Germany: Arbeiterpresse Verlag presents its 2007 publishing programme at the Leipzig Book Fair

Our correspondent
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Arbeiterpresse Verlag, the publishing house of the Socialist Equality Party in Germany was once again represented at the recent Leipzig Book Fair, the second largest such event in Germany and one of the biggest book fairs in the world.

A new work, Leon Trotsky and the Fate of Socialism, *which will be published this summer, was presented at a March 24 meeting attended by some 80 people. The volume contains eight lectures delivered by David North between 1998 and 2005. North is Editorial Board Chairman of the* World Socialist Web Site*and National Secretary of the Socialist Equality Party in the US, and author of several books and collections of essays on political, historical and philosophical themes.*

Arbeiterpresse Verlag is also publishing two new editions of works by Leon Trotsky: Whither France? *and, for the 90th anniversary of the great event,* The History of the Russian Revolution.

Peter Schwarz, a member of the World Socialist Web Site*editorial board, delivered the following remarks to the meeting of readers and supporters.*

"The historian is a prophet in reverse." This saying by the Romantic poet, critic and scholar Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829) contains an essential kernel of truth. One cannot look into the future without knowing and understanding the past.

If one considers mankind's contemporary situation, then there seems little ground for optimism: war, misery, unemployment and glaring social inequality abound wherever one looks. In addition, we are witnessing the destruction of the environment and a considerable decline in culture.

In the field of the natural sciences and technology, however, mankind has made and continues to make enormous progress. The development of computer technology and the Internet has given human communication unprecedented new dimensions.

But how can this be used to improve human society? How can society be organised so that it can truly be called human? By this, I mean a society that is centred not on the pursuit of profit but on human needs—i.e., a socialist society.

One cannot answer this question without studying and understanding the experiences of the past century.

"Certainly, the past cannot be changed and we must live with its consequences. But how we understand the past—and the process through which those consequences were formed—is the essential foundation of our comprehension of the present historical situation and the potential within it. Our assessment of the possibilities for socialism in the future is inextricably bound up with our interpretation of the causes of the defeats it suffered in the course of this century," writes North in the new book to be published by Arbeiterpresse Verlag.

The most important event of the twentieth century was undoubtedly the Russian Revolution of October 1917. For the first time in history, the working class, led by a Marxist party, conquered power and undertook the conscious attempt to place society on a new socialist foundation.

"This Revolution can be supported or opposed, but it cannot be ignored. The answers one gives to the problems of the present day are inseparably linked to one's assessment of the October Revolution, its aftermath, fate, and legacy."

Was the October Revolution doomed to failure from the beginning? Were Stalinism and its crimes the inevitable result of Bolshevism? Did the collapse of the Soviet Union prove the bankruptcy of the socialist organisation of society?

If one answers these questions with "yes"—and that is the dominant opinion among university academics at present—then Marxism has surely failed all down the line. One would have to abandon a socialist perspective completely. At best, one might try to improve social conditions through moral appeals to the ruling class—a rather hopeless venture, as the experiences of the past have shown.

North pointedly rejects such views. He meticulously shows that the October Revolution contained quite different possibilities. Stalinism was not the inevitable result of the seizure of power of the proletariat. It did not arise out of Bolshevism, but as a reaction to it—Stalinism embodied the growing counter-revolution. It was met by significant resistance on the part of contemporary Marxists and was only able to consolidate its position by destroying a whole generation of revolutionary Marxists in the purges of the 1930s.

North does not ignore the objective factors that helped Stalinism to gain the ascendancy—the legacy of economic and cultural backwardness in Russia and the international isolation of the Soviet Union. There is, however, "a critical difference between recognising the objective material foundations of Stalinism and declaring that from those foundations there could only be one political outcome—the irreversible bureaucratic degeneration of the USSR and its ultimate collapse in 1991," he writes.

Such a mechanical view of Soviet history ignores "the role of politics, of programme, of the struggle of tendencies, of consciousness—the significance of the decisions made by individuals, motivated by a greater or lesser degree of political insight into the historical process, about what they intended to do. History is transformed into an entirely abstract and super-deterministic process: everything is determined by blind and uncontrollable forces."

If one considers the fate of the Soviet Union not from this crude determinist position, but from the standpoint of the living struggle of social and political forces, then it is clear that Leon Trotsky and the Left Opposition played a decisive role. "This is why a consideration of alternative outcomes to the struggle inside the Russian Communist Party and the Communist International is not a hopelessly speculative enterprise.... Leon Trotsky and the Left Opposition entered into struggle

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with an extraordinarily far-reaching understanding of the historical implications of the issues confronting the Soviet Union and the international socialist movement. In both his analysis of the domestic and international contradictions of the USSR and the warnings he directed to the Stalinists, Trotsky left no doubt as to the ultimate consequences of the growing authority of the bureaucracy and the false policies of the Soviet leadership. ‘Does bureaucratism bear within it a danger of degeneration, or doesn’t it?,’ Trotsky asked in December 1923. ‘Anyone who denied it would be blind.’ “

North provides a detailed answer to the question of whether the victory of the Left Opposition would have significantly altered the course of Soviet and world history and answers with a clear “yes.” He tackles three issues of fundamental significance in determining the fate of the USSR: “1) Soviet and inner-party democracy, 2) economic policy and 3) international policy.” In each of these areas he meticulously shows that the Left Opposition had developed an alternative.

None of the political and intellectual currents that claim the Soviet Union was doomed to failure from the start have ever taken the trouble to submit the policy of the Left Opposition to a concrete analysis, comments North. “Trotsky remains to this day ‘The Great Unmentionable’ in Soviet history.”

And he draws the conclusion: “All the claims that the demise of the USSR was inevitable, that the socialist revolution is by its very nature a utopian undertaking, that, therefore, the October Revolution led the Russian working class into a blind alley from which there could be no escape, that Marxism leads inevitably to totalitarianism, etc., are refuted by the historical record left by the Left Opposition. It clearly represented, in terms of the policies it advanced, a viable, theoretically acute and powerful political opposition to the Stalinist bureaucracy.”

The volume being published by Arbeiterpresse Verlag contains eight lectures delivered by David North from 1998 and 2005. They all are concerned with important experiences of the workers’ movement in the twentieth century. Two deal with the significance and the consequences of the Russian Revolution, two with the struggle between Marxism and revisionism, which preceded it. A further lecture looks at the origins of Bolshevism and Lenin’s book *What Is to Be Done?* One of the lectures treats “Marxism and trade unions.”

However, North does not simply illuminate these historical experiences. His lectures are also polemics against the ideological and philosophical tendencies that dominate today in the academic world. For example, the lecture already mentioned above, Leon Trotsky and the fate of socialism in the 20th century, tackles the positions of the well-known British historian Eric Hobsbawm.

Hobsbawm has written valuable books on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but when he deals with the twentieth century and the Soviet Union, his historical work is impaired by the fact that he was for many years a member of the Communist Party. Although he does not defend every crime of Stalinism, he relativises them, however, by presenting them as the result of purely objective processes, over which subjective factors had little influence. He justifies Stalin with the argument: “Objective circumstances brought him to it.”

Thus Hobsbawm maintains that rapid industrialisation “was going to require a good deal of coercion, even if the USSR had been led by someone less utterly ruthless and cruel than Stalin.” Hobsbawm barely mentions Trotsky and the Left Opposition. Because they were defeated by Stalin, he concludes they were of no historical significance.

Hobsbawm’s approach is one-sidedly deterministic. He refuses to consider any historical alternatives. He is only concerned with what happened, and not with what might have happened. In this way, he not only justifies Stalinism, his method leads him to regard the collapse of the Soviet Union as inevitable. Thus, Hobsbawm denies retrospectively the validity of the October Revolution and any possibility of the revolutionary change of society.

In another lecture, “The Russian revolution and the unresolved historical problems of the 20th century,” North tackles the post-modernists, including the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard and the American pragmatist Richard Rorty. “The political, economic and social decay of bourgeois society is mirrored, if not spearheaded, by its intellectual degradation,” writes North.

A characteristic of post-modernism is “ignorance of and contempt for history.” Such people believe it is a naïve illusion to regard history as a law-governed process: For them, “there is no objective foundation underlying what people may think, say, or do about the society in which they live. People who call themselves historians may advance one or another interpretation of the past, but replacement of one interpretation with another does not express an advance toward something objectively truer than what was previously written—for there is no objective truth to get closer to.”

In the lecture “Marxism, history and the science of the perspective,” North deals with the philosopher Karl Popper and his claim that historical forecasts and thus a scientific foundation for socialism are impossible. In his answer to Popper, North defends the scientific theory of history of Marxism and writes:

“Marxism, as a method of analysis and materialist world outlook, has uncovered laws that govern socio-economic and political processes. Knowledge of these laws discloses trends and tendencies upon which substantial historical ‘predictions’ can be based, and which allow the possibility of intervening consciously in a manner that may produce an outcome favourable to the working class.”

The ideological tendencies that North deals with in this book currently exert considerable influence in the universities. They play an important role in deterring young people from making a serious study of history and Marxism. This new volume by David North contributes to opening up these questions for them.

It appears at a time when the need for a political and social alternative is becoming ever greater. The collapse of the Soviet Union encouraged the idea that there could be no alternative to capitalism. But in the meantime, capitalist society has again shown its true face, as Marx once described it: as a brutal system of exploitation that inevitably creates social inequality, unemployment and war.

Attempts to restrain capitalism and control it socially have proved futile. This is shown most clearly by the rightward shift of social democracy. Today, “reforms” no longer mean improving the social situation but smashing up the welfare state in the interest of global corporations.

The American government, which after the Second World War secured stability in Europe, has today become the most important factor of worldwide instability. The illegal invasion of Iraq has set ablaze the whole Middle East. And now Washington is also threatening to attack Iran.

An understanding of the lessons of history—and in particular the history of the Soviet Union—is a basic requirement in providing the growing opposition to capitalist society with a socialist alternative.

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