

Brooklyn workers and young people speak to Socialist Equality Party election campaign

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Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party presidential campaign of Jerry White and Niles Niemuth campaigned in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant over the weekend, to bring a socialist and antiwar program to Brooklyn workers.

Bed-Stuy in north-central Brooklyn is, by New York standards, a neighborhood, but is the size of a small city with over 150,000 inhabitants. After the 1930s, it was the home to thousands of Brooklyn Navy Yard workers, many of them African-American, and boasted the second largest black population in New York City after Harlem. It was stricken by deindustrialization and, after the 1980s, incomes substantially declined.

The neighborhood remains working class and poor on the whole. Although it is still predominantly African-American, in recent years mass immigration to New York, as well as the pressures of the housing market, have brought on a substantial demographic transformation. On any given day on Fulton Street, its main commercial area, one can hear many languages spoken besides English, including Arabic, Bengali, Creole, French, Spanish, Urdu and Wolof (a language of West Africa), and, as with much of New York, a truly international view of the problems facing the working class can be found in discussions there.

There are many small businesses along with fast-food establishments and discount clothing stores, and, in the warmer weather, unemployed and underemployed workers trying to eke out a living selling bottled water, food or goods. Public benches along the street are filled with the destitute, including untreated mentally ill who are often homeless.

Bedford-Stuyvesant has one of the highest proportions in New York City of homeless students in public schools, at over 15 percent. Sixty-one percent of students who do have housing receive a free lunch in school, meaning that they live in poverty or only slightly above the poverty line.

Perhaps the greatest social pressure on workers here is the housing crisis. Bed-Stuy is currently one of the national epicenters for gentrification. Thousands of residents are

forced out of their homes each year because they cannot afford skyrocketing rents. Buildings are often purchased by investors who pay cash, and landlords rent apartments to better-off middle class people who are in turn priced out of even more costly neighborhoods elsewhere in the city. Luxury condominiums are being built and sold at a frenetic pace, and a three-unit brownstone, the hallmark of Brooklyn architecture, can sell for as much as \$2 million.

On Fulton Street over the weekend, the SEP campaign team handed out hundreds of election programs and over a thousand leaflets advertising the appearance of Jerry White in the neighborhood on September 27. SEP supporters engaged in dozens of conversations with workers on the social crisis directly impacting their lives as well as the war drive of US imperialism and the need for socialism.

In discussing the 2016 elections, it was difficult to find an ardent supporter of Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump. Some workers felt that Trump should be kept out of office at all costs, and so were reluctantly voting for Clinton. One worker said heatedly that he was not going to waste his vote.

But by and large, most people who spoke to the SEP campaigners did not feel they had any real choice in the election, and it was precisely this that attracted many into a discussion on the socialist campaign of White and Niemuth.

Joncar Black, a homecare worker, for example, remarked, “There is no democracy—just one set enjoying the wealth of the country. We are still in poverty and cannot buy food or pay for rent. A workers’ party would be good for everybody.”

Gary Smith, a social worker, stopped and explained his views: “I’m against both Trump and Clinton. They are both old wine in a new bottle because they won’t prosecute the predatory banks and corporations. Have you heard of the idea of collateral consequences? Eric Holder had this idea when he was defending Arthur Andersen during the Enron scandal. The idea was when you criminally prosecute a company, it can go bankrupt, and Arthur Andersen did. To avoid this collateral consequence, there has never been a criminal prosecution of a big bank or company since. AIG,

Bank of America, HSBC, Merrill Lynch and Goldman Sachs have robbed the guts out of companies, and there is no criminal prosecution.

“Holder continued to go along with this as attorney general. He was for fines only, and the fines have been small enough that they mean nothing to the big corporations. When the big banks crashed the economy by driving Lehman Brothers into bankruptcy, it was to make Goldman Sachs bigger, and Holder went along with that too. I don’t buy Hillary for what she has done.”

Another man who took the SEP leaflet said, “I am Muslim and Trump is a racist. The US government makes the countries in the Middle East drown in war. They should leave them alone.”

One woman, Pancy, stopped and turned back after reading at the leaflet she had taken. “This is interesting. At this point I will vote for Hillary against Trump. But I will come to your meeting to learn more.” In further discussion about Clinton, Pancy was surprised and disturbed to learn that the Obama administration had deported over 2 million undocumented immigrants.

Kurtis Bell, a professor of political science at Columbia University, told a campaigner, “I agree with you 100 percent. The root is class warfare. Both parties are playing what I call sensationalized politics, catering to a specific constituency that has their own agenda, not what we generally refer to as ‘the people.’ Both cater to elitism, and nobody talks about the working poor, Black, white and Latino.”

Kurtis expressed sympathy for the campaign of Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders and wished that Hillary Clinton had taken Sanders as her running mate. “She didn’t do that,” he said,” because Sanders doesn’t have an air of elitism as Hillary does, which could have negatively impacted against her.”

The SEP supporter noted that Sanders’ campaign had consciously, from the beginning, sought to pull back into the Democratic Party youth and workers who were estranged from the establishment parties, and that Clinton was attacking Trump from the right on the issue of war.

Lance Bovain, a maintenance worker, told the SEP campaigners, “I don’t think wars are necessary. Killing just results in more killings. In this election, Trump is wishy-washy so you don’t know what he stands for. The working class should have a party to oppose war.”

Joshua Williams is an unemployed youth who told campaigners, “I think the prospects for a bigger war are very high. I hear this not from the mainstream media, but from other sources. I think these bigger wars include the potential for nuclear war and disaster.

“I don’t like Hillary Clinton because she hasn’t met a big

donor she doesn’t like. Both she and Trump are very likely to start a war. And I didn’t support Bernie Sanders. I think the working class should have its own party. I am OK with getting rid of capitalism.”

Amadou, an engineering student from West Africa, said about the election, “This is a weird election since none of the candidates are expressing what they are going to do. Maybe they don’t have an idea of what they are going to do.”

When an SEP campaigner pointed out that both Clinton and Trump expressed their support for war, he responded, “War is not a solution, it is something that only creates more problems. You see poverty here since everything is going towards war. We need to be spending to build and not destroy. It has been like this for more than two decades, why is everything going to war and not education?”

Bernard Thomas, who works for the Department of Education, said, “There are not a lot of good choices this election. You have one candidate that wants to isolate a whole group of people, and the other one you can’t trust at all.

“You see all these politicians forget about the homeless or that the rent is going up. Instead, they are focused on putting people in jail. It is like they want to make the jails rich. Both these candidates aren’t really honest about their policies.”

Asked what kind of candidate he would like to see, he added, “I want a candidate that is for single parents, or the average Joe that can’t pay his rent. We need to be taxing the rich.”

When an SEP campaigner pointed out that there was no money for working class people because everything was done to benefit the rich, including preparation for war, Thomas agreed and said that he was interested in hearing Jerry White speak.



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