

Workers and youth speak out in St. Helens, England

Liz Smith
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The Socialist Equality Party has been campaigning in all areas of the Town Centre ward in St. Helens, where its candidate Danny Dickinson is standing in the local elections on May 3.

At the unemployment office, campaigners discussed the perspective of the SEP with workers and young people.

In every instance, the response was the same. Workers spoke of their disgust at the systematic attempt to drive down wages and force them onto cheap labour schemes. One young worker commented, “I came out of school to get work, but I am now being forced back into education because there are no jobs. It’s a vicious circle as the only options available are voluntary work or work schemes. I feel like I’m being forced back to school when I have already left that environment. I agree with you—there should be no cuts to jobs or services.”

A young mother described her circumstances, explaining that she had never claimed benefits in her life, but due to her marriage breaking down was forced to in order to provide for her two children. That day she had been forced to come down to the office and queue to speak to someone on the telephone about her claim, as she could not afford using her mobile phone to contact the office.

As a single parent, she had to give up her job as a carer, which she loved, so she could look after her children and as a result had developed depression. She described the utter indifference to her situation by the official political parties and her struggle to survive on a day by day basis. “I’m just being pushed from pillar to post”, she said. “The rich don’t have to bother about these things as they always have someone to do everything for them.”

The SEP also spoke to Andrea Hodson, who works as

a project officer with homeless families and young people in St. Helens.

“Having read your manifesto”, she said, “I love the fact you oppose all cuts. My younger son who is at college wants to work full-time, but he has worked out if he is on the minimum wage he would be out of pocket. That means he cannot afford to work right now and that bothers him more and more.

“A few days ago I saw an interview with a woman who works 16 hours a week but can’t get the extra eight hours required in order to qualify for the new threshold for Working Tax Credits. This is going to affect more and more people.

“I have worked all my life. I am 41 now and have worked since I was 16. At the moment I have got two jobs and get taxed on the second job. It has just cost me £4,000 to qualify on a counselling course.

“What concerns me is that we are going back to a workhouse society where people are being punished for being poor. Families are being separated looking for work. Things are getting like America, where people have to use private health care and working people get what’s left—the crumbs. They are providing more services for people who can pay and cuts for those who can’t. The poorest people won’t be able to see anyone without paying for it.

“In St. Helens the housing situation has changed where if you are 35 years of age and below and homeless you still only get a single person’s allowance, so you might have to share a house with someone else. Some of the people who end up in hostels have had poor private landlords. They might have lived there for eight or so years and then get two months to get out.

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“This is happening more and more. People have dodgy landlords who won’t carry out repairs. They are left in a situation where they either put up with it or risk making themselves ‘intentionally homeless’. Some people are scared the landlords are going to make life difficult for them.

“With the privatisation of so much public provision, social enterprise businesses are making a lot of money through the outsourcing of services that used to be run by the council. A lot of these make money out of people on Housing Benefit. A young person who is working and comes into a hostel cannot afford it—this is how they perpetuate social misery. If you are classed as working, there is no support. These companies are making their money out of the unemployed.

“The government is splitting families up by saying you have got to go where the work is. There’s a lot of disillusionment amongst young people who have no direction and see so little on offer. Equally for those who are retired who have worked all their lives. They should be entitled to have a bit of peace at the end of their working life.

“Today you have to be earning a decent amount of money to pay into a pension. I remember the Poll Tax riots and the miners’ strikes. My father worked at Bold Colliery as a fitter. At that time, if you worked at the pit, you could live in a pit house, but as soon as you left you had to give the house up. I remember he was unemployed for a long time and went everywhere to find a job.

“The governments say they are sending troops to Afghanistan and Iraq to help people, but this is a lie. It’s about oil. But that’s how they justify why they have to spend the money on war.

“As much as [Libya’s Colonel] Gaddafi was a dictator, they murdered him. He should have been brought to justice. They try to cover up what they have done. Now they are doing the same with Syria and [Bashar] Assad. It’s a strategy that they use. The interventions aren’t to provide peace but about ownership and power.

“A few years ago I felt like stepping down from politics because I was so disillusioned. I want a party that does want to fight, not appease people. I am not willing to be appeased anymore. I want equality for the majority, not the minority.”



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