

Jerry White discusses with workers and students at London meeting

Our reporters
8 September 2012

US Socialist Equality Party presidential candidate Jerry White spoke at a well-attended public meeting at the University of London Union on Thursday. White is in England on the second leg of his international tour, having held a series of meetings in Sri Lanka the previous week. He will speak in Berlin on Saturday.

After White's report there was a lively discussion, with questions about Obama's plans for health care and food stamps, the Republican presidential campaign, and the role of the American media in restricting discussions of politics. White noted that the term "working class" is largely absent from American media discussions of the political situation.

White said that Obama's health care plans were sold as an expansion of health care, but this in no sense is a genuine reform. It is based on for-profit medicine. The insurance companies, pharmaceutical industry and other major corporations had a direct influence in drafting the legislation. Its aim is to force millions that are uninsured into private insurance under penalty of fines.

A student from the US state of Wisconsin asked how the energies unleashed during the 2011 protests against Governor Scott Walker had been dissipated. He asked how such movements could be prevented from failing in future.

There was a growing movement for a general strike against Walker, White explained. But the unions and ex-left groups had pushed the militant anger of workers behind a fraudulent recall campaign for the replacement of Walker with a Democratic opponent. The Democrats chose a right-wing candidate who had used the anti-labour legislation in his own city. Not surprisingly, he lost the election.

Instead of creating illusions in the Democrats, this raised the necessity of an independent revolutionary

leadership of the working class.

A question was asked about the role and character of the trade unions. The speaker, pointing to the Marikana massacre and the breakaway Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union in South Africa, suggested that the problem was not unions per se but their leaderships.

White explained that if it were the case simply of the union leadership, one would have to point to the successes of other unions with more left-wing or militant leaderships. But it was not possible to point to a single example. In South Africa, most of the workers involved in the Lonmin strike are not unionised.

The COSATU trade union federation and the National Union of Mineworkers two decades ago were considered some of the most militant unions in the world because they led the struggle against apartheid. He asked, "How has it been transformed? We are looking objectively at the degeneration of these organisations.

"There was a period in which trade unions commanded the support of militant workers. In our party at that time, we fought for a programme in the unions to maximise the struggles of workers. But there was always a conflict between Marxism and even militant trade unionism. The trade unions try to get the best price for labour in the capitalist system, whereas the Marxists fight for an end to the wage system.

"But a profound change took place in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The unions were integrated into the state and the corporations. Lula in Brazil was the head of one of the largest unions. He went on to head a government that is imposing attacks on the working class.

"There are objective factors involved in this—in particular, the growth of an integrated world economy.

This enabled the corporations to transfer production to areas of cheaper labour. All those organisations that are based on nationalism and the defence of national competitiveness responded by voluntarily lowering the living standards of the working class.

“The most graphic example is the case of the USSR. In one sense you could say that the biggest workers’ organisation in history was liquidated. So what about the trade unions and Labour and Social Democratic Parties? They followed in lockstep.

“New organisations of the working class are needed, controlled by the rank and file and in irreconcilable conflict with private profit. It is a question of what class runs society, allocates resources and prevents war.”

A number of those who attended the meeting spoke to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters after the meeting.

Philip, a retired worker, said he had taken from the meeting the point that “you have to educate yourself.”

Tim, a history teacher, said, “The internationalism of the party is fantastic, and I think it definitely needs to be something that we follow. The lessons that he’s drawn there, from what he’s talked about internationally, are something that we should look into.”

Many of those who attended were pleased to learn more of the struggles and traditions of the American working class, which are not reported in the bourgeois media. Ricky, an unemployed worker, said he found the meeting “very informative.” He continued: “There is an alternative in America. We are not to be fooled by the capitalist-owned media over there, because there are a lot of alternative media and leftist points of view. America has a proud tradition of revolution and socialism.

“Today has demonstrated that and renewed my faith that there is an American working class and this working class is hopefully moving on.”

A student, Emile, said the meeting was “educating and inspiring.” He added, “It gave a new dimension to different struggles in the world, especially struggles in America that are not publicised in the Western media.”

Marc said it was great “to have difficult questions answered openly and honestly with such a clear perspective. I think it’s really important to learn lessons from history and apply those to the present, so to hear that that was the SEP’s most crucial point was really encouraging and hopeful.”

Many of those who attended the meeting recognised the similar conditions faced by American and European workers. A benefits office worker said she had “learned a lot” about the working class in America. She recognised White’s description of the situation facing those on benefits, as “where I work people are taking part-time work, 20 hours a week, zero-hour contracts, to get off benefits.”

Laura, a student, said she found it “interesting to hear of the struggles that people are facing in the US, as they do reflect, echo and impact on what people in the UK are experiencing.”

A man from Wisconsin found it “very interesting to see the level of interest in socialism in Europe.” He continued: “In America, it’s viewed completely differently. Something like this would probably not draw as many people who showed up here and wouldn’t be able to take place many places in the country. It’s interesting to see a British perspective and their view of socialism.”

There was a serious response to the political analysis. Claire, who recently finished college, noted, “You have a lot of criticisms of the ex-lefts, but it’s a schooling. It is about class, and your class analysis is bang on.”

Jerome, a retired academic, said he had grown up “in a period where social democracy still existed, and people took for granted that it always would, that governments actually cared about the welfare of ordinary people. And that’s just disappearing.

“I really have come to the same conclusion as Jerry White. There is only one way to deal with this situation, and that is for the working class to rise up and overthrow their masters. If that doesn’t happen, then the living standards of workers all over the world are just going to get worse.”

Cameron, a student, said, “I can definitely identify with the overarching ideas that he espoused.” He said the meeting had “definitely inspired me to find out more.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)