

SEP candidate Niles Niemuth speaks with students and workers in Lincoln Park, Michigan

Our reporters
1 November 2018

With less than a week until the November 6 midterm elections, Socialist Equality Party congressional candidate Niles Niemuth campaigned Wednesday among workers and students in Lincoln Park, a Downriver suburb in Michigan's 12th district which borders southwest Detroit.

The area is a bedroom community for workers employed at the surrounding auto, steel and chemical plants. In recent years the city has seen a growth in its Hispanic and Latin population, now accounting for more than 20 percent of residents, many of whom have family members who are immigrants or are immigrants themselves.

Like many other cities in Downriver, Lincoln Park has been marked by decades of deindustrialization and stagnant wages. More than one in five residents live below the official poverty line, well above the national rate of 13 percent.

Gabrielle and Alison are both 20 years old. Gabrielle is studying nursing at Henry Ford College. She pays \$2,500 per semester for her course and is working at Tim Hortons, a fast food café chain, for \$9.75 an hour to pay it off. "It's garbage," she said. "I would take anything for \$20 an hour."

Alison is waiting to be accepted for a position as a pharmacy technician trainee. Her mother is a steelworker and her father works in an auto engine plant. She was studying psychology at college but had to drop out last year because it was too expensive, and she couldn't afford it any longer. She told us she thinks education should be freely available to all as a basic right.

Both of them were outraged by President Donald Trump's deployment of troops to the southern US border against immigrants from Honduras and other countries in central America. "It's messed up," Gabrielle said. "Why don't they just let them in? They just want to work. I know plenty of immigrants, lots of them here illegally, and all they want is to have a life: to work, have a family, have a dog and a home. There are ICE agents who come to my work at Tim Hortons every day looking for them."

Alison added "I just saw on the news they're trying to get rid of the birthright citizenship law. If your parents came here 'illegally' and had you, you can't be a citizen. It is so wrong. Everyone here is an immigrant. I'm Irish and Indian and German." Gabrielle added: "People should have a right to live everywhere in the world."

Gabrielle moved to Michigan from Dingess, a small mining community just outside Logan County in West Virginia. She and her boyfriend have considered moving back there, but the only work he could get would be in a coal mine, where Gabrielle's cousins work.

"If you have money, you can go anywhere you want," Alison said. She and Gabrielle were both angered by the endemic poverty around them and the immense levels of social inequality in the US. "I heard how much money Jeff Bezos has," Alison said. "How could you ever spend that?" Gabrielle said she thought "he should be made to spit that back out so we can share it with everyone."

They had other concerns: the danger of world war and dictatorship. Gabrielle said "I'm scared that in the years ahead it's going to be really restricted, that we won't be allowed to do anything. Trump the other week sent everyone a text message. How did my number get to the president? What else are they going to do?"

Alison said she was scared there "is a danger of a third world war. There are wars happening right now we don't even know about, and there are bigger countries getting together. You saw that whole North Korea thing. Trump threatened to wipe it out. It just sort of happened really quickly. It's like a scary movie."

Neither of them had any interest in the choice between Democrats and Republicans. Niles explained that his campaign is aimed at building a movement of the working class independent of both these parties for socialism and genuine equality. "If we all got together and did something about it—that's what we need," Gabrielle replied. "A lot of the time it feels like we're a small group. But we're not."

The working class really is a big part of the world. It's the high class and the low class."

Alison said she was not very familiar with what socialism means but that she supports issues she associates it with: "I think it means people are equal and everyone gets free schooling and healthcare," she said. "Everyone should get enough so that they can live on it," Gabrielle said. "People shouldn't worry about housing, electricity, or all these basic rights."

Niles also spoke with Tom, a 29-year-old Ford autoworker. He has been at Ford for almost three years, but the company has kept him on as a temporary part-time (TPT) worker, a category of casual and insecure work expanded by the United Auto Workers union in the last two contracts. "I applied for this job because Ford was supposed to be the great American dream," he told us. "I've been transferred between different facilities six times: in Bronswtown, Livonia, Romulus, Dearborn, Monroe. Other people have even more time than me and are still being kept as TPTs."

He and his wife, who has just started working as a nurse, have two kids and are living paycheck to paycheck. "It's really tough," he said. "School supply season comes around and holiday comes around and birthdays. It's stretching and budgeting."

He described the atmosphere of management harassment that takes place at the plant. "One woman almost got fired for having a heart attack a few months ago," he said. She had tried to take a day off work the day after having the attack. "Three weeks later they tried to fire her for it. She was in her 50s. She just quit because she couldn't take it anymore."

Tom said he pays union dues to the UAW "even though we don't get profit-sharing or the same benefits or any of the other things you are supposed to get for being in a union." He had been following the UAW corruption scandal involving payouts from Fiat Chrysler to the leading union officials in exchange for enforcing contracts which are favorable to the company, and he was disgusted. "When you start at the plant, they show you the video about why the union was founded and why they do what they do. Then while you're working there, it seems like you're in the video," before the union was formed.

Niles also spoke with Anastasia and her friend, both Sophomores at Southgate Anderson High School, as they were on their way home from school. Anastasia's father is a mechanic and works night shifts to make ends meet, leaving her to take care of the house, her dog and brother.

"We have so much we want to change about the world," she told me. "But you can't vote for anyone to do it. They say they will but they do nothing." Anastasia's father

previously had to work four jobs at once to help pay for four surgeries for her when she was younger. "With Obama I remember my dad telling me that Obamacare wasn't as good as it was meant to be. He still doesn't have health insurance now."

"They spend money on barely anything," she commented. She noted that her school is run-down and underfunded. "We need better food in the cafeteria and better bathrooms. The bathroom stalls have no locks. Some of the doors are off and the toilets are broken."

Anastasia noted that when she was in middle school a student committed suicide with a gun on the school grounds. "His name was Nicholas. No one feels safe. There is nothing for us. There used to be a bunch of language classes and other things for you to go into if you were interested, and now there's nothing. There's no support."

"I want to know what I'm going into in this world," she said. "We don't know how we will get a job. When you fill out an application, not many people succeed. Not many people get accepted into college."

"We're supposed to be here in the land of the free," she said. "I don't feel free."

She said ordinary people "barely have anything anymore and the rich are making so much money. They want us to think they don't have any money because they don't want to spend it on fixing things for us. But it's a lie. They spent \$600 million on a new skyscraper in the city. We could have used that for schools! For all sorts of things. If there are billionaires in this world, there is money to build things."

But the money was being spent "for things we don't need like the military." She noted that victims from the hurricane in Florida "have lost their homes and their cars. What are we doing for them?"

"It's government of the rich," she concluded. "They don't do anything and get paid millions of dollars. I would like socialism. Maybe we could start fixing things that actually need to be fixed."



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