SEP candidate speaks at children and family centre in Ardwick, Manchester

Our reporter
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Robert Skelton is the Socialist Equality Party candidate for the Ardwick ward of Manchester. On Friday, he spoke to a group of parents and staff at the Bushmoor Children and Family Centre in Ardwick. The centre is part of the Sure Start network of children's centres in Manchester, all of which are threatened with closure or privatisation due to the £109 million package of cuts being implemented this year by Labour Party-run Manchester City Council.

Skelton told the audience, "The Socialist Equality Party opposes all the cuts to Sure Start and we oppose every single cut being made in every public service. It's the first line in our manifesto . … The decimation of Sure Start is a clear indication of the malicious character of the £85 billion in cuts that are being imposed by the Conservative/Liberal government. These come on top of the £20 billion in cuts already imposed by Labour."

Skelton noted that Sure Start had been introduced by the previous Labour government in 1999 as a "cut price stop gap for a lot of services that had previously been taken on by the welfare state. … But that doesn't make their elimination any better—it makes it worse. Because quite frankly, for a lot of parents there is nothing else.

"The politicians tell us too much public spending has gone on and the money has run out", said Skelton. However, as he noted, during the entire post-war period the level of public spending had stayed at virtually the same level.

"So why are we getting these brutal cuts in our public services? These cuts are being carried out in their entirety because of a massive, publicly funded bailout of the banks. This is now costing us £1 trillion at least."

Skelton pointed to the vast levels of social inequality in Britain, and the fact that the top 1,000 wealthiest individuals in the UK had an income of more than £330 billion. "This amount of money would fund every Sure Start centre nationally for the next 300 years and still leave billions left over", he noted.

The bailout was organised by the last Labour government and the cuts to pay for it are now being imposed by the Conservative/Liberal-Democrat government, Skelton observed. "All this money to bail out the rich is being paid for in the form of cuts at a local level by Labour councils such as Manchester's. This is the nature of politics today. It is a conspiracy against working people by parties that are so close together you couldn't pass a cigarette paper between them.

"The rich have got three parties looking after them, but working people, the vast majority of society, don't have their own mass party. And without that working people don't have very much at all", he continued.

"We think the question of millions of people being politically unrepresented is the most important question in the world today. Without such a party you can't fight big business."

Explaining that working people could not improvise a new leadership, Skelton said, "All over the world today, working people are finding out that even when they overthrow dictators and tyrants, they just get replaced by other people from within these hated regimes. This is what has happened in Egypt and Tunisia.

"Workers need a party with a long history of struggle for principles. The Socialist Equality Party is the only party that is socialist and internationalist, and represents the interests of the working class, the unemployed, students, pensioners and those in poverty.

"We are for workers taking power and forming a workers' government that represents the democratic will of society. You can't have a real democracy when

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the super-rich one percent of the population ensures all the decisions taken are in their favour."

Skelton received a warm response from parents and staff.

Mustafa, who has a child at the centre, asked for further information about the policies of the SEP. Another parent said that it wasn't until she heard Skelton's speech that she realized the amount of money given to the banks by the government was so large. "It is getting harder for most people to get by", she said. "I've noticed I'm spending an extra £20 a week on shopping".

Another parent noted that the government claimed there was no money for Sure Start centres, but they can find the money to fund the war in Libya. He said another way they were denying services to poorer people was by increasing university tuition fees to £9,000.

Leyli, a worker at the Bushmoor Centre, said, "We have four staff here. The Bushmoor centre has been running about six or seven years. It is very important to the local area because it is a deprived community and there are lots of parents with free access to the centre and they benefit from it. The children don't have access to private nursery or private care. So the children can come to the parent and toddler group in the afternoon and use the facilities to play.

"They can come and cook and do drawing according to the weather and the season. So for them to cut that; a lot of the parent and toddler groups are devastated and saying, 'Where can we go with our children?'

"The same thing with the morning parents. A couple of them have jobs related to these two and a half hours. They say, 'If that goes, we'll lose our jobs'. In the morning we have 15 to 16 parents. In the afternoon it can range from 2 parents to 16 parents. We do parties twice a year and that can get up to 40 parents in here with their children. We are one of the busiest centres in Ardwick because most of the parents have very easy access. It's right in the middle of the housing estate, so they can just come in.

"We also give advice as well. We have the Connect team upstairs, which gives them advice on housing, with their benefits and any problems with the council tax. That will all be cut off too.

"We are getting a confusing message about the future of our service. First they said all the services will go. There won't be any services. Now they are saying they will go to a private tender. But we don't know who the private tender is or when it will happen. The private sector is only really interested in money. Most of the parents around here are on benefits, so they won't be able to afford the private prices. A private company will think, 'I'm not going to get much money in here or from this area because it's mostly non-working parents'."

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