Stockton workers support SEP presidential campaign

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Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party election campaign spoke to shoppers at the Sherwood Mall and canvassed neighborhoods in East Stockton, California last weekend, distributing materials on the party's presidential campaign and the city's recent bankruptcy.

A heavily working class city of 300,000 in California's Central Valley, Stockton has been especially hard hit by years of pervasive foreclosures, widespread unemployment and rising poverty. The city's recent decision to declare bankruptcy has been used to accelerate the attack on the already poor living conditions of workers in the area. It is the largest city in US history to seek bankruptcy protection.

SEP supporters distributed Spanish and English-language editions of Jerry White’s election statement and a statement on the dangers posed to the working class by the Stockton bankruptcy. They were well received by local workers who expressed a high level of interest and enthusiasm about the campaign. Many agreed with key parts of the campaign platform during discussions, above all its insistence on the international unity of the working class and its opposition to efforts by the Democratic Party to politically divide workers on questions of race and nationality.

“Immigrant workers have to unite with other workers to fight for something better,” Maria G. told party campaigners. Describing from her doorstep how she'd been recently laid off from her job at a local laundry service and her husband’s lack of work, she lamented “things have gotten so hard over the last few years.”

During the housing boom, predatory lending practices helped inflate the market. When the bubble burst, housing values plummeted to a third of their peak, devastating the local economy and leaving home owners with little to show for their massive mortgages. Unemployment in Stockton stands at 17.5 percent.

Far from aiding people in cities like Stockton, the state's latest budget heightens the crisis. Democratic Party Governor Jerry Brown's realignment policies shift the burden of many former state functions to local governments that are even less able to pay for them. At the same time, Brown’s budget targets support services, including over $2 billion in cuts to Medi-Cal and over $800 million in cuts to CalWorks. This budget was crafted solely by the Democrats in coordination with the state's unions.

A farmworker Maria H. complained to campaigners that her, “working conditions are terrible” noting as well, “the unions don’t do anything for us.” She agreed that workers should build a socialist party, “to fight the parties of the rich…or else things will just keep getting worse.”

The United Farm Workers endorsed Obama's re-election campaign in January on the grounds that the administration was protecting immigrants' rights. During his presidency, Obama has deported a record 1.2 million immigrants. Instead of fighting to unite farm workers, the UFW has tried to fan nationalist tensions by applauding Obama's “principle that U.S. farm workers be hired before foreign labor.”

“Working people need their own party in the United States,” East Stockton resident, Joaquin, told campaigners after reading over and discussing a Spanish-language campaign statement. He also asked to be contacted for future meetings.

Salvador, a farm worker delivering produce to a local farmer’s market, spoke with campaigners about SEP presidential candidate White and the Obama campaign.

“You know how Obama tricked immigrant workers into voting for him? All the major Spanish news and radio stations said he was actually going to help immigrants—unlike Bush,” he told campaigners. “One

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year after he was elected, things got worse for immigrants. It was then that I knew it was all a fraud."

Far from helping immigrant workers, Obama has combined a campaign of mass deportations with a steady assault on social programs. As part of his re-election campaign, last June he announced that he would limit his deportation of youth. In fact, the program is a cynical election ploy that places immense hurdles before young immigrant workers who want to stay in the US.

After discussing the recent efforts of Wisconsin's Government Accountability Board (GAB) to keep Jerry White off the ballot and despite the fact thousands of voters endorsed his candidacy, Salvador emphatically told campaigners, "That is wrong! They are probably afraid you'll be bigger than the Democratic Party someday."

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