Well-attended SEP election meeting at Oberlin College

Our reporters
6 October 2012

Socialist Equality Party presidential candidate Jerry White spoke to a meeting of more than forty students at Oberlin College on Thursday.

Oberlin is an important liberal arts college in Northwest Ohio. The city of Oberlin became a racially integrated community at the time of its founding in 1833, before the Civil War. The college reflected that, admitting two black students in 1835. Oberlin also became a major transition point in the Underground Railroad for escaped slaves in the years leading up to the Civil War.

Referring to this history, White began his remarks by noting the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. “Just over 150 years ago, Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, and turned the Civil War into the Second American Revolution, freeing the slaves from the owners in the South. As such, it’s a great pleasure to address students at Oberlin College at such a time, a place that was a major area for the abolitionists.”

White then contrasted the vast change that has occurred in American political life over such a long time. “The campaigns of Barack Obama and Mitt Romney have been, and continue to be, chiefly an exercise in deception,” said White. “Regardless of whether Obama or Romney wins, the next administration will accelerate the destruction of health care, retirement protections, public education and other essential services, which tens of millions depend on.”

On the international scene, White stressed that “both parties are determined to launch new wars: against Syria, Iran and ultimately China to defend the economic and geopolitical interests of US imperialism. These measures are being prepared behind the backs of the American people.”

The meeting at Oberlin was held one day after the first of the presidential debates. “There was not a single mention of the word unemployment or poverty from the president in the entire 90 minute debate, White said. “Obama praised capitalism without mentioning the social crisis at all. He made no mention of Wall Street. In a particularly revealing exchange, when Romney said the wealthy would do well whether he or Obama won, Obama just smiled.”

Whatever tactical differences exist between Romney and Obama, White said, they are both wholly dedicated to defending the rights and privileges of the wealthy while destroying the living standards of the working class.

“This is not a century ago when Teddy Roosevelt issued a call for the regulation of the corporations and banks. There is no New Deal or War on Poverty. Today, the ruling classes respond to crisis by taking back everything that was won from the ruling elite through a century of struggle.”

White presented several slides to give a visual indication of the stratification that has taken place in American society over the past forty years. He showed that during the 50s, when the tax rate on the rich was at 90 percent, two thirds of the wealth of the country went to labor. The trend over the past 30 years, however, has been a decline in the wealth of the vast majority of households in the US, especially after the 2008 economic collapse.

The remarks were followed by an extensive question and answer session. Students asked questions about the

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viability of racial politics, the relationship between the US elections and war with Iran, whether socialist revolution was inevitable, the framework of a socialist society, and the connection between short-term activities by the SEP and the longer-term goal of social revolution.

White first answered the question on racial politics, replying that racism and anti-immigrant chauvinism have been used to divide the working class. He explained, however, that racial politics was cultivated by the ruling class in the wake of the riots in the 1960s. None other than Richard Nixon talked about “black capitalism.” In one area after another, the US ruling elite put in place black business politicians who attacked the working class just as ruthlessly as their white counterparts.

White also reviewed the experience of South Africa, where the African National Congress, the supposed progressive and black alternative to the Apartheid government, recently shot 34 platinum miners. The incident, White argued, exposed the bankruptcy of racial politics and the centrality of class.

In answer to a student who asked if socialism was inevitable, White replied that class struggle and the necessity for socialist revolution was rooted in objective contradictions of the world capitalist system. He said Marxism had revealed the fundamental conflict between social production and private ownership, as well as between globally organized production and the capitalist nation state system. “Mankind is now threatened with a huge struggle over the division of the world economy. “ While the eruption of mass social conflict is inevitable, White said, “It is necessary to build a political party that understands the logic of the historical process.”

After the meeting, Maurice, a freshman, expressed agreement with White's talk. “I think this is what we need. The left today is so confused about what it should be doing, and this is it. I'm glad that I heard White's talk and I look forward to coming to more meetings.”

Andy, a biology student at Oberlin said, “I thought it was very good. I like graphs and statistics. To have something to look at brings it together and makes the points clearer. My first election was in 2008. I voted for Obama, but I think I have grown a lot in four years. I am definitely looking for something different. I do my best to match what is being said with facts.”

Andy said he was interested in helping to build the International Youth and Students for Social Equality. “I came here not just to hear a talk but to take action.”

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