California workers speak against budget cuts, unemployment

A WSWS reporting team
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Teams of Socialist Equality Party members spoke to workers and youth in Los Angeles and San Francisco over Memorial Day weekend about the campaign of Jerry White for president and Phyllis Scherrer for vice president and the SEP's program to fight worsening social conditions, mass unemployment and the budget cuts imposed by California's Democratic governor Jerry Brown.

Two weeks ago, Brown called for over $8 billion in cuts, affecting mainly health care and social services. He's demanding the gutting of Medi-Cal and CalWORKs, the state's Medicaid and welfare-to-work programs, in addition to cuts in wages for state workers, under conditions of over 10 percent unemployment and the recent termination of extended federal unemployment benefits for nearly 100,000 Californians.

SEP members and supporters distributed SEP candidate Jerry White's recent statement on Brown's proposed budget cuts (See "Oppose Brown's cuts in California") and raised the question of the role of both big business parties in their attack on workers' living standards and past gains. They discussed the need to build a revolutionary party to fight for international socialism, the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of workers' organs of political power.

Cristina, a young unemployed worker, told the WSWS about finding work in Los Angeles, "I'm looking for a job and it's hard to find one. I graduated as a medical assistant. I quit working at a medical supply place because they weren't even paying minimum wage. I had found a job after graduation but they weren't even paying me anything."

On the upcoming presidential election she said, "I didn't get a chance to vote in 2008. Obama says a lot of things but he's not going to do any."

A psychologist from northern California, who wanted to remain anonymous, spoke to the WSWS specifically on budget cuts. "We've experienced cutbacks since Schwarzenegger, new cuts will just exacerbate the situation. There's a massive staffing shortage, especially direct care staff at our 24-hour facilities. They haven't been hiring for a long time."

He complained of "not enough staff to fill each slot so there's lots of overtime. Sometimes people are forced to take two consecutive eight-hour shifts, so we see a lot of tired faces. This makes it difficult to maintain quality care. Morale is about the lowest it's ever been."

Asked about the role of the unions in supporting Brown's policies, he said, "The unions have basically been capitulating. I don't feel like AFSCME has supported us at all, and the SEIU is basically the same. Every once in a while they send us an email telling us to call our congressmen, but that doesn't do anything.

"The cuts make things more dangerous. If we closed [as a consequence of cuts], some of the patients would end up in prison, mental institutions or homeless. If a person has a meltdown, the cops are called and they aren't trained to deal with developmental disabilities."

On Jerry White's campaign, he added, "I'm very pleased the SEP has a candidate. I think it's important for the SEP to get the word out about the crisis of capitalism."

Manuel, from Bell Gardens, works for a demolition company. "It's hard work," he says, "The houses are very old in Los Angeles. There was much more work before the recession, now I only work two or three or four days a week. I don't have health insurance. In case of accident, they'll help, but that's it."

Manuel described his background, saying, "I have five brothers and my family is in Mexico. There's a lot

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of violence there. The economy is dead in Mexico. It's a desert."

Carlos P. works in a produce warehouse in downtown Los Angeles. He told the WSWS the current work environment there was "not a lot of work. Business is so slow now. I'm the manager, there's been a lot of layoffs. We have to work a lot to make ends meet. We have two kids and a third one on the way." On the water contamination in Maywood he said, "The water's bad, sometimes it comes out yellow."

Another young immigrant worker, Carlos, is a 20-year-old ice cream vendor from Mexico City who lives in East Los Angeles. He described his economic situation: "I work six to eight hours a day. I work for a lady who gives me a commission. Business is OK, but toward the end of the month people have to pay rent and they don't have enough money to buy ice cream."

Carlos described life in his neighborhood: "In East L.A. there's a lot of crime and I have to split rent with a few roommates. I've been in California for two months. I arrived in Chicago from Mexico originally, but I couldn't stay for long because I couldn't speak English."

About his journey to the US, he laughed and said, "I had to run fast to cross the border! There's a lot of violence in Mexico; it's very common. The government is an oligarchy and they just want to protect themselves. I was studying rhetoric and physics. Education may be free but it's no use when you want to get a job."

The WSWS asked Carlos if he faced any discrimination in America. He replied, "The police will occasionally harass you here, but Chicago is different. There are not as many immigrants there and that's why I left. The government here is only interested in money, just like at home. There are connections between the drug cartels and the army as well as the government. All the guns in my country come from here."

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