

David North's lecture at Peradeniya University in Kandy attracts significant support from students and workers

By our reporters
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The lecture delivered by David North on Wednesday at Peradeniya University in Kandy on “The Lessons of the History and Contemporary Struggle for Socialism” drew an enthusiastic response from the 200-strong audience. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka organised the lecture to mark the 80th anniversary of the founding of the Fourth International, led by Leon Trotsky, in 1938.

North is the chairman of the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) and the national chairman of the SEP in the United States. He is in the country at the invitation of the SEP (Sri Lanka) to participate in events to celebrate the 80th anniversary and the 50th anniversary of the SEP.

The Peradeniya University lecture was the first event addressed by North during his visit. He will deliver another lecture on October 7 at the New Town Hall in Colombo.

In the lead-up to Wednesday's lecture, SEP and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) members engaged in an intensive campaign among students, academics, non-academic workers and workplaces around Peradeniya and the highlands city of Kandy. They distributed thousands of leaflets and WSWS articles.

The SEP and IYSSE held an exhibition of Marxist literature at the university from nine o'clock in the morning of the lecture, which drew the attention of students and academics and led to intense discussions with party campaigners.

A wide collection of literature, including books written by David North, such as *In Defence of Trotskyism* and *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century*, was displayed in the exhibition and at the bookstall at the entrance of the lecture hall. Such was the interest that 14,000 rupees worth of books were sold.

The evening lecture's audience included university students, academics and non-academic staff, medical doctors and nurses from Peradeniya teaching hospital and SEP and IYSSE members.

The event was chaired by Wije Dias, the general secretary of the SEP. He thanked the English Faculty of the University of Peradeniya, which helped obtain the main hall of the university

arts faculty, the Arts Theatre, for the lecture.

Dias spoke about the importance of drawing the lessons of the history of struggle for socialism. He explained that world capitalism was undergoing a deep crisis, which had intensified since the 2008 financial crash began in the US and gripped the world. He briefly traced the recent struggles of teachers and workers in the US and workers in Europe, as well as the emergence of protests by workers and poor peasants in India.

Dias said the working class needed the guidance of a revolutionary internationalist perspective. Studying the Fourth International's eighty years of struggle was vital for this perspective, he emphasised.

Introducing the lecturer, Dias said North had played a leading role in the struggle for Trotskyism for more than four decades. “North is an authority on the history of Trotskyism and has written numerous books in defence of it,” Dias explained.

At beginning of his lecture, North insisted on the great contribution made by those pioneer Trotskyists in Sri Lanka, then known as Ceylon, who had founded the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) in 1935, and, in 1942, the Bolshevik-Leninist Party of India (BLPI). Their contribution to the cause of revolutionary socialism was well known by Trotskyists throughout the world.

Emphasising the critical importance of the lessons of history in the struggle for socialism today, North said: “The Trotskyist movement is, of necessity, conscious of history. In the absence of a historically-grounded perspective, political analysis is degraded to the level of eclectically-selected impressions.”

North elaborated the pivotal stages of the theoretical and political struggle waged by Trotsky to uphold the perspective and program of international socialism, which provided the revolutionary strategy for the Russian working class to take power in the 1917 October Revolution, against the anti-Marxist theory of “socialism in one country” promoted by the Stalinist bureaucracy. Trotsky's defence of Marxism laid the basis for the founding of the Fourth International in 1938.

North concluded: “Mankind has passed, as Trotsky anticipated, through ‘decades of war, uprisings, brief interludes of truce, new wars and new uprisings.’ Defending the heritage

of Marxism as a politically-persecuted minority under the most unfavorable conditions, the Fourth International, under the leadership of the International Committee, has accumulated immense experience. Events have vindicated its historical perspective.

“Now, at this late and very advanced stage of the death agony of capitalism, the conditions exist to build the Fourth International as the mass World Party of Socialist Revolution.”

Following the lecture, which was translated into Sinhala and Tamil simultaneously, North answered a range of questions asked by audience members.

Responding to a question about the prospects for socialism in the United States, North explained that the objective conditions that had suppressed the development of political class consciousness among American workers, above all the vast wealth and unchallenged global supremacy of American capitalism, had been profoundly eroded. The historic decline and crisis of American capitalism now provided the impulse for the growth of class consciousness.

“The American ruling class, as Trotsky once wrote, is the most frightened in the world. It has always feared the development of socialism among workers. This is why the anti-Marxist propaganda has always been conducted so furiously in the media. But despite all the efforts to discredit socialism, there is an upsurge of interest in socialism among workers and youth.”

When North referred to the growth of militancy among American workers and the efforts of the SEP to develop their understanding of the international character of the class struggle, there was a burst of applause.

During the book exhibition and before the lecture, SEP and IYSSE members spoke to students, academics and workers.

Sithara, a first-year psychology student, said: “I am already convinced that mankind has no better future with capitalism. Therefore, I’m interested in socialism. I was a sympathiser of the JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna), but I have understood that it doesn’t play any role in fighting for socialism.”

Sithara said she appreciated discussions with the SEP. “I realised that socialism is the real necessity for the working class. The only solution for the common problems facing the working class is socialism. The question I had was, ‘How does the working class realise its revolutionary role; how does it attain its consciousness?’ In the discussion, I realised the necessity of a revolutionary party to educate and guide them.”

Vishanka, a post-graduate psychology student, said: “The most important thing I understood is that we cannot fight for socialism on the basis of a nationalist perspective. We should fight for international socialism and need to make strong criticisms against all the pseudo-left groups. Capitalism cannot be overthrown by individual efforts. We have to understand the root cause of the capitalist crisis. I think this type of intervention in universities is really decisive.”

Lakshitha, a geography student, said that in the absence of a

socialist perspective, the masses could easily be misguided and subordinated to the capitalist parties. Commenting on the presidential election in 2015, he said: “Many people, including myself, voted for Maithripala Sirisena, considering him as the ‘lesser evil,’ who could put an end to the anti-democratic rule of Mahinda Rajapakse.

“But now we see his government is continuing what Rajapakse did. All the pseudo-left parties, including the JVP, campaigned for Sirisena. No one explained that the actual problem is the crisis of the Sri Lankan ruling class, as you did.”

Lakshitha spoke about the globalised economy and the international working class. “Every government has to create better conditions for international finance capital,” he said. “Therefore, they have to intensify the exploitation of the working class within their countries. Workers need to identify themselves as one international class.”

Wijaya, a final-year arts student, joined the discussion, describing the difficulties he faces as a university student. “My father is dead,” he explained. “My brother is a plantation worker. I have to visit home every week to see my mother. It costs me 500 rupees each time to go home. I eat the cheapest meals from the university canteen to save as much money as I can.”

Wijaya said he believes socialism is the solution for the crisis of capitalism but was not clear how a socialist society could be established. He agreed that the most important thing is the development of the political knowledge of the working class and youth and understood that revolutions cannot succeed by armed struggles that were not based on scientific Marxist theory.

Wijaya bought several party publications, including *Why Study the Russian Revolution?* and *The Historical and International Foundation of the Socialist Equality Party*.

After the lecture, Wijaya discussed the important points he had grasped. He said he learnt how Stalinism betrayed the October 1917 Revolution, and the accuracy of the Trotskyist perspective. He denounced the JVP-led Inter University Students Federation’s promotion of “No politics in universities” which seeks to prevent students from understanding this historical record.

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