

Detroit workers speak out against budget cuts

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28 May 2012

Socialist Equality Party campaign teams over the weekend spoke to workers and young people in Detroit about the policies of Socialist Equality Party candidates Jerry White for president and Phyllis Scherrer for vice president.

The Detroit city council approved last week sweeping budget cuts under terms of a consent agreement with the state of Michigan. The cuts include a 10 percent pay reduction for city workers and 2,566 layoffs out of a workforce of 11,000. The lighting department and public transit are to be privatized, and the fire department will see a 13 percent cut in funding.

SEP supporters handed out articles from the WSWS (See, “Detroit council approves brutal cuts”) and argued that what is taking place in Detroit demonstrated the failure of the capitalist system. They stressed the need for the working class to build new organizations—workplace and neighborhood committees, independent of the unions and the Democratic Party—and build a political party of its own based on a socialist program.

Erica Webb, a charter school teacher in Detroit said, “It is a shame. A lot of schools have been closed because of the policies imposed upon us.

“If we don’t take a stand the people in charge are going to be able to do whatever they want to do. Ultimately their goal is to privatize the school system, shut down the public schools and have more charter schools. The people have to speak up.”

Erica expressed her opinion of the Obama administration. “We haven’t seen much change in Obama. They gave money to the auto companies, for what? He was saying bring the troops home. Why is it taking so long? They should not have sent them over in the first place. So many lives have been lost.”

SEP campaigners explained that the Obama administration was continuing and deepening the reactionary policies of the Bush administration on education, while it pursued aggressive militarism overseas. They stressed the need for the working class to break with the Republicans and Democrats and construct a political party of its own.

Anson, who works in the funeral industry, said, “I’m trying to get out of Detroit ASAP. I say they need to restart from scratch. All of them, the mayor, the city council, need to be gone. I think [Detroit City Council member] JoAnn Watson is out of

her mind.”

The SEP explained that those on the city council such as Watson were attempting to divert the attention of working people from the fundamental class issues involved in the crisis in Detroit by promoting racial politics, portraying the struggle as the “white” suburbs against largely African American Detroit. The SEP campaigners stressed the need for the unity of the entire working class, black, white and Hispanic to fight the cuts.

Madonna Maus, who works at AT&T, said she used to live in Detroit. “I don’t know what they are going to do about the city. It is going to ruins. In the neighborhood where I used to live, all the houses are now at a 45-degree angle.

“I don’t think I like the capitalist system. In the 1960s they talked about capitalist pigs. Well, this is the meaning of capitalist pigs—what is happening to Detroit. It is all about the dollar.”

Larry El, a retired plumber, said he was disillusioned with the policies of the Obama administration. “It is supposed to be for the people, but it is about corporate policies. They are trying to keep the racial thing going, but it is about corporations. More and more people need to listen. It is going to take people as a whole coming together. The unions have sold out. Everyone is getting things under the table.

“There have been millions killed for nothing—Vietnam and now Iraq. They didn’t find any weapons, but people are still losing family members for nothing.” Larry said he agreed that the working class needed an alternative to the policies of the Democrats and Republicans and was glad to buy a copy of the SEP program and make a donation to the election campaign.

Thomas McDonald, a Detroit city worker in the Department of Public Works said that he had been forced to take furlough days resulting in a 10 percent pay cut. “We set up for parades, fix the streets. We don’t like it. It is bad. The prices are going up. Gas is going up. You can’t make it on these cuts. We have been working 4 days for over a year now.

He spoke about the conditions in his neighborhood in Detroit. “Where I live at it is almost like the country. The weeds are so high. It’s terrible. Something is going to have to happen.”

Leah West is a member of the support staff working with special education students in the Waterford, Michigan schools.

“I just started work, and my checks are \$400 [a week]. and they want me to take an eight percent cut. I take home less than \$12,000 a year [after taxes]. I would be lost without my parents. I have had to move back home. Because I am a mother I get financial aid for school, but they are trying to cut that off as well.

“I keep up with my politics, but I am always undecided when it comes time to vote because it seems there is no good candidate. It is always the lesser of two evils.”

Leah said she was very interested in finding out more about the SEP and purchased a copy of the party’s program.

Later in the afternoon, SEP presidential candidate Jerry White joined a campaign team at the Detroit Electronic Music Festival in Hart Plaza.

Melissa told White, “I work in a community clinic in Columbus, Missouri. Her friend added. “I worked in a warehouse, but was fired on my birthday. I had been hired at \$8.60 an hour.”

Melissa said, “I was in New Orleans after Katrina and saw the tent cities. All over they’re letting things get worse.

“I voted libertarian because the government is so fed up. I just want to get rid of all of it.

White replied, “The problem with the libertarians is that they criticize government corruption from the right. They condemn things like child labor laws and only oppose problems in government to open up more ways to privately exploit workers. We’re for a workers’ government run by the working class, the vast majority of humanity.”

Taylor told the WWSWS that he was disgusted with the two party system. His friend, Sean, asked, “So are you trying to emulate Norway and the like with a lot of social services?”

In response White said, “All those countries are actually cutting their social programs. What we mean by socialism isn’t some specific reform, but social equality and democratic control of production.”

White described the conditions facing working people in Detroit, where basic social services from education to public transit were being gutted in order to ensure repayment to the banks and bondholders of the city’s debt.

“So all the cuts to schools are just going to the banks?” Taylor asked. “Do you see a downside to socialism, like there’s all these socialist countries that are giving it up so there must be some problems with it?”

White explained that what existed in the former Soviet Union, China and other Stalinist countries was not genuine socialism or communism. The bureaucracy under Stalin betrayed the working class through the policy of socialism in one country. “We base our struggle on internationalism. There is no country that is separate from the global economy,” said White.

Sean asked, “I think the US grew from the Protestant work ethic. Why would people work under socialism?”

White replied, “First, whatever gains workers have was fought for in bitter struggles against the bosses. So the Protestant work ethic doesn’t explain the standard of living in the US.

“Look at all the people today who are rich,” White added. “They didn’t get there by working hard, they’re criminals! The people working hard are the people putting in 10-hour days, 6 days a week and they’re not the people with millions of dollars. Finally, there are far more motivations than just private profit. Teachers work hard to educate, and they aren’t paid well. Scientists work hard for the sake of discovery, and artists work very hard to create even when they aren’t paid well. Imagine how strong a motivation the actual elimination of poverty would be.”

Torey from Syracuse, New York told White, “There are no real jobs opening up. Now, nobody gets jobs, and when they do they’re paid low. I want \$2 more an hour, from eight to ten and they call me greedy. I’ve been listening to Obama and Romney and they’re not saying anything. It’s all the same from them.

“I moved out here to Detroit just to get away from where I was from and try to make a good life.”

“All these companies, they cut the workers out. They don’t want our opinions.

White explained that corporations like General Motors, which had slashed hundred of thousands of jobs, did not want to hear workers’ opinions because workers don’t like what they are doing. He said the SEP fought for the public ownership of the auto industry and other giant corporations under the democratic control of the working class.



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