

SEP candidate Phyllis Scherrer campaigns among NYC workers in aftermath of hurricane

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On Saturday, Socialist Equality Party vice presidential candidate Phyllis Scherrer spoke to workers and young people in Lower Manhattan about the need for a socialist program to prevent the kind of social disaster that has affected many millions on the East Coast of the United States and in the Caribbean in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy. Lower Manhattan was severely impacted by Sandy one week ago.

Residents of the Baruch Houses public housing development still had no heat on Friday afternoon and only recently had power restored. No relief agencies were present at the development, although individual volunteers who had signed up online for private relief initiatives were arriving to bring supplies to tenants. Most of these volunteers were younger people from neighboring areas who themselves had lost power and other essential services after the storm.

Many Baruch families were heating their apartments with their ovens, leaving windows open to avoid carbon monoxide poisoning.

Inside and around the Baruch Houses a huge police presence was evident, with police vans, squad cars and groups of officers standing at street corners. As Scherrer spoke to residents, ambulances and fire trucks arrived. Other utility trucks lined the streets in an area of Manhattan that was overwhelmed by floodwaters.

Scherrer spoke to some of the utility workers who have been working 12- and 14-hour shifts to restore power, asking them about the state of the infrastructure. One worker told her that that the failure of the electric grid was entirely preventable.

Scherrer approached a group of residents standing at one of the entrances. They explained, "This is the largest housing complex in Manhattan. We just got our lights back last night. We didn't have a blackout. They cut the power out purposely."

"They shut you down intentionally?" asked Scherrer. One of

the residents explained that the city had hoped they would all leave, and there have been rumors that the city wants to tear down Baruch Housing and replace the complex with luxury high-priced condominiums.

Scherrer asked Ernest Brown, an event planner, and his nephew Shawn Washington about the conditions in the area after the hurricane.

"No help came at all," Ernest said. "We got space-ship food [military rations] from the police. Everyone was triple-charging you."

Ernest remarked that the development was not a violent area, and that most shootings were by the police. He said that the city did not provide for basic needs of the residents. "We need a new community center. There is a shut bathhouse, four floors that could be used for a community center, but the city won't hear of it. They're stopping us from going place to place in the complex. The police are beating people up and stopping and frisking them."

Discussing the election and its relationship to the social crisis, Scherrer explained, "Regardless of who is elected, whether it's Obama or Romney, we're going to see austerity, much worse than we've already seen. There is going to be an intensification of the war drive and an attack on social programs. What you've seen and probably been experiencing for years is what a larger section of the population is going to be experiencing. There is no way to impose this type of social inequality peacefully. They took money from us to bail out the banks. We are for a redistribution of that wealth back to the population. This will only happen with a socialist government."

Scherrer remarked that the so-called "fiscal cliff" due in January would mean an automatic end to long-term unemployment compensation and other basic programs for working people, "all because we bailed out the bankers to the tune of \$23 trillion."

“They can only do this,” she said to the Baruch residents, “because we don’t have our political independence as a class. The working class is tied to the parties that made the decisions about who would get relief after the storm and who wouldn’t. We need our own political party that we build and will fight for us.”

“The conditions facing workers in Baruch are a class question and a part of an international assault on the working class,” Scherrer said. She pointed to the role of Barack Obama, hailed as the first black president who would therefore bring fundamental change, but who was carrying out class-war policies for the rich against the working class.

Ernest nodded in agreement and said, “Those of us poor people who know what’s going on know that Obama didn’t deliver on his promises.”

During the conversation, two young volunteers—Leroy, an art director, and Lynn, a graphic designer—approached the entrance of the building with batteries for the tenants. They listened to the conversation as Scherrer emphasized the international character of the crisis, particularly in Greece, Spain and South Africa. Scherrer went into detail, particularly on the situation in South Africa, where the government with the support of the National Union of Mineworkers had shot down striking miners. She spoke of the ruling African National Congress as an instrument of the bourgeoisie in post-apartheid South Africa.

After listening to a brief explanation of post-apartheid South Africa, Leroy asked, “So this transcends race, it’s a question of the haves and the have-nots?”

Scherrer said that it was, and asked Leroy and Lynn why they had come to the Baruch Houses. Leroy said, “We wanted to help out.” He lives down the street from the development and had also lost power and heat. “I thought it was the entire area. I know Wall Street got power, but I didn’t realize that it was a lower class versus people-with-money issue.”

Scherrer spoke to a number of people who were shopping at the Key Food supermarket, one of the few in the neighborhood. “This was an entirely preventable crisis,” she said to Millie Cruz. “This disaster could have been averted.”

Millie said, “It certainly could have. It was like two separate worlds. No one knew anything about us down here. Only toward the end trucks came with food and water. We were stranded. No information, nothing whatsoever. Battery Park City and certain other areas had light and we had nothing here. They don’t see the people down here.”

Scherrer also spoke to people who did not live in Baruch, such as James, a truck driver, who expressed broad agreement with the program of the Socialist Equality Party.

He and his wife had been bringing flashlights and dry ice to the seniors in his building, “I saw a lot trucks in Battery Park City. I think they should have been sent to the places in need. You have people that are still without.” Commenting on billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s original insistence on continuing with plans for the NYC Marathon, James said, “He was going to be handing out water to runners in Staten Island while Staten Island is devastated. It’s just him not being in touch with reality.”

Scherrer said, “The mayor and the ruling class in this city were worried about a social explosion. People saw that they had generators, food and water for the marathon while many thousands were suffering without basic necessities. That’s why they canceled the marathon.” She mentioned the hotel manager that had cancelled reservations for marathon runners because he was housing hundreds of refugees from the storm. “A crisis like this brings the real class tensions to the top.”

Tanaya Johnson and Shantel Dunbar spoke to campaigners outside of Key Food. “We didn’t even have heat before the storm and one elevator wasn’t working in my building. I think they should have backup generators. There are no windows in the stairwells and it’s dangerous to carry water up to the 13th floor,” Shantel said.

Tanaya said, “If Cuomo hadn’t been concerned about the CEOs and their companies downtown, I believe it would have taken much longer to restore electricity in this area. The city doesn’t take care of the grounds here. Even before the storm, leaves blocked the drains. You can see the difference by neighborhood, which ones they’re concerned about and which ones they’re not.

“This country is run on the back of the working class and the poor. We pay more in taxes than [Warren] Buffett or Romney,” she added. “They’ve cut our afterschool programs and the school buses, and Head Start fees have risen to \$600 a month and our wages aren’t going up.”



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