

Sanders campaigns in West Virginia

Naomi Spencer, Clement Daly
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Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders made a campaign stop in Huntington, West Virginia on Tuesday, April 26. A crowd of some 6,500 students, workers, young people, and families attended the event in the city's arena, waiting for hours beforehand in a line stretching blocks in the rain and muggy weather. Many had traveled hours from eastern Kentucky or remote areas of West Virginia to see the candidate speak.

West Virginia has the worst unemployment rate in the country, the lowest labor force participation rate, and its coal industry is collapsing with violent rapidity. Statewide polls have indicated that of the presidential candidates, Sanders, along with presumed Republican frontrunner Donald Trump, garner the highest approval ratings. Especially among young people and political independents, the two "outsider" candidates have tapped into outrage over inequality and the poverty gripping Appalachia and the country at large.

At the Huntington event, Sanders spoke for an hour, rattling off his standard denunciations of the "billionaire class," and tailored his stump speech to include West Virginia statistics on poverty, life expectancy, drug addiction, and social inequality. These remarks earned loud boos and cheers from the crowd.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* distributed material for Sunday's International May Day Online Rally, and spoke to attendees of the Sanders event.

Alison, a 23-year-old resident of Barboursville, West Virginia, described herself as an Independent and said this year would be her first time voting. "Most of the reason I am here is I am not really affiliated with anybody, but I feel like I need to be here in order to listen and see, you know, where everybody is coming from. I feel like that's the responsible thing to do."

WSWS reporters asked Alison what she felt was the

most pressing political or social issue facing the working class. "I feel that we do need to make a point to make life more affordable for everybody. I don't really stand by minimum wage being \$15 an hour or anything like that. I believe we need to make education more accessible so that people can get educated to receive jobs that do help them pay bills," she added. "We need to expand schools; we need to make sure that everybody has access to better education."

Austin, a 13-year-old from rural Webster County, said he felt that of all the candidates that Sanders was the least militarist. "I like his ideas for peace. He's one of the most peaceful politicians I've seen. He is for the middle class and I like his opinion on free college and jobs."

The WSWS asked what he felt was the most pressing issue for his generation. "I like the idea of free college and better wages," he said. When he graduates from high school, he said he wanted to go to college, then establish himself. "I think I'd say the same as most people," he said. "Probably start a family, get a good job."

Austin expressed ambivalence and confusion over the nature of the wars in the Middle East. "I don't see us going to war with other countries," he said. "I see ISIS being a big problem though. I honestly don't know how that's going to play out. I'm just hoping for the best there, because a lot of things could happen there that I'm just not certain about."

Nicole, 28, originally from Kalamazoo, Michigan, has lived in Huntington for six years after graduating from Marshall University with a theater degree. She said Sanders taps into desperation and hope. "There's a certain segment of the country, one that a lot of us are in, that has just gotten pushed further and further and further down," she said. "And the idea of the American dream just seems to die a little more every day when you work two jobs, three jobs, and no matter what you

do, you still get further and further behind, and there seems to be no way out no matter what you do.

“When I grew up, it was drummed into me: if you get an education, it’s your ticket out of poverty. So that’s what I did. I got an education, I got scholarships. I still ended up with student loans. Not a lot, but I still had loans, and now I can’t pay them back.

“I can find some jobs but not enough to pay my regular day-to-day bills, let alone a student loan bill,” Nicole said. “A car repair puts you in so much debt, you’re stuck for the next two years, which is exactly the case I’m in. So it just seems that there’s no way out no matter what you do.”

She spoke about inequality as a central concern. “It’s mainly been the economic and equaling things out across the board,” she said. “Social equality, economic equality. And I’m not saying that I don’t want to pay my fair share, but I want everybody else to pay their fair share too. When my tiny little paycheck from a summer job has more than an 18 percent tax rate, and somebody who doesn’t really do anything is making \$5,000 an hour, that doesn’t seem quite right to me.

“And it’s not even an ‘It’s not fair.’ It’s not moral. There’s something very wrong with that. People keep going on, ‘It’s a Christian nation.’ Well, it’s not a Christian nation at all. From many, one. That’s the thing, not ‘In God We Trust.’ It’s absolutely criminal for somebody who makes \$5,000 an hour to say, ‘I don’t need to pay taxes.’ But you’re making \$2,000 for an entire three months and you need to pay 18 percent tax.”

Nicole pointed to social polarization and the divisive character of identity politics. “I think in the last four years, not necessarily in the campaign, but just as a country, it’s becoming a ‘them and us’ in every group. It’s, ‘you’re Republican, you’re a Democrat, you’re in support of LGBT rights, you’re Black Lives Matter, you’re this, you’re that, you’re the other thing. There seems to be this trend where we keep wanting to designate ‘you’re in this box, you’re in this box, you’re in this box,’ and the more they delineate people, the less we’re going to make a change.

“I think if we just stop labeling people or stop labeling everything—we seem to like labels a lot—if you stop trying to categorize everybody and just figure out what the problem is and then fix it, rather than saying, ‘Well, this is a black problem, this is a gay-

transgender problem.’ It’s an everybody problem because we’re all stuck here. There are no free trips to the moon. We’re stuck here. We might as well make the best of it.”



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