SEP holds meetings in Illinois in lead-up to November 5 anti-war conference

Our reporters
4 November 2016

In the final days before the Socialist Equality Party's November 5 emergency anti-war conference, Socialism vs.Capitalism and War, the party's vice presidential candidate, Niles Niemuth, addressed successful meetings in Rock Island and Chicago, Illinois. At both meetings, Niemuth detailed the deep crisis gripping both parties of the political establishment, sounded the alarm over the advanced preparations for major wars following the elections, and raised the call for building a mass socialist anti-war movement internationally.

On Saturday, Niemuth spoke in Rock Island, part of the Quad Cities, a metropolitan region on the Mississippi River bordering Iowa and Illinois. The Quad Cities has historically been a center of farm equipment manufacturing, with the headquarters of Deere, Inc. located in Moline. Last year, workers at Deere widely opposed the concessions contract backed by the United Auto Workers union and have since suffered hundreds of layoffs.

In response to a question from an attendee at the meeting, Niemuth analyzed the campaign of Bernie Sanders for the Democratic presidential nomination, noting that the self-described "democratic socialist" had professed support for Obama's use of drone assassination and provocations against Russia. Niemuth pointed to the record of the *World Socialist Web Site* in predicting Sanders' inevitable attempt to channel anti-capitalist sentiment behind the Democratic Party and the chosen candidate of Wall Street, Hillary Clinton.

Following the meeting, Niemuth gave an interview to a student-run radio station at Augustana, a small college in Rock Island, explaining the purpose of the SEP's election campaign and the platform on which the candidates were running.

On Tuesday, Niemuth spoke to a meeting at University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) about the threat of war. He reviewed the record of war under the Obama administration, the calls by both Trump and Clinton for an escalation of war, and the discussion within ruling circles of the likelihood of conflict with Russia or China. He pointed to the growing signs of class tension and opposition throughout the world and emphasized that the working class is the social force that can lead the struggle against war.

He said, "It is not possible to stop war and put an end to social inequality without attacking the wealth and political power of the entrenched ruling class, which controls the whole political system."

Attendees at the meetings asked questions about US politics, the elections, whether Russia and China are a source of war, the history of socialism and the SEP, and reformist "local" politics. In response to a question about whether the SEP would be on the ballot in Illinois, Niles noted that in the state a candidate must wage a campaign even to be a write-in candidate, and if that status is not obtained, the votes will be tossed out. He pointed to the thoroughly anti-democratic nature of such ballot access laws.

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party had extensive and lively discussions with students and workers at UIC on the question of war and the US presidential elections before and after the meeting Tuesday.

Omari, a theater student, said, "I feel like this is great movement. We as a people have to come up with a consensus that this is not acceptable. We have to stop allowing the ruling class and controlling parties from manipulating our interests and putting ourselves in dangerous positions. Whoever becomes candidate of the two, it does not look good.

"Clinton and Trump do not represent our interest, not even a little bit."

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A student in political science from Britain said about Clinton and Trump, “It’s essentially two terrible candidates, really.”

Asked what he thought about the candidates’ foreign policy positions, he responded, “I can understand why people are afraid of Hillary. And I think Trump’s foreign policy is very confusing. On the one hand, he says he’s going to pursue an isolationist position, but then he’s simultaneously saying he says he’s going to defeat ISIS, which implies massive military spending.”

Speaking on Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, he added, “I actually supported him in the leadership election the first time. I don’t necessarily think he’s ‘too left.’ I actually think he’s really not left-wing.”

“I’m a full-time chef and I work 40-60 hours a week,” said Chris. “I’m just tired of being a laborer and not having any respect. Being swept under the carpet, no benefits, no health care. I can’t go to a hospital because I have no health care. Obamacare doesn’t protect me at all, and I didn’t even apply. With costs going up by 25 percent, I can’t afford it. I threw my shoulder out and I can’t afford an MRI, which costs more than a thousand dollars. It’s criminal. I also have asthma and have to go through my friend’s insurance to get inhalers.

On the elections and the meeting, he stated, “I’m terrified of both these candidates, if and when they are elected. It’s disgusting. I really liked this meeting and want to get involved. I’m a single father with no social help. I’m tired of working my fingers to the bone for nothing. It’s time for a change.”

Kathryn, a nanny and a teacher, saw a poster advertising the meeting and wanted to attend. “I thought the lecture was wonderful, informative and relevant, considering the approaching election. My friends and I have been talking about scary it is, and how the choices don’t represent us. We came to this meeting because of the danger of war that you were talking about. It feels so crazy to be having these discussions, but we need to build something completely different. I think socialism seems the only alternative to what we are seeing now.”

Andy, a student at UIC and a member of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), commented:

“I think it’s scary, first of all, the fact that we’re fighting and bombing seven different countries and that’s not being discussed and what’s also not being discussed is the conflicts it’s creating with China and Russia. There’s a reason for it, why those in power are hiding it, why it’s not being discussed, and it’s because they know there’s opposition to war.”

Commenting on the role of the IYSSE and the building of a new socialist-internationalist anti-war movement amongst youth and students, he said, “I think the IYSSE is important because it appeals to students and young people because they have an inherent interest in the world because they’re going to be inhabiting it. Because they have to have a leading role in it, and not be an aside to political interests that are not their own.

“If there was a war, it would be me that would be going, especially as a young man, I would be the first to go. I think that’s something that young people have to realize. The ruling elite will not be fighting these war themselves. They will be sending the working class and the youth to fight their wars for them.”

He further added: “A political movement, especially a revolutionary one, doesn't happen by itself, doesn't happen overnight. It needs leadership, it needs political organization.”

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