

“It’s like they want to go back to the slavery days”

Workers speak on budget cuts and the social crisis in Detroit

An SEP campaign team
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On Saturday, campaigners for the Socialist Equality Party talked to shoppers at Eastern Market in Detroit about the party’s 2012 election campaign. They handed out a variety of election material, including presidential candidate Jerry White’s campaign statement and a recent WSWWS article on budget cuts in Detroit. Many people expressed disgust with both major political parties and interest in a working class alternative.

A 64-year-old produce worker at Eastern Market, Paul Williams, told SEP reporters what he thought about the election campaigns so far. “It’s like it doesn’t matter what I think,” he said. “The rich folks have the money, and politics is all about money. This has been happening for 30 years. They buy the elections—both parties. It’s money against the basic rights of human beings. Money is ruling the world.”

“That’s why you see this fighting and these protests across Europe,” he added. “People are fed up with dictatorship, and the rich telling them what to do. Young people, young educated people, they can’t get a job.

“I follow what’s happening everywhere, like the protests in Egypt or Bahrain. There’s going to be a civil war, and it’ll come here soon too, with the attacks they’re bringing here on people. Last week they cut city workers’ pay by 10 percent—firefighters, teachers, all workers. Even workers earning only \$20-30 an hour; they’re doing it here, cutting pay, breaking up unions. It’s like they want to go back to the slavery days.”

Asked about his own living conditions as a citizen of Detroit, Williams said, “It’s rough. There’s too many people out of jobs. There are homes abandoned, weeds

growing through the houses. The city won’t cut the weeds. They cut the fire department, so there’s no one to put out fires. You can’t go to the gas station at night because it’s not safe.”

He added, “I’ve never voted in my life. I don’t believe in this system. People say that your vote counts, but it doesn’t.” Williams added, however, “If I had to choose one party, I’d choose the Democrats. I’d rather have Obama.”

SEP campaigners explained that the question was not which party of the ruling elite to support, but rather the need to build a new political party based on the independent interests of the working class. This was the basis for the SEP campaign of Jerry White and Phyllis Scherrer.

Williams’ complaints about the deterioration of Detroit were a common theme among workers. Kelvin, a construction worker in Detroit who works primarily in home improvement, spoke to SEP campaigners about the effect of budget cuts.

“My main problem has been the cuts to bus service,” he said. “A lot of people need it to get to work, so a lot of people lost their jobs because they couldn’t get to work when the cuts came in. That has a domino effect: they have no job, no income, and they lose their houses. There are a lot of people moving in that direction.

“There were changes to a lot of different lines. It might have been a 24-hour service, but now it only runs until 10 p.m. That means night-shift workers have no way to get to work. They used to be independent—they could make their own way to work and didn’t have to ask for help to get there.”

Kelvin added: “I myself was lucky because the changes were introduced after the stop at which I get

off. I wouldn't have the money to get a vehicle so I would have lost my job."

In Detroit, as across the nation and internationally, cuts to pay and social services have been coordinated with the unions. A carpenter and union member who preferred to remain anonymous spoke about the large pay cuts he had received with the complicity of the union.

"They took 10 percent off my pay three years ago, and another 6 percent last year," he said. "Then, at the same time, the union raised the dues for us. The union heads want to drive these nice big cars. The union represents big money. Look how the city is working with the union right now to get concessions."

Asked whether there had been any struggle to defend workers' conditions, he said: "They could have fought harder, but they've got their finger in the pie too. Union leadership comes with unwritten benefits. Take the mandatory union dues, where does that go? They don't hold any community giveaways, or barbecues. Instead, I see myself taking my car, my old car, to get it fixed, and I see the leaders coming with new cars every year!"

SEP campaigners explained that this was a universal process, internationally and across the US. They pointed to the fact that following the bankruptcy agreement with the auto companies, the United Auto Workers now has a direct interest in boosting corporate profits, as it owns significant stock. "Yes, that sounds like a conflict of interest to me," he said. "If you're on the board then you're working hand in hand with the management. And management never loses—they always take from the workers."

Asked what he thought about the elections, the carpenter said: "I think Obama is trying to fix the economy from what Bush did. I think the closest thing to socialism is the Democrats. It's definitely not the Republicans. I'm sorry that the independents can't do anything."

SEP campaigners explained that Obama had been the preferred candidate of the financial elite in 2008, receiving more donations from Wall Street than his Republican opponent, and that the working class required a new political party of its own. Bob added: "Obama will be the first president to ever get over \$1 billion in campaign donations."

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