

Michigan bookstores host signings for *The Crisis of American Democracy*

Our correspondent
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David North, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (US) and chairman of the editorial board of the *World Socialist Web Site*, appeared at two book signings in Michigan last week.

Both events included remarks from North, readings from his book, *The Crisis of American Democracy*, and question and answer sessions. They were held October 5 in Shaman Drum Bookstore on the University of Michigan campus in Ann Arbor and October 7 at Schuler Bookstore in East Lansing, near the campus of Michigan State University.

At the signings, North highlighted certain themes from his book, a collection of lectures that focus on the significance of the US Presidential elections of 2000 and 2004. He placed the unprecedented assault on democratic rights in the US—an assault propelled by the theft of the 2000 presidential elections—within the framework of the overall social crisis in the country.

Explaining the central premise of his book, North argued in Ann Arbor that “American democracy is presently in a deep and terminal crisis. The traditional forms of bourgeois-democratic rule—a constitution which places clear limits on the power of the state, an institutional ‘balance of power’ aimed at preventing the concentration of power in the hands of an uncontrolled executive branch, the unquestioned dominance of the civilian government over the military, the separation of church and state, the right of habeas corpus, the maintenance of a free press, the ultimate accountability of the state officials to the people in the form of free and open elections—all are in an advanced state of decay,” he said.

North noted that when the book first came out, its arguments may have appeared to many to have been exaggerated if not false. “Certainly the claim that the entire social and political structure of the United States

was rotten to the core was dismissed all too flippantly by those who found it convenient to label this book as nothing more than left-wing polemics,” he said.

The consequences of Hurricane Katrina have done much to undermine these criticisms. “The response of the government to Hurricane Katrina—its indifference and callousness in the face of mass suffering and the monumental scale of its incompetence, came as a shock,” North said. Moreover, the exposure of the extreme levels of poverty combined with the decay of the social infrastructure of the United States could not but call into question the stability and viability of the entire American system.”

“There are events that take place quite unexpectedly, which suddenly reveal a society for what it is,” North continued. He likened the hurricane to the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, which so completely exposed the indifference, incompetence and decrepitude of the ruling Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union. So too with the response of the political establishment to Hurricane Katrina. Over a thousand perished in the disaster; several thousands were left stranded in the city of New Orleans for days without food and water; hundreds of thousands have been left unemployed and homeless, with little or no help from the government.

“This event was not an aberration,” North said in Ann Arbor. “A similar emergency would provoke a similar situation in any American city. The same malignant social conditions would be exposed. The same indifference on the part of the political and social elite would find expression.”

In his remarks at both venues, North argued that the eruption of American militarism and the attack on democratic rights in the US were inextricably bound up with the enormous and growing levels of social inequality in the country, as documented in his book.

“What *The Crisis of American Democracy* sets out to bring into the open is the underlying cause of this erosion of democratic processes,” he said in Ann Arbor. “The breakdown of the American system has causes that are far deeper than the idiosyncrasies of various political leaders.”

In explaining the underlying social conditions behind the crisis of American democracy, North pointed to figures, included in the lecture “Militarism and social polarization in contemporary America,” showing that in 1960 the average CEO of a Fortune 500 company made 41 times the wage of an average worker. In 2000, it was over 500 times. “If history has demonstrated anything,” he said in East Lansing, “it is that such an enormous concentration of wealth is incompatible with democratic forms of rule.”

In forcing its interests onto society as a whole, the ruling elite must inevitably resort to anti-democratic and violent methods. This is the significance, North said, of the immediate move by the Bush administration to exploit the disaster caused by Hurricane Katrina, and more recently the threat of an avian flu pandemic, to push for greater military authority over domestic affairs.

At both events, North read from a lecture entitled “After the 2004 election: the political challenge confronting the American working class,” originally given in November 2004. The lecture explained how the victory of the Republican Party was bound up with the complete decay of the Democratic Party and the collapse of the traditional forms of working class organization: the trade unions.

The collapse of any semblance of liberal reformism, and the complete inability of the trade unions to offer any opposition to the attack on jobs, wages and social programs, reflect basic tendencies of world capitalism, North explained. With its positions of world economic hegemony severely undermined, the American ruling elite has responded with a ferocious attack on the working class, including the attack on democratic rights and the escalation of militarism all around the world.

North concluded his remarks at both meetings by pointing to the inevitable collision between the needs of mass society and the nature of capitalism, in which all economic decisions are subordinated to the interests of private wealth accumulation and the drive for corporate profits. The present state of affairs cannot continue

much longer.

“The corporate bosses and the mass media argue continuously that massive cuts in wages and benefits are required. This refrain is heard not only in the United States but throughout Europe. Society, we are told endlessly, lacks the resources to provide a decent standard of living for the working class, which comprises the overwhelming majority of society. This is being asserted by those who are paid millions and tens of millions of dollars for mismanaging the companies they control. The reality, however, is very different. What society cannot afford is the ruling class. The rich have simply become too expensive to maintain,” he said.

North stated that there existed two irreconcilable social principles: that of capitalism, which proclaims the supremacy of private wealth over all social and mass interests; and that of socialism, which declares that the needs of society as a whole must take precedence over the mindless and destructive pursuit of personal riches.

He ended by calling on those attending the signings to read the *World Socialist Web Site* and help build the Socialist Equality Party.



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