

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Jobs, housing and danger of war on voters' minds

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27 April 2016

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with workers and students in Pennsylvania voting in the primary elections on Tuesday. Reporters also distributed copies of the election statement for Socialist Equality Party candidates, Jerry White and Niles Niemuth.

As with the rest of the US, behind the “economic recovery” in Pennsylvania lie very deep social problems. Unemployment, underemployment and poverty still dominate. The jobs that replaced steel and manufacturing, particularly in Pittsburgh, are mainly in service, education and health care, which pay only a fraction of the wages and much lower benefits.

The largest employer in Pittsburgh is UPMC, the multinational health insurer and health care provider. While categorized as a nonprofit, and thus exempt from paying taxes in the city, the institution routinely makes over \$500 million a year. Meanwhile, the average wage for workers at the company is just over \$13 an hour.

The median household income in Pittsburgh is \$40,000, well below the state average of \$53,000. The poverty rate is 22.8 percent, with one in three children living in poverty.

Affordable housing is another major problem. The city has been conducting a long-term program of tearing down low-income public housing units and replacing them with what is called “mixed income housing.” In practice, this means many low-income families are forced to move further away from the city, and where jobs and public transportation are scarce. Rents have skyrocketed, in some neighborhoods going up as much as 300 percent over just five years.

Francis, a retired worker, said she had voted for Hillary Clinton. She believed the economy was the biggest issue. “I would like to see more jobs,” she said. “Everyone also should have insurance. That’s a big thing for me. Everyone has a right to hospitalization if they need it,” she explained. “I’m for Hillary, but Bernie [Sanders] would be my second choice.”

When asked about her views on war, Francis said that she was opposed to it, but that it had not been the main factor in her vote. She seemed skeptical that Clinton would bring the country into another war, claiming “I think she’ll handle [preventing war] as best she can.” She was unaware of Clinton’s role in the 2011 invasion of Libya, the Syrian conflict and the 2014 far-right coup in Ukraine. “See, I didn’t know that,” she said. “I figured that with Bill by her side, it should be alright. He did pretty good.”

Regina explained that while she was retired, she had gone back

to school at the Community College of Allegheny County (CCAC) to become a drugs and alcohol abuse counselor. She explained that she had voted for Bernie Sanders.

“Free education is really important to me, for one,” she said. “I think he has some solid factors to implement, though I don’t think Congress will let him.” She said that she was a veteran of the Iraq Gulf War (1990-91). “War is not good for anyone,” she said. The WSWW reporter explained that Sanders had given support in a town hall meeting Monday both to additional US boots on the ground in Syria as well as a continuation of Obama’s “kill list.”

“I was not aware of that,” she said. “In today’s times, we’re put into complicated situations.”

Norman, a mathematician, began by stating his antiwar views. In reference to Regina’s remark, he said, “These aren’t ‘complicated situations.’ It’s simple mathematics,” he said. “After you have annihilated all of Syria’s food supply, their water supply and their population, what did you win? Nothing! That is what is going to happen if we invade Syria.”

He then went on to speak on the refugee crisis. “Look, those Syrian refugees will go home once things settle down,” he said. “They don’t necessarily want to be in Germany, France or elsewhere. They aren’t ‘invading’ Europe. Things are too dangerous and they had to leave! It’s simple. If I told you your home was about to get bombed and your only choice was to go to Nome, Alaska, you wouldn’t be thrilled either, would you?”

He said he had voted for Trump. The reporter pointed out that Trump stoked up racist, xenophobic views against Muslims and Syrian immigrants. Given the vast gulf of Trump’s views from his own, the reporter asked why he voted for him.

“Honestly, I don’t give a hell who wins,” he said. “Out of 300,000,000 people here in the United States, our choice is only these five idiots? I can’t believe it. Hillary is a psychopath. Trump is also a psychopath. I remember my high school class elections being better than this, and that isn’t saying much. It’s shameful.”

Kalee, a maid, explained that she had cast her vote for Sanders. “For me, women’s rights is a big issue, as well as pay inequality more generally,” she said. “I like that Sanders is more of an isolationist as compared to the other candidates. I also admire his socialist background. I’ve been following him since he filibustered the Bush tax cuts.”

On the subject of war, she said, “I know that he feels like we shouldn’t be involved in [foreign interventions] without the support of our allies. I think most of all he wants to resolve things

peacefully through the UN.”

When made aware of Sanders’ support of additional troops in Syria, Obama’s “kill list” and of the NATO troop buildup in Eastern Europe, she expressed serious disappointment. “No, I did not know that. That’s really unfortunate. It seems so out of character for him, so inconsistent with the things he’s said up until now.

“It’s difficult for me, because I’m an idealist,” she added. “There are so many issues we’re facing, just so many. I don’t think any [major] candidate is capable of addressing them. I suppose Sanders is the closest. The part of his platform that I like the most is how he talks about ‘the revolution.’ And I think that’s something that goes beyond him. That’s something he’s not exempt from. He needs to represent his constituency. It’s not just about his presidency, it’s about his constituency and what they want.”

She said that she would vote for a party that was for the defense of social rights and genuinely against poverty and war. “Yes, I identify as a socialist. So, yes I would. But there needs to be a significant level of support. I would vote for a future presidential candidate on this platform, especially in Congress. I might even vote [for a genuine socialist candidate] in this election cycle.”

The reporter explained that such a party already exists—the Socialist Equality Party—and urged her to read the party’s election statement of 2016.

Nicole, a registered Nurse at UPMC Children’s Hospital indicated that she was voting for Sanders. “I’m for equality,” she said. “I didn’t watch all the debates, but he seemed like the only one who didn’t dance around the answers.”

She also expressed opposition to war. “My little cousin just joined the Air Force, and I’m worried about him. I don’t want him to get sent out anywhere.” When she learned of Sanders’ pro-war record, she said, “I’m actually surprised. I had not thought he was for any of that.”

She expressed interest in the Socialist Equality Party’s platform. “I’d be willing to hear [SEP candidates Jerry White and Niles Niemuth] out. It’s hard to say. If you aren’t a major party it’s so hard to get elected. Especially because the media never covers those parties, so people haven’t heard of you. But I’d be interested in what they have to say.”

The WSWS also spoke to workers voting at a polling place in Scranton, Pennsylvania, a declining industrial city in northeastern Pennsylvania.

Susan, a school counselor in Susquehanna County, said that she was supporting Sanders in the election. “It’s the bottom versus the top,” she said, when asked what she thinks the most important issues in the election are, she replied, “It’s about money not being distributed fairly.”

“There is plenty of money. We shouldn’t have to beg for health care, for education and for food. I wish you could talk to my daughter. She’s working two jobs just to pay back her student loan debt.”

When asked if she had considered the threat of war as a major issue in the election, Susan agreed that it was not being discussed much. “My brother-in-law fought in Afghanistan, and he came back with an injury,” she said. “Veterans are coming back and

they can’t get what they need. They can’t get back into the workforce.”

When the WSWS pointed out that Sanders was seeking to channel working-class support back behind the Democratic Party, Susan said she would support the Democratic nominee against the Republicans, no matter whom the latter nominated.

Dave described himself as an IT worker and said that he would also be voting for Sanders.

When asked what mattered the most to him in the election, he responded, “getting the money out of politics and a livable wage.”

When the WSWS pointed out that under Obama 60 percent of the federal discretionary budget is given over to military spending, Dave said, “The government’s got to stop doing all that. We could use that money for other things like education and roads.”

Elaine is a student at an area medical college. She went to the polls with Jesse, who is an engineer and was wearing a Bernie Sanders t-shirt.

Jesse said that the most important issue to him in the election is “finances.” When asked what he meant by that one-word reply, he said, “I’m angry about how all the money is going to the top in society, and then they say there’s nothing for health care.” Elaine echoed the sentiment, saying that the most important issue to her in the election was the cost of health care.

Elaine said that by the time she finishes medical school, she would have nearly a half a million dollars in student loan debt, including her undergraduate education and a previous master’s degree. “I’m on the high end,” she said. “But people coming out with \$200,000 and \$300,000 in debt is totally normal.”

“They have trillions of dollars to bail out Wall Street,” the WSWS correspondent noted, “and yet no one running for office outside of the Socialist Equality Party is calling for the abolition of student loan debt.”

Both responded in the negative when asked if they felt “represented by the two-party system.”

“You can’t have just one or the other,” Jesse said. “There are too many differences in this country. “It’s like there’s this disconnect between people living daily life and the politicians.”

Elaine added, “A new world is evolving, and this old system has to go.”



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