

“Obama has only helped the wealthy”

SEP campaigners speak to residents in Washington, DC about social crisis and the US elections

Our reporters
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On Saturday, Socialist Equality Party supporters spoke to Washington, DC residents at an intersection along Minnesota Avenue in Ward 7, located in Southeast DC, while campaigning for SEP presidential candidates Jerry White and Niles Niemuth.

Located east of the Anacostia River, Wards 7 and 8 are home to some of the starkest levels of poverty in the US. A December 2015 report released by the non-profit DC Action for Children shows that from 2009-2013 40 percent of all children in Ward 8 lived in poverty. Similarly, the number of children receiving Medicaid grew by more than 2,000 recipients from 2010 to 2014. According to the 2015 Kids Count Data Book released by the Annie. E. Casey Foundation, 40 percent of children across the city live in homes where their parents lack “secure, full-time, year-round employment.”

A federal estimate of homelessness in the District released in May found that, for the first time since the annual census began collecting such data in 2001, the number of homeless children and their parents now outnumber homeless single adults—4,667 to 3,683, according to a count conducted in January.

While the federal estimate stated that the number of homeless families increased by 30 percent over the past year, the latest Hunger and Homelessness Survey issued by the United States Conference of Mayors this past December put the figure at 60 percent. The survey noted that 34 percent of homeless adults are employed.

A common concern raised by residents is the high cost of housing, which has contributed to the rise in homelessness. Starting in 2010, real estate speculation

sent housing prices soaring in working-class neighborhoods. Meanwhile, affordable housing units have declined significantly, shrinking from 60,000 units in 2002 (about 40 percent of total housing) to 33,000 in 2013 (less than 20 percent), according to a report by the DC Fiscal Policy Institute released in March of last year.

“I know they have all these building developers coming up from 8th Street that are moving all these poor people out of the neighborhood,” said Raymond, 61. “I read in the newspaper last week that some developers are kicking people out for being \$25 short on their rent. In Brookland Manor they even had the *Washington Post* run a story on it.”

Brookland Manor is a subsidized public housing apartment complex located in Northeast DC, and home to 1,200 mainly low-income residents. Developers are currently seeking to gentrify the area, refurbishing the apartment complex with units designed for smaller and wealthier families. In a bid to evict its residents, Brookland Manor has been filing lawsuits against residents based on delinquent payments, often as small as between \$25 and \$100, and minor infractions such as walking a dog without a leash, the *Post* reported earlier this month.

“I feel for these younger folks today; they’re not getting anything from the wealthy. They won’t be taught an education or be able to engage with society. The rich just want them for fighting more wars,” Raymond said.

The SEP asked Raymond about the role played by the Obama administration. “Obama has only helped the

wealthy,” he replied.

Delonte, 21, a young father with his one-year-old daughter, Ariel, said, “We do okay as far as government assistance, but lately they’ve been cracking down. They tend not to let you get on assistance until you are jobless and on the brink of poverty, but for people working jobs and trying to support a family, there’s no way to get ahead. It’s like the government wants you to do worse.”

It has been two decades since the Clinton administration signed legislation that limited welfare benefits to 60 weeks. Nearly 40 percent of Washington DC’s welfare recipients, consisting of around 5,700 adults and 12,000 dependents, have reached this limit and are facing dramatic cuts to their assistance.

While the city has attempted to make up for these cuts in the past, these funds have declined in recent years from an average of \$441 per month, basically matching the funds recipients received from federal grants, to \$158. Even more cuts are expected in October 2017.

When asked about those that say these programs should be cut, Delonte said, “I don’t agree with that.

“Some people really need these programs and they shouldn’t just be thrown away. My relative just came home from doing 13 years [in jail]. He can barely read.” He added, “Most jobs around here only allow you to be able to afford a one-bedroom apartment. Once people spend their money on rent, they need some extra assistance.”

Delonte continued, “One of my mom’s friends has been homeless for seven years. Sometimes she has to spend nights on friends’ couches. How can she go in for a job appointment under those circumstances?”

Welfare recipients face difficult barriers to employment, including unaffordable childcare, illiteracy, lack of job skills, health problems and issues related to domestic violence.

Tyrone, an older worker, spoke about issues related to neighborhood crime. “There are no jobs, no education available. When people are not taught anything, they have no skills, you are going to resort to desperate measures. That will happen whether you are black or white,” he said.

“We need to get people jobs, that’s the root [of it],” he said. “Politicians need to give us opportunities like our parents had, so young people can get out and be

responsible.”

When asked about the elections, Tyrone said, “I can’t trust either of them. How can Hillary Clinton say she is against the billionaires when she is connected to billionaires?”

SEP campaigners also spoke to a woman about the costs of war and how it affected social conditions in the DC area.

“War will do nothing for us. There is already a war being fought right here!” When asked to elaborate, she said: “A war on drugs, a war on our young people.”

“A class war,” said an SEP campaigner. “Exactly,” the woman replied.



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