The 2000 US elections and the new "irrepressible conflict"

Interviews from David North's lecture in Sydney, Australia

20 December 2000

We are publishing here a series of interviews with workers, students and youth who attended a lecture delivered by David North, chairman of the World Socialist Web Site *editorial board and national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party of the US. The lecture, entitled "Lessons from history: the 2000 elections and the new 'irrepressible conflict'" was given at a public meeting of the SEP of Australia held on December 3 in Sydney.*

The WSWS *posted the text of David North's lecture on December 11, and the question and answers that followed the lecture on December 13.*

Brad, a 27-year old landscape gardener from the Central Coast, north of Sydney, said that he previously had little understanding of what was occurring in the United States. "At first I thought it was so much in-house fighting between the two major parties. As things developed I began to try to follow the events but I learnt little from the news broadcasts and commentary here.

"The most important thing I learnt from the lecture was to look at the events from a different viewpoint or a different perspective. The report put the present events in an historical framework and compared the crisis in the US today with other turning points in US history. The comparison that was raised with the period and events that led to the American civil war was very important.

"When I heard the report, what stuck in my mind was the old saying that history repeats itself. I know it is not exactly the same but when you heard the report it gave you an idea that there are big historical questions involved in the present election crisis and fundamental changes are taking place.

"Just before leaving to attend the meeting I heard an American reporter on a TV program say that whatever the outcome of the election the vital thing was to stay united. In the past there were never comments made like that. Then when I heard David North speak I began to realise why these warnings were being made.

"I think the figures he gave about the growing inequality in the United States were important in order to understand why there has been this move to overturn democratic rights. It is clear that there is a growing opposition developing below the surface by masses of people to the conditions that are being forced on them. I think that is why there is such a drive to put in place a very repressive government. It will be needed to deal with any opposition that may begin to develop and also to carry out further cuts to the conditions of workers.

"Today I heard the speech by Gore conceding defeat after the Supreme Court brought down its decision stopping votes in Florida being counted. He said he would respect the democratic process. But I immediately thought back to what David North had raised about the count, the rigging and the grab for power by the Bush camp and thought, where is the democracy? The Supreme Court acting along political lines decided the outcome of the election, not the people.

"The same thought must be going through the heads of people in the United States. After what has happened Bush will have very little credibility among thousands of people. If the economy in the US begins to slow down and when Bush begins to push through harsh measures then these people are going to be thinking that they did not vote for him and their votes were not counted.

"I am not certain that workers in the US will understand the need to change the system but they do have a history of fighting for democratic rights. I know how I would feel if my vote had been discounted like that. If I were in the US I would certainly be angry and I would be looking for ways to express my opposition.

"If anyone said to me that people can change things by voting, I would say after what has happened that this position is completely false. As far as the present system is concerned your vote counts for nothing. Workers will have to look for other ways of changing things, and not only in the US.

"What has happened in the US must have an impact everywhere. America has always been held up as the home of democracy. If democratic rights are being openly overturned there, how long will it be before other countries, like Australia, start throwing out basic rights? After all, the governments here and elsewhere are all looking to carry out the same program that shifts wealth away from the working people towards big business and the rich. It cannot be done democratically."

David, a train driver from Canberra, commented after the meeting that the US election crisis was "much bigger than the public has been led to believe. The ripples will come through the system globally from America. The fundamental principles of democracy are now going to be set somewhat on their tails. We will see the extremes that arise when a system is pushed into a crisis or a dilemma.

"Americans have stuck to their right to vote, particularly after the Civil War. This whole process is going to reclaim the sentiments of the old Civil War, the founding fathers and the Declaration of Independence—of democracy and freedoms. Those foundations are going to have to be revisited.

"America's been running on a complacency with the rise of capitalism, but that complacency is now being uprooted and disrupted. People are now starting to evaluate their own society. They have to start thinking in the streets and the lessons of history have to start coming through to the younger generations.

"Complacency is detrimental if you just leave an elite or a social class to run the show. The meeting has made clearer to me that there are fundamental political problems in America. I was quite surprised that the Supreme Court has the overriding power. I would have thought that in a democracy, the overriding power would be the people."

Tim, a University of Western Sydney law student, said that before the meeting he had not been aware of what was going on in the US election nor how far-reaching the implications were. "On the TV, they have denied

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that there is a crisis at all. Now I am well aware after the articles from the *WSWS* and especially after the lecture by David North that there is actually a real constitutional crisis in the US similar to the one in the pre-Civil War period.

"The American people face a real problem. If they are denied the right to vote then they will start asking what is next. They just gave us a little thing—a few basic rights, the right to vote. Now we are denied that. So tomorrow no one is going to ask us anything. They will just do what they like. Only 5 percent of rich people control everything while 95 percent really have nothing. If I were in the establishment's shoes I would put in Gore. I am talking from their standpoint. They are undermining the system that has served them for 150 years so well.

"If George W Bush becomes president that will certainly have implications around the world. Rightwing parties especially in Europe are going to use the opportunity. They will say: if America, which is the mother of democracy, can deny the right to vote why shouldn't the German National Party say that everyone who is not German or Aryan background—like Hitler used to do—should be thrown out of Germany? Why couldn't Le Pen's party in France say the same? I don't think we are immune in Australia either.

"There is going to be a clash with the interests of the European Union which is starting to distance itself from America and NATO. It is already trying to install a European army, which will be to protect European interests. I think that American foreign policy is going to be challenged to a much greater extent than previously. In the Balkan crisis, the European countries couldn't resist the initiative of America. Now they will start to say they will have their own policy."

William, a high school student, said: "The coverage in the media is only skin deep. It only focuses on the immediate, not the forces underneath and it doesn't go into the tampering with the votes and everything, the hiding of ballots.

"I heard about the people harassing the ballot counters. They stood outside protesting and shouting to make them give up the counting. It shows how determined Bush is to win this, even if it means boycotting the people. It's not just Bush personally, but the right-wing forces behind him. If Bush wins, the implication around the world will be that you can get away with that kind of stuff.

"At the meeting today, I was impressed by the way that David North compared the political crisis to the Civil War. He showed that a similar build up of events is happening again. That is what I find with the *WSWS*. Unlike the media, it examines the historical forces behind the events, instead of giving a superficial description of things as they happen."

Marley, a first year university student, said the Republicans had taken the White House in an anti-democratic way. "That is just a foreboding of what is going to happen in the future. Bush didn't win the presidency democratically, so why should anyone expect him to act democratically?

"David North compared the situation today with the lead-up to the American Civil War. I think that helped to understand certain patterns in history, and the possibilities of what will follow. He spoke about the compromises that were made by the North, the way they pandered toward the South in the years leading up to the Civil War because they were worried about the South's response if slavery wasn't made legal in new states.

"In recent years they have been pandering to the right-wing. In the case of the election, they have been worried that if Bush didn't get in, the right-wing would just riot, just like the slave-owners did in the Civil War. The ruling elite in the South wanted to get rid of the obstacles to slavery, and that is pretty much what the right-wing want to do now—they want to be able to do what they want with the working class.

"What David North said made sense to me. That they want to get rid of all the social reforms and rights, like public health and safe working conditions, so they can exploit the working class as much as possible, and to get rid of democracy because it is an obstacle to them doing that.

"You hear people saying everywhere that the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer, but it is like people accept it as something that is inevitably going to happen. The poor feel that there is nothing they can do about it so they have this resignation. The government isn't going to fix it. Unions aren't going to fix it. The inequality has produced a complete alienation.

"But the right to vote is one thing people hold on to. It is one of the few things that let you feel as though you are a part of what is going on, even when everything around you is saying that you're not. You can say, it is my vote at least, my vote means something. Even when you're seeing around you that your vote doesn't mean anything, you can still hope and pray that it will.

"David North was talking about Judge Scalia in the Supreme Court saying the right of suffrage doesn't really exist because the people don't choose the 'electors'. Scalia said it in such crude terms. He basically told the people 'tough luck, your vote doesn't really mean anything anyway'.

"What has happened in the election is showing that there isn't really any democracy in America. For them to come out and say it though, means the ruling elite isn't hiding it anymore. That is a really scary thing. If they're not going to hide it, it is like they think don't have to appease anyone anymore.

"The vast majority of Americans, especially the poorer sections, are going to be thinking, what is left for us? We don't even have the right to vote. They are going to start talking about it and it is going to lead to tension between the government and the mass of the workers.

"David North explained that America had been the hardest country to shift into socialist revolution because it had most of the money and the most illusions in capitalism as the best form of society.

"It seemed like American capitalism would always have everything under control. They had the money, the weapons and the armies, so people thought they could fix everything. So when you see them falling apart in front of the whole world, you realise it is not such a permanent thing, that capitalism is not there forever. It is definitely changeable. I think that is a good thing. It has been shown how fragile it can be.

"Those who are saying nothing important has happened are lulling people in a false sense of nonchalance—that the crisis will just blow over, so let's not worry about it too much. I think this is really short-sighted. Even if straight after Bush gets the presidency there is no big revolt against it, it is pretty much inevitable that something will arise from the democratic rights of the people being taken away from them.

"Under conditions where people's consciousness about society is going to be rising, there have to be options around that explain what is happening and make sense. There has to be a voice out there telling the truth about what is going on and I think the truth will always come through, because it will click in people's consciousness that 'yeah that sounds right, that sounds like the way I feel'.

"I've heard radical voices and their take on what is happening. But what I really like about the SEP and *WSWS* is the analysis. No one else that I've read deals with issues so in-depth, explaining what is going on and what it means for the working class. I don't know very much about Marxism, except the basic ideas, but the way the party uses Marx's analysis and puts issues into the perspective of history makes what is happening comprehensible and understandable.

"I think society should be organised in a way that everyone benefits from it, where everyone gets what they need. Where people don't have to fight anymore and don't have to feel that nothing comes to them without crawling over other people, or taking it from other people. I don't know how, but I think society should operate in a humanity-friendly kind of way."

Stan, a young worker, said the *WSWS* was the only source of reliable political analysis. "In comparison the mainstream media numb people's

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capacity to think and sow confusion. They provide a mouthpiece for very right wing commentators. They constantly bombarded the public with pro-Bush sentiments. For example they kept focusing on Bush protesters and on many occasions the cameras aimed at people holding ‘sore loser man' signs and they declared, without any reference to polls, that people wanted a conclusion to the election process.

“The reality is that millions were radicalised by the elections, they were angry that thousands of votes weren't counted. Specifically in Florida there are affidavits from people who declared that they had been prevented from voting due to racism and harassment. These areas would have voted predominately Democrat. The inclusion of these disenfranchised voters would have changed the result of the election.

“What struck me about the lecture was how David North pointed to the inability of the courts to reflect the will of the people and the political parallels between the 1850s and today. The Dred Scott decision in 1857 was basically that a slave is the property of the slave owner. The essential thrust of the ruling was to allow slavery to be extended beyond the slave states. It ultimately led to civil war.

“The lecture also highlighted the inability of the Democratic Party, the Radicals, the Greens or the AFL-CIO to wage a struggle for democratic rights. The Democrats have either very weakly defended the right for people to vote or not at all. In his concession speech, Gore reinforced the legitimacy of the Supreme Court decision.

“It's not out of the question that the ballots could somehow now be destroyed or disappear. That's in the interest of not only the Bush camp but the Gore camp as well. There will be a major crisis for Gore and Bush if the uncounted ballots show Gore to be the victor. Gore would have to justify his concession and ongoing cooperation with the Bush camp to the American people.”

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