

SEP candidate for Michigan legislature

## D'Artagnan Collier addresses public meeting in Detroit

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D'Artagnan Collier, Socialist Equality Party candidate for the Michigan State House of Representatives (9<sup>th</sup> District) and a founding member of the Committee Against Utility Shutoffs (CAUS), addressed an October 28 meeting in Detroit and outlined the socialist response to the crisis ravaging the city. Teachers, students, retirees and unemployed workers as well as Detroit residents active in CAUS attended the meeting, which capped months of campaigning by the SEP candidate and his supporters.

Helen Halyard, a long time leader of the SEP, chaired the meeting and introduced Collier. She explained that Collier, a Detroit City worker, was a lifelong resident of Detroit, becoming active in the socialist movement as a student at Osborn High School. "He has spent his whole political career telling workers the truth. There is no reformist solution to the problems we face; the working class has to build its own party."

In his opening remarks Collier noted the obscene amounts of money being poured into the campaigns of both the Democrats and Republicans, with predictions of a record-shattering \$4 billion. "This spending bonanza by corporations and the wealthy is just one expression of the vast gulf that separates ordinary people from the political establishment."

He said the enthusiastic response to his campaign was one of many indications of the growing spirit of rebellion among working people in the US, who were entering into struggle amid mounting class conflict all over the world. "In France, where the government is attempting to impose austerity measures and raise the retirement age, workers across the country have engaged in mass strikes for several weeks."

He went on to detail the conditions facing working people in Detroit. "More than 36 percent of Detroit residents live below the official poverty line. For those under the age of 18, the number is 51 percent. In Michigan, median income declined by 6.2 percent over the course of just one year—from 2008 to 2009.

"During that period, another 159,000 people officially joined the ranks of the state's poor."

"The situation in Detroit," said Collier, "symbolizes the objective breakdown of American capitalism; a once great city, a center of manufacturing and production, has been turned into ruin."

He said that in the course of his campaign he had spoken to many different layers of working people—auto workers in Lake Orion who were being told to work for \$14 an hour, striking members of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra facing a 33 percent pay cut, Detroit teachers told to "donate" \$500 a month to the schools. In Detroit tens of thousands face the approaching winter, utility giant DTE's "killing season," without heat or electricity.

In each case, said Collier, the media and big business politicians had attempted to blame ordinary people for the economic crisis in an effort to deflect workers from the real source of the crisis—the attempt by Wall Street, spearheaded by the Obama administration, to place the burden of its reckless financial swindling and criminal wars onto the backs of working people.

"Working people must now draw the lessons of the 2008 elections, the Obama administration, and the experience of the last three decades of declining living standards. The Democratic Party neither works on their behalf nor speaks in their name, and it is not some sort of 'lesser evil' to the Republicans."

He explained that the gains the Republicans were expected to make in the congressional elections were not a sign of pro-business sentiment within the population. "The collapsing support for the Democratic Party is a sign of the mass disaffection with the Obama administration. The American population is moving to the left, not the right."

Collier outlined the social rights of the working class advanced in the SEP Program, including the right to a job, a livable income, the right to decent and affordable housing, the right to utilities and public transportation and the right to culture. He explained that these rights could be won only through a struggle against corporate power and the capitalist state.

To obtain the resources needed to realize this program, Collier said, "The assets and resources of major corporations in all the most essential industries—banking and finance, energy, food production, retail, transportation, health care and pharmaceuticals, etc.—must be seized and transferred to public ownership."

He called for an end to the expenditure of hundreds of billions of dollars on the war and military conquest overseas. "We call for the immediate withdrawal of all US troops from the Middle East and Central Asia and the complete dismantling of the US military machine. This alone will free up trillions of dollars to meet social needs."

American workers, Collier said, had to oppose efforts to whip up anti-immigrant sentiment. “The enemy of American workers is not immigrant or foreign workers. Rather than being duped by these attempts to keep the working class divided, American workers must ally themselves with their class brothers and sisters around the world and support their struggles.”

Collier explained that in order to win these rights workers had to build new organizations of struggle independent of the unions and the Democratic Party. He pointed to the formation of CAUS in Detroit and the rank-and-file committee established by GM workers in Indianapolis to oppose efforts by the United Auto Workers and management to impose a 50 percent pay cut.

Collier urged workers to join the SEP and consciously take up the socialist banner. “On November 2, in a formal sense, my campaign will come to a close. However, the building of the Socialist Equality Party continues. So I urge all those who live in my district to go to the polls and vote for me on Tuesday, and everyone in this room to become an SEP member and fight for a genuinely democratic and egalitarian future for all working people.”

After the presentation the chair invited questions and comments from those in attendance.

An unemployed worker asked how the fight outlined by the SEP would continue in the aftermath of the election. “I hope you are elected Tuesday. In the event you are not, I hope this movement continues. Is there a way to support you?”

Several supporters of CAUS related their experiences with DTE energy.

Monique explained how she faced the threat of shutoff on a monthly basis as she struggled to pay her utility bills.

Jeannette related how she had been without gas and electric service at one point for a month and a half. “When I tried to get help I found closed doors,” she said.

A retired worker said he was very much opposed to those politicians that had permitted DTE Energy to combine gas and electric service on a single bill, meaning customers who fall behind on payments face having both gas and electric service cut off simultaneously.

Lawrence Porter, a member of the Socialist Equality Party and chairman of CAUS addressed a number of the issues raised. He said that after the election the struggle of CAUS and the SEP would continue and urged workers to become politically active in the struggle against utility shutoffs as part of the broader struggle to mobilize the working class against the attacks being waged by big business.

Porter explained that CAUS had been established in the wake of deadly fires last winter as a consequence of utility shutoffs that claimed 11 lives. “The issue of utility shutoffs is a major crisis. There were 160,000 shutoffs in southeast Michigan through May of this year. There were 142,000 shutoffs in 2008 and 221,000 in 2009, a 50 percent increase.”

While DTE Energy tried to give the impression that it was under some form of public control, Porter said, the governor-appointed Michigan Public Service Commission, which supposedly regulates DTE and other utilities, is a tool of the energy monopolies. “DTE was allowed to enact rate increases, which MPSC retroactively

ratified, of 20 percent last year.”

He said the proposal to merge gas utility Michcon and electric utility DTE Energy was promoted by Joyce Giles, a DTE executive, who came up with the idea of combining gas and electric charges on one bill. “Some question whether this is legal. But they went ahead and did it.

“There is an incestuous relationship between the Democratic Party and DTE. The Democrats passed a bill making utility theft a felony. They didn’t pass a bill against utility shutoffs.” He pointed out that the Democratic Detroit Mayor Dave Bing sat on DTE’s board of directors for 20 years.

Collier said the discussion at the meeting represented “the beginning of a serious and honest dialogue linking immediate goals with the long term interests of the working class. We say workers have to fight for socialism, workers must own and run the banks, basic industry and utilities—that the profits must go to the benefit of society. There has to be a revolution around the world.”

He said that the ruling class had promoted black nationalism and other forms of identity politics to create divisions within the working class. The bankruptcy and reactionary character of such politics was being exposed in the daily lives of workers, including their experience with the Obama administration.

In response to the question of what workers could do, Collier explained, “Read our program, which draws basic conclusions from the experience of the past 30 years. Educate yourself to become a leader of the working class.”

At the conclusion of the meeting there was a generous fund collection and more than two dozen copies of the SEP Program were sold. The WSWs spoke to several of those who came.

Elizabeth Vinson, a retired health care worker, said, “I think it was an excellent presentation and very clear. I will vote for D’Artagnan.”

Karen Walker, who has been unable to find work since being laid off as medical claims processor, told the WSWs, “I grew up in a Democratic and union household. My brothers were members of the United Auto Workers along with my dad. He used to stress the importance of that. I thought it was a core belief.”

She said her experiences had led her to question those beliefs. “I have been disillusioned with the Democratic Party, especially after Obama’s election.” She added, “I feel the unions are basically in line with the corporations, not the needs of the working class. I felt paying my union dues was a waste of money.”

She said she was excited to find out about the SEP campaign. “I think it is time for a change. Those being affected need to be involved in the political process. I think knowledge is power. I am thirsty for any I can get.”



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