

The Breakdown of Capitalism and the Fight for Socialism in the United States

Program of the Socialist Equality Party Part two

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The Basic Social Rights of the Working Class

44. Every man, woman and child is entitled to live and enjoy his or her life and develop his or her potential to the maximum, without the curse of poverty and material want. The fact that tens of millions of people in the United States are “ill-fed, ill-clothed, ill-housed and insecure”—nearly 70 years after President Roosevelt declared that such conditions are intolerable—is an unanswerable indictment of American capitalism. The Socialist Equality Party proposes that the working class adopt the concept that there exist social rights that are essential to life in a complex modern society and, therefore, “inalienable.” Working people must resolve to secure these rights through the mobilization of their strength as a class, independent of and in opposition to the corporate-controlled political parties and the institutions of the capitalist state. These rights are:

The right to a job

45. The right to employment is the most basic of all. Without a steady, good-paying job, it is impossible to satisfy all other needs. The loss of a job means the loss of self-esteem and social connection, immense psychological distress, along with the elimination of health care coverage, the destruction of life savings, and vulnerability to poverty and homelessness for oneself and one’s family.

46. Millions of Americans confront this desperate situation. What was once considered unacceptable in the US is now proclaimed the “new normal.” The official unemployment rate is close to 10 percent, while real unemployment is much higher. Half of the jobless have been without work for more than 27 weeks, and the average length of unemployment is nine months—a level of long-term unemployment unseen since the Great Depression. Some 26 million people are unemployed or underemployed. In some states, official unemployment is over 14 percent, while real unemployment in urban centers can approach 50 percent.

47. Chronic unemployment is robbing an entire younger generation of

its future. Sixty percent of college students are graduating with no offer of a job, and more than half of workers 16-24 years of age have no job, the highest level since World War II. It is universally acknowledged that today’s youth will live significantly worse than their parents.

48. An emergency public works program must be launched immediately to provide employment for all. There is plenty of work to do—rebuilding schools, hospitals, public housing, roads, mass transportation, water and sewage systems, communications networks and other public facilities, and improving the conditions of life for working people.

49. Against mass unemployment, layoffs and workplace shutdowns, the working class must defend unconditionally the right to a job. Every worker who is laid off and all those entering the workforce must be guaranteed paid job training and employment.

The right to a livable income

50. Wages have been under attack for decades. The dismantling of industry has wiped out “middle-class” manufacturing jobs, with decent wages, benefits and job security. In the auto industry, which long set the standard for manufacturing wages, new workers are hired at \$14 an hour, barely above the grossly inadequate official poverty line for a family of four. Mass unemployment is deliberately used to drive down labor costs and boost profits. The Obama administration’s strategy for economic growth is based on turning the US into a cheap labor platform for exports.

51. The current federal minimum wage (\$7.25 an hour) condemns millions to poverty. It must be replaced by a guaranteed annual income that covers all needs. The many people unable to work because of old age, disability or ill health must also receive this income.

52. For decades, credit cards, second mortgages and other forms of debt have concealed the decline of living standards. The same big banks bailed out with public funds are tightening the screws on working people. To ensure economic security, there must be immediate debt relief for the millions of Americans who work as virtual indentured servants to giant financial institutions. This should include reducing debt payments to affordable levels and abolishing usurious interest rates, bank fees and overdraft fees.

The right to leisure

53. Workers have been subjected to a relentless increase in the

workweek, with millions dependent upon overtime and multiple jobs to make ends meet. The eight-hour day, the demand raised by the workers' movement nearly 150 years ago, is now a thing of the past. American workers put in 340 hours more a year on the job than workers in France—nearly nine full weeks. While millions remain on the unemployment lines, employers seek to cut costs by increasing the hours of those still working, rather than hiring the jobless. This is intolerable. To improve conditions of life and provide jobs for the unemployed, the workweek must be shortened. Workers should earn a full-time income based on a 30-hour workweek.

54. Out of the world's 33 richest countries, the US is the only one in which workers receive no legally mandated paid vacation. Nearly half of all workers have no paid sick days. Workers have a right to sufficient time for family, leisure and cultural activities. This must include the right to five weeks paid vacation annually, together with adequate paid sick days and paid family leave. To relieve the burden on families, society must provide free childcare and after-school activities.

The right to decent and affordable housing

55. An estimated 3.5 million people, including 1 million children, become homeless every year. Over 1 million houses are repossessed, and tens of thousands face eviction from rented homes and apartments every year. The emergence on the outskirts of major cities of tent cities, the modern equivalent of the "Hoovervilles" of the Great Depression, is among the most damning indictments of the profit system.

56. The economic crisis of 2008 was precipitated by a speculative binge in subprime mortgages. Mortgage lenders exploited people's need for a home in a filthy scheme designed to extract as much as possible from those least able to pay. In the process, home prices shot up to record levels. As housing prices have collapsed over the past two years, millions of people now find themselves "under water," owing more to the banks than their homes are worth.

57. A major factor in homelessness is the lack of affordable housing. Due to the surge in housing costs and the decline in income, the average American consumer spends 34 percent of income on housing and another 30 percent on transportation. This leaves very little for food, utilities, health care, education and other basic necessities.

58. There must be an immediate halt to all foreclosures and evictions. All mortgages should be restructured to affordable levels, indexed to income and employment status.

59. The right to decent housing for all can be assured only by placing the home-building and financing industry under public ownership, and pouring hundreds of billions of dollars in public funds into the construction of new homes and apartments and the renovation of existing buildings.

The right to utilities and transportation

60. Every year, millions of households in the US have their utilities turned off for non-payment. Shutoffs, which serve the profit interests of the giant utility companies, lead directly to deadly fires, people freezing to death in their homes and other social horrors.

61. The deregulation and privatization of utility companies throughout the country has led to sharp increases in electricity and heating bills. Worst affected are the poor. On average, an individual on Supplemental

Security Income (SSI) now spends about 20 percent of income on utilities. Many workers face unpaid utility bills in the thousands of dollars. Federal and local programs for low-income energy assistance are grossly inadequate and underfunded, and the Obama administration is planning another \$1.8 billion cut in assistance this year.

62. All the basic utilities—including electricity, gas, phone and Internet access—must be made available to everyone as a basic right, not subordinated to the profit needs of the utility companies.

63. Similarly, mass transportation systems have been starved of public investment and allowed to decay, where they exist at all. This has particularly severely impacted those who are elderly, disabled or otherwise unable to provide their own transportation. All people must have access to safe and affordable public transportation.

The right to high-quality health care

64. Advances in medical technology make possible an enormous improvement in the health of the world's population. Yet more than 46 million people in the US lack any health insurance, while at least 25 million more are "underinsured"—unable to bridge the gap between insurance coverage and medical bills. Existing federal health care programs, including Medicare and Medicaid, are inadequate, underfunded and under relentless attack.

65. Despite health care costs that are double or more those in other advanced capitalist countries, the US ranks last among them in conditions of health. According to a 2009 study by Harvard researchers, there were nearly 45,000 deaths in the US in 2005 associated with lack of health insurance. High medical bills are responsible for 62 percent of all personal bankruptcies, and 80 percent of these are among families that have health insurance.

66. The response of the ruling class to this health care crisis has been to cut costs for the corporations and the government and ration health care for the vast majority of the population. The Obama administration is spearheading this campaign under the fraudulent banner of a health care "reform" that was drafted in close consultation with the insurance companies and drug manufacturers. At the same time, the Obama administration has created a bipartisan budget deficit panel tasked with cutting federal health care programs and Social Security. At a state level, governments starved of resources are slashing coverage and eligibility for Medicaid benefits for the poor, elderly and disabled.

67. The solution to the health care crisis lies in putting an end to the privately owned health care corporations, which rake in \$200 billion a year in profits from human suffering, and establishing socialized medicine. This means an end to medicine-for-profit and the establishment of free, high-quality state-run health care for all. This must include the right to preventive care, prescription drugs, mental health care and advanced tests and procedures, as well as the right to an abortion, which is under attack throughout the country. A multi-billion-dollar program must be launched to train new doctors and other health care providers and establish new facilities in order to meet the needs of all. Existing personal debt accumulated through massive health care expenses must be abolished.

The right to a secure retirement

68. Millions of retired workers and the elderly are thrown onto the scrap

heap by American capitalism, forced into poverty once they can no longer produce profits for their employers. Cutbacks or the unavailability of elder care means that aging parents are thrown back on the resources of their adult children.

69. Over 7 million older Americans—about one in five—are living below the poverty line, due in part to rising health care costs. About 60 percent of the elderly depend entirely upon Social Security for survival. Because Social Security benefits are inadequate, more and more older workers are forced to delay retirement or go back to work, often competing with younger workers for minimum-wage jobs. Older workers also face age discrimination, with a nearly 10 percent increase in reported cases between 2004 and 2009.

70. Those workers who were able to win decent pensions in an earlier period are seeing their benefits scaled back, and newer workers are getting jobs with few or no benefits. The past three decades have seen a proliferation of defined-contribution pension plans, including 401(k) plans, rather than defined-benefit plans. This has substantially reduced the cost to businesses, while serving as a means of funneling money into the stock market, where it is at the mercy of financial speculators.

71. All workers must be guaranteed pensions that allow for a secure retirement, with an income that covers all necessities of life. Workers should be allowed to retire at the age of 60, with a full pension. Elder care programs must be expanded and fully funded.

The right to education

72. With the growing complexity of society and work comes the need for all workers to have a quality education. Yet the state of education is abysmal and getting worse. Starved of funds, states and localities throughout the country are shutting public schools and ending critical programs. Teachers are victimized for the crisis in education, and have been forced to accept mass layoffs, cuts in benefits and wages, and increased class sizes. The decay of the schools, combined with the social crisis, has led to a surge of high school dropouts. The inevitable result is a decline in educational achievement.

73. The catastrophe facing the public schools is the product of three decades of attacks and budget-cutting, as well as the privatization of school services, the draining of public resources into for-profit schools, and the proliferation of “performance-based” testing. These have been combined with an assault on the separation of church and state through the introduction of religious indoctrination into the schools in place of the teaching of evolution, cosmology and other sciences. Obama’s “Race to the Top” program has deepened the right-wing policies promoted by the bipartisan “No Child Left Behind Act,” signed into law by Bush. Districts are pushed to compete for meager funds by expanding charter schools, firing teachers at “underperforming schools” or shutting these schools down altogether.

74. While education in the US has always been plagued by inequality, the expansion of American democracy was accompanied by increasing access to education—including the introduction of public education following the American Revolution, the expansion of public high school education spearheaded by reformer Horace Mann, the extension of education to African-Americans after the Civil War, and desegregation in the 20th century. These earlier reforms are now being reversed. It is precisely the egalitarian aspect of public education that makes it the target of the right-wing politicians and the corporate interests they represent.

75. At the college and university level, young workers are increasingly priced out of access to education, or forced to take out tens of thousands of dollars in loans to pay outrageous tuition costs. Students graduating

with a bachelor’s degree from public four-year institutions owe on average \$20,000 in debt, even as they face an increasingly bleak employment outlook. Total college student loan debt is approaching \$1 trillion, and exceeds total credit card debt. This debt should be abolished.

76. All discussion of equality in a society where access to education is largely determined by income is a fraud. A public works program must include a plan to hire tens of thousands of teachers and staff at quality wages and benefits, reduce class sizes, repair older schools and build new ones, and equip all schools with the most up-to-date books and learning technology. Higher education, including continuing education for adult workers, is a necessity in modern society and must be guaranteed to all free of charge.

The right to a healthy and safe environment

77. The health and well-being of humanity depends on a healthy environment. However, addressing environmental degradation is impossible in a society in which every decision is dictated by the pursuit of profit.

78. The oil spill disaster in the Gulf of Mexico has destroyed the economic and environmental basis of the entire region. It is a graphic expression of the deadly consequences of deregulation, corporate cost-cutting, and the reckless pursuit of profit by giant corporations. In the face of the greatest environmental catastrophe in US history, the Obama administration has left everything in the hands of BP, unconditionally defended the profit interests of the company, and held no one accountable. The immediate victims of the disaster—workers and small business owners in the Gulf region—will receive grossly inadequate compensation for the devastation of their livelihoods.

79. Among the many environmental disasters confronting mankind—including pollution of cities and waterways, the devastation of rainforests and coastal regions and the destruction of biological diversity—perhaps the most dangerous is global warming, which threatens to disrupt the world’s climate, destroying agricultural production, increasing the spread of diseases, and jeopardizing all life on the planet. Despite urgent warnings from world scientists, capitalist governments the world over are incapable of responding. Even inadequate international treaties such as the Kyoto Protocol are now declared unfeasible.

80. An emergency response to the environmental catastrophe must begin with the expropriation of the global energy giants under the democratic control of the working class. This is the necessary first step in the implementation of a rational global plan for the production of energy in a way that can meet social needs while protecting the environment, including a massive social investment in alternative forms of energy and public transportation. The expropriation of these companies will also free up resources to ensure that regions affected by environmental disasters are restored and those who have seen their livelihoods destroyed, including by the BP oil spill, are made whole.

81. Included in the right to a healthy environment is the right to a safe work environment. Decades of cost-cutting and government deregulation have made for an increasingly treacherous workplace, from stress disorders affecting about 1 million workers a year to deadly accidents like the Upper Big Branch mine explosion that killed 29 miners in the worst coal mining disaster in 40 years. The capitalist system treats workers as disposable commodities, whose injury or even death is of little consequence measured against the relentless drive for profit and individual wealth accumulation.

The right to culture

82. Access to art and culture is a basic component of a healthy society. Yet, like everything else, it is under relentless attack. American culture—film, television, music—was once a pole of attraction because of its innovation and powerful democratic and humanistic spirit. The subordination of culture to the profit motive has led to an immense degeneration.

83. Culture has suffered from funding cuts for the arts, a right-wing ideological assault on artistic expression, and the general brutalization of American society. Government subsidies to museums, orchestras, theaters and public television and radio have been gutted. Art and music education has been drastically curtailed or eliminated outright from most public schools. Library hours and services have been scaled back, and education funding cuts have included the closure of school libraries. The media, owned by giant corporations, function as mouthpieces of the government and the wealthy, polluting public airways and spreading lies. The damage to the intellectual and moral fabric of society resulting from such a mercenary and philistine approach is impossible to quantify.

84. To enable all working people to have full access to art and culture requires massive public funding and the creation of new schools and centers for music, dance, drama and art, either at a nominal fee or for free. Decisions on subsidies and grants for the arts must be taken out of the hands of the politicians and bureaucrats and placed under the control of committees of artists, musicians and other cultural workers.

To be continued.



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