

Notes from the campaign trail

SEP campaign volunteers reflect on talking to thousands of workers in Michigan's 12th District

By our reporters
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Dozens of supporters and members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) have collected thousands of signatures over the requirement to place Niles Niemuth on the ballot for Michigan's 12th congressional district.

In order to overcome restrictive ballot access requirements enforced by the Democrats and Republicans, supporters are continuing to collect signatures right up until the deadline, which is only three days away.

Over the course of the last five weeks, teams have campaigned all throughout the district, which encompasses communities in Wayne and Washtenaw counties, and spoken to tens of thousands of workers. The campaign has evoked popular interest among workers, students and young people looking for a socialist alternative to the two corporate-controlled parties.

A few volunteers have taken the time to reflect on their experience out on the campaign trail so far, and why they decided to get involved. We will publish the interviews in two parts.

Dwjuan, a young African-American student who just graduated from Wayne State University, volunteered during the latter part of the petitioning process after learning about the socialist platform of the campaign.

He explained, "I decided to help with Niles' campaign because his program speaks directly to improving the lives of working-class people. I had a chance to chat with him briefly and work with him during the petitioning campaign. He approached workers earnestly and detailed how their lives can be

made significantly better in a socialist society. He was composed in the face of hecklers and forthright when engaging with workers who showed interest in seeing an option on the ballot that actually represents their interests.

"My first time petitioning was an interesting experience. I think we tend to make a lot of assumptions about people before we try to engage with them politically. I had good discussions with a lot of people who I would've naively dismissed, say, two years ago."

Dwjuan is adamantly opposed to identity politics and was drawn to the campaign and the SEP over the clear class analysis of society and our call for the unity of workers regardless of race.

He noted, "I think it's easy to fall into the trap of viewing white workers, generally, as racist and reactionary, and there are certainly workers who have right-wing and confused views. At the same time, there are also a large number who are not and we need to find a way to connect with those people. It's the only way that we can challenge the juggernaut."

Dwjuan's experience was echoed by many petitioners who worked in the Downriver area of the district.

Kathleen Martin, who joined the SEP in 2013 following a demonstration the party called against the privatization of the Detroit Institute of Arts, explained that "there's a common middle-class conception that Downriver is full of racist and backward white workers, which is not true. It is a lie used to keep people divided. We spent hours speaking to workers of

all races, collecting thousands of signatures in places like Taylor, Woodhaven and Wyandotte, who are in favor of seeing a socialist on the ballot.

“I met two older white workers, Jane and Doug, in Wyandotte who agreed to sign immediately. They were thrilled to see young people fighting for socialist politics in the working class. Doug asked how old I am—I’m 26—and he noted that the US has been in a state of perpetual warfare since before I was even born.

“We discussed the issue of the Socialist Equality Party’s democratic right to be on the ballot. Both stated that neither the Democrats nor the Republicans represent the interests of working people, only the rich. ‘I think we need a committee to investigate all the people in Washington who have investments in arms, these people who profit from war’ Jane told me, ‘They should all be tried and prosecuted because who fights the wars? The poor, and we always lose.’”

Reflecting on the last five weeks overall Kathleen noted that it has been an invaluable political experience. “Growing up in the metro Detroit area, I’ve seen firsthand the total decimation of entire cities and neighborhoods, a direct result of the policies of both big-business parties. I never even voted until the SEP ran Jerry White and Niles Niemuth in the 2016 presidential elections, because I never felt that the Democrats and Republicans cared about the real issues confronting masses of workers in this country. I think Niles’ campaign in the 12th district has enormous potential to influence large sections of the population both inside and outside the area who are eager to join a genuine socialist movement.”

Another member of the SEP, Isaac Finn, commented on the change he noticed among workers since joining the party in 2008, when he was 17 years old. He explained, “At that point I had been attracted to the *World Socialist Web Sites*’ coverage of protests in Europe following the recent housing crisis and forced austerity. Unlike many of my friends, I was skeptical about Obama’s ability to implement reforms that helped workers and I was very interested in the party’s perspective that his administration would continue imperialist wars and budget cuts. Following Obama’s bank bailout and auto industry restructuring, I applied to join the party having been completely convinced of their perspective.”

Isaac noted that compared to his experience in 2008

he felt the population has moved far to the left. “Then, I often heard from my peers that I should ‘Give Obama a chance.’ But over the last few weeks many people I spoke with while gathering signatures expressed disgust with both the Democrats and Republicans. At the Wyandotte Street Fair a small group approached me to ask what the petition was about. As soon as I said that we were running a candidate outside the Democrats and Republicans, a young man, who could not have been older than 22, exclaimed ‘the two-party system is obsolete’ and signed the petition. He then encouraged his friends to sign as well.

“Among older workers I have frequently been asked the same questions about what socialism means and the platform of our campaign. I remember one particular instance when a middle-aged woman and her daughter asked me about the campaign and nodded as I explained our focus was about taking resources that go towards billionaires and imperialist war and using these funds to help workers and rebuild the infrastructure in Michigan. As soon as I finished, she signed along with her daughter.”

Reflecting on the campaign as a whole, Isaac explained that he thought the campaign would find a broad audience among workers. “The working class is totally alienated from both political parties. The youth have no future under capitalism, the older workers are having their pensions stolen, all the while the banks and the ruling elite have been handed billions of dollars. The working class is looking for a political alternative that fights in their interest—a program which is only being fought for by Niles and the Socialist Equality Party.”

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