

# Large Colombo audience hears David North's lecture on the history of the Fourth International

By our reporters  
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A three-hundred strong audience gathered at the New Town Hall in Colombo on Sunday to hear a lecture delivered by David North, the Chairman of the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site*. The lecture's theme was "The Lessons of History and the Contemporary Struggle for Socialism."

North, who is also chairperson of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in the US, was in the country at the invitation of the SEP (Sri Lanka). Four days earlier, on October 3, he delivered a lecture on the same theme at Peradeniya University in Kandy, which also drew enthusiastic support.

These two events were part of a series of lectures being organised by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) around the world, to celebrate the 80th anniversary of the founding of the Fourth International by Leon Trotsky in 1938. The Colombo meeting also celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the Sri Lankan SEP.

In response to a vigorous campaign waged by the membership of the SEP and its youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, the meeting was attended by many workers, students and socially conscious intellectuals, from several parts of the island. Significantly, a large contingent of SEP and IYSSE members and supporters travelled 250 miles, from the war-ravaged north of the island, to attend the Colombo event.

Wije Dias, the General Secretary of the Sri Lankan SEP, chaired the meeting. He noted that the 80th anniversary of the FI was taking place at a critical turning point in the international class struggle: "On the one hand," Dias declared, "the major imperialist powers are driving towards a third world war, which will be fought with nuclear weapons, while, at the same time, the ruling classes in every country are establishing repressive, authoritarian regimes. On the other hand, in opposition to these war preparations, the working class this year has entered a wave of class struggles, beginning in the US, then sweeping into Europe, the Middle East, South Asia and the Far East."

The speaker insisted, "What is breaking down is the capitalist world economic system. An alternative social system must be built." This could only be accomplished, Dias said, by building a world federation of socialist republics, under the leadership of the working class, which must rally all the oppressed masses.

Dias pointed out that "Sri Lanka is a prime example of the disastrous consequences for the workers and oppressed masses that result from the abandonment of the program of international socialism." He referred to the betrayal carried out by the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) in 1964, with the blessing of the Pabloite revisionists. The SEP, he explained, had been established as the

Revolutionary Communist League (RCL) in 1968, to raise the flag of international socialism once again.

Dias continued: "We commemorate this history, because its lessons are essential for today's class struggles. The most basic of these lessons is the need to establish the political independence of the working class, fighting for an international socialist program and a socialist republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam, as part of a socialist republic of South Asia."

Introducing North, Dias pointed out that he was an authority on the history of the Trotskyist movement and had given decisive leadership to the ICFI, particularly after the 1985-86 split with the Workers Revolutionary Party renegades. Dias referred to the transformation of the ICFI's leagues to parties in the mid-1990s, and the founding of the *World Socialist Web Site* in 1998, as the organ of the world Trotskyist movement. He also displayed a number of important books authored by North.

At the outset of his lecture, North insisted on the critical significance of the lessons of history in the struggle for socialism today: "The revolutionary movement develops its program and activity through the continuous, critical reworking of historical experience. Without a historical reference point, it is impossible to navigate through the turbulent currents of the class struggle. Moreover, how can a revolutionary party train its young cadres, and the working class as a whole, without studying the monumental revolutionary events of the past century?"

The ICFI leader explained the necessity of "studying and assimilating the lessons of Trotsky's struggle against Stalinism," which "remains the fundamental theoretical and political struggle of the last century, of the most profound and immediate significance to every critical issue of political strategy that confronts workers, and all those seriously seeking the correct path of struggle against capitalism in the contemporary world." North went on to provide a brief summary of the historical and political origins of the Fourth International.

North pointed out how the imperialist forces, mainly the US, have brought the world to the brink of a nuclear Third World War, in direct contrast to the proclamations made by the ruling elites, in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Stalinist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, that capitalism would bestow upon humanity "peace, prosperity and universal democracy."

North then pointed to the "widespread discussion of the danger of fascism returning to power," citing from several recently published books on the subject. Referring to the failure of any of these authors

to explain the real root cause for such an upsurge of right-wing fascist forces, North said: “Trotsky, who produced the greatest analysis of fascism, insisted that this political scourge was rooted in the contradictions of capitalism, and that the breakdown of bourgeois democracy—beneath the pressure of global economic crisis, international geopolitical tensions, and domestic social conflict—was an irreversible process.”

“The political alternatives that present themselves in the epoch of the death agony of capitalism,” North continued, “are either fascist barbarism or socialist revolution. The triumph of one or another will determine the future of mankind. The triumph of fascism means the death of human civilization. The victory of the socialist revolution opens up the possibility of a revival and flowering of human civilization on a new and glorious level. That is the choice before us.”

North also delivered greetings to the SEP on its fiftieth anniversary—from the SEP in the US, and on behalf of the ICFI, and declared that the Sri Lankan party had steadfastly fought for an international socialist perspective, under enormously difficult conditions.

At the conclusion of the lecture North replied to questions raised by the audience. His answers were very well received. For the convenience of the audience, the lecture was simultaneously translated from English into the Sinhala and Tamil languages.

Several participants spoke to WSWs reporters both before and after the meeting.

**Keshani**, a student at the University of Colombo, said she previously had not believed in socialism, thinking that it was not practical. “But after long discussions with SEP campaigners at the university, I’m now convinced about the growing opportunity for socialism in this world situation. The international perspective that your party represents has particularly strengthened my interest towards socialism. No other so-called socialists speak about a socialist program anymore.”

Referring to North’s lecture, Keshani said she had learned a lot and had received answers to many questions. “The necessity of learning the lessons of history and basing ourselves on international perspectives was well explained. I am enthusiastic. The attacks of capitalism under globalisation must be confronted by organizing workers internationally.”

Keshani said the history of the LSSP’s betrayal in Sri Lanka was new to her, but that it was an important lesson. “I am ready to discuss these things and take the initiative,” she said.

**Percy**, a non-academic worker from the University of Moratuwa said the experiences discussed in North’s lecture were essential for the working class: “It cannot go forward without these lessons. The difference of the SEP is that it emphasises the strength of the working class. That strength needs to be improved further. I think more lectures like this will be required for that. As a worker in a university, I have seen many struggles of university students. Unless they are provided with an international perspective and leadership, the working class cannot succeed.”

**Thaneswari** from northern Point Pedro said she was convinced that international socialism was needed to solve the problems faced by the peoples of the world. Workers were engaged in a global production process.

Referring to the brutal 30-year civil war in Sri Lanka, Thaneswari said she now understood that people had been confined to nationalism, with disastrous consequences. “Parties like the Tamil National Alliance (TNA—a front for the Tamil bourgeois parties) do

not support the people. Although the war has been concluded, the government’s oppressive rule over the Tamil people continues.” She appreciated that the meeting was attended by both Sinhala and Tamil people, across ethnic lines.

**Gnanavel**, an accountant at the Northsea factory, said: “I came from Jaffna to participate in this event. There should be a change from capitalism to socialism, which is the truth.

“David North talked about the history of the party. It is good to lead the working class towards international socialism, as capitalism is ruling the world.”

However, he said, the party’s policies had not yet reached the broad masses and it should increase and expand its activities. The party’s positions should be explained in areas where the working class is in the majority, by organizing such meetings.

**Awantha Atigala**, a prominent Sri Lankan cartoonist, told WSWs reporters: “In my view, speaking about solving the problems faced by the masses in a national framework is utterly ridiculous. The JVP, FSP and other pseudo-left parties never speak about the relevance of the global economy to events in Sri Lanka.

“The explanations given in the lecture about Stalinism and other revisionist tendencies are very important. Many people misidentify socialism as Stalinism, or other forms of petty-bourgeois radicalism. Since no other party provides the working class with a genuine perspective, I believe the workers will be attracted to the SEP.”

**Anjana**, a student from Kalutara, said: “It was mentioned in the lecture that the capitalists are driving towards a world war. As a science student, I’m aware of how destructive such a nuclear war could be.

“North mentioned a resurgence of fascism. In the 1930s, the masses in Germany met the same situation and Trotsky called for a front between workers-based parties in Germany. At that time those parties didn’t agree with it. Finally, Hitler came to power and that resulted in a catastrophic world war. In 1938, Trotsky presented a program to end the world war, which explained the crisis of capitalism. “

Anjana raised that other parties, like the JVP and the FSP never spoke about international socialism.

Underscoring the enthusiasm engendered by David North’s lecture, audience members contributed 28,800 rupees to the party’s fund. They also purchased 13,500 rupees worth of Marxist literature at the meeting’s bookstall.

Several television channels and radio institutions covered the meeting. They included the state-owned Independent Television Network (ITN) and the privately owned Siyatha and Hiru broadcasters. Radio institutions covering the event included the privately owned IBC (Tamil), Lankasiri (Tamil) and Madyavediya (Sinhala).

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