

SEP holds public meeting on crisis in the auto industry

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The Socialist Equality Party held a public meeting on the crisis in the auto industry on Saturday, December 20, in Detroit. The meeting held at Wayne State University outlined a political strategy for workers to fight plant closures, layoffs, and concessions.

In the main report to the meeting, WSWs reporter and SEP member Jerry White began by describing the extreme concessions that will be demanded of autoworkers as a result of the recently announced Bush administration “bailout” of the industry. He warned that the central aim of the government and banks is to undermine the pay and conditions of autoworkers as a first salvo against the working class as a whole. (See “Report to SEP meeting: “Auto workers must resist government-corporate demand for poverty wages”)

“It is no exaggeration to say that the concessions being demanded from auto workers would reduce them from being among the highest paid industrial workers in the world to conditions of poverty and exploitation not seen since the days before the mass industrial unions were built in the 1930s,” White said.

White discussed the historical role of the UAW’s approach to union-corporate collaboration and concessions, based on the false identification of workers’ interests with those of “their” bosses and national governments, and pointing to the devastating legacy this had left autoworkers.

White warned that President-elect Barack Obama would not be an ally of workers. On the contrary, Obama’s main aim will be to carry forward the

impoverishment of autoworkers, while providing “cover for the UAW,” which “has already agreed in principle to all of the Bush administration’s demands.”

White outlined a socialist strategy to fight plant closures, layoffs, and concessions. It is necessary, he said, for “a fundamental change in the practice, politics and philosophy of the workers’ movement.”

First, he said, workers must revive forms of direct struggle based upon the independent interests of the working class, by organizing demonstrations, strikes and factory occupations, those “militant traditions of an earlier period that have been suppressed by the trade union bureaucracy.” He urged workers to form rank-and-file factory, workplace and neighborhood committees in opposition to the UAW and the entire trade union bureaucracy.

Second, White explained that the SEP calls for a break with the Democratic Party. “Industrial action must be linked to a new political strategy,” he said. “For decades, the unions have promoted the myth that the interests of workers can be advanced through the Democratic Party. The Democrats, no less than the Republicans, represent the corporations and banks. Workers should place no reliance on the incoming Obama administration, which fully supports the assault on the autoworkers. Workers need a new political party based upon their independent interests.”

Third, it was necessary to reject the capitalist market and revive the traditions of international socialism. “Workers within the United States and throughout the world are facing the consequences of an economic system whose central principle is the pursuit of private

profit—regardless of its consequences for society as a whole,” he said. “In response to the unfolding crisis of world capitalism, the SEP fights for the socialist reorganization of the economy.”

This would entail the nationalization of the auto industry and financial institutions under public ownership and democratic control, and the building of a workers’ government: “a government of, by and for the working class,” White said.

Other speakers on the platform included SEP National Chairman David North, National Secretary Joseph Kishore, and Assistant National Secretary Lawrence Porter. Speakers affirmed that the SEP would intensify its work among autoworkers in the coming weeks and months.

Discussion followed the presentations.

A student from Oakland University, near Detroit, whose father works for General Motors, asked the panel how wage cuts would save the auto industry if workers could no longer afford the cars that they make.

In response, North said that fundamentally corporations were in business to make profit, not make cars. This was precisely the point of the “restructuring.” The new auto industry, and the economy more generally, would be reduced massively, intensifying the exploitation of workers while marketing cars to a much smaller share of the population.

White added that this marked a transition from what was once called the “Fordist” economy, a central tenet of which was that workers should have a purchasing power that would allow them, for example, to buy the cars they produce. The social principle being developed in the auto industry, he said, was similar to the industrial organization of China, in which exploited workers had little chance of buying the products they make.

Greetings of solidarity with the US autoworkers were received from the Canadian, French, and German sections of the SEP. These messages stressed that

autoworkers the world over face the same conditions, and that they must unite internationally on a socialist program to fight against layoffs and the impoverishment of the entire working class.



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