

Cortland, New York residents and youth discuss poor working conditions

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Supporters of the SEP presidential campaign spoke to Cortland residents and youth about their working conditions and future prospects.

Cortland, NY is a small town of 24,000 people in upstate New York. The unemployment rate in July was 9 percent, up from 8.4 percent a year ago. In addition, while the trend of unemployment had averaged at about 5.5 percent from 2001-2008, unemployment jumped to an average of 8.9 percent under the Obama administration. The income per capita is \$17,174, and the household median income is \$33,600, before income tax. This is far below the national median income, which is just above \$50,000.

SEP campaigners had an extended conversation with Alex, Pat and Joey about the local conditions in town. All three young men are looking to go to college, but are unable to because of the costs and their inability to get decent jobs.

“The current conditions are terrible for people my age,” began Joey. “We want to become independent, and follow our own plans, but you can’t when you’re forced to work for long hours for basically no pay. I’d like to play metal music or be a physical therapist, but I can’t when I have to struggle just to get by. Every job that I can find is fast food, and it’s all low-wage.”

“I think we should tax everybody,” Joey added, “but tax the rich the most, a lot more than they are now.”

He also talked about the poor treatment of workers. “My ex works at the Brewster House in Homer. She takes care of older men, and gets sexually harassed all the time, but her boss doesn’t do anything. Even more, when she got sick, and had the documents from her doctor about it, she just got yelled at by her boss for not showing up. “

Pat continued on this theme, based on his own experiences. “The only way you get any sort of money

is to work religiously. I work for ARC [Community Services], based in Madison, and it’s not uncommon for me to work 18-hour days, four days a week. It’s illegal by New York State law. You’re supposed to have 8 hours minimum between shifts, but they don’t care. They just want as much work as possible.”

Alex then said, “There is also all the police repression that you hear about in the news, with the anchors claiming people are hooligans. They are just trying to get by, and have found no way, again and again, to do it.”

All three took the SEP presidential campaign statement and said that they would support the candidates because no one else spoke out for their interests.

The SEP campaign also discussed the largest corporation in the area, Marietta, a consumer products manufacturing firm, with workers in the area.

“It’s like a prison in Marietta,” said James, a new-hire at Marietta. “I got a tour because I’m about to start working there. Hopefully I’ll last a bit longer than a few weeks, like most people, but it’s really where people go for a paycheck for a few weeks. I think they like it like that, so they don’t have to pay anyone decent wages. And the working conditions are horrible. Most places there is no AC, just giant fans, so it gets unbearable in the summer.”

Two older workers, Jeff and Mark, compared Marietta to other companies in the area, as well as the downward trend of Cortland over the past decade.

“I quit Marietta and started working at Northeast Transfer,” began Jeff. “It’s much better. After 3 months, I got a \$2/hour wage increase versus three years at Marietta for only \$0.19/hour increase. Marietta degrades you as much as possible. Why should I take a urine test for minimum wage? And how is it okay to

take all the bonuses away? They used to give out \$200 bonuses every two months, but now that's gone away.”

Mark continued, “Cortland has gone down in the past ten years. Rubbermaid became Marietta. Borg Warner is gone. I work at Paul Trinity, which makes filters of all kinds, industrial, small scale, etc. This place is sunk because the companies ship jobs away just for money. Corporate greed is the problem.”

Aaron, another worker in the area, was forced to work a low-wage job so he could stay near home for his children's daycare. “I can't travel though there are better opportunities for what I do—the building trades—in nearby upstate [New York] cities. The long commutes would not have let me take care of my kids properly, even though the pay would be better.”

Two other workers the SEP campaigners spoke to had long commutes to work in Cortland for near-minimum-wage jobs. “The company we work for loves to speed up work during busy seasons, but makes sure that no one gets overtime. They are very good at milking us dry.” They also thanked the campaigners for having these discussions with them and said they would read the SEP campaign statement and would most likely vote for Jerry White and Phyllis Scherrer in November.



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