

“The key to the future lies in the international unity of the working class”

Jerry White speaks in Canada

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22 March 2012

On Tuesday, Jerry White, the Socialist Equality Party candidate for President of the United States, addressed a well-attended meeting of students, workers, and young people in Kingston, Ontario. White emphasized the need to unite the working class internationally against declining wages, austerity, and endless war enforced by the ruling elite of each country.

Those in attendance responded enthusiastically and White’s remarks were followed by a discussion period that covered a wide range of international political issues. Informal discussion continued long after the official end of the meeting, with many attendees expressing interest in the upcoming events.

In addressing a Canadian audience, White made clear that the US SEP’s election program was a direct challenge to the nationalist, pro-capitalist policies of the trade union bureaucracies and the ‘left’ parties of the political establishment.

“First, we insist that the key to the future lies in the international unity of the working class. The interests of the working class cannot be defended on the basis of a national program. In every country, working people are oppressed by transnational corporations that scour the globe for profits. The financial and industrial corporate conglomerates demand the lowering of wages and the elimination of social benefits essential for a decent standard of living. In Europe, the international banks are transforming Greece into a third world country, reducing living standards by as much as 50 percent.

“Regardless of nationality, ethnic background, religion or language, workers and youth throughout the world have the same interests. Therefore, the working class requires an international strategy. Workers in the Middle East, Europe, Africa, Asia, Latin America, and

Canada are the allies of US workers in the global struggle against capitalism.

“In every part of the world, the working class is facing universal demands for austerity and drastic wage-cutting, the erosion of basic democratic rights and the growth of ever more authoritarian forms of political rule, militarism and the threat of world war. At the same time a corporate and financial elite is amassing vast fortunes through the looting of society and the systematic destruction of working class living standards. The SEP sees the forging of the unity of the North American working class as a critical component of an international socialist strategy.”

White pointed to the long history of joint struggle by the working class in Canada and the US, from the struggles led by the Knights of Labor in the 1880s to the revolutionary syndicalism of the Industrial Workers of the World in early 20th Century, to the sit down strikes of the United Auto Workers on both sides of the border in the 1930s and 1940. He highlighted the role of socialists in forging this international unity and leading these mass struggles.

While the ruling classes in both countries, chastened by the Russian Revolution and the powerful upsurge of the working class following WWII responded to the class struggle by making social concessions, in Canada to a far greater extent than the US, the working class movement remained in one form or another under the domination of pro-capitalist trade unions and social democratic parties like the NDP. They insisted that the lessons of the Great Depression and the world war had been learned, that the capitalist system could be reformed and there would never be a repeat of the previous social catastrophe.

The current breakdown of world capitalism and the ongoing assault upon the social gains won in the post-war period has proven this national-reformist perspective to be entirely bankrupt. White pointed to the example of the Caterpillar workers in London, Ontario, for whom the nationalist perspective of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) bureaucracy led to a bitter defeat: “On January 1, the multi-billion dollar transnational corporation locked out 465 workers who build locomotive engines after they rejected the company’s concessions demands, including for a 55 percent wage cut that would have reduced pay from C\$35 an hour to C\$16.50.

“After three weeks, the company announced it was closing the plant. Despite overwhelming support for a struggle, the CAW accepted the closing. Throughout the six-week struggle, CAW officials, paralleling the nationalism of their counterparts in America, presented the struggle as one of defending the ‘Canadian way of life’ against an American company. This was aimed at blocking any common struggle by Canadian and US workers and bolstering illusions that appeals to the Conservative Harper would protect workers.”

“For the last three decades, the UAW in the US has collaborated with the corporations to sharply reduce labor costs, including at Caterpillar where the union betrayed a 17-month strike at the company’s Illinois plants in 1994-95. Caterpillar is shifting production [from the London, Ontario] to Muncie, Indiana, which pays workers \$12 to \$14.50 an hour, less than half the pay for most workers at the plant being closed in Ontario.”

“In order to attract investment every government around the world is to cut labor costs, and provide whatever tax cuts and deregulation is demanded by big business. It is the demands of world capitalism, not any claims by the unions or NDP about ‘protecting the Canadian way of life’ that is dictating this race to the bottom.”

Questions and discussion after White’s remarks included the SEP’s attitude towards the ‘humanitarian’ wars and aggressive foreign policy of US imperialism and its allies, the implications of a socially-owned and scientifically planned economy for the environment, and the reception of the SEP’s program among rural workers in the US (popularly portrayed by Canadian nationalists as ignorant and reactionary).

Lee Parsons, a long-time member of the Socialist Equality Party (Canada) pointed to the parallels between the assault on the working class in the US and the policies of the Harper Conservative and the Ontario Liberal government. In response to a question on Quebecois nationalism, Parsons highlighted the role of the Quebec ‘sovereignty’ or independence movement in dividing French and English-speaking workers and harnessing the militancy of the Quebecois working class to a section of the capitalist elite.

For more information on the SEP campaign and to get involved, visit socialequality.com



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