Socialist Equality Party candidate Niles Niemuth speaks in Ann Arbor on the right to universal health care

Our reporter
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On October 3, Niles Niemuth, the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for Michigan's 12th congressional district, spoke to a public meeting hosted by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. The title of the meeting was "Health Care and the Rights of the Working Class."

Niles placed emphasis on how the breakdown of global capitalism has impacted health care, health care workers, and the overall living conditions of the working class in the United States and all over the world. He outlined how the fight for universal health care is bound up with the fight against all other attacks on the working class and above all, with the fight for socialism.

The meeting opened with Niles reviewing the political issues in the University of Michigan hospital system's nurses contract dispute. The nurses have been working without a contract since June 30 and will begin voting on a tentative agreement this Sunday, with no details yet announced publicly. They have demanded that the new contract include safe staffing levels, adequate pay increases, maintain existing retirement benefits, and the elimination of the widely opposed Victors Care class-based model of health care.

Niles defended the struggle of the nurses but also warned that it would be betrayed by the UMPNC—the nurses' union—unless the nurses took the struggle into their own hands, through the formation of independent rank-and-file committees.

He then proceeded to outline the enormous health care crisis facing the working class in the United States, including the ravages of the drug and opioid epidemic, the profit-driven poisoning of public water systems, a historic drop in life expectancy, and the decades-long attack on social health care programs.

Niles emphasized the role of the Democrats and Republicans in driving down the living standards of the working class on behalf of the profit system, as well as those pseudo-left organizations, including the Democratic Socialist of America, which sow illusions in capitalism through vague reform programs.

"The only viable basis for providing quality health care for all is one that rejects capitalist private ownership and the control of the banks and major corporations and the subordination of social needs to private profit. The capitalist principle of for-profit health care must be ended."

Niles continued, "Working people must take the position that health care is a social right—along with education, housing, employment, retirement and access to culture—not a privilege reserved for the wealthy, and must be provided to all free of charge."

He concluded by explaining what genuine socialism is—revolutionary, international, and independent of the bourgeois political parties—in opposition to the varieties of pseudo-left tendencies that invoke the term only to cloak it in bourgeois politics.

After the report, audience members contributed questions and remarks about the role of the trade unions in the current crisis, the difference between a genuine socialist perspective on health care and the pseudo-left's demand for Medicare for All, the public health crisis in cities like Flint and Detroit, the impact of the mental health crisis on the working class, and questions about the connection of the health care crisis to deindustrialization.

WSWS reporters spoke to participants after the

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meeting.

Joseph, a freshman at the University of Michigan, told the WSWS, “I like the fact that Niles is running independently of both the Democrats and Republicans because they both represent the same thing. The Democratic Party claims to uphold and speak to more socially progressive and liberal values but they are not prepared to challenge the wealth of those at the top.”

He later commented, “I liked what Niles said about expropriating the wealth of the billionaires to pay for badly needed social programs that are necessary for all of society. I also agreed with the need to unite all different sections of workers. I do not agree with the way the media demonizes white workers or the way they pit urban workers against those in rural communities. The social crisis is affecting us all.”

Shannon, who works at the university, also attended the meeting. She explained that before coming into socialist politics, she felt like there was no hope for the future of her children. She concluded, “I’m excited to see more people turning to socialism. This gives me hope.”

Ethan, an undergraduate, also spoke to reporters, noting, “Niles gave a clear, unifying philosophy for the working class. I learned a lot about the trade unions and the Flint water crisis. This is very different from my experiences with the DSA. They do not agree on anything. Here I saw a unifying view.”

He also spoke about his growing interest in socialism. “I came to Michigan after living in Las Vegas. We moved there after my dad lost his construction job in 2008. Later I found out that this was not an accident, but a product of capitalism. Most of my family is working class.” Ethan expressed interest in joining the IYSSE and fighting for socialism.

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