

Workers and youth speak on Chicago, Quebec and the attack on democratic rights

Our reporters
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Over the weekend, SEP campaigners in several cities throughout the US spoke with workers about the criminalization of protests and strikes, distributing a statement by Jerry White on recent crackdowns in Chicago and Quebec. (See, “The criminalization of dissent in Chicago and Quebec”)

Many workers and youth knew little about the massive student strike in Quebec, which has been virtually ignored by the corporate media in the US. The Canadian government recently passed legislation that essentially criminalizes the strike action, in an attempt to force students to relent. In Chicago, police attacked protesters and locked down the city during the NATO conference last weekend.

Workers in New York City have had first-hand experience with the connection between social inequality and the attack on democratic rights.

Campaigners visited Jamaica, Queens, which has been hard hit by the economic crisis, leading New York City in foreclosures. The official jobless rate still hovers around 10 percent. The response of the ruling elite to social tensions was evident on Saturday, as police numbering in the dozens patrolled virtually every corner in sight along the main pedestrian thoroughfare.

Rose Smith, a housewife originally from the Caribbean island of Anguilla, learned of the student strike in Quebec for the first time from an SEP campaigner. “I agree with the fight in Canada to stop raising tuition,” she said. “[The costs] should stay like they were before the economic crisis hit. It is hard times now, and they should not be raising tuition.”

“My daughter has to work three jobs to go to school,” Rose continued. “She is getting paid only \$7 an hour. She can only take two classes a semester so we can pay for tuition, mortgage, food, insurance, clothing and

taxes. But like Quebec, tuition is going up nearly a thousand dollars a year at CUNY. Before you could get financial aid for 16 months to get a GED and an Associate’s degree. After July 1 that is finished. Poor people cannot afford to pay for college. Poor people need a way to fight this.”

The discussion turned towards the Occupy movement and the suppression of the protests in New York and elsewhere. Rose gave her take on it: “I don’t hear anything about Occupy Wall Street today. I was happy about Occupy Wall Street, but I was afraid to go out and join it because of all the police attacks against it.”

The campaigners explained that the SEP was intervening in the election with a program to fight the attacks on education and to defend democratic rights, which are under attack by the Obama administration as much as the Republicans.

Alejandra Colon, who works with families of mentally challenged children, objected forcefully to the attacks on dissent in Chicago and Quebec. “It is wrong for them to ban the demonstrations in Quebec, Chicago, New York City and everywhere else.” With respect to New York City, Alejandra remarked on both the crackdowns on Occupy Wall Street and the police policy to “stop and frisk” hundreds of thousands of working-class youth without any suspicion of wrongdoing. “I feel like I don’t have any rights because I am nobody. Only Wall Street has rights.”

When Alejandra was asked what she thought about President Obama praising the Chicago police actions, she reacted sharply saying, “I like Obama. Obama is trying to get things for us. The other guy is trying to take things away.”

After the SEP campaigners detailed Obama’s record, Alejandra admitted, “I guess I will have to read the paper and watch the TV news more closely. Obama is

messing up. That is the reason so many people are not going to vote. Now I see he is taking away from the working people. He is not helping; he is making it worse. Every time someone makes it into high office, they change. They are for the rich and not for the lower class.”

Valeriano Alvarez, who works in retail security, immediately drew the connection between the response to protests in Quebec and Chicago and the terrible economic situation for millions of working people. He explained his own struggle of trying to provide for his wife and his child. “It’s not easy to find jobs out there. A lot of people are getting into security jobs, since they are the only ones in demand.”

“I was working as a bouncer at a 5-star hotel in Manhattan,” Valeriano continued, “but I was badly underpaid. The starting wage is supposed to be \$14 per hour, but they were only paying \$12. To get extra qualifications, you have to take certification courses—\$800 for each course; that’s one month’s rent. It’s not right, and it’s not fair.”

Valeriano noted that there has been no relief on offer from the government, that the politicians were “sitting there doing nothing.” He thought that while Obama may have meant well, he came in at the wrong time. As SEP campaigners drew out the class nature of Obama’s policies and explained the necessity of an independent struggle for socialism, Valeriano admitted that he hadn’t paid too much attention in the past, but reacted with interest.

Jamal Jones overheard an SEP campaigner talking to a passerby, took a flyer and urgently interjected: “Obama is not who he says he is. Look at who his backing is. Look at everyone in his cabinet. Everyone is from the finance industry. In 2008, I didn’t vote for either candidate. Bush, everybody knows he did a horrible job. He was for the rich and dealing with issues from the right. Obama dealt with issues from the left but he was put in office for ‘change you can believe in’ to frustrate people.”

Jamal explained that he always tries out independent candidates. “It is hard for them to go on the ballot because of this machine called the Democrats and Republican Party.” The campaigner explained the difference between the SEP and other parties that work to contain opposition within the confines of capitalism. The critical task is to build a party that fights for the

independent class interests of workers. Jamal was eager to learn more about the SEP campaign.

The SEP also campaigned on Massachusetts Avenue in Boston.

Northeastern University student Marielle Evangelista and a friend stopped to talk. Marielle was angry about the arrests and police violence in Chicago during the recent NATO summit. “The government is scared,” she said. “They’re scared of protesters, that’s why they went against the protesters in Chicago. From what I read, the charges of terrorism against those people who were arrested just aren’t true.”

Marielle had heard about the Quebec student strike and wondered why students in the US weren’t more involved. “The situation here is worse, as far as tuition is concerned,” she said. “So it’s interesting that no one is protesting here in the same numbers when our tuition is also rising. Maybe it’s in small increments, but it’s already just so high.”

“I think it’s really cool that they’re mobilizing and doing this in Quebec,” she said. “It should be getting more attention here. The only people that know about it are radicals. It’s not really being talked about in the mainstream media.”

The campaigners explained that the SEP was running in the 2012 elections to advance a real alternative to the Democrats and Republicans for the working class. They explained that so-called left groups such as the International Socialist Organization, who have been heavily involved in the Occupy movement, are attempting to channel such protests into support for the Democratic Party.

Marielle said she didn’t think much of Obama. “The Democratic Party is slightly better,” she said, “but it’s still holding up the status quo. It’s not making any real change in any kind of economic way.”



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