

UK: St. Helens workers speak to the SEP's Danny Dickinson

Our reporters
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Socialist Equality Party campaign teams are speaking to many workers and youth about the programme advanced by Danny Dickinson, who is standing as the party's candidate in the St. Helens Town Centre ward in the May 3 local elections.

Alex and his wife Sarah were among those who spoke to Dickinson in the town centre on Saturday.

Before losing their jobs last year, they were employed at St. Helens College. As a result of the previous Labour government's austerity measures and those imposed by the current Conservative/Liberal government, education funding in the UK has been slashed. In 2010 the college made 60 staff redundant. Further jobs were lost last year and another 90 are set to go in 2012.

Alex and Sarah said that their prospects for employment in St. Helens are so poor that they are now planning to emigrate.

Alex said, "It's looking very grim at the moment. We've been sat on savings that we've accumulated all our lives and they've just disappeared. It's got that way now, that a 23-year-old lad that has never worked gets more money than me. I get £51 a week to live on and it's the first time I've ever been out of work."

Alex was employed in adult training at the college. He said, "They were looking to be recruited as apprentices and it sounds absolutely brilliant on paper. But nobody wants to take them on."

He had only been at the college for a few years. Before that he had worked in numerous jobs, including the Delphi Automotive Systems plant at nearby Kirby for 18 years.

He worked for a short period at the Pilkington's glass works that once employed tens of thousands in the

town and was synonymous with it. It now only employs around 1,000 workers.

"This town, systematically, has just gone down and down over the last few decades," Alex said.

Mocking the so-called "service sector recovery" which was promoted as being able to replace the loss of thousands of manufacturing jobs, Alex said, "Well everyone can get a job at McDonalds or Burger King or Subway. We're all middle class now. There is no working class. There is nobody struggling. We can just get a job at these places."

Sarah was a lecturer in logistics at the St. Helens College and had only worked there for six months before being made redundant. She had previously been made redundant from nearby Warrington Town Council, after 22 years service.

She told the team, "My son has just come out of the army. He was in Iraq. It took him six months to get a job and he's employed now. My daughter is unemployed and her partner is unemployed and they've got four children. They can't afford to get a job, because on benefit they get their rent paid."

Alex said, "My daughter works 16 hours a week cleaning at the college and she had that amount taken off her benefits."

The couple said their family and friends had suffered, "massively so", with the recession, which had affected "nearly everyone we know. There's hardly anyone working anymore."

Many workers previously employed in highly skilled jobs now had to resort to driving taxis, Alex said. "Just as an example," he explained, "I taught 90 percent of the taxi drivers in this town for their NVQ [work-based certificates]. And if you look at these lads working on the Hackney carriages or private hire cabs, you'll find

lecturers, engineers, ex-solicitors. You name it and you will find them working cabs, because these lads are disenfranchised now and are driving cabs. There are about 500 cab drivers in St. Helens.”

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Taxi drivers were also being hit hard by the recession. Alex had recently sold his own minibus used as a taxi:

“I was paying out £245 a week before I earned a penny. It’s very, very difficult.”

Sarah agreed, saying, “And with the recession, not many people are using taxis now and fuel prices have gone up. Insurance has also gone sky high.”

Alex said there were no longer any decent, well paying jobs available in St. Helens. “I saw a programme on TV the other night and it was baloney”, he said. “If it was in Nazi Germany, you would say it was ridiculous propaganda. There was a man walking around a town saying, ‘I need some staff to work for me at £18,000 starting salary and I can’t get anybody’. That is absolutely rubbish.”

Sarah said she agreed with the SEP that there was no difference between the policies of the ruling Conservative/Liberal government and the Labour Party: “We were saying to each other that you can’t distinguish between them.”

Alex said, “I think a new party has got to be based on the principles of public ownership of all the major utilities and the banks. I’ll tell you what, you’ve opened my eyes. You really have.”

Ray is a National Health Service worker. He described some of problems he faces in a hospital threatened with privatisation.

“I’ve been in the NHS nearly 40 years and I’ve never seen morale so low,” he said. “People at my hospital have to work seven days a week now over the last two months. This is because they have taken the overtime rates off us and people need that money. We’ve not had a pay rise in two years,” he said.

Ray said he had no faith at all in the trade unions. “Where I work the unions are in cahoots with management.”

Speaking of trade union leaders he said, “These guys are getting paid £200,000 plus a year. Will they worry about me? I think the unions now are not worth a carrot.”

Joe, a worker in his 20s, said, “I think it’s going back to how it was decades ago. The super-rich are making even more money and they have accounts to make sure they don’t pay any taxes.”

He told the team, “Petrol has now gone up to £1.50 a litre and I’m struggling to get to work with those kinds of costs.”



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