

“I spend all my time worrying how to make ends meet”

SEP speaks to workers, youth in Walkley, Sheffield

Our reporters
23 April 2011

The Socialist Equality Party is standing Simon Walker for local authority elections in the Walkley ward of Sheffield. The campaign team have been speaking to workers and youth in the Netherthorpe and Upperthorpe areas of the ward. Closest to the city centre, these areas are made up of social housing estates with a number of concrete tower blocks and maisonettes built in the 1960s, as well as newly built student accommodation, plus mid-Victorian terraces, much of which is privately rented.

The area, which borders on the former industrial area of Neepsend, is traditionally one of the poorest areas of Sheffield with the infamous Kelvin Flats, dubbed “Streets in the Sky”, now demolished, qualifying for Objective 1 funding. (South Yorkshire qualified for European Union Objective 1 status in 2000; this was awarded to regions whose GDP is below 75 percent of the EU average). This money was used by the local council to replace formerly run council services and cultivate local business interests through the supply of low paid jobs.

Social inequality is a major issue raised by residents with the SEP campaign team. This is especially the case amongst the many unemployed. Those employed are mainly on the minimum wage currently at £5.93 an hour working as cleaners, shop workers, and in schools and hospitals.

Katherine works as a cleaner at the University of Sheffield. She fears big job cuts caused by declining student numbers due to the hike in tuition fees to £9,000. Katherine said student numbers are expected to fall by half, which would have a big impact on local employment. She explained how the workloads were increasing massively, and that departments can decide who cleans their areas as they hold their own budgets.

Sara is a single parent who works in school meals. She told the SEP that workers in her position are compromised by having to rely on work within school hours so that they can be at home for their children at the end of the school day. Up until the mid-1990s school meals were provided by the city council, but they were sold off as part of the privatisation of school services. Now private companies cut corners in order to win the contracts for school meals.

Danny, a postal worker, was met whilst campaigning in Upperthorpe. “The way society is going at the moment, we’re going to be in the situation where children have no future”, he told the SEP.

“I come from an estate where kids have no hope; in fact, no one has. Take health for example, I’ve been trying to book a doctor for ages. Why can’t I get an appointment?”

“I am worried about the NHS—I have had medical problems with my eyes since I was younger. I need to know I’m going to get the support throughout my working life. I’ve always worked. I’ve worked in London, Scotland and Ireland in the past...but at present people’s living conditions and working conditions are the worst I have ever known.

“I totally agree that the working class must stand united. The banks are not interested in helping people. They are only interested in the rich. As for Libya, I think Britain shouldn’t get involved. I did believe, at the beginning, that there was a point in the Iraq war but not this one”.

Pete Brown, who lives in Upperthorpe, is unemployed. He read the SEP manifesto following a canvass. “I think what you are saying is common sense. It’s based on rational thinking and decent decisions. I’ve been unemployed now for two months, and in this situation I am spending all my time worrying about how to make ends meet, rather than being able to be creative.

“One of the biggest things for me is the corporation tax evasion; I can’t get my head around it. If these companies abided by the law, then these cuts wouldn’t have to be made. You’re advocating what should happen.

“All of our wealth is off borrowed money and the multinational companies are oppressing people and benefiting a small number of people. Tesco in this area are so big that local businesses don’t stand a chance. There is no real hope for social mobility under a coalition government or any government. People should have the opportunity to work. Presently a small number of people are needlessly wealthy and millions suffer for the benefit of a handful of millionaires.

“It’s so sad that under this system the primary objective in life is to make as much money as possible, chasing the dream which doesn’t make people any happier. I would rather pursue my own interests; just secure the basic things in life”.

In relation to the drive for war, Pete said, “Nothing justifies doing things to the detriment of other people. They are only invading Libya because of the oil, and I can’t believe that people believe that it’s for humanitarian reasons. There are a number of dictators in the Middle East. Why Libya?”

“The level of injustice annoys me and people turn a blind eye. Over a million marched against the threat of war in Iraq, and whatever way you look at it was the wrong decision—a catastrophic mistake. So many people died and ultimately it was for stealing wealth to make the rich richer”.

“I’m not defending in any way the MP’s who fiddled their

expenses, but this was peanuts compared to bankers' wealth whose bonuses are incomprehensible. I think one of the reasons why they get away with it is because people can't get their heads around those kinds of sums of money.

"The cuts are ridiculous. I have just received a letter telling me that after six months of unemployment my housing benefit will be cut by £5 a week. To someone on my income that's £20 a month, the equivalent of my monthly water bill.

"When I left university there were so few opportunities. You either take on managerial responsibilities, which I don't want to do, or be a cleaner, so I went into catering. Part way through my degree I changed my mind about what I wanted to do as I'd had a change of heart. Marketing is basically a made up subject of how to con people.

"Just look at the coverage in the press, on a day when a thousand Iraqis die and one British, they will focus on the British soldier. I currently help out asylum seekers and refugees staying over at a night shelter in Sheffield. I want to work to help people. The government only looks at them for their economic benefit.

"I voted Liberal Democrat in the last election. I feel betrayed and rather stupid for voting for them, but they put themselves forward as being for more equality than the Labour Party did. I definitely agree with what the SEP is saying".

Sharane, 19, is at college training as a cabin crew attendant. "I think cutting the Educational Maintenance Allowance [EMA—a £30 stipend for the poorest students] is daft, as less and less people are going to go to college, and this will lead to more gangs on the streets. There are no jobs going. The EMA is getting cut, and teenagers are going to think, 'What's the point?' because there isn't any point in going to college when they have been at school for so many years.

"I'm on EMA and this has to cover bus fares, travel expenses and dinners, my uniform and books. On my course we go on a lot of trips, and one of them cost £75. If you haven't got a job and only £30 a week coming in, you have to save a bit out of this for the trips, and then you've not got anything for college.

"I've been looking for a job for the last three years since I left school. I have had Saturday jobs at hairdressers, but can't find a part-time job anywhere. I've handed my CV to about 300 employers including seasonal work at Christmas but got nothing. All my mates are trying really hard. I even went to Connexions [youth careers advice], who looked at my CV and said it was fine. I'm just not getting any replies back. I think it's good what the SEP is trying to do".

Jennifer, 18, who is taking an apprenticeship in Health and Social Care and Adult learning Disabilities said, "I agree with your main slogans as I consider myself a socialist brought up in the working class. I think the recent elections were not positive. The Labour Party is too close to the Conservatives especially when Blair came into power. You got more privatisations, and the policies benefited the rich.

"The social needs of the majority of the population should be valued more than the profits of a minority. My younger brother has got autism, and his school has had a lot of cuts, and he's been badly affected by this, which has put more stress on my mother. It has been difficult enough to get tax credits and disability living allowance as everything seems to change all the time. At his old school he had one to one support, and now he's gone up to the junior school he doesn't get this. He has Aspergers, and routine is important for a child in this

situation.

Mike was a call centre worker but has been unemployed for five years. He told the SEP about the conditions at the centre.

"The call centre was run by Dixons store group, and it was high pressured work and was taken over by Capita. At the time you were entitled to one hour break and lunch, ten minutes personal time and ten minutes toilet time. They took the ten minutes personal time away which meant an extra 10 minutes on the phone leading to more stress. They made lots of changes and split up all the groups who worked well together and changed the shifts and mixed up the teams, which broke up the solidarity. At the same time they took away the direct technical coach support. Previously you could have gone to see them as a relief from the call.

"The changes meant that you had to phone them to make sure we stayed at our desks. The team leaders were also thin on the ground. They are supposed to take calls that are out of the remit of the handler. One day I had been taking a long call from a customer who needed to speak to a team leader.

"For example, I couldn't give vouchers out; I wasn't trained to deal with an escalation of that level. I was trying to get support and had been stuck on the phone for over an hour. I hit a wall out of sheer frustration. Because the wall was made of thin plasterboard, it made a dent. I was sacked for gross misconduct. The HR manager insisted that it say on my record that I was sacked for 'gross misconduct and a danger to the public'. How am I going to be a danger to the public in a call centre? I was consistently one of the highest performers over five years. Even though I explained it was accidental damage caused by frustration they sacked me.

"They were shedding a lot of staff and used any excuse to get rid of people. They proceeded to march me ceremoniously through the call centre rather than let me go out of the side door to make an example of me to others.

"Capita is part of the whole capitalist conspiracy of cheap labour. They should be called 'DeCapita', as that's what they do. They recently took over the Sheffield technical call centre as a cost cutting exercise. They send memos out saying it was not a staff shedding exercise but an efficiency drive. Before that incident, I moved to a call centre in Nottingham. We were told they weren't in a staff cutting exercise but it was. The company only paid any overtime two or three months later and were indifferent to your health. I once went deaf temporarily with someone screaming in my ear.

"The word 'bankers' is taking on a whole new meaning. They are just getting richer and richer. I agree with all of what the SEP is saying. They are the main questions. The wars in Libya and elsewhere are for oil and nothing else".



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact