

Socialist Equality Party (UK) speaks to workers about attacks on welfare in Manchester

SEP candidate Ajitha Gunaratne
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is fielding a slate of eight candidates for the upcoming European elections on May 22 in England's North West constituency, which includes the two cities of Manchester and Liverpool. It is running a joint campaign with the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG—Socialist Equality Party) in Germany, where the elections are scheduled for May 25.

The North West is a region devastated by de-industrialisation and the austerity policies of successive Conservative and Labour governments. Unemployment remains close to 300,000 in the region. It has the lowest life expectancy of any region in the UK.

Over the last two weeks SEP members have been distributing the election manifesto and spoken to hundreds of workers, youth and unemployed people. Many spoke about their dire situations, particularly the effects of the Welfare Reform Act of 2012, including the “bedroom tax”, where anyone renting social housing and whose residency is deemed to have too many bedrooms faces an “under-occupancy penalty” which reduces their housing benefit.

Sean, 31, explained how the bedroom tax helped make him homeless. After years of living in hostels and overcoming drink and drugs dependency, he was able to get a housing association flat in Manchester three years ago. When the bedroom tax came into effect he was told that because he had been given a two bedroom flat, his housing benefit would be reduced by 14 percent.

Sean explained, “One day when I went back to my flat I found I couldn't get in and a note on the door telling me to go to Whitemoss housing office. There I was told that because I had accumulated a debt they had

changed the locks.

“The housing officer said they couldn't offer me a single bed property. There's not enough to house you all, she said. She told me to start ringing around hostels again but you can imagine how long the list is to get into those now. The officer also said I had seven days to get my belongings out of the flat or they would be destroyed. She also suggested I put them into storage but that would cost about £7 a week.

“I've tried so hard to get myself back on my feet but now I am homeless with no possessions, living in bus shelters and train stations. I know 50 or so people in the same position who have lost their properties, sleeping rough and relying on handouts from charities,” Sean said.

YW, currently a housewife from Ardwick also spoke of her experiences with unemployment, saying, “My situation is really bad. I've not worked since 2005 when I lost my job as a medical secretary. Since then I've been applying for jobs everywhere, for everything and anything but no luck.

“I was told at the job centre that I was only entitled to about £4 benefit every two weeks. That is because my husband works part time at a takeaway as a waiter earning £80-90 a week and we don't have children. But I have to support my mother as well. Although she doesn't live with us she is here all the time because she has loads of health problems—cataracts in both of her eyes and problems with her toes and neck.

“There's no future for anyone—everyone's struggling. The government's not helping at all. If you're on Job Seekers Allowance, you already don't have enough money and they expect you to go here and there on buses for training and interviews and voluntary

work when you cannot afford the fares. I was sent from the job centre to do voluntary work for the childrens' charity Barnados to improve my CV. When I asked about help for bus fares and to buy lunch they said no.

"A lot of my friends are jobless. They are trying their hardest, doing courses, like me. The officials keep saying, 'well, you're doing everything you can, applying for six jobs a week which is what you have to do to get benefits, but employers don't get back to you. What are you supposed to do?"

"And then you get sanctions on top of that. I was on a sanction because I wasn't well and got up late and missed an appointment, and they sanctioned me for a whole month without benefits. You still have to go and sign on but you get no benefits at all. The second sanction would mean that they wouldn't pay me for two to three months. That's not happened yet, but it could."

Joseph, a 24-year old musician and writer, explained how he had not been able to find any work since last December after doing odd jobs for more than two years.

"When I went to sign on with the job centre, I didn't agree with the way they treated me. It was very much with an accusing tone. It was like I was lying to get money. So I decided that there was no real point of going there losing all my dignity and getting angry. So I decided to try and live off making music in the streets and growing my own vegetables or going to the back of shops and getting the food they threw out.

"There is a big group of people in Manchester who don't live in the system at all. It's very hard. We need money but I don't want to go back to the job centre. The only way I can see a way out is if I travel abroad, but there are the same problems across Europe.

"I feel very let down by the government and I see the suffering of those all around. The public sector has been cut massively and people have been left to fend for themselves. My mother had 66 hours a week of care cut to nearly 20 hours a week and she is getting worse. She has to pay the bedroom tax for a room that is tiny and has her medical equipment in it.

"I don't have any faith in the government. I have an intense dislike of them. The bankers and pharmaceutical companies are enriching themselves while billions of people are in poverty. They are failing the whole world.

"I have read a lot about the developments in Ukraine

but I don't trust what we are told. My understanding is the US is funding the far right there. Everyone thought that Obama was a big thing but he is just a puppet who would kill anyone to protect US interests. I have also heard about homophobia in Russia but I can see it is being used in a propaganda campaign to discredit the Russian government.

"Both Tony Blair and George W. Bush should be put on trial for their crimes. They are war criminals. Blair is officially applauded and his opinion is still respected in the international community. This was demonstrated by his opinion being sought over Syria.

"I am not as educated as I want to be about these important issues but I am passionate and want to be more educated. I never went to university or college. I am not so informed about your programme but I am going to go to the meeting as it sounds much more honest and interesting than any other political party. Your programme could make the change needed...and I would love to be part of the effort," he said.



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