

SEP campaigns in Leechburg and Brackenridge, Pennsylvania

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A Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaign team spoke with residents of Leechburg and Brackenridge in western Pennsylvania's Allegheny-Kiskiminitas river valley, campaigning for the SEP's Presidential candidates, Jerry White and Niles Niemuth. Many residents greeted the campaign with interest and enthusiasm, speaking of low-wage jobs, dwindling retirement benefits and a political establishment with nothing to offer.

Campaigners distributed copies of an SEP election statement, and several residents signed up for the SEP newsletter or otherwise sought to stay in contact with the SEP.

When SEP campaigners explained that this campaign was independent of and in opposition to the Democrats and Republicans, Don Sweeney, a young unemployed worker in Brackenridge, listened with interest.

Speaking of the big-business presidential candidates, Don explained, "I don't like either one. If I were to say who I like out of both of them, I would say Trump. Clinton was already in office, and we saw what that was like."

After SEP campaigners explained the demand for a workers' government, Don asked how this could be achieved. A lengthy discussion followed in which SEP supporters explained the necessity for creating a mass independent political party of the working class.

Historically, western Pennsylvania was a major center of the global steel industry. After decades of plant closures and layoffs, facilitated by the United Steelworkers (USW) union, steel employment in the area is a fraction of what it once was. As a result of these betrayals, young workers face low-wage, casual jobs, and retirees are forced to subsist on dwindling pensions and meager Social Security benefits.

Don described the low pay and casual labor

conditions facing an entire generation, "I just moved back from New York, up near Albany, but I lived around here for ten years. I just got back two weeks ago, and I am unemployed. I was driving a forklift for \$12 to \$13 an hour in New York. Here I was making \$18 to \$19 an hour.

"In Albany, they can lay you off for any reason. If you miss work one day, they can lay you off. Here there are more protections."

A Brackenridge truck driver with 30 years' experience took a copy of the SEP election statement after expressing no confidence in the Democrats and Republicans. "It's getting worse. It's going to get worse if Hillary gets in, but Trump's not ideal either."

Both Brackenridge and Leechburg were sites of 2015-2016 lockout of 2,200 workers by Allegheny Technologies Inc. (ATI), during which the ATI Bagdad plant in Leechburg was idled, putting 220 workers out of work.

Christine, a retired schoolteacher from Leechburg, spoke about the impact of the lockout on workers and their families.

"The Bagdad plant, they have titled it idled, but I don't think it's going to open again. The 200-some people who were laid off. Some of the workers just retired or got other jobs.

"It's been very hard on the families. Even during the lockout, many of them couldn't afford their medicines without their insurance. They were able to buy some kind of insurance, but it didn't cover much.

"A lot of the workers did lose their jobs. I think they're trying to find work elsewhere. It's mainly the younger guys who didn't have much seniority. A lot of the older guys went ahead and retired with a lower pension, and just got out."

After SEP campaigner quoted Obama's assertion that

“America is pretty darn great right now,” Christine responded, “I don't think so. Everyone promises to help the middle class, but no-one does, even the things that Hillary's saying she's going to do on this. I don't think either one of those candidates can relate to middle-class people.

“They both work for big money, and Obama's not a poor person either. He's got a beautiful home that he's going to move into, that he's renting now.

“We need a revolution. I think that's what we need to do. It's going to take the younger people, with more energy and drive than the older people”

Speaking on the bipartisan attacks on Social Security, Christine continued, “They're supposed to improve it, but I don't think they're going to do that. If they reduce it, or eliminate it, there would be a revolt for sure. We put our money in there; we deserve to be able to retire.

“I'm fortunate, I have a pension, a teacher's pension, but they're eliminating teachers' pensions now. Nobody's going to have a pension, that's going to be a thing of the past. Already with the younger teachers, they're having to put money in a 401(k). As far as contributing toward health benefits, health costs are so ridiculous. It's just insane.

“Things have to change. I hope they change. It's up to you guys, the younger people. You have the energy and drive. We'll pitch in, but you have to initiate.”

After the discussion Christine donated generously to the SEP election campaign.

Brad, a young worker from Brackenridge, spoke of the hardships facing convicts. “People should give criminals more opportunities.

“I'm a convicted felon. I couldn't even get a job at McDonald's.

“But, I got a job anyway. I work at TruFoods through a temp agency. I make Kind Bars, making \$10.07 an hour; it started at \$9 an hour. After a few months, they pass you off to TruFoods, and they decide whether to hire you. Then you get a 401(k), and they offer medical, which you have to pay for.

“Last week I worked 54 hours. It's usually more like 48. I'm a wrapper operator. There are three of us, and there are three shifts, so if one of us calls off, we work together to cover. I just got paid, and I have \$4 left to my name.”

Brad explained the wealth his factory produces. “We can put out 100,000 bars per hour, and they cost the

company 3.5 cents to produce.” Kind Bars sell for over a dollar a bar.

Speaking of the nearby ATI Brackenridge mill, Brad argued, “They need to have an agreement. If they don't hire the community, they should help rebuild the community, especially with all the soot coming out of there.”

An older unemployed worker in Leechburg spoke about the lack of decent-paying jobs across the country. “I was in Florida for 15 years. There are jobs there, but they don't pay all that much. It's not very good.

“I had a job in Greensburg making \$9 per hour cleaning at a CVS facility. I got laid off. SSDI [Social Security Disability Insurance] or SSI [Social Security Insurance] pays a bit, but it's not enough. You can't live on that. I'm 57.

“I have a few friends working as janitors for the school district. That's the only good job around here.”

A retired power plant worker spoke of her family's connection to the mill in Leechburg, “My husband worked at the Leechburg [ATI] mill. He's retired now, and we get a small pension. Now he works for the sheriff's department. My dad and my grandpa both retired from Allegheny Ludlum.”

She expressed concern over attacks on retirees and young people. “If they get rid of Social Security, what are we supposed to do? They take a part of our wage every week. We haven't had a raise [in social security benefits] in years.

“Jobs today are hard to come by for young people. My grandson, he's in college at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. He's so far in debt, he'll never get out.”

Asked about the presidential election, she responded, “There's nobody to vote for this time. Hillary's a liar, and he [Trump] is a joke. I've been a Republican all my life. The slams he made about women are unacceptable. Trump doesn't care about anybody. He's got his millions already.”



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