

# David North addresses Sri Lankan Trotskyists on the 50th anniversary of the ICFI

A correspondent  
21 November 2003

To mark the 50th anniversary of the founding of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), David North, Chairman of the WWSW International Editorial Board, addressed a meeting of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka on November 16 in the capital Colombo. The gathering took place in the midst of a political crisis on the island provoked one week earlier by the president's threat to invoke a state of emergency.

Joining SEP members from Colombo were delegates from across the island, including Jaffna and the LTTE-controlled Vanni region in the north; Ambalangoda and Hikkaduwa in the south; and Kandy, Hatton and Bandarawella in the central hill districts. SEP General Secretary Wije Dias extended on behalf of the party a warm welcome to North, who delivered an extensive report on the history and principles of the ICFI. It was translated into both Sinhala and Tamil.

North began by pointing to the unique character of the ICFI. "What other political organisation in the world today is capable of surveying its entire history and connecting its present practice to the principles and ideals upon which it was ostensibly founded?" he asked.

North noted the perplexity in ruling circles in Sri Lanka in the wake of the constitutional crisis. He observed, however, that the headline "Befuddled and Bamboozled" that appeared in a Colombo newspaper could apply to the Bush administration just as well as to the government in Sri Lanka.

The US may have an unprecedented arsenal of weapons, he said, but that, of itself, could not solve the problems of US imperialism. "George Bush in his ignorance and in his sadism exemplifies the political and intellectual bankruptcy of the ruling elite within the United States. A war was launched last March in violation of international law and on the basis of lies and misrepresentations, which have been thoroughly exposed."

North explained that the American ruling class "believes that its policies can be elaborated in ignorance of the historical lessons of the past and that truth is whatever the media proclaims it to be. But history and the truth inevitably take their revenge against ignorance and lies."

The speaker pointed to the objective contradictions in world economy that were fuelling social and political tensions throughout the world. The global development of the productive forces had become incompatible with private ownership and the nation state framework. Extraordinary technological developments were behind the integration of Asia into globalised production processes, but only a tiny minority of the population was reaping the benefits.

North stated that the most concentrated expression of the world crisis was to be found in the eruption of American imperialism. What were the prospects of the mad attempt to reorganise and stabilise world capitalism beneath the hegemony of the US, he asked. Already in Iraq there was resistance and that resistance would not only take primitive forms of

guerrilla fighting and terrorist actions. A new political alignment would emerge in the working class, which required a political program and clear perspective.

North insisted that the political problems facing the working class could not be resolved on the basis of religious fundamentalism or chauvinism; nor could imperialism be defeated through terrorist acts such as those carried out the day before in Istanbul.

"We base ourselves on the strength of the working class. Great political problems cannot be solved by isolated conspirators working in small and hidden groups. What is required is the raising of the political culture and consciousness of the broad masses. That is why we are irreconcilably opposed to terrorist organisations that exploit and contribute to the confusion and disorientation of the working class.

"It is notable that terrorist organisations make no appeal to the masses, let alone present a program that represents the interests of the working class and the oppressed sections of the peasantry. A car bomb is the reactionary antithesis of a political program that strives to instil within the working class an understanding of its historic goals. The terrorist methods of Al Qaeda and similar organisations arise from the fact that they represent a disaffected section of the national bourgeoisie. Their actions represent so many bargaining chips in their long-term negotiations for a rearrangement of the existing power structure.

"Terrorist attacks that murder innocent people cut across and disrupt the process of politically educating the working class. They play into the hands of the most reactionary forces in the capitalist state. And they lend themselves easily to police and intelligence manipulation. Who benefits from bombing workers' homes in Riyadh, or planting bombs outside two synagogues in Istanbul? Under conditions in which the United States confronts substantial opposition in Turkey to the war in Iraq, bombs go off in Istanbul, killing innocent people."

## Foundation of the Fourth International

Turning to the history of the Fourth International, North stated that the International Committee had engaged during the past half century in an uncompromising struggle against all forms of political charlatanism.

"For much of the last fifty years we heard the revisionists, the Pabloites, praise various organisations as an alternative to revolutionary Marxism and deride the program upon which our movement was historically rooted. But what has become of all our critics?"

"We can now survey an extended period of our history and make an objective assessment of its significance. We can pose the question: were

the principles upon which the International Committee was founded in 1953 historically and politically vindicated? When one reads the documents that were produced in the heat of the political struggle a half century ago, one is struck by their extraordinary prescience.”

North reviewed the historical struggles embodied in the founding of the Fourth International in 1938 and the ICFI in 1953. “From the founding of the Left Opposition some 30 years earlier in 1923, Trotsky had led the struggle against the development of the Stalinist bureaucracy and subjected its programmatic twists and turns to a merciless critique. Every fundamental question of Marxist strategy and tactics was hammered out: above all, the international character of the social revolution in the twentieth century, against the Soviet bureaucracy’s nationalist orientation.”

Trotsky’s rejection of the claim that the national bourgeoisie could play a revolutionary role in the colonial countries was tragically vindicated in 1927 by the slaughter of communist workers by the Kuomintang in Shanghai. In Germany, the coming to power of Hitler as a result of the Comintern’s abrupt swing to the ultra-leftist theory of “social fascism”, combined with the lack of any internal criticism within the Communist International, led Trotsky to conclude that the Third International was finished as a world party of social revolution. A new international party had to be built. While understanding that the scale of the defeats suffered by the international working class had laid the foundation for a new imperialist war, Trotsky nonetheless remained optimistic in his broad historical prognosis. Notwithstanding the scale of these defeats, the working class remained a revolutionary class.

## **The struggle against Pabloism**

North reviewed the political issues that led to the split within the Fourth International in 1953.

“In the aftermath of the Second World War, there emerged within the sections of the Fourth International a conception that Trotsky had not anticipated the form taken by political developments at the end of the war.” These layers claimed that Trotsky had promised them “world revolution”. But while a revolutionary upsurge did take place in 1943-5, the decimation of the Trotskyist ranks by the combined blows of Stalinism and imperialism meant that this upsurge came under the control of the Stalinist and reformist bureaucracies.

North went on to examine the fundamental outlook of the opportunist tendency—led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel—that began to adapt itself impressionistically to the political and social relations that were established after the war. For the Pabloites, he explained, social reality consisted of US imperialism on the one hand and the Soviet bureaucracy on the other. The international working class was totally ignored.

The Pabloites vastly overestimated the role and strength of the Stalinist bureaucracy. They seized upon the new economic structures established in Eastern Europe as evidence that Trotsky had been wrong in his characterisation of Stalinism as counter-revolutionary. Not only did they argue that a section of the bureaucracy would undergo a process of “self-reform,” but that it would, in fact, become the major vehicle for socialist revolution.

North explained that the ICFI did not have a “bad man” theory of history. It was not that Pablo and Mandel set out to betray the Fourth International. Both had, at one time, made considerable sacrifices for the Fourth International. Rather, their adaptation to Stalinism and to the bourgeois nationalist leaders in the colonial countries was a product of the enormous pressures brought to bear on the Trotskyist movement by the post-war restabilisation of capitalism. These pressures were reflected in

Ceylon in the emergence of a pro-Stalinist faction within the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) in 1951-2 that split from the party.

“The problems within the Fourth International reflected changes in class relations on a world scale: the growing influence and strength of the Stalinist bureaucracy, the radicalisation among masses of peasantry, the emergence of a new middle-class. All of these tendencies had their impact on the political orientation of the Fourth International. The correct political response to these new phenomena could only be found in a creative reworking of the whole history of the struggles of the Marxist movement.”

What underlay the orientation of Pablo and Mandel to the Stalinist bureaucracies and to bourgeois leaders like Nasser in Egypt and Ben Bella in Algeria, North said, was a deep pessimism in the ability of the Trotskyist movement to build parties in the working class. They attributed to the Stalinists and bourgeois nationalists revolutionary capacities that these political forces did not possess. “What were the political conclusions drawn from this perspective? The Trotskyist parties had to dissolve themselves into the Stalinist parties and the bourgeois national movements.

“It became clear between 1951, when this political line was elaborated, and 1953, when the political struggle erupted in the Fourth International, that the advocates of this line were more or less demanding the political liquidation of the Fourth International.” This is what led to the issuing of the Open Letter to the international Trotskyist movement by US Socialist Workers Party (SWP) leader James P. Cannon on November 16, 1953, and to the formation of the ICFI.

## **The LSSP’s “impartiality”**

North pointed out that many criticisms had been made of Cannon’s tactics in the 1953 split. But, for the most part, they served to avoid the key issue: were the political positions set out in the Open Letter right or wrong? He contrasted Cannon’s stance with that of Leslie Goonewardene and the LSSP leadership, and its political consequences.

“Goonewardene knew very well, from the experiences in Ceylon itself, the implications of the Pablo line. But the Ceylonese leadership chose instead to adopt an attitude of fine impartiality toward the struggle that was raging in the Fourth International. Why? It reflected, within Ceylon, the adaptation of the LSSP to social forces that were emerging. It was the preparation for politically fatal compromises.”

To join with Cannon and the SWP in fighting Pabloism would have meant deepening the political struggle against Stalinism and bourgeois nationalism and re-educating the membership in the program and history of Trotskyism, North said. “The LSSP leaders knew that. But how did that fit in with the political pacts that were being elaborated in Ceylon? The question of their parliamentary faction was becoming more decisive for them than their international political commitments.

“In fact, the only way they could have prepared and elaborated a revolutionary response to the problems in Ceylon was on the basis of the international questions. Instead, they chose to adopt a position of neutrality: ‘Yes, Pablo’s positions are wrong, but it would have been better if Cannon had not been so impulsive and pushed things to an organisational break.’”

North reviewed the key issues stressed by Cannon in 1953: “The struggle against capitalism must be waged consciously at an international level. Capitalism cannot be decisively defeated in one or another country. The struggles in each country must be guided by and subordinated to an international strategy. And political parties, even those calling themselves socialist, which deny this essential truth are fundamentally reactionary.

“Moreover, the struggle which must unfold on this international basis requires conscious political leadership. No matter how severe the crisis of capitalism, no matter how weak the bourgeoisie in one or another country, such as Sri Lanka, it is wrong to believe that the working class can spontaneously elaborate the program, the strategy and tactics it needs to come to power. The political leadership of the socialist revolution is a conscious, scientific task. This is the major lesson of the twentieth century.

“From this standpoint, as Cannon insisted in 1953, no other political party can serve as a substitute for the cadre of the Fourth International. Herein lay the basic difference between Trotskyism and Pabloite revisionism. Pabloism engaged in an endless search for alternatives to the Fourth International—searching among the Stalinists, among the bourgeois national movements. In this way, the Pabloites abandoned the central task of our epoch: the struggle to build and train a Marxist cadre within the working class.”

### **A unified world movement**

In the final part of his address, North reviewed key turning points in the IC’s protracted struggle against opportunism in the post-war period, including against the SWP’s reunification with the Pabloites in 1961-63. He paid particular attention to the political ramifications of the LSSP’s stance in 1953, which was more and more preoccupied with parliamentary manoeuvres at the expense of political principles. When LSSP leader Colvin R. de Silva met with Chinese Premier Chou En Lai in 1957, he failed to even raise the fate of the Chinese Trotskyists who were languishing in Maoist prisons. By 1964, the LSSP leadership had betrayed the fundamental principles of Trotskyism and entered the bourgeois government of Madame Sirima Bandaranaike—a decision that was to have devastating consequences in the following three decades for the Sri Lankan and international working class.

North dealt with the subsequent political degeneration of the Workers Revolutionary Party leadership in Britain and the political struggle that culminated in the split of 1985-86. He pointed out that all of the factions that broke from the International Committee based themselves on the apparent strength of the Stalinist bureaucracy and the various national liberation movements that were blown apart in a matter of years. The collapse of the Soviet Union was followed by the direct adaptation of organisations such as the Palestine Liberation Organisation to imperialism. The IC, on the other hand, based itself on establishing the political independence of the working class and assimilating the historical lessons of the twentieth century. In this way, it laid the basis for the advances made over the last 18 years.

North concluded by pointing to the huge expansion of the influence of the International Committee through the establishment of the Socialist Equality Parties and the *World Socialist Web Site*. “We must use the occasion presented by the 50th anniversary of the founding of the International Committee to reaffirm our commitment to the defence of its principles, the assimilation of its lessons and the training of the advanced sections of the working class and socialist intellectuals in this history. We have not come this far to now turn back. We function today as a unified world movement. We fight each day through the *World Socialist Web Site* to bring to the working class internationally our analysis of the world crisis of capitalism and the program of the Fourth International.

“No one could have anticipated, 50 years ago, all that would flow from the split out of which the International Committee emerged in 1953. Virtually all of those who were active in that struggle have now passed from the scene. But the political principles for which they fought retain

and acquire an immense political significance in the present period. And we will demonstrate that it is, indeed, possible to build the most powerful political parties in the world on the basis of Marxism.

“That is the meaning of this anniversary. I think we have every right to take immense pride and satisfaction in the opportunity we now have to carry this entire experience into the new century and make it the basis of a vast expansion of our international movement.”



To contact the WSW and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**