

Socialist Equality Party holds public meetings in New Orleans, Mobile

A WSWWS reporting team
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) held two public meetings in the Gulf Coast last week, centering on the political implications of the BP oil spill. The meetings, which took place on August 3 at Tulane University in New Orleans and August 4 at the University of South Alabama in Mobile, focused on the connection between the Gulf oil spill and the capitalist system that produced it.

The meetings were led by Andre Damon, who made two trips to the Gulf Coast to cover the BP oil disaster as a correspondent for the *World Socialist Web Site*. Based on interviews with experts and residents, Damon outlined the sociological, ecological and health impact of the oil spill, now acknowledged to be the worst in human history.

Damon set out to show that the government systematically obscured the extent of the spill in order to protect BP's interests, in pursuance of its central aim of keeping the company profitable despite the damage that it caused. "The government figures, first presented as 1,000, then 5,000, 12,000, 25,000, and ultimately 62,000 barrels of oil per day, show a carefully managed publicity exercise designed to limit public outrage at BP," he said.

Damon spoke from personal experience about the suppression of media coverage of the spill, recounting how his team was turned away from a shoreline covered in oil by Fishing and Wildlife officers, at the behest of local BP officials.

Damon said that the \$20 billion pledged by BP for paying damages to residents is wholly inadequate, given the level of destruction for which the company is responsible. "The BP spill has already released at least many times more oil than the Exxon Valdez, and if the

finances from the Exxon Valdez were applied dollar for dollar to the BP disaster, the total would be several times larger than the \$20 billion escrow account," said Damon. "Given the fact that Louisiana has a population density 100 times greater than that of Alaska, a reasonable estimate of the damages moves into the trillions," he added.

Reviewing the numerous cases of fraud, illegality and gross negligence in the daily operation of the Deepwater Horizon oil rig, Damon said that the blame for the disaster lies squarely with BP. "The company cut every possible corner, even over the objections of its partners, in order to fatten its own profits. This directly resulted in the deaths of 11 rig workers, and hundreds of billions of dollars in economic damages."

"Yet the government is determined to let the company off unpunished," he said. "This is in keeping with the whole policy: the government routinely and systematically approved BP's unsafe practices, and, with the direct support of the Obama administration, the company was free from even the most token regulation."

"It has been the explicit policy of the Obama White House to leave BP in charge of the cleanup, even though the company has pursued unsafe measures to reduce the cleanup costs, and sought to hide the damage to limit its own liability," Damon added. "Last year the Obama administration exempted the Deepwater Horizon from a mandatory report on the environmental impact of the drilling project. This administration has repeatedly shown itself as the staunchest defender of BP's profit interests."

The presentation also featured profiles of local residents interviewed by the *World Socialist Web Site*. The first of these featured Thynara Ohm, a Vietnamese fisherman working in Venice, Louisiana. "He put all of

his money into his boat, and was unable to recoup any of it, because the fishing season started immediately after the spill,” said Damon. “Ohm will have to move back to Vietnam unless he gets help.”

Damon also recounted the stories of Sean, a cleanup worker in Venice who was afraid he would get sick, but could not openly talk to the press, and Dean Blanchard, a shrimp company owner who plans to close his operation in Louisiana, destroying 90 jobs with it.

Tom Agnew, a Tulane University student who came to the meeting in New Orleans, said he was struck by the fact that Blanchard plans to move out of the country because he does not feel safe in the US. “I’ve tried and I can’t think of anything much sadder than that,” he said after the meeting.

After the lecture, a member of the Gulf Restoration Network, Colin Nugent, an environmental nonprofit, recounted his experiences of the spill and its aftermath. “Every aspect of the cleanup is profit-driven. BP does not even clean up the oil that it can’t resell.” He added that “many of the fishermen put out of work tried to get a job on the cleanup but could not, because BP was not hiring them.

“The oil spill is just the latest insult against the Gulf Coast,” he said. “We are losing 25 square miles of coastal wetlands every year, in large measure as a result of the oil industry.”

Damon concluded his remarks by equating the BP oil spill with the capitalist system as a whole. “This disaster is the quintessential expression of capitalism. It is an irrational, archaic and bankrupt form of social organization. The only way forward is to replace capitalism with socialism, and the only way to do that is by means of a mass movement of the working class, led by its own political party.”

The question and answer session focused on the viability of this perspective, and the necessity of an “all or nothing” struggle against capitalism. In attendance was a member of the International Socialist Organization, who asked about the SEP’s stance on “reform,” and whether it made sense to eschew present gains in order to further a “utopian” socialist society.

Damon replied, “In 2008, people tried to implement reform by voting for Obama; but he only continued the policies of Bush; the American ruling class is beyond reform. The question is ultimately one of class orientation: there is no way to prevent disasters like the

Gulf Coast oil spill outside of the working class mobilizing independently, in its own interest, to transform society. The only impetus that drives ‘reform’ is the threat of revolution.”

Damon concluded the New Orleans meeting by calling on those present to join the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) and the SEP, and to help build the new ISSE section at Tulane University.

“No city has been so utterly forsaken and betrayed by capitalism as New Orleans; first with Hurricane Katrina, and now with the oil spill,” he said. “But the atrocities committed against the people of this city are only one part an overall offensive against working people throughout the country and internationally.

“I call on everyone in this meeting to join the ISSE and SEP, and to help mobilize the counteroffensive of working people against the system that causes war, unemployment and disasters like the financial crisis and oil spill.”



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