ohio’,” he said, accusing every country from China and Japan, to Saudi Arabia and Iraq, for the collapsing economy.

White pointed out that nationalist appeals had long been used by the Democrats and the trade union bureaucracy to conceal the class divisions in the US. He said that modern

corporations operated internationally and sought to pit American workers against their brothers and sisters in other countries to see who would work for the lowest wages and worst conditions.

White said he had recently been in Germany where GM was wiping out thousands of jobs. In opposition to economic nationalism, he said, the SEP fights for the international unity of the working class in a common struggle against the capitalist system.

The SEP candidate warned that Obama would escalate the wars in the Middle East and Central Asia to assert US domination over the energy-rich regions. He noted that Obama had recently told students that they should expect to do “national service” in exchange for government support to go to college. This, White said, was the first step towards military conscription—the draft.

Luckie defended Obama, claiming that such wars were in “our national interest.” His justification for this assertion was that working class youth from Dayton and other poor cities were fighting and dying in these countries—and therefore the war effort should be supported!

Luckie complained that the Bush administration did not follow the advice of military leaders like Colin Powell to use overwhelming force to crush resistance to the US invasions. “I agree with Powell,” Luckie said, “We should just drop a bomb and walk away. That would mean fewer American kids being killed.”

White denounced these remarks, saying that the US government was guilty of war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan. He called for the immediate withdrawal of US troops and the dismantling of the US war machine.

The debate provoked a great deal of discussion among students who had never been exposed to a socialist political alternative. After the forum several students and teachers thanked White for his remarks and for addressing the issues that most concerned them.



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