

David North lecture tour

Nearly 100 attend meeting in New York City on the 80th anniversary of the Fourth International

By our reporters
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David North continued his international speaking tour on the history of the Fourth International with a meeting on November 8 in New York City attended by nearly 100 people. The audience included students and faculty from New York University, where the meeting was held, along with students from high schools and other colleges in New York and New Jersey and workers from various industries, including construction.

North is the chairman of the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site* and the national chairman of the Socialist Equality Party in the United States.

The meeting follows highly successful meetings in Michigan, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology near Boston, and in Sri Lanka. North spoke this Monday in Chicago and will speak today in Portland, Oregon; Wednesday in Berkeley, California; and Thursday in San Diego. Next month, North will speak in Australia and New Zealand.

The meeting in New York, “Eighty Years of the Fourth International (1938-2018): The class struggle, revolution, and socialism in the 21st century,” emphasized the necessity for a scientific understanding of history, particularly in light of recent political developments, including the anti-Semitic massacre that took place only weeks prior to the meeting.

North began by noting, in addition to the 80th anniversary of the founding of the Fourth International, the significance of two centenaries this week: the German Revolution and the end of World War I. These events, of world-historic significance, could only be understood in their historical context. Yet what dominates in the academy, he explained, including at NYU, is an

intellectual climate hostile to an objective, scientific approach to history.

North stressed the SEP’s historical approach: “Our party ... places great weight on historical anniversaries. We do so not because we are by nature nostalgic, but rather because it is through history that we can orient and understand the place of our movement in the contemporary political situation.”

North stressed that the major problems humanity confronts today—including the threat of war, the resurgence of fascism, global economic crisis and imperialist competition for markets—are the same it confronted in the 1930s, when the Fourth International was founded. Despite the changes over the intervening decades, we are in the same basic historical epoch.

He contrasted this with the approach of those who, when the USSR dissolved in 1991, proclaimed “the end of history” and the end of socialism. Francis Fukuyama’s book *The End of History and the Last Man* famously claimed that the dissolution of the USSR marked “the end of history as such, that is, the end of mankind’s ideological evolution, and the universalization of Western democracy as the final form of human government,” as North summarized.

According to this view, “the major political and ideological problems had been largely thrashed out and resolved.”

More insidious was the “Short Twentieth Century” thesis advanced by Eric Hobsbawm, who had been a longtime member of the Communist Party in the UK, and who argued that, with the dissolution of the USSR, the 20th century as a historical period of wars and revolutions, beginning in 1914 with the outbreak of

World War I, had ended.

These claims have been exploded by subsequent events, most recently the neo-Nazi riots in Chemnitz, Germany, of which North showed chilling footage.

North outlined the pseudo-left's call for a "left populism," articulated by philosopher Chantal Mouffe, who writes about the necessity for a "construction" of "the people." Based on postmodernism's "anti-essentialist," that is, anti-Marxist and anti-scientific, approach, Mouffe explicitly rejects class-based politics and social revolution against capitalism.

In contrast to this, North stressed, "The task of the Marxist movement is to fight to bring the consciousness of the working class into alignment with its objective being. A complex and difficult struggle, to be sure, but one which is objectively possible, because it is based on real, objective relations that exist."

To highlight the objective conditions for social revolution, North showed figures demonstrating the extreme economic inequality in the US and globally. Under such conditions, with obscene wealth at the apex of society, gender politics and other forms of identity politics are used to shuffle around wealth within the top 10 percent. This accounts, North elaborated, for the viciousness of identity politics, including the #MeToo campaign.

A section of the New York meeting

North noted that Leon Trotsky, when he founded the Fourth International amid major defeats of the working class, always stressed its objectively revolutionary role, including in the United States, where the working class engaged in massive strikes throughout the 1930s, an upsurge of the class struggle which he followed closely. This revolutionary perspective animates the struggle of the Fourth International today.

The report was followed by a lively question-and-answer session, and many attendees stayed afterwards for discussion with members of the SEP and its youth group, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality. Attendees also donated generously to the party's work and purchased Marxist literature from the book table.

Attendees spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* after the meeting. Victoria, a student at Bloomfield College in Bloomfield, New Jersey, spoke to the WSWWS about the lecture, which she said "definitely broadened my mind on the foundation and history of the Socialist Equality Party."

When asked what attracts her to the history of the

Trotskyist movement, she said: "I'd say the revolutionary side of it. The strikes such as the one in 1934, the Minneapolis General Strike, which helped revitalize industrial unionism. I feel it's important for one's voice to be heard, but unfortunately it's not something we see in most unions today."

Renwaldo, a college student in Queens, said, "One thing I found very interesting about the lecture was the comment about 'anti-essentialist' ideology, and the danger of basing our understanding of history on a subjective viewpoint.

"We are taught when we are young to associate socialism immediately with fascism. It is scary to think that this kind of teaching isn't an accident."

Gandhi, a freshman at NYU, told the WSWWS: "I definitely think we need history, because if you don't know why things are the way they are, you won't know how to combat it. ... Those who fail to know history are doomed to repeat it, you know that quote.

"With the pseudo-left, a lot of people don't know what actual socialism is, they think Russia was socialist, and if they don't know that history then they won't know what the USSR actually was and then they will look toward capitalism."

Asked why he thinks it is important to study the history of Trotskyism, Gandhi said: "The understanding that I need to know that history because I can't call myself a socialist, I can't understand the problems from this perspective without knowing that history. That's why I want to learn more, because if I don't then I can't properly analyze the problems that are present now, that affect me. Otherwise, I'll just be seeing it from the perspective that is handed down as we grow up in a capitalistic society—reformism. It's popular among Democrats—not getting rid of capitalism, just reforming it, which isn't the solution."

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