

David North addresses London meeting on the 15th anniversary of the WSWS

Our reporters
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David North, chairman of the *World Socialist Web Site*’s international editorial board and national chairman of the Socialist Equality Party in the United States, addressed a May 5 meeting on 15th anniversary of the WSWS in London. The meeting was well attended, with 135 present, including workers and young people from South Africa, Greece, Italy, France, Ireland, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Pakistan, Libya and Bangladesh. North’s presentation had a powerful impact, with dozens seeking continued contact with the Socialist Equality Party in Britain and a number applying to join.

The audience listened attentively to North’s extensive lecture. It began with an outline of the theoretical and philosophical foundations of the WSWS—rooted in the historical materialist tradition established by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.

North gave an explanation of the present political situation, which centred on a comparison between the 15 years of the WSWS, 1998-2013, with the equivalent period 100 years ago, 1898-1913. The earlier period led to the outbreak of World War I in 1914 and the subsequent revolutionary overthrow of Tsarism in Russia in 1917, in which the world’s first workers’ state was established by Lenin, Trotsky and the Bolsheviks.

The historic parallels drawn included a survey of the depth of the present economic crisis, the return to colonial-style wars, led by the United States, and the growing danger of war against Iran in the Middle East and against China.

North noted the sharp ideological separation of the classical Marxist tradition represented by the International Committee of the Fourth International and the WSWS from the various petty bourgeois tendencies that now stood openly as pro-capitalist and pro-war.

The report was followed by wide-ranging questions from the audience. Among many questions asked, Neil, a philosophy student, noted how the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) movement had adopted right-wing, pro-war positions. He asked North, “How do we within these various identities move our fellows into a different position, a Marxist position?”

North said that Marxism could not be utilised to render more correct an orientation based upon identity politics. He explained that identity politics is deeply rooted in postmodernism’s repudiation of both the Enlightenment conception of a unified humanity and of Marxism, which is based upon class politics.

All discrimination based on a person’s sexual orientation must be opposed, North said. “This shouldn’t be an issue with thoughtful people who are concerned with democratic rights.” But a political perspective that declares sexual identity and race to be the primary social categories is invariably an attack on class-based politics and a striving instead for “the allocation of privileges amongst various select identities.”

Amjad from Glasgow spoke about the “incompetence” of the trade unions and their inability to “build a meaningful resistance to austerity.” He asked, “Do we need to build new trade unions? How do we organise the working class?”

Amjad referred to what he called “the Venezuela experiment,” asking how the SEP saw the future of Venezuela after the death of President Hugo Chavez.

North explained that underlying the breakdown of the trade unions internationally “is the globalisation of capitalist production and the international mobility of capital.”

The national programmes of the trade unions were “blown apart by globalisation... There is an objective

basis for the crisis of trade unionism, and the rottenness of the bureaucracies is only a subjective expression of that deeper objective problem.”

In a broader historical perspective, he added, “trade unions at best can only be defensive organisations of the working class, and the problem of social revolution cannot be resolved by organisations whose aim is to fix the best possible conditions for the sale of labour power.”

The existing trade unions have long ago given up even that function. However, “The task before us is not the formation of new trade unions, but the creation of insurgent organisations of the working class, of a democratic character, revolutionary in their orientation, such as factory councils, rank and file committees. Such a struggle can only bear fruit by building a revolutionary movement in the working class.

“What separates the International Committee from other groups is that we do not conceive of the workers’ movement in a trade union form. The central problem of the working class is politics, the struggle for power, the reorganisation of the productive forces of mankind. That is the central question.”

Turning to Venezuela, North asked, “How long do we have to go on debating this? Looking for another leader, whether his name is Castro or Chavez or, at one time, Nasser in Egypt, Ben Bella in Algeria? Looking for one or another hero based on a largely bourgeois movement that shall grant reforms we can call socialism?”

“The question again is the independent organisation of the working class. Chavismo is absolutely no alternative. It has been the nature of opportunist politics for the entire post war period to elevate one or another petty-bourgeois leader and say, ‘That is the solution’... The basic problem is the development of the consciousness of the working class, and that is what our movement represents and why we place such emphasis on the political clarification of the working class.”

A young man asked North for his perspective and opinion on what is happening in Italy and what should be done there. North recommended that he study the history of the Communist Party of Italy, once the largest in Western Europe. This was the only basis on which the central question confronting Italian workers could be understood—whether they continued to base their fight on a politically disastrous national

perspective or on the revolutionary internationalist foundations of socialism.

A former member of the now defunct Workers Revolutionary Party denounced North for holding the position that the trade unions and the Labour Party were not “workers organisations” and for supposedly abandoning the struggle to “build a movement to overthrow this corrupt leadership.”

North replied that the ICFI “always intervenes in all the struggles of the working class, but we intervene from the standpoint of developing a rebellion by the working class against the trade union bureaucracy and the existing organisations. We also make clear that these organisations have in the course of 80 to 90 years undergone a transformation. They are not politically or even sociologically in any sense working class organisations.”

He continued, “The premise of your question is that one cannot conduct a fight within the working class unless one declares or bestows on these organisations some sort of special historical legitimacy... We are not going to build a revolutionary movement on the basis that we tell workers they have to refurbish these organisations. No political movement was ever built which had as its perspective that it would get someone else to do the job for them. Those who can fight for power, fight for power. Those that are not willing to fight for power ask someone else to do something for them... The fact of the matter is these organisations are rotten, decrepit, thoroughly corrupt, reactionary. Do I make myself clear?”

North’s reply was greeted with enthusiastic applause from the audience. Afterwards, many stayed to discuss with North and SEP members the political content of the meeting and to organise further discussions.



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