

Los Angeles workers speak on social crisis

An SEP campaign team
24 September 2012

In preparation for a public meeting held Saturday in Huntington Park, an area in Los Angeles County, Socialist Equality Party vice presidential candidate Phyllis Scherrer campaigned among working class and youth in the area.

Workers in Los Angeles have been especially hard hit by the recession. Stories of multiple families sharing small apartments, unemployment and declining wages are ubiquitous. For the city's substantial immigrant population, the threat of deportation is also a constant worry.

In response to the economic crisis, the federal, state and city governments have pursued a ruthless austerity policy. Only last week, LA Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa announced that the maximum benefit amount for city worker pensions will be reduced by 25 percent, and the minimum retirement age will be increased from 55 to 65.

On Saturday, Scherrer spoke to workers attending an event to assist applicants to the Deferred Action for Child Arrivals program set up by the Obama administration. DACA applies only to those residents who came to the United States before the age of 16 and are currently 31 years old or younger. In exchange for providing reams of work and educational data to prove residency, biometric scans and a \$465 processing fee, participants are promised a mere two-year reprieve from deportation.

Despite the extremely limited character of the program, intended by Obama largely as a campaign stunt, hundreds of thousands have applied throughout the country—a reflection of the desperate state facing the millions of undocumented workers in the US.

Martín, 28, works as an aircraft technician. He said, “I was brought to the United States when I was nine. I have lived here without any status for 19 years, and I

am here hoping that this program will give me the opportunity work in my profession. I graduated as a aircraft mechanic five years ago. The aircraft and aircraft maintenance companies all require proof of residency or citizenship.

“Basically, I am in the same boat as everyone else here,” Martin added. “Currently I work bussing dishes in a cafeteria. I know that the program is limited and that there are risks involved. But it is better for me to do it than not to do it. It is like driving. People in my position drive cars even though it is illegal for them to do so. When they get stopped, it costs more than \$1,000. But they still do it anyway. This is the same thing.

“I believe that behind the record deportations are private companies that run the deportation prisons, and make use of their labor. That is why I think that President Obama has increased the rate of deportation. While they are waiting for deportation, the government pays these companies, and they squeeze out their labor. It is a modern form of slavery. It came as a mysterious surprise to me that Obama would even open up this Deferred Action program, given his deportation record.”

María came to the event with her 15 year old daughter. “I am here with my daughter,” she said. “She is 15. She was seven when we crossed the border. My husband works in a garment workshop near downtown Los Angeles. He works from 7 in the morning to 6 in the evening every day. His pay is piecework. It is very difficult to make it on the 30 to 40 dollars that he earns every day.”

Sylvia majored in English at a Los Angeles area community college. Earlier this year she was accepted at UCLA, but cannot afford tuition there. She was brought to the US when she was 5 years old, together with her younger brother. She came to the event with her mother Rosa.

Rosa said, "The life of an undocumented immigrant is very tough. My job right now is being a nanny and a housekeeper. I care for children and clean their homes. Before that I was a bartender. That job paid better, but the work was grueling. I would never get enough sleep.

"In March my son was deported. He had misbehaved and was in a juvenile facility. The police acted wrongly, delaying his release date two weeks until his 18th birthday. On that day, they transferred him to LA County Jail, and placed him on deportation hold. He is now in Tijuana. The sheriffs deliberately prolonged his incarceration beyond his birthday so that ICE could deport him.

Sylvia said, "I know that this program is not a path to citizenship; and that we could still be deported and that it will not entitle me to financial aid to study."

"This program is a two-edged sword," Rosa added. "ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] will have information about all the students and all their undocumented parents. I tell my daughter that this scares me. I know how this happens. With this information, ICE appears with no warning and deports entire families. That is the risk. It is important for my children.

When asked about whether or not they believed the Obama administration represented the interests of undocumented workers, Rosa said:

"Obama? No, no, no. He had to do something to get the votes, but no, no, no; in reality he has done nothing."

Scherrer and reporters also spoke with workers in the largely working class area of Huntington Park on Friday.

Jazmin De La Cruz is a student at Hamilton High School, which has a student body of 3,000. She described the conditions at her school saying, "There are 40 to 50 kids a class, it's pretty bad. The teachers get by, but sometimes they have to pay for some stuff like tissues. The students think it's pretty crazy with the budget cuts and how the teachers can't go one-on-one anymore."

Ofelia, a young woman who was on her way to work at McDonald's, also spoke to campaigners. She goes to LA Trade Technical College and is studying Visual Communications to be a graphic designer. When asked

if she was able to sign up for all the classes she wanted she replied, "No, I didn't even get two of my classes. The main reason is budget cuts."

She described her own living situation saying, "I rent with my mom. It's \$1,000 for a single room with a ceiling that's falling apart." At her job she said, "I'm not getting any hours, only 2 days a week, so I'm going for a job at Yoshinoya (restaurant). The only reason I'm working now is because I talked to the managers."

Asked if she was following the election campaign, Ofelia replied, "I don't find it necessary because everything they say is false." The campaigners pointed out it was necessary for young people and workers to follow politics if they want to change society for the better. Ofelia was handed a leaflet advertising the SEP meeting and expressed interest in attending.



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