SEP campaign teams win support for Detroit regional conference

A WSWS reporting team
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Over the past week the Socialist Equality Party has waged an aggressive effort to build support for the Midwest regional conference, Socialism and the 2012 Elections, to be held November 4 in Detroit. Campaign teams have visited schools and workplaces in the Detroit metropolitan area including university campuses, auto plants, fire stations and markets. During the course of the campaign SEP supporters have made many new contacts and initiated a broad discussion on the political issues raised by the election campaign.

Detroit is the poorest big city in America, with over half the children in the city living below the official poverty level of $22,314 a year for a family of four. Sixty-five percent of children live in households where no one has full-time, year-round work. Democratic and Republican politicians in Detroit and the state of Michigan as a whole are carrying out huge cuts in essential services. In Detroit, scores of schools have been closed while the city is closing fire stations, slashing pay for city workers and carrying out massive jobs cuts.

On Saturday, an SEP campaign team visited Eastern Market in Detroit. Many workers and young people stopped to discuss the policies of the SEP. Gaetano, a young worker from Sicily, remarked on the lack of access to health care in the United States. “Hospitals will only treat you if you have insurance. If not, they will just skip over you for someone that does. My brother lives in Taiwan, and he gets vision, dental and health care for $80 per year. And they say the US is the best country?

“It’s really the insurance companies,” Gaetano added. “They don’t care if you’re living or dead as long as they can find a way to make money off of you.”

Robert, a student in Detroit, expressed disgust with the Republican and Democratic presidential candidates. “The elections are a joke. Our choice is between two right-leaning candidates who will keep killing people overseas no matter who is elected.

“The social conditions in Detroit are bad. I’m living on the stipend I get from the GI Bill, but I’m only getting 80 percent of what I’m supposed to get. I also can’t get unemployment. And I have two kids. It’s very hard, with a lot of scrimping. It was slightly better when my wife was deployed in Afghanistan, because I could rely on her income, but not anymore.

“This is a worldwide phenomenon,” Robert said. “In Spain and Greece there is 25 percent unemployment. The whole world is going through the same cuts, so I like that your work looks at other countries.”

Robert Ybarra said that he had been considering voting for the Green Party. An SEP supporter explained the role of the Greens, especially in Germany, where they have supported war and austerity. “I didn’t know that,” replied Robert. “I’ll definitely have to think about voting for Jerry White now.”

On Friday, a campaign team distributed copies of the World Socialist Web Site Auto Workers Newsletter at the Chrysler Warren Truck plant north of Detroit. The newsletter contained a call by SEP presidential candidate Jerry White to auto workers to support the SEP election campaign.

Nancy, a Warren Truck worker, was very interested in attending the Midwest regional conference in Detroit, saying she was disillusioned with Obama and Romney. “Where’s the brighter future? It is a struggle paycheck to paycheck. We want to have something for our children. We are the ones breaking our backs. We are the ones making the product.”

She described the conditions she faced at her factory,

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where she had worked 13 years as a part-time worker. When she was finally made full time, she took a pay cut from $28 an hour to the second tier pay level of $14.65 an hour under terms of the bankruptcy and forced restructuring of the auto industry imposed by the Obama administration.

"The only grace they gave us was that they waived the 90 days to receive benefits, but we lost much more than we gained. Even when I was part time I still had to pay full union dues. What a ripoff! The union never lets you know anything."

SEP supporters explained that the United Auto Workers had abandoned any defense of the interests of auto workers. In fact, the UAW owned 55 percent of the stock in Chrysler, giving it a vested interest in keeping wages low and profits high. "If the union has stock, why would they fight for us?" said Nancy. "Why should they have their fingers in the cookie jar? It is a legalized mafia."

In Ann Arbor Michigan, SEP campaigns are conducting work to build for the conference on the campus of the University of Michigan. Justin Reed, a former U of M student who now lives in Traverse City, expressed support for the SEP presidential campaign. "I want to vote third party," he said, "but I'm not into many of the things the Green Party stands for." SEP supporters outlined the party's socialist program, including defending basic social rights and internationalism, in contrast to the nationalist and pro-capitalist platform of the Green Party.

"It's so weird that the base still supports Obama at all. I voted for him in 2008. That was my first election," Justin explained. "Now I'm familiar with what the Democrats and Republicans do. They say one thing and do the opposite. Obama is doing the same thing that Bush did. His health care bill is a handout to insurance. With Bush it was Halliburton. The private sector gets fat."

"There are so many things that neither candidate has talked about," Justin added. He pointed to the fact that the summer was the hottest on record and the worst drought in over half a century. "There was no mention of the environment in the debates, for the first time in 24 years," he said. "It's like the Democrats and Republicans got together before the campaigns and said, 'okay, we're not going to talk about this, this and this.'"

The SEP also campaigned among workers at the Detroit wastewater treatment plant where workers struck earlier this month over plans by the city to eliminate 81 percent of the jobs. City workers in Detroit have faced draconian pay and job cuts under the administration of Democratic Mayor Dave Bing. Dorian, the husband of one worker who had participated in the strike, told SEP campaigners he was interested in the conference. "It is something I definitely want to be involved in. I am neither pro-Obama nor pro-Romney. I haven't really seen Obama do anything. The same with Dave Bing. I believe city workers are getting the short end of the stick."

Among those planning to attend the Midwest regional conference is Greg, a classical musician in Detroit. He said he had been considering a vote for Obama, but was open to an alternative. "I am torn, because it is either a Democrat or Republican that is gong to be elected, but I love the SEP stance."

The SEP explained that workers had to reject the framework of the lesser of two evils, which has been used for decades to keep the working class tied to the Democratic Party. Whether Obama or Romney wins the election the working class has to prepare itself to fight the attacks on its jobs, living standards and democratic rights by building a new, revolutionary leadership.

"This is not something that will happen overnight," said Greg. "I am looking for something that will cause a change. It looked like Occupy would get some traction, then it started to dwindle. In Wisconsin after they started the petition recall campaign it just petered out. I would like to be there at the conference to continue my journey and learn more about this movement."

For more information on the Regional Conferences, visit the SEP campaign web site.

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