

Jerry White speaks to workers and students in Virginia

Our correspondents
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Socialist Equality Party presidential candidate Jerry White addressed a meeting at the Annandale campus of Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA) Thursday.

Located in the suburbs of Washington, DC, NOVA has about 75,000 students. Reflecting the highly diverse population of the region, many students come from an international background.

President Barack Obama has used the school to make several public speeches. In February, Obama unveiled his draft 2013 budget at the Annandale campus, in which he outlined plans to subordinate public education spending even more directly to the interests of big business.

At the public meeting in Annandale, White addressed an audience of about 25 students, workers and professionals. Students came to the meeting from neighboring George Mason University and from colleges in Baltimore, Maryland to hear the SEP candidate.

White explained that, regardless of which big business party won the 2012 elections, “The next administration will continue and escalate the destruction of the social conditions of the working class.”

He said that the pro-war and economic austerity policies of both parties have been “brushed over in their election campaigns, as they prepare new crimes behind the backs of the American people,” including the threat of a major new war in the Middle East against Iran.

White then reviewed the devastating impact of the

world economic crisis on the working class. “Especially in Greece and Spain,” White told the audience, the policies of the financial elite were “producing mass unemployment, poverty and hunger.” Using a projector, White showed images of protesting workers and youth in Athens and Madrid, as well as images of working class families in these countries who have been forced to scavenge through dumpsters for food.

These conditions were “producing mass opposition among workers and youth. In the US, workers are also entering into rebellion, as shown in the recent teachers’ strike in Chicago.”

White stated that, whatever their tactical differences, the Democrats and Republicans have entirely repudiated the idea that the population has any social rights. This was clearly shown by Republican candidate Mitt Romney’s comments to a private fundraising meeting, in which he decried the notion that anyone should have a right to basic social necessities like food, shelter, an education, or healthcare.

However, White pointed out, the response of the Obama campaign to Romney’s naked class hatred was entirely tactical. In fact, the Democrats accept the central premise of Romney’s argument that the working class has no social rights.

“The reformist policies of the FDR [Franklin Delano Roosevelt] administration, which were only carried out in response to mass social struggles by the working class, and subsequent programs such as Medicare and Medicaid, are now being repudiated,” White told the meeting.

“In fact, for the past 30 years, wealth redistribution has gone upward towards the super rich.” He presented a graph showing that in the 1950s some two-thirds of social wealth in the US went to labor, largely in the

form of wages, while the top rate of tax on the wealthiest earners was 90 percent. Today, however, only about half of national wealth goes to wages, while the highest tax rate is only around 32 percent.

“The top one percent in the US enjoyed a 277 percent increase in their wealth since 1980,” White noted, while the wealth of most other households in the country has stagnated or declined.

The SEP candidate’s address was followed by a lively question and answer session. Audience members asked White about his policies toward education reform, alternative and environmentally friendly energy sources, and the difficulties of campaigning in the face of a virtual media blackout of third party candidates.

On education, White answered that the Bush and Obama administrations have carried out a sustained attack on public education, under both the No Child Left Behind and the Race to the Top programs. These programs are designed to privatize schools and make it easier to fire hard-pressed teachers. He explained that since the start of the recession, and with the acquiescence of the Obama administration, some 300,000 public education workers had been laid off.

“We defend public education,” White answered. “And we support a massive spending program to raise wages of teachers and improve schools. But it is also necessary to eliminate poverty. How can a child learn properly if they are homeless or hungry or poor? The problems facing schools are bound up with the problems facing the entire working class and youth.”

Two older attendees of the meeting expressed outrage that anyone could suggest that capitalism had failed. One of them said that the system had merely become “debauched” by big money and corrupt politicians, and that it was necessary to scrap the Federal Reserve Bank in order to save capitalism.

As White explained the position of the SEP, these two conservative audience members became more and more agitated, until one of them started shouting in praise of entrepreneurs such as Sam Walton, the ruthless billionaire founder of the Walmart retail empire.

An English major studying at the State University of New York asked about the fate of arts and humanities education under the Obama administration.

White replied that successive administrations have starved educational institutions of funds for the arts in

particular. “The ruling class has no interest in having an educated, cultured working class,” White said. “In fact, like the slave owners of the South who denied an education to their slaves, the financial elite today want to deny workers and youth access to socially critical culture.”

Following the meeting, many attendees stayed to speak with White and other SEP members. One student from George Mason University said that attending a meeting with a Marxist presidential candidate was “the greatest moment in my politically awakened life.”

A dozen students signed up to become members of the IYSSE, and many people purchased books on socialism, including copies of Trotsky’s *The Revolution Betrayed* and Vladim Rogovin’s *1937: Stalin’s Year of Terror*. A generous collection was also raised to help the SEP presidential campaign.



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