Broad turnout for “Socialism vs. Capitalism and War” conference in Detroit

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The Socialist Equality Party (US) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality held a conference Saturday, November 5 in Detroit under the heading “Socialism versus Capitalism and War.”

The conference was well attended. Some 200 workers and youth traveled from throughout the US and Canada to attend in person, including significant delegations from California, Louisiana, New York, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Minnesota, Virginia and Michigan. Many were young people attending their first meeting of the SEP.

Branches of the SEP in the US and parties of the International Committee of the Fourth International outside of the United States organized for the event to be broadcast to members and supporters across the country and around the world. There was participation from Costa Rica, Brazil, Germany, France, Spain, the UK, Turkey, Russia, Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, Australia, New Zealand and the Philippines.

In opening the conference, SEP National Secretary Joseph Kishore noted that it was taking place just three days before the US presidential election between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. The campaign had “plumbed new depths of filth, degradation and dysfunction,” he declared, adding, “The outcome of the election is not yet known—provided there is a clear outcome. However, the policies of the next administration are known: Whether it is headed by Clinton or Trump, the US is preparing vast expansion of war abroad and social and political reaction at home.”

Placing the conference in the context of ever-expanding global war, Kishore said that it was “an extraordinary political fact that there does not exist, outside of this meeting, any organized effort to mobilize workers and young people against imperialist war.”

Andre Damon, IYSSE national secretary, gave the first report to the conference: “The Global Crisis and the Danger of World War.” The report examined the past quarter century of unending war, including 15 years of the “war on terror” in the Middle East and Central Asia. Damon reviewed the moves by the United States to militarily encircle Russia and China and the discussions taking place behind closed doors on the implications of a war involving large nation-states, which will entail a level of violence and killing not seen since the Korean War.

SEP (Australia) National Secretary James Cogan, Partei fur Soziale Gleichheit (Germany) Assistant National Secretary Christoph Vandreier and SEP (Sri Lanka) General Secretary Wije Dias gave powerful contributions on the war drive against China, the crisis in Europe and the remilitarization of Germany, and the escalating danger of all-out war between India and Pakistan, both of which are armed with nuclear weapons.

In one of the main reports, Jerry White, the SEP candidate for US president, recounted the experience of the election campaign. “In the scores of meetings and countless discussions that [West Virginia House of Delegates candidate] Naomi Spencer, [US vice presidential candidate] Niles Niemuth and I have had with factory workers, coal miners, teachers, striking nurses and college and high school youth across the country, we have encountered a real hatred of war and the irrational squandering of millions of lives and trillions of dollars on the mad quest for US global domination.

“Everywhere there is a growing interest in genuine socialism and a feeling that the working class, which produces society’s wealth, should control that wealth.”

White referred to the growing number of workers’ struggles that have been provoked by inequality and attacks on jobs, wages, health care and pensions. He said that the campaign of the SEP had fought “to prepare the leadership in the coming struggles that are before us, in the United States and throughout the world.”

SEP vice-presidential candidate Niles Niemuth focused his remarks on the political lessons of the campaign by

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Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders during the Democratic Party primaries. He noted that many of those who came to the SEP meetings throughout the country had originally been supporters of Sanders "because they thought he represented a challenge to the capitalist status quo.

"Sanders' rhetoric, about a 'political revolution' against the 'billionaire class,' was calculated to appeal to deep anger over social inequality and the domination of society by the rich." In the end, however, "Sanders is now going around campaigning on campuses, calling on young people to support Clinton without saying anything about what she will do."

Niemuth concluded, "Workers must draw the most far-reaching conclusions from the experience of the Sanders campaign" and reject "a whole type of pragmatic politics that hopes for a solution to the crisis confronting the working class without a direct challenge to capitalism."

Naomi Spencer, the SEP's candidate for West Virginia House of Delegates in District 16, spoke about the desperate social conditions in regions of the country that have been portrayed by liberals and supporters of the Democratic Party as reactionary and racist. She denounced the notion that workers who happen to be white are "privileged" because of their race.

She noted that West Virginia has been mired in a terrible budget shortfall for years and that communities were vulnerable to flash flooding and mudslides, "problems typically associated with the developing world, not the so-called richest country on earth." She said her campaign has resonated with people who see no choice between Clinton and Trump and are looking for an alternative.

A major theme at the conference was the need to unify the working class in opposition to all efforts to divide workers along national, racial and gender lines. The conference was attended by a significant representation of African American youth and women, reflecting the predominance of class issues among all sections of the working class and youth. Statements from speakers opposing identity politics and calling for a common movement of all races were met with enthusiastic applause.

David North, national chairman of the SEP and chairman of the *World Socialist Web Site* International Editorial Board, was the main speaker in the final section of the conference: "The strategy of anti-imperialist struggle: Lessons from history."

Referring to the threat of nuclear world war, North said, "One question that I would imagine is on everyone's mind is, 'How can we possibly prevent this cataclysm?'… Indeed, we have stressed that perhaps the greatest danger is the chasm that exists between the extent of the danger, how real it is, and the still limited awareness among broad masses of workers of what it is they are confronting. How can that immense contradiction be overcome?"

North pointed to the lessons of World War I and the Russian Revolution. He noted that despite the relative isolation of V.I. Lenin and Leon Trotsky in the lead-up to the first imperialist war, both had been convinced that the incompatibility of world economy with the capitalist nation-state system would inevitably give rise to the greatest revolutionary upheaval in history.

The current election, North said, has revealed the incredible level of popular disillusionment, alienation and anger. Regardless of who wins, this will not go away. "Everyone knows that something is sick and rotten. We are going to witness a new period of political radicalization."

He continued: "We know that in the final analysis, the impulse for political radicalization comes from the objective contradictions that exist within the system. What we see as our task is to now turn out as broadly and as irreconcilably as possible to develop this movement throughout the country, in every state, among workers and youth, and put before them a strategy for the struggle against war."

Referring to the ICFI resolution, "Socialism and the fight against war," North said that the struggle against war must be based on the working class; it must be anti-capitalist and socialist; it must be independent and hostile to all political parties and organizations of the capitalist class; and it must be international, mobilizing the vast power of the working class in a unified global struggle against imperialism.

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