

Phyllis Scherrer speaks in Morgantown, West Virginia

A WSWS reporting team
24 March 2012

Phyllis Scherrer, the vice presidential candidate for the Socialist Equality Party, spoke at a meeting at the public library in Morgantown, West Virginia on Thursday. The meeting was attended by a laid-off steel worker and students from the area and West Virginia University.

In her remarks, Scherrer explained that the most essential questions facing the working class were completely ignored by the political establishment: Mass unemployment and poverty, social inequality, the erosion of core democratic rights and the drive toward war.

“The escalating attack on democratic rights occurs within the context of a growing drive toward war that threatens a global catastrophe of unimaginable scope,” Scherrer said. “In testimony before a Senate committee Wednesday, Pentagon officials confirmed they are drawing up war plans against Syria at the request of the Obama White House.”

To the American people, the prospect of another invasion—coming on the heels of more than a decade of unending war—appears to be sheer madness. The subjugation of Iran—a country three times the size of Iraq, with three times the population—would involve a massive mobilization of troops that would inevitably require a draft and a general call-up of young men and women in the US.

Moreover, it could lead to a clash with Russia and China, threatening to engulf the planet in a Third World War, this time fought with nuclear weapons.

Scherrer discussed the social conditions and history of West Virginia, a center of coal production that has

been decimated by deindustrialization during over the past several decades.

The assault on workers in the region was possible due to the role of the United Mine Workers union. There is a history of militant class struggle in West Virginia. However, the UMW, along with the US trade unions as a whole, accepted the capitalist system and carried out a purge of socialist-minded workers in the aftermath of the Second World War.

For the past thirty years, the UMW, like the trade union apparatus as a whole, has responded to the crisis of American capitalism by thoroughly integrating itself into the corporate establishment, actively participating in the attack on the working class. Thousands of jobs have been eliminated, and the conditions of mine workers are returning to what they were in the 1930s.

Scherrer said a struggle to defend workers’ rights required a break with the trade unions and the building of new organizations of working class struggle. The basic question, however, was the political independence of the working class on the basis of a revolutionary struggle against the capitalist system.

Following the talk, a number of questions were raised. Norly, who recently graduated from West Virginia University asked, “How did the trade unions get to where they are now?”

Clement Daly, an SEP supporter, explained, “In the 1950s, as part of the McCarthyite witch-hunts, the most self-sacrificing and militant workers—many of them socialist or communist—were thrown out of the trade unions.” The unions made an alliance with the Democratic Party and the capitalist system. Under conditions of economic growth, workers were able to win definite gains.

“Today, because of the economic decline of the US the trade unions act as the policemen and the arbiters

for the destruction of wages and living standards.”

Manish, a graduate student at WVU, followed up with a question about the internal workings of the trade unions. “How are the unions funded? How are officials elected?”

Scherrer explained, “The unions are not run democratically at all. They have become shackles from which the working class must break free. This is the context within which we have to see the endorsement of the AFL-CIO of the Obama administration. Their claim is that they can aid the ruling class in exploiting the workers, and they can do it without labor struggles like strikes.

“Many trade union leaders have been given positions in the Obama administration. For example, Joe Main, who was the head of safety for the UMW, is now the head of the Mine Safety and Health Administration, overseeing the mine owners in West Virginia who walked away from disasters such as at the Upper Big Branch mine explosion where 29 people were killed two years ago this coming April 5. To this day—just like the bankers on Wall Street—no criminal charges have been brought against any Massey executives.

“The trade unions have a material and financial interest in the re-election of Obama.”



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