

“America is broken”

SEP campaigns for May Day Online Rally in historic coal mining region of Pennsylvania

Our correspondents
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Over the weekend, supporters of the Socialist Equality Party campaigned in Scranton, Pennsylvania for the May 4 International May Day Online Rally, organized by the International Committee of the Fourth International.

Scranton, with a population of 76,000, is the biggest in a series of cities along the seam of anthracite “hard coal” deposits that made northeastern Pennsylvania a center of American industrialization in the 19th century.

Important chapters of the class struggle have been written here. In 1877 and 1878, 17 Irish coalminers, accused of belonging to a secret organization called the Molly Maguires, were railroaded through the court system and hung in the coal towns of Pottsville and Mauch Chunk (today Jim Thorpe).

In 1897, 19 Polish, Lithuanian, and Slovak coal miners were gunned down by a Luzerne County sheriff’s posse as they defied a court order and marched peacefully during a region-wide strike. Dozens more were wounded.

Five years later, in 1902, another coal mine strike erupted, involving 150,000 anthracite miners, and drew the intervention of President Theodore Roosevelt and United Mine Worker head Johnny Mitchell—perhaps the first significant example of White House-union bureaucrat collaboration in US history.

Over the past fifty years the region, today an urban area of 550,000, has been hit hard by the closure of mines, as well as silk and textile mills. The coal towns have suffered a population decline of 60 percent since 1940, roughly the same as the city of Detroit.

Poverty and joblessness are endemic. The official poverty rate is 21 percent. In Wilkes-Barre, the second

largest city in the region, the poverty rate is 27 percent.

The official jobless rate in Scranton is 10.5 percent and in Wilkes-Barre 11.1 percent, but it is well known among residents that the real unemployment rate is far worse.

The SEP spoke with a number of workers in Scranton about social conditions in the area, the May 4 Online Rally, and the Obama administration’s threat of war against Russia.

William, 20, works at a sales agency. Born and raised in the Scranton area, he hopes to become an anesthesiologist but is concerned about the tens of thousands he would have to pay in tuition.

“I know a lot of people around here who don’t have jobs, and they can’t find any,” William said. “People lose their work, and then there’s nothing out there.”

When asked about the US war threats against Russia over the Ukraine, William said, “It’s outrageous. It seems like there’s always another country they’re after. All of this effort into war.” William said that he planned to get a group of friends together to listen to the online May Day rally.

Carl was waiting for a bus near the Scranton square. He said that in his job he “works on a line running paper down a conveyor for just a little over minimum wage.”

“I’ve talked to some veterans [about the possibility of war between the US and Russia over Ukraine]. They roll their eyes at it and say, ‘here we go again.’ We don’t need another war.

I don’t believe we’re over there for the reasons they’re saying. Look at the Gulf War. That was all about oil. I think if you look at it, you’re going to find out that it’s about oil in Ukraine too.”

“America’s broken. Low paying jobs aren’t hard to find. But costs outweigh incomes. In 2007 when the recession hit, I was working two jobs and on Saturday. My wife worked too. We couldn’t keep up with the mortgage and pay the utility bills. Now they say the recession is over.

“The American dream is not a white picket fence anymore,” Carl said. “It’s trying to keep your electricity and heat on.”

Tyré and Stephanie were shopping at a Rite-Aid pharmacy with their infant daughter. Tyré is without work and knows many other unemployed workers in the area. “There’s a lot of money out there, but no one will hire anyone,” he said.

The couple said that they had not been able to follow the US war threats against Russia, but when told that of the hundreds of billions of dollars spent every year on the military, Tyré said, “That’s just stupid. There are so many things that they could do with all that money. Just look around here.”

Jim is a young worker who lives in the Scranton area. He delivers paint for a living, but has an education in music, a field in which he can’t find work. His day job doesn’t pay enough, so his parents help support him.

He didn’t think there was much of a chance of war breaking out between Russia and the US. On the Obama administration, he said, “I’m pretty disappointed. I didn’t expect that much, but still I’m disappointed. Between him and Clinton, I thought he would be more left.”

Zane is a young bus driver who was waiting to start his shift when he spoke with us. Born in Kuwait to a Pakistani family, he said he hears about the social crisis in the conversations of his riders.

“I see two kinds of people on the bus,” Zane said. “Young people who are using the buses to go look for job, career link and temp agencies. And old and disabled people who are going to the doctors and grocery store. There’s a lot of talk on the bus about politics and how the economy is not good. There’s a lot of excitement when there is a job that pays fifty cents over the minimum wage.”



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