“The only jobs out there are low wage jobs”

Bronx workers speak to SEP campaigners on the jobs crisis in America

A reporting team
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A Socialist Equality Party campaign team visited the Parkchester neighborhood in the Bronx, New York over the weekend. The team spoke to workers and youth about the economic situation and the political program of the election campaign for Jerry White and Phyllis Scherrer. (For more information and to get involved in the SEP campaign, click here.)

Campaigners distributed copies of articles and statements from the *World Socialist Web Site* on the jobs crisis in the US. Some 200,000 workers were cut of long-term unemployment benefits in several states throughout the country over the weekend, as a result of the abrupt expiration of federal extended benefits.

Parkchester is a residential area located in the northeast section of the Bronx, one of the five boroughs composing New York City.

Much of the neighborhood consists of a large complex of 100 multistory apartment buildings constructed as a single development between 1939 and 1942. It was designed to house 12,000 working class families. Although originally the Parkchester apartment complex had a whites-only policy, it and the surrounding community are now home to a diverse working class population.

The Bronx, which was home to 1.4 million people as of the 2010 census, has been hit hard by the economic crisis. In February, the borough’s official unemployment rate reached 14.1 percent—the highest in nearly two decades, and the highest of any county in New York State (Each city borough is also a county.) The actual unemployment rate, counting those who involuntarily work only part time and those who have given up looking for work altogether, is much higher.

During the first half of the twentieth century, the Bronx grew due to the influx of immigrants, mostly of European origin. They found employment in a variety of industries and other businesses in this or other boroughs of the city, linked by a growing mass transit system.

However, beginning in the 1970s, the national economic decline and deindustrialization of northern urban areas was reflected in gradually worsened conditions for borough residents. One effect was a large increase in arson by landlords who made more money from collecting insurance payments than by properly maintaining their properties. Extensive areas were left as urban wasteland.

What little industry remained in the years before the crash of 2008 has now largely disappeared. Several hundred manufacturing jobs were lost when the Stella D’Oro cookie factory closed in 2009. This was followed by Old London Foods, the makers of Melba toast, which shut down its Bronx plant. The largest employers in the Bronx are in the healthcare, retail, and nonprofit sectors.

Workers who spoke with SEP campaigners expressed deep concerns about unemployment, low wages, the high cost of living, student debt, and the overall lack of action by the government to address the difficult conditions they are facing.

Danny Collado, 32, is a maintenance worker and a member of the Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union. “I have a job, but I will have to get a second job just to break even. People think a union job is something special. What is a union job? It is just taking $20 out of every pay check. It doesn’t mean you can’t get fired.

“I work in a club. They work you 16 hours a day but then give you a day off because they don’t want to pay you the overtime. In New York State, overtime is not after 8 hours a day. It is only after 40 hours in a week. My check may say $700, $800 but I only take home $500. The taxes are incredible. I am $10,000 in debt in credit cards.

“There should be programs not just for the poor but all people who can’t make ends meet. We are paying rent, insurance, utilities. I think in New York City, they raise the rent as high as they want. How can you come to the Bronx and charge $1,200 a month rent on a family making just $25,000 a year gross before taxes are taken out? Where I live in West Farms in the Bronx, most of the young people do not seem to work.”

Asked what he thought the government was doing, Danny said, “I actually haven’t seen any changes from what Bush did. I don’t know why. I don’t vote. It looks like a popularity vote.” Danny bought an SEP program.

Greg O’Donovan, an actor, and Ed Buggs, a bus driver, both

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in their 40's, live in the Norwood section of the Bronx. Greg told the WSWS, "I was an actor in "Law and Order" [a television program] 3, 4 years ago, but then I was unemployed for 2 years."

Ed referred to growing social inequality and then described his own work and living situation. "It is strange that Hollywood made so much but here we are cutting, closing more schools, and laying off teachers. I am a bus operator for the New York State facilities from Roosevelt Island [in the East River near Manhattan]. We are with the Teamsters Union. We are trying to get a contract with high wages and a pension. We have not had one in a year and a half. Management and the union are in bed together. Our union rep does not get out there for us."

Greg pointed to a man sitting on the side of the walk and begging who was obviously mentally ill. "We can talk in the abstract, but this is an example of what's going on. As this reporter just said, there are 200,000 long-term unemployed who are losing their unemployment benefits this weekend. How many more will be on the street? What is being done for people like this? There should be more of a support system, a safe place for them." Greg bought an SEP program.

Wanda Sanchez is unemployed. She formerly worked with students developing their reading and writing skills. "They just laid off a number of people in my department, and now they are closing down Lehman High School. If enough kids don't pass literature and math they call it 'a pipeline to Rikers' [a city prison]. What is going to happen to our economy when kids are growing up with no parents or help?"

Asked about what she thought of unemployment being cut off for 200,000 people she said, "It is going to cause a major civil unrest. And the government is going to retaliate by picking up undocumented workers."

Campaigners asked her what she thought about Obama, Sanchez responded, "I tried to support him as a black president, but he is doing nothing. We need to protest and vote that is how real change comes about. If Romney becomes president I would want a socialist. With Obama I don't really know what to do."

Dan Philips, a naturalized citizen from Guyana and former technical worker for 16 years, said, "I am in my early stages of unemployment and I do not know how long I have. I have experience with wiring and the company laid me off and blamed the economy. They are doing well; I know that they are even taking jobs out of state. They did it because of my benefits."

Asked about the 200,000 people who are having their unemployment cut off he said, "We have a dysfunctional Congress. I only want retraining, but they are not doing that. I want to take a course, but I don't have the money. I am dependent on Social Security. Obama has more of a heart on this."

An SEP campaigner interjected that Obama had actually proposed cutting Social Security about a year ago. Philips responded, "I was for the Democrats because they care, but what you are telling me is amazing. This is about my survival. A government is not a business; it needs to care about the people. I have already paid into Social Security. It is like breaking a promise." Dan made a contribution to the campaign.

Shanta, a recent graduate from Grambling State who studied sociology and psychology, owes $60,000 in student debt and now she finds herself underemployed.

"A lot of people are in the same position as I am—people who graduated with me or a couple years ahead of me. The only jobs out there are low wage jobs, ones you could get without college. Either that or you're expected to have experience. But the corporations don't want to actually train people. The employees they have now want to do more and more work. I've gone on a lot of interviews, sometimes group interviews with 10 other people applying for the job, but no one gets hired. It's like they're just creating this illusion that there are jobs when there's actually not."

Asked about her opinion about the refusal of the Obama Administration to put forward any serious jobs program, she explained, "There's no quick fix. I disagree with those who come out and chastise Obama, because at the end of the day it's a problem that was already there when he came into office."

SEP campaigners detailed Obama's record continuing and deepening the Bush Administration's attack on jobs, including his role in halving wages of autoworkers. They also reviewed Obama's role in bailing out the banks, which despite record profits are not investing in jobs.

In response, Shanta asked the campaigners: "So, what will the SEP do to solve the problem?" The campaigners explained that the goal of the election campaign is to build up a powerful movement that fights for the independent interests of the working class, including guaranteeing the right to a decent paying job for all. Interested in learning more, Shanta purchased a copy of the SEP program.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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