

SEP presidential and vice presidential candidates speak to teachers at Detroit rally

A WSWS reporting team
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Socialist Equality Party presidential candidate Jerry White and vice presidential candidate Phyllis Scherrer spoke to teachers attending a rally in downtown Detroit on Wednesday. The rally was called by the Detroit Federation of Teachers union, which has played an instrumental role in imposing wage cuts, school closings and right-wing school “reforms”.

About 350 people gathered for the rally, which was marked by a complete absence of political discussion by the union-sanctioned speakers, aside from the routine endorsement of local Democratic Party candidates for state office. Speakers included Chris Michalakakis, president of the Metro Detroit AFL-CIO, Michigan Federation of Teachers head David Hecker and Detroit Federation of Teachers President Keith Johnson.

Hecker explained that the sole desire of the union was to bargain with the Financial Advisory Board, the mechanism set up by the state and city governments—including both Democrats and Republicans—to oversee the destruction of public worker wages and social services. Johnson attempted to blame the cuts on corruption and mismanagement. He led the gathering in a politically incoherent chant of “We’re sick and tired of being sick and tired.”

Immediately following the union speakers, White, Scherrer and supporters of the SEP began to address a crowd of workers a short distance away from the speaker’s platform.

White voiced his solidarity with the teachers, then discussed the role of the trade unions in enforcing the 10 percent wage cut for teachers, firemen and other Detroit city workers. The trade unions, White explained, are no longer working class institutions. On the contrary, they have helped management enforce the wage cuts by directing political opposition into support for the Democratic Party, which is itself responsible for implementing the cuts.

“The Socialist Equality Party insists that public education is a social right,” White said. “However, to fight for this right, teachers and other workers must mobilize independently—outside of the unions—in a political struggle against the two-party capitalist system.” In opposition to those

around the Democratic Party who seek to portray the attack on workers in Detroit as a racial issue, White insisted that the interests of workers of all races were fundamentally the same.

Scherrer, an elementary school teacher in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, expressed her support for the teachers. Pittsburgh, Scherrer said, is an “old mill town” that shares much in common with Detroit. Both cities, she explained, have been run for generations by the Democratic Party, which has led both cities into disaster after disaster. This fact, Scherrer said, highlights the need for a break with the Democratic Party and the building of a mass revolutionary movement of the working class in the fight for socialism.

Several workers who listened to White and Scherrer speak expressed their support for the Socialist Equality Party’s presidential ticket.

Cariann Chagnon is an elementary teacher. “You guys really speak to me. I wish you spoke to more of my brethren. We will have to convince them. How much more ripe does the situation have to be? There is a change in the working class. Obama is a complete disappointment. I absolutely thoroughly agree with it being a class question. Race is used as a distraction, when class and inequality are the real issues.”

Mike, a teacher from Detroit, said enthusiastically: “I just might vote for you, now. I gave money to Obama, and I’m not too appreciative of his turning his back on labor. I don’t see much of a difference in the two parties on the top, because they’re both working for Wall Street... I’ll give your campaign money this time.”

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party handed out hundreds of leaflets and discussed the pay cuts and the 2012 elections with several teachers and demonstrators. Though many of the teachers expressed their continued support for the Obama administration, several others voiced their opposition to the tactics of the DFT.

“[The pay cut] sucks. Our bills are going up and our wages are going down,” said Heather, a mother from Detroit.

Kristine Danielson, a friend of Heather’s, said, “What needs to happen is we need to connect this with labor struggles

around the world. That's the problem with this kind of protest—union reformism doesn't work. We need to radicalize.”

Sherry is a teacher at Barton Elementary School, which is being targeted for closure. She said, “It started with the steelworkers years ago, then the auto workers at the Big Three, now it's teachers and firefighters. They're taking everything away from us. They tell us there is no money, but they bailed out the banks. It's not the ones at the top who are sacrificing.

“You can't rebuild a city if you don't educate kids. There are no neighborhoods without neighborhood schools. We need new schools with smaller classroom sizes. All the studies show that is the best way to teach kids—but they are doing the opposite. They're piling kids into classrooms with 42 kids and schools that have all the K-12 classes. It's insane.”

White explained that the shutdown of neighborhood schools was being coordinated by the union with the administration of Mayor David Bing, which was deliberately shutting services to whole sections of the city as part of its plan to shrink costs. While the attack on public education was irrational in the minds of teachers, parents and youth, White said, it was happening all over the world. “The capitalist system and the social inequality it creates,” he said, “are incompatible with public education or any other democratic or social right.”

Vivian, a middle school teacher with over 30 years in the Detroit Public Schools, said, “When is it going to get better? When are we going to have enough current textbooks and technology to give children what they need, like they have in the suburbs?”

The political establishment, White said, had long sought to divide the working class with racial politics by claiming the problem was “black Detroit versus the supposed white suburbs.” In fact, White explained, the attack on public education was happening not just in Detroit but in the suburbs too, and, in fact, around the world. “They say there just is no money for proper schools and teacher salaries.”

“The money for schools should come from the money they are spending on prisons,” Vivian interjected. While first saying she thought that Obama “had his hands tied by the Republicans,” Vivian responded to White's arguments, in particular when he pointed out the president's attack on teachers, his support for the firing of Rhode Island teachers and his Race to the Top program. Obama, White said, “says poverty is no excuse for bad schools.”

Vivian responded, “Poverty is *the* issue. No matter how hard you try, if you come from a poor neighborhood or if you don't have enough books and supplies, you're not going to make it.”

“The wealthy people who should be paying taxes don't, and they are milking the poor.”

One Kindergarten teacher told the WSWS, “They don't want to fix the schools. That would fix the problems in Detroit.

That's not their goal. They are disenfranchising children. I have no aide and have never had one. I used to pay the lunch lady, who was one course away from getting her certification, as an aide. I trained her as an aide, and she came in to help me. I spend \$100 month on coats, plants, whatever my classroom needed. My pay has gone down \$1,000 per month. I can't do that anymore. Yet, I just spent \$100 yesterday on supplies to get my room ready.

“It's good to be the king, like the emergency financial manager Roy Roberts. They have given the principals authority to let go anyone who doesn't agree with them. In my building 10 out of 16 teachers were fired because they dared to disagree with the principal at a meeting. Two of those teachers were National Board Certified and were two of the best teachers I have ever known, and I've been teaching for 27 years, so that is saying something.

“They took their grievance as far as they could go, and now they are out of jobs.”

Lenore Ellery is a special education teacher who works with cognitively impaired students. She angrily denounced district administrators, saying: “[They] can't dump the special education students from the charter schools the day after the 'count day.' The charter schools get their money for the students and then send them to us with no money. We call it dumping, because of the way they treat the students.

“Now they are putting the debt on our backs. I love my job and the kids. They won't leave us alone and let us do our jobs. There is no toilet paper and soap. I bet they have toilet paper and soap downtown! We even have to buy all of our cleaning supplies to make sure that our rooms are clean for our babies when they come!

“We need more support staff, not less. Would you want your surgeon to use a butter knife or dirty gauze during surgery?”



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