

David North addresses New Zealand meeting celebrating 80 years of the Fourth International

By our reporters
11 December 2018

David North, chairperson of the international editorial board of the World Socialist Web Site and the Socialist Equality Party (US), delivered his lecture “Eighty Years of the Fourth International (1938–2018): The class struggle, revolution and socialism in the 21st century” at Victoria University in Wellington, New Zealand on Sunday.

This was part of an international series of meetings commemorating the founding of the Fourth International, the world party of socialist revolution, by Leon Trotsky in 1938. In the past two months, North has delivered lectures in cities in the United States, Sri Lanka and Australia.

The Wellington meeting, organised by the Socialist Equality Group (NZ) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, attracted a diverse audience of more than 50 people including students, workers, unemployed people and academics. Some WSWs readers travelled from Auckland and other parts of the country to attend.

North began by pointing to the explosive “yellow vest” protest movement in France, in which hundreds of thousands of workers had marched against social inequality and austerity. The re-emergence of the class struggle, North said, could only be understood in its broader historical and international context. The contradictions of capitalism, which produced catastrophes in the 20th century—the Depression, the rise of fascism and two world wars—had again led to a systemic crisis, with revolutionary implications.

North explained that Trotsky called for the building of the Fourth International following the betrayals of the Stalinist parties in Europe, which had led to the defeat of the working class and the rise of fascism in

Germany in 1933. Then, as now, the threat of dictatorship, fascism and war could only be defeated with an explicitly socialist and internationalist strategy, aimed at uniting the working class to overthrow capitalism.

The speaker pointed to the danger posed by the re-emergence of the extreme right and neo-fascism in Europe, America and internationally, consciously promoted by the political establishment and the corporate media. They include the anti-immigrant New Zealand First Party, which has been given a major role in the Labour Party-led coalition government of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern.

North stressed that a genuine socialist movement against war and fascism could only be built in a political struggle to demarcate Marxism from pseudo-left politics and postmodern theories, such as those of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, which have dominated universities throughout the world. These representatives of the upper middle class reject politics based on the working class, instead advocating various forms of “left populism,” which include identity politics based on race and gender, and adapt to the nationalism of the far-right.

The lecture prompted serious questions about the nature of the working class and how postmodern irrationalism provided the theoretical justification for the opportunist politics of left demagogues such as Bernie Sanders, Jeremy Corbyn and the Syriza government in Greece.

A Chinese student asked whether the political unification of Chinese and US workers was possible given the rise of militarism in both countries. North replied that “the future of the world largely depends

upon such a unity being effected. America and China are headed on a collision course. American imperialism simply will not tolerate the restraints which the development of China has placed on its own profits.” The answer of the Chinese ruling elite was to prepare for a catastrophic war.

North noted that there had been a substantial turnout of Chinese students to his recent lectures in the US, which was connected with the growing social crisis in China and concerns over international developments.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to members of the audience following the meeting.

Shantanu, an unemployed IT worker, who travelled from Auckland to attend the meeting, said: “I was very enthused by [North’s] command of language, understanding of Marx, history and the times that we currently live in. I had no idea that fascism in Europe has come to such a point, especially in Austria.”

He found Trotsky’s analysis of the rise of fascism “amazingly perceptive. It’s as if Trotsky knew something was going to happen before it happened. I’m inspired to read more of Trotsky’s writings now, and much more of David North’s writings.”

He agreed with North’s critique of pseudo-left politics, particularly its rejection of the working class and adaptation to nationalism. “You don’t get this kind of discussion in New Zealand anywhere. They’re teaching a very narrow-minded point of view in universities.

“Classes do exist, perhaps classes have changed a bit since 1844 or since the Fourth International was founded, they look a bit different, but they’re still there.” The yellow vests were “a demonstration coming from the people, coming from the working class. A lot of people will respond to your ideas because people are sick of capitalism in general.”

Peter, who volunteers as an advocate for welfare beneficiaries, was interested in North’s comments on postmodernism and purchased his book *The Frankfurt School, Postmodernism and the Politics of the Pseudo-left: A Marxist Critique*. He said North’s clarification of the objective nature of the working class was very important. “David explained that the modern worker of today is not the same as the workers when Marxism was founded. The proletariat is today much more diverse and more numerous than people realise. The worker is still the most important social

category.

“I do think people are looking for an internationalist-style politics rather than a nationalist style politics,” he continued. “Some of our social problems can’t be dealt with on a national platform. You cannot deal with climate change within a nation state; if you cannot get agreement that is international then you are stuck.”

David, a meat worker and long-time WSWS reader, said he had been “transfixed by the whole presentation.” He said protests in France “show the widespread opposition to the ruling elite throughout Europe,” and their violent suppression by the police was “pretty shocking.” He agreed that the world was faced with “either fascism or a socialist revolution.” There is “no ‘middle path’ through parliament, even in New Zealand.”

Stan, an unemployed worker from Levin, who also followed the WSWS, was similarly moved by the footage of mass demonstrations in France. “There’s images of snipers on rooftops, schoolkids on their knees with their hands behind their backs, surrounded by militarised police and that kind of thing. That’s the kind of reaction we have to expect from the bourgeoisie to the working class.”

Stan was struck by North’s “emphasis on objective processes and the similarity of current events to events prior to World War I and World War II,” including the pseudo-lefts’ adaptation to “nationalist poison.” He thought that many New Zealanders “probably don’t see the danger in the Labour-New Zealand First government, because they are too close to it,” and because the media had sought to downplay the extreme nationalism and anti-Asian racism of NZ First.

The authors also recommend:

Eighty Years of the Fourth International: The Lessons of History and the Struggle for Socialism Today

[9 October 2018]

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<http://www.wsws.org>