

In Ithaca, New York appearance, Phyllis Scherrer responds to presidential debate

Our reporter
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Phyllis Scherrer, vice presidential candidate for the Socialist Equality Party, spoke to a meeting Wednesday night at Tompkins County Public Library in Ithaca, New York. She focused her address on the questions the second presidential debate did not raise. The meeting was attended by workers and youth from the area as well as students from Cornell University and Ithaca College.

Scherrer pointed out that neither candidate offered any relief to the tens of millions of workers who have been victims of the economic collapse that followed the Crash of 2008. Ithaca and upstate New York have been particularly hard hit. The official poverty rate in the nearby cities of Rochester and Syracuse is 34 percent. Cornell University itself has eliminated 700 jobs or 9 percent of the nonacademic workforce over the last few years.

Addressing the presidential debate the night before Scherrer said, “The Obama administration has constantly made the claim it has generated jobs over the past four years—but the bulk have been low-paying jobs. Millions more have been jobless long-term, and neither candidate admitted that both parties plan to eliminate long-term unemployment benefits on January 1. Romney was the only one that mentioned poverty, but he proposes policies that would only make the situation worse.”

She also spoke about what is being concealed by these elections. “The campaigns by Obama and Romney are concealing the fact that a bipartisan group in the Senate is currently discussing how best to cut trillions of dollars from the federal budget over the next ten years. This will include unprecedented cuts to Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security and other basic social programs the working class depends on to survive.”

In addition to austerity and wage cutting at home, Scherrer said, both parties planned to launch new wars. After more than a decade of bloody interventions, occupations and war crimes, she said, the American population is deeply hostile to another war. “Nevertheless, further wars are being planned against Syria, Iran and ultimately China. Any one of these has the potential to ignite into a much broader conflagration. And yet, despite the enormous consequences for the American working class any of these wars holds, this is being concealed by the Democrats, Republicans and the media.”

“This is the true nature of both parties. They are beholden not to the population as a whole, but to a tiny elite that is bent on destroying the gains that were fought for by the working class in the 20th century. And they are using the elections as a smokescreen in an attempt to hide the measures of austerity and war they are planning.”

Scherrer outlined the socialist alternative the SEP was presenting to the working class, and explained that the most critical question was building the party as the leadership of the mass struggles that will erupt in the aftermath of November 6.

After Scherrer’s remarks, Charles, a student from Long Island, asked, “What has the response been to your campaign? Where I’m from, I don’t think you’d get that much of a hearing.”

“People everywhere have become disgusted by the two-party system,” replied Scherrer. “Workers were angered by the bailout of Wall Street at the expense of social programs in the US and they’ve begun looking for an alternative to politics as usual.”

“We’ve campaigned all across the US, from New York to Chicago to Los Angeles to Louisiana and we’ve found warm support for our program

everywhere we go. American workers no longer consider ‘socialism’ a dirty word, and are beginning to think about it more and more.”

Chris, a young worker in Ithaca, asked, “Isn’t there a corresponding relationship between the level of militancy among workers and their consciousness?”

Scherrer explained that the history of the American working class, like its counterparts around the world, has been one of fierce class battles, reaching a semi-insurrectionary character during the factory occupations, general strikes and pitched battles with police and the National Guard in the 1930s. The key question, however, was the political subordination of the working class to the Democratic Party by the trade unions, along with the Stalinists who played a prominent role during this period.

“There has been no lack of militancy,” Scherrer said, but the most critical question is the development of political consciousness.”

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the Democratic Party and the trade unions utilized anticommunism and nationalism to cut workers off from the socialist traditions that had guided earlier generations. The key factor in maintaining the domination of the Democratic Party and reformism, however, was the residual power of American capitalism. The decades-long decline of American industry, the explosion of social inequality, and the evaporation of the so-called American Dream for tens of millions of workers, particularly from the younger generation, were driving workers into mass struggles again, Scherrer said.

Pointing to the Chicago teachers’ strike, Scherrer said, “Every teacher was focused on defending public education as a social right. The block against this struggle was the Chicago Teachers Union, which included in its leadership members of the International Socialist Organization, which suppressed the strike in order to prevent a political upheaval against the Democratic Party.

“Political consciousness means an understanding of the class forces that are arrayed against the working class, in that sense who your class friends and enemies are. The American working class has repeatedly shown its courage and self-sacrifice but it must be politically armed to wage a struggle against capitalism. This is the task of the SEP.”

After the questions, an extended informal discussion was held and copies of the program of the SEP were sold.



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