

The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century

Successful campaign for book presentation in Leipzig

By Christoph Dreier
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“Historical questions come up immediately in discussions with workers and students in Leipzig,” said International Youth and Students for Socialist Equality (IYSSE) member Denis. “The question of what Stalinism was and why it collapsed comes up over and over again. People are also concerned about the return of militarism and right-wing extremism.”

For the past two weeks, the IYSSE has supported Mehring Verlag’s campaign for the presentation of David North’s new book, which will take place within the framework of the Leipzig Book Fair.

North will present *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century* at the university in Leipzig on Friday. The book is a sharp polemic against various attempts to falsify history in order to discredit the Russian Revolution and minimise the crimes of imperialism. North shows how the basic problems of the twentieth century—social crises and wars—are reemerging and once again posing the question of revolution.

In the book, North explains the meaning of the October Revolution and the causes of Stalinist repression. He discusses the causes of both world wars and the development of fascism and the Holocaust, as well as the history of the movement of the working class. He provides a sharp defence of the materialist conception of history against the irrationalist conceptions put forward by the post-modernists.

All of these questions have arisen during the campaign. In the past two weeks, members of the IYSSE and supporters of Mehring Verlag have hung up thousands of posters, distributed fliers and carried out hundreds of discussions at book tables throughout the city—at the university, at schools and outside

workplaces.

Lively discussions developed at the book tables about the present political situation and the fundamental questions discussed in the book. Above all, the questions of the return of German militarism and the aggressive policies against Russia have prompted workers and students to consider historical parallels.

“I get short of breath when I think about the developments in Ukraine,” said an older woman, who worked as a mathematics teacher in the GDR. “Germany is making bad mistakes with its aggressive policies aimed at Russia. Since the reunification of Germany, the propaganda against Russia has continuously intensified.” She sees a direct connection between the development of war and the growth of social inequality. “I read a poll according to which the biggest fear of German companies is that there will be a general strike,” she said, smiling. She said that she would definitely be at the meeting on Friday.

Sascha, an art student from Russia, also said that he wants to come to the meeting. He sees parallels between the attack on Yugoslavia and the German policy in Ukraine. One can already see how far the social devastation in Ukraine has gone, he said. “For the Western countries, it is all about geopolitics.”

Sascha had not heard of Leon Trotsky before and looked forward to reading the new book. However, he is not uncritical of the October Revolution, he said. “I do understand that revolutionary violence is the only solution, but I am against violence,” he explained, saying that this is a dilemma for him.

Another student came to the information table at the university library and was glad to find out that David North is returning to Leipzig. He had previously

attended a book presentation three years ago, when more than 300 people came together to hear North talk about the book *In Defence of Leon Trotsky*. “Since then, the falsification of history has only intensified,” said the student.

Workers are also interested in the book and the meeting. Supporters of Mehring Verlag talked with workers outside the BMW factory and the Amazon logistics centre to advertise the meeting.

A worker came to the book table and saw Leon Trotsky’s books immediately. “I have heard of him,” he said. “He was killed by Stalin’s GPU. The Ulbricht Group worked its way up in Moscow by blackening the reputation of the communist opposition,” he said.

An IYSSE member named Philipp referred to the theoretical work of Leon Trotsky and the Left Opposition, which made clear there had been a socialist alternative to the rule of the Stalinist bureaucracy. “The new book by David North devotes a lot of space to this question, because the existence of the Left Opposition shows that Stalinism is not the result of socialism, but rather its worst enemy.” Trotsky defended workers’ democracy and internationalism against Stalin.

On Wednesday, about a thousand teachers, finance employees and policemen demonstrated at Augustusplatz in Leipzig against retirement cuts, for better funding for schools and a small wage increase. Many participants saw a link between their demands and their opposition to war.

Monique is a teacher in the Leipzig district of Connewitz. She is on strike because she thinks the schools in Saxony are in an unreasonably bad condition. The schools chronically have too few teachers and go for months without any management. She sees a connection between the cuts in social spending and the development of war and right-wing extremism.

“There is no party in Germany that would support protests against war,” she said. “That is disturbing.” When a union representative on the stage thanked the police for their collaboration, Monique became irritated. “We all know who the police support.” She said that they don’t support the population or immigrants, only the right-wing extremists of Legida [the Leipzig branch of the Pegida organisation that originated in Dresden].”

Christine is a 33-year-old elementary school teacher.

She attended the demonstration because she finds the unequal pay of workers not employed directly by the state intolerable. “The union dropped the demand for equal payment because the cost for the state was supposedly too high. I have little hope for the demonstration today,” she said.

Supporters of the campaign spoke with Christine about the historical crisis of the trade unions, which David North discusses in his book. “The unions have always been closely bound up with capitalism,” said a supporter. “To the extent that the crisis deepens and production is globally organised, these organisations transform themselves into co-managers.” Workers need a political—a socialist—programme and must organise themselves independently of the unions.

Three older teachers made a similar point. They came to the bookstand after reading a flyer. “The question of war is more important than the question of wages,” said one. “The lessons of history are crucial.”

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