A new “irrepressible conflict”

SEP holds post-election meeting in New York

Our reporters
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On Saturday, November 17, the Socialist Equality Party held a meeting in New York City to assess the political situation in the aftermath of the US presidential election. The party had originally scheduled a regional conference to be held in the run-up to the presidential elections on November 3, but in the aftermath Hurricane Sandy that meeting had been postponed.

The meeting was opened by WSWS writer Phillip Guelpa, who spoke on the situation facing the region because of the devastation from Sandy. “Over 8.5 million residents of the Tri-state area found themselves without electricity in one of the most populous areas in the country,” Guelpa said.

Guelpa said that as far back as 1985 in the wake of Hurricane Gloria, analysts had called on utility companies in the New York area to address weaknesses in the power grid. He also pointed out how much worse the consequences of the latest storm would have been “if the understanding of the storm’s potential severity had not been available, as it was, days in advance.” It was just this scientific understanding that was threatened by the capitalist crisis and the budget cuts that put a question mark over the launching of the next network of weather satellites that orbit the earth.

Guelpa noted in closing that the skills and workers, including jobless construction workers, are available to cope with the aftermath of the hurricane, but they are not being used. “This misallocation of social resources will continue as long as society remains under the control of the financial and corporate elite, a tiny fraction of the population,” he explained. “The only way out is for the working class to break free from the capitalist two-party system and build its own party based on socialist principles to take control of the wealth of society for the benefit of the vast majority.”

The main political report was given by SEP National Secretary Joe Kishore, who spoke about the speed with which the analysis of the SEP election campaign and its candidates, Jerry White and Phyllis Scherrer, were being confirmed in the actions of the Obama administration. He cited the resolution of the pre-election regional conferences, which warned of the plans for the escalation of war and the assault on the working class whoever is elected.

On military policy, Kishore noted, “Israel has moved very rapidly to dramatically escalate the developing war in the Middle East, with the backing of the United States. The offensive against Gaza is very much tied to the campaign of the US and European imperialism against both Syria and Iran.”

Kishore then explained the significance of the political establishment and media’s campaign over the “fiscal cliff,” which is being utilized to rapidly push through extremely unpopular cuts in Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid and other social programs.

Kishore placed particular emphasis on the role of “left” and pseudo-left organizations in the orbit of the Democratic Party, analyzing recent articles published in the *Nation* magazine and the International Socialist Organization. The continual support of these political tendencies for the Democrats—and the capitalist system—is not the product simply of mistaken ideas, but reflects definite social interests. “Theirs is the politics of the upper middle class,” he said, “a layer that may have certain grievances, but which is in general complacent, opposed to any fundamental transformation of social relations that would harm their own interests.”

He explained that their continual focus on race, gender and other forms of identity politics is bound up not only with their rejection of the working class, but their opposition to the concept of objective truth and a scientific approach to politics. “Marxism is a science,” Kishore said. “It is the science of perspective. We proceed from an understanding of the objective crisis of world capitalism and the class interests of different political forces, and it is on this basis that we make a political prognosis. We seek constantly to orient our own subjective practice in relation to the objective interests of the working class.” It was on this basis that the SEP was able to make an analysis of the elections that has been so quickly confirmed.

Kishore concluded with a reference to the 150th Anniversary of the American Civil War, citing the speech by New York Senator William Seward in 1858, three years before the outbreak of war, in which he spoke of an “irrepressible conflict” between slavery and free labor. “We face now a new irrepressible conflict,” Kishore said, “a conflict between the international working class and the capitalist system. The basic question is that of political leadership. This objective conflict must find political form. This means the building of the Socialist Equality Party.”

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The reports to the meeting were followed by a lively discussion. One retired teacher asked for clarification on the SEP's analysis of the trade unions, and what the alternatives to the unions were.

Kishore said that while the SEP fought for the creation of rank-and file-committees—whose task would be to organize and coordinate the struggles of the working class, breaking them free from the trade unions—the essential task was political. The working class had to consciously break with the two-party system and had to be won to a socialist program.

Kishore explained that the role of the trade unions had to be grasped historically and internationally, reviewing the evolution of the SEP's (and its predecessor, the Workers League's) attitude to the unions. The major industrial unions had been built by struggles of workers in the early part of the 20th century, but had ultimately been crippled by their leadership's allegiance to the profit system and their political alliance with the Democratic Party.

The increasing globalization of production, Kishore remarked, had rendered these nationalist organizations bankrupt. They now work in close collaboration with the state and the corporations to impose that attack on working people.

At this point in the discussion one member of the audience interjected that Kishore's reply was too long and that the SEP needed "more immediate" ways of reaching workers, who were not interested in a historical perspective.

These comments led to an extensive discussion on the nature of opportunism in the workers' movement and the need for a revolutionary leadership that is built on theoretical and historical principles instead of pragmatic considerations of short-term gain.

Other members of the audience, for example, cited an increased thirst for a historical perspective on the part of many workers. One SEP supporter brought up the experience of Occupy Wall Street, which virtually disappeared in New York during the Obama reelection campaign and recently surfaced to organize some charitable donations for victims of Hurricane Sandy in the wake of the storm, in line with its credo of "no politics."

After the meeting, informal discussion continued among audience members, who discussed the party's program as well as the day's organized meeting.

Josh, a member of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality from New Paltz, New York, observed in response to the discussion, "Learning the history of the socialist movement allows you to cut through propaganda by knowing the facts."

Fernando, a student at Brooklyn College, concurred most strongly with the SEP's stance on identity politics. "For academics and those espousing identity as the central issue," he said, "questions of class tend to undermine their own privileged positions."

Ernest, who teaches at the City University of New York, noted that the Obama administration was carrying out policies "no different from that of Romney or Bush, despite Obama's rhetorical statements about his care for the poor."

In speaking about the media uproar over the "fiscal cliff," Ernest said that he thought this was the ruling class response to the bank bailouts in 2008, calling them a "1-2 punch," aimed at first bailing out the banks and then subsequently declaring entitlement spending and other social programs as unaffordable.

Addressing the meeting's analysis about Hurricane Sandy and other supposed "natural" disasters, Ernest said that it was the tendency of capitalist society to place its population in harm's way, ignoring the dangers because of its exclusive focus on profit. Referring to claims that charity work was the only way to deal with such disasters, Ernest stated this was little more than "the bourgeoisie getting the working class to clean up its mess."

Sabina, a social worker who told reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* that she had graduated with over $100,000 of student debt, had come to the meeting with a family member. She had voted for Obama in the most recent election, but said that both candidates' policies had disgusted her overall.

"I want to like Obama," said Sabina, but added, "unfortunately the two political parties treat American life like a sort of game they play when they want to be elected." Sabina later acknowledged that her vote was, like that of many others who had voted this year, one of despair rather than one of confidence.

Speaking on her debt, Sabina said that though she went to school for social work, the price of her tuition was "like going to law school." Referring to her field of social work, she said most positions she applied for were swamped with hundreds of applications.

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