

Jerry White speaks on austerity and war at Monroe County Community College in Michigan

Our reporter
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Socialist Equality Party presidential candidate Jerry White spoke to a meeting of Monroe County Community College students in Monroe, Michigan Thursday. White explained that workers and young people confronted an escalation of austerity and war in the aftermath of the November 6 elections, regardless of whether President Obama or his Republican rival Mitt Romney won.

Monroe is among the worst-off counties in Michigan in terms of the growth of poverty, hunger and homelessness since the onset of the economic crisis four years ago. The local community college has had an increase in enrollment as a result, particularly among layers of laid-off workers and indebted former university students seeking job training. Many of those in attendance were nursing, pre-medical and accounting majors.

White spoke on the disconnect between the official political narrative in the debates and the realities confronting broad sections of the American population. “The idea that this is a society where people don’t care about politics, that it’s not about class and we’re all heading up the ladder of entrepreneurship, is false,” White said. “The reality is that young people are accumulating enormous college debt, people are losing their homes to the banks and taking pay cuts, and whether Obama or Romney wins, they have no answers to the crisis confronting the masses.

“Obama is carrying on the policies of the Bush administration,” White said. “There is a consensus among the Republicans and Democrats at every level of government that your generation has to foot the bill for the bailout of the major banks and the wealthy at the top of society.”

The presidential “town hall” debate reflected the deep polarization of American society, White said, noting that those in attendance had all been screened and pre-

selected. “No question that wasn’t pre-approved was allowed,” he explained. “Where were the serious questions? Is the US preparing war against Iran? Does the president believe he has the right to assassinate anyone in the world who he deems to be a terrorist, without charges?”

Displaying an image of the front page of the October 14 *New York Times*, White said, “We’re told that Al Qaeda is the greatest threat to our safety. Yet even the *New York Times* has been forced to acknowledge that the bulk of the guns that the US, through its allies in Turkey and elsewhere, is sending into Syria are going to terrorist organizations that are directly aligned with Al Qaeda.” The stoking of civil war and arming of jihadists in Syria once again exposed the “war on terror” as a fraud.

Yet no questions about the US’s role in Syria or its designs on Iran could be raised, White explained, “because these are not wars to benefit the American people. They benefit the same banks, conglomerates and energy giants that exploit the American working class. There is a direct connection between the US wars against people around the world and the attacks on the conditions of the American people.”

Therefore, White said, workers in the US shared a common interest with international working people in opposing these corporations and the “free enterprise” system that Obama promotes and defends. Far from creating wealth and prosperity for society, as the president declared the capitalist system would do for those who were “risk-takers,” only a tiny sliver of the population was enjoying wealth at the expense of everyone else. “The rich have enjoyed prosperity, while creating a catastrophe for the working class,” White said.

Pointing to the mass demonstrations in Greece taking place Thursday, White reviewed the deepening crisis in

Europe. The austerity policies in Greece have led to such a huge economic contraction that Greece has been reclassified as a “developing country.” Cuts in Spain, Portugal, and elsewhere have created similar conditions. “The austerity is driving the class struggle,” White said. The experiences of the striking miners in South Africa, protests of young Foxconn workers in China, and demonstrations around the world have also found their echoes within the US.

White reviewed the strikes of the Chicago teachers and Detroit water and sewerage workers, and made reference to the 2011 protests in Wisconsin and Occupy Wall Street. “What’s driving the class struggle? It’s inequality. Society is divided between those who produce all the wealth, and a handful who control it. That handful makes all the political decisions.” The more unequal society becomes, White said, the more social and democratic rights come under attack, because of the fundamental incompatibility of class inequality and democracy.

Obama’s auto bailout, which was predicated on the demand that younger workers make half the wages of their parents’ generation, has resulted in record profits and a workforce that cannot afford to buy the cars they make. “When Obama and Romney talk about economic growth and jobs,” White said, “they mean low-wage jobs.”

The policy of “insourcing,” White noted, had resulted in the closure of factories in Canada and Europe and the relocation of operations in the US, where unemployed workers lined up to apply for jobs paying as little as \$9 an hour. “That’s why high levels of unemployment are not a mistake,” he said. “It is a deliberate policy, and that is why Obama has done nothing about it.” The trade unions, based on capitalism and a nationalist orientation, have facilitated this state of affairs. “The unions do not care if workers are making \$10 an hour as long as they get their dues.”

In discussion afterward, students asked White whether capitalism could be “balanced” with socialist redistribution policies. Darryl, a student, asked whether the socialist perspective was “too strong” and would “collide with other strong views in the political discourse.”

The official presentation of politics, White replied, portrayed the Republican and Democratic differences as being fundamental. “On the surface they have deep differences—but when it comes to defending their class, they’re on the same page. The problem isn’t that there are too strong opinions or congressional gridlock, but

rather that you cannot unite ‘Main Street’ and ‘Wall Street.’ The ‘strong opinions’ I presented represent the interests of the working class, which can’t be reconciled with the interests of the financial parasites.”

September 22, White pointed out, was the 150th anniversary of Lincoln’s signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. “There were those before the Civil War who appealed for the abolitionists and the slaveholders to come together and reach a compromise. It became clear that the slavocracy was willing to wreck the entire country in order to preserve their wealth and property; a revolution was required to end what could not be resolved with compromise.”

The historic decline of American capitalism has placed the country at the center of the crisis of the world markets, a situation the American ruling class is determined to make the working class pay for. In this context, White stated, “The answer isn’t to find a compromise, it is to speak for the interests of the vast majority.”

“Can you have a mix of capitalism and a more equal distribution of wealth?” White asked. “No—the capitalists are hostile to that. Could you have a system of slavery and more ‘humane’ conditions? The wealthy do not want to give any concessions, because that would encourage people to ask for more.”

Debbie, a nursing student, expressed her agreement with White’s presentation. “I agree that both parties are basically the same,” she said. “Obama’s health care program is not about providing care for everyone. They want to take more and give less in services, and to limit what people can get.” The result would be a lowering of life expectancy, something already reflected in mortality statistics since the onset of the economic crisis. Debbie said she agreed with the SEP’s call for the defense of social rights, including health care.



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