Campaign meeting with Niles Niemuth brings socialism to Wyandotte, Michigan

Tom Hall
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On Tuesday, Niles Niemuth, the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for Michigan's 12th congressional district, spoke to a well-attended public meeting in downtown Wyandotte, a suburb in the Downriver area of metropolitan Detroit.

Niles examined the social and political crisis in the United States and elaborated an independent, socialist strategy for the working class. The audience included workers and retirees from the area, SEP supporters, and a contingent of students from the Wayne State University chapter of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, which hosted Niles at a meeting last week.

Campaign teams for Niles campaigned over the previous week, going door-to-door, putting up posters, and advertising for the meeting outside of grocery stores, auto plants and other locations. Campaigners also spoke to residents outside of a local screening of Michael Moore's documentary on Trump, *Fahrenheit 11/9*.

A central focus of Niles' opening remarks and the subsequent discussion was the conditions facing the working class and how workers can organize to oppose exploitation and inequality. The largely working-class Downriver area has been hit particularly hard over the past several decades by plant closures and layoffs, especially in the steel industry.

"Between 1979 and 1983 major plant closures and downsizings in Downriver resulted in the loss of 14,750 jobs, a 40 percent decline in the area's workforce in just four years," Niles explained. The unions and the companies enforced one concessionary contract after another, he added, while claiming that this would prevent layoffs. However, this did not save a single job, and one steel mill after another closed.

At facilities such as the massive McLouth Steel works, the unions promoted as a supposed solution to this "hemorrhaging of jobs" the creation of Employee Stock Ownership Plans, or ESOPs. This is falsely presented as workers' control over production or even socialized ownership by pseudo-left groups such as the Democratic Socialists of America, and in a recent comment appearing in the *Detroit Free Press*.

Niles said, "This turned out to be massive scam which defrauded thousands of workers out of their livelihoods … ESOPs have nothing to do with real ownership and control by the working class of the means of production. There can be no democracy or equality between capitalists and workers, that is, between exploiters and their wage-slaves." The McLouth works, he added, was ultimately closed in 1996. "At its height as many as 6,000 people worked at the facility, now it sits a rusting polluted testament to the failure of the capitalist system."

Jerry White, US labor editor of the *World Socialist Web Site* and former SEP presidential candidate, reviewed the role of the United Steelworkers (USW) union and the late District 2 director Harry Lester in demobilizing and suppressing workers' opposition through dead-ends such as ESOP. When Lester died in 2015, he was eulogized by Debbie Dingell, the Democratic incumbent in the 12th district and auto heiress.

The multi-million-dollar UAW-Chrysler bribery scandal "has provided conclusive evidence of what many workers have long suspected: that they are up against a criminal conspiracy between the companies and the unions, which falsely claim to represent their interests," Niles stated.

Niles also raised the still unexplained death of Jacoby Hennings, a young part-time autoworker, in the union office in Ford's nearby Woodhaven Stamping plant last year. "My campaign has raised the call for a public inquiry into Hennings' death. Ford, the UAW, the Democrats and the Republicans have ignored this case, accepting the narrative that Hennings was simply another disgruntled employee. Hennings' loved ones and all of his co-workers deserve a full accounting of what happened to him."

Moreover, "The anger of autoworkers over routine injuries and deaths finds no outlet in official politics. None of the capitalist politicians, be they in the mold of Bernie Sanders, Donald Trump or Debbie Dingell speak for the interests of the working class."

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The skyrocketing levels of social inequality are incompatible with democratic forms of rule, Niles explained. “The American state and its institutions are democratic only in the most formal sense. In reality, they are instruments of corporate domination created by capitalism, in which the Democratic and Republican parties, the twin parties of the ruling class, exercise a monopoly.”

Niles also pointed to the $1.5 trillion committed to US military spending over the next two years, and Trump’s fascistic rant at the United Nations earlier that day, as signs that the American ruling class is preparing new and more dangerous wars to offset the historic decline of American capitalism.

Nile’s remarks were followed by a wide-ranging and lively discussion on topics such as the SEP’s proposal for the formation of rank-and-file committees, the right-wing proposal for changes to the history curriculum in Michigan public schools, the SEP’s position on the sexual assault allegations against Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh, and the failure of the US military to reach its recruitment quota and what it says about the growth of antiwar sentiment in the American population.

One audience member asked about the pollution of drinking water in Flint and Detroit. Niles responded that a multi-trillion-dollar public works program is necessary to improve the conditions, not only of the country’s drinking water, but infrastructure in general, which has been allowed to fall into serious disrepair. The discussion was underscored by the fact that torrential downpours during the meeting flooded out streets all over the Downriver area.

The WSWS spoke to attendees after the meeting.

Doug is a former lab technician at a company that manufactures “frac sand” for the oil and gas industry. He decided to leave his job over health and safety concerns and currently supports himself by renting out property on Airbnb.

“I think everyone’s tired of that last name [Dingell] around here,” Doug said, referring to the fact that, including Debbie Dingell’s husband John and his father before him, the family has been in Congress for nearly a century. “But I met [Republican candidate] Jeff Jones while I was volunteering, and I felt I got to know him pretty well, and I thought, ‘This guy is a total idiot.’ So when I met you guys on campaign, I thought I had to come and hear from a third party candidate.”

Speaking about the pollution of the area’s rivers, Doug said, “They’ve put up signs all up and down the Huron River saying do not fish. I’m probably going to have to get myself tested, I’ve been swimming in that water all summer.

“I’m interested in the idea of socialism,” he said. “When it comes down to it, we’re all the same.” Doug discussed the levels of inequality in the United States with SEP campaigners, who pointed out the fact that Jeff Bezos is worth $160 billion while Amazon warehouse workers make $12 an hour. Doug added that Amazon, which has opened up multiple fulfillment centers in the Detroit area recently, is sending out mass texts encouraging people to apply for positions.

Ashley is a student at Wayne State University who recently came around the International Youth and Students for Social Equality.

“I joined the IYSSE and I’m trying to learn as much as I can about leftist politics. I wanted to come to the campaign meeting for Niles, specifically because I want to know who I’m voting for and expand my knowledge of what’s going on in the world, because a lot of this is news to me. I haven’t been keeping up with the news, and a lot of what’s in the news is not really what’s going on in the world. It’s good to be informed.”

“I think the difference between Niles and other politicians and groups like the DSA and the Democratic Party is that Niles is actually fighting for the working class,” Ashley said. “It’s not lobbyists, it’s an actual leftist party. When you actually dig deeper you find that it’s not ‘Democrats: left wing,’ ‘Republicans: right wing’—they’re both right-wing parties, and the DSA is still a right-wing party. They don’t actually care for working class people, and they’re upholding capitalism, which is the main root of a lot of the issues in society.”

“Lately, I have been thinking of this metaphor of a dragon, hoarding wealth. And the village needs to rise up and slay the dragon. And we have the power to slay the dragon. We can take matters into our own hands, we don’t need anyone else, we just need each other. And that’s why being educated is so important, we have to develop our knowledge.”

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