

Socialist Equality Party campaigns for ballot status in Louisiana

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A campaign team of the Socialist Equality Party recently campaigned throughout the state of Louisiana to obtain ballot access for the party's presidential ticket, Jerry White for president and Niles Niemuth for vice president.

The Socialist Equality Party was on the ballot in the 2012 presidential elections, when the Socialist Equality Party ran Jerry White and Phyllis Scherrer. While Louisiana has among the easiest ballot access requirements in the United States, where onerous petition requirements are frequently used to block access for smaller parties, the fact that the Socialist Equality Party is seeking ballot status in the state for the second consecutive presidential election is an indication of the growing support for the party in the American South.

While campaigners have fulfilled all of the requirements for ballot access, the party must attach a \$500 filing fee along with its ballot application. The Socialist Equality Party appeals to its supporters throughout the country to donate to help offset the costs of getting on the ballot.

The state of Louisiana has played host to some of the worst crimes of the American ruling elite in the 21st century. In 2005, Hurricane Katrina, a natural disaster compounded by decades of neglect, killed more than 1,800 people and flooded more than 80 percent of the city of New Orleans, the state's largest city and a major port near the mouth of the Mississippi River. The response of the ruling class, in which rescue operations and humanitarian aid were impeded by the occupation of the city by the National Guard and orders for police officers to shoot "looters" on sight, exposed the brutality of class relations in the United States to a horrified world public.

Eleven years after the storm, the city itself is home to

almost 100,000 fewer people, and the ruling class has seized upon the "opportunity" presented by the storm to convert the city into a test bed for pro-corporate policies, most significantly the conversion of almost all of the city's public schools into privately run charters.

In 2010, the coastal waters off Louisiana played host to the worst environmental catastrophe in American history, when the BP Deepwater Horizon oilrig exploded, killing 11 rig workers and releasing nearly 5 million barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico. The Obama administration worked tirelessly to shield BP from any responsibility, working hand in glove with the company to hide the true extent of the spill and minimizing its financial liabilities. To date, not a single top executive has served jail time for the disaster, the full impact of which remains poorly understood.

Since the Great Recession, Louisiana has been one of the leading states in slashing funding for education and social programs, first under the Republican administration of Governor Bobby Jindal and now under the Democratic administration of Jon Bel Edwards. State spending for higher education has been slashed by 41 percent since 2008, the deepest cuts in the nation.

The state's publicly owned Charity Hospital network was sold off to private companies in a fire sale in 2013, in such haste that many winning bidders did not even bother to fill out all of the required paperwork.

At the beginning of the year, in response to a severe budget deficit caused by years of corporate tax breaks and the decline in the global oil industry, the Louisiana state legislature pushed through hundreds of millions of dollars in cuts, including cuts to health care and education so deep that many hospitals and universities were threatened with closures.

The result is that the working class in Louisiana faces

social conditions that are increasingly impossible. Louisiana has the third-highest poverty rate in the nation, at 19.9 percent according to the Census's latest figures. In New Orleans, this figure is far higher, at a staggering 27.9 percent. In some rural parishes (the state's equivalent of counties), it approaches or surpasses 40 percent. Social inequality is rampant, with one report by Bloomberg in 2014 naming New Orleans the second most unequal city in the United States, behind only Atlanta, a fellow Southern metropolis.

As in other parts of the country, the state's political establishment has responded to the social crisis with increased repression. The state has been called the "prison capital of the world," with nearly 40,000 incarcerated in 2014 out of a total population of 4.6 million. Police violence is rampant; at least 41 people have been killed by police in Louisiana since the beginning of 2015, including the notorious execution-style murder of Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge last month.

Meanwhile, due to soil erosion caused by the activities of the oil industry and other manmade phenomena, large portions of the state's coastal regions are literally disappearing, with the state losing the equivalent of a football field's worth of wetlands every hour. In addition to threatening the existence of whole communities, the loss of the coastal wetlands, a key natural barrier against hurricanes, increases the odds that a catastrophe on the scale of Hurricane Katrina could hit the state sometime in the future.

The crisis of capitalism has begun to find reflection in the consciousness of workers and young people throughout the state. In the cities of New Orleans, Baton Rouge, Lafayette, Alexandria, Shreveport and Ruston, campaigners from the Socialist Equality Party encountered a militancy and opposition to social inequality, as well as a broad disaffection with the entire political establishment. A university student told campaigners in Baton Rouge, "The education system is being robbed. People are not graduating, even if they are able to get a job that's going to pay them well enough to make ends meet."

Alice, a young waitress in Ruston, said, "I was homeless for a while. ... We have a house [now] with four roommates. I see police patrolling around and clearly harassing people in my neighborhood." She expressed opposition to the discrimination of

undocumented immigrants, explaining that many of her co-workers had been harassed and deported. "The idea of Trump building a wall is the most terrifying sign," she said.

The campaign exploded the myth, promoted relentlessly by the media and Democratic Party, that America is intractably divided by race, and that white workers, and Southern whites in particular, are hopelessly reactionary. Workers and youth of all races were interested in the party's campaign to fight for a socialist program. Campaigners also visited Winn Parish in the north of the state, where the socialist Eugene Debs won the popular vote in the 1912 presidential elections.

Dalton, a student at Louisiana Tech University, told campaigners that he would not vote for either of the two main candidates and declared his opposition to the attempts to divide the working class along racial lines. Dalton explained the social conditions facing young people in Louisiana. "You're going into debt \$40,000 and you get out and a lot of people move back with their parents," he said. "They can't find work, or they're working at McDonald's or fast food."

Dalton added, "I believe that the longer it goes like this, the more corrupt it gets, something is going to happen. Either our generation or the generation below us is going to have enough and rise up and throw the system over and try something different, which I hope happens, because this system is just not working."



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