

SEP candidate Niemuth discusses attacks on public education with Erie residents

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Continuing his campaign this week in Western Pennsylvania, Socialist Equality Party vice presidential candidate Niles Niemuth visited Erie, Pennsylvania, a former manufacturing and transit hub of the southeastern Great Lakes region.

Located on the southern shore of Lake Erie, Erie has long served as Pennsylvania's main access point to maritime trade in the Great Lakes region, and the St. Lawrence River region of Canada. During the mid-19th century, Erie became a railroad hub as well. In the first half of the 20th century, there was a substantial growth in manufacturing in Erie, including the Erie Forge and Steel factory, Hammermill Paper, and the General Electric locomotive plant.

Like much of the rest of western Pennsylvania, Erie was devastated by layoffs and factory closures that resulted from the policy of deindustrialization. The General Electric locomotive plant, which once employed over 10,000 workers, now only employs several thousand, with major layoffs since 2008, including 950 jobs cut in 2013. Hammermill Paper shut down in 2002, laying off nearly 800 workers. The population of Erie has fallen by more than a quarter, from 140,000 in 1960 to roughly 100,000 today. The median annual income is \$33,000, nearly 40 percent below the statewide median of \$53,000.

In response to budget shortfalls, Erie Public Schools threatened last month to close all public high schools in the district, effectively ending the right to public education beyond eighth grade in Erie. The district opted to keep high schools open only after the promise of \$7.6 million in emergency funds in the Pennsylvania budget passed on Wednesday.

Niemuth spoke with Erie residents about the threat to public education and broader political issues in the US elections.

Asked about the threat to close the school, Elva, a 65-year-old grandmother, responded, "I think it's terrible. If they can't seem to OK the budget for the schools, then we need to take the kids over to the legislature and let them take care of them."

"These kids are running wild. If they're not in high school, they'll just be shooting up the neighborhood. A lot of them are already skipping school, and quitting school, and this just makes it worse."

Elva works part-time at a dollar store in Erie for \$10 per hour, after starting at around \$7 per hour. Asked whether someone could raise a family on her wage she responded, "No, you can't. You have to get at least \$20, \$25 an hour to raise a family, and even that might not be enough for a big family."

Asked about the elections, Elva replied, "It doesn't make any difference, Republican, Democrat. With all those companies, without all those little people, if they all weren't there, what would they do?"

Amar, a local restauranteur, spoke on the threat to close the schools. "I'm pretty sure they have money to fund the schools. We need a change. Both the Republicans and the Democrats have too much power."

Amar, who fled Bosnia during the US-backed violent breakup of Yugoslavia, compared the political situation in the US to that in Bosnia. "Bosnia has three presidents, just looping around, getting what they want. It's all about money. The people with power get money. The rich are always getting their funds increased, and we're not getting anything."

Asked about the current refugee crisis, Amar expressed deep sympathy. "Somebody needs to give them an opportunity. It's not their fault that they are refugees. Someone took everything away from them. Before, they had a home and everything just like everyone else."

Cheryl, a mother of two, moved to Erie from New York City ten years ago. She disagreed strongly with the threat to close the schools. “I don’t think that’s a good idea at all. A lot of these kids don’t have anything to do as it is. As far as extracurricular activities, they don’t have any after-school programs.

“High school is the most important age at this point. They need to know life skills, instead of just violence and shooting people, and killing people, and things of that nature, so closing the schools is just hard. If that’s something they’re thinking about doing at this point, I would need to leave, because I’m a mother of two. I graduated high school, I went through college, and I’m productive. I try to help my little community where I stay, to keep kids active every day. If you close the schools, you’ll have a bunch of 16-, 17-, 18-year-old kids out in the streets, just wandering.

“When I was in high school, I went around and I spoke to kids about things that were going on in their lives and at home, things like teenage pregnancy, and kids not having both parents at home. Already, that’s enough for children of that age group to be dealing with. Some kids go to school for an outlet. They don’t have that now if they close the schools.”

Cheryl works as a machine operator at a local manufacturing facility, making \$7.75 per hour, just above the state minimum wage. Such low-wage sweatshop jobs are the deliberate product of the Obama administration’s policy of transforming the US into a cheap labor platform to “insource” manufacturing.

After Niemuth pointed out that a handful of billionaires own more wealth than 150 million poor Americans, Cheryl replied, “There are a lot of groups that do have a lot more wealth than other people. They don’t have to worry about what we worry about. This is how the system was set up.”

Niemuth argued, “All of these problems, education, poverty, unemployment, it’s all rooted in the capitalist system. The politicians speak for those who control the entire system. What we’re representing is socialism, workers’ control of production, democratic control of society.”

Cheryl agreed strongly, and responded, “I’m praying and I’m hoping, and I’m wishing that that’s something that will come to light eventually, because the way it’s going, we’re in our last days. The way it’s going right now, it’s not going too well. The President, the

government, it’s just not right.

“It [Erie] is going to be a ghost town in the next five years. When I moved out here, it was such a nice place. The jobs were good, it was a place you could raise your kids. There was no violence.”



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