

Opening report by David North: The capitalist crisis and the fight for socialist internationalism

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This Perspective is the text of the speech given by David North, chairman of the World Socialist Web Site international editorial board and national chairman of the Socialist Equality Party (US), to open the International Online May Day Rally hosted by the International Committee of the Fourth International and the WSWs on Sunday, May 4.

On behalf of the International Committee of the Fourth International, permit me to welcome working people and youth from all over the world who are participating in this first online international celebration of May Day. The extraordinary response to this event—with listeners representing more than 60 countries—testifies to the immense political and historical significance of this rally. It represents a milestone in the development of a new international revolutionary movement of the working class for socialism. Those who are taking part represent a vast cross-section of the international working class. The great diversity of the world's population finds expression in this global audience. But in this meeting, all the differences employed by the ruling elites to divide the masses—those of ethnicity, religion, nationality, language, gender and even that of age—dissolve in the face of the inescapable reality of the world capitalist crisis, the political imperatives of the class struggle, and the objectively revolutionary role of the international working class in modern society.

This rally demonstrates that a new mood of social opposition to capitalism is emerging. There is a growing realization that the existing economic system is not only incapable of finding viable solutions to the problems that beset mankind, it is driving the entire planet toward a catastrophe.

May Day is the appropriate occasion for the working class to challenge the daily propaganda of the establishment media and to deliver its indictment of capitalist society. Rosa Luxemburg fondly recalled, and adopted as her own motto, the precept of Ferdinand Lassalle, who declared that the most revolutionary act consists of always proclaiming aloud “what is.” This is the principle that guides our actions today. At this rally, the International Committee will expose the reality of contemporary capitalism and imperialism.

The political organization of society seems more and more to assume the structure of a prison for the criminally insane. But in this global prison, it is the sane—the great mass of the people—who are behind bars, while the madmen—consisting of capitalist politicians, the professional killers of the state intelligence agencies, corporate gangsters, and the swindlers of high finance—patrol the walls of the penitentiary, shotguns in hand.

Nearly 25 years ago, following the dissolution of the Stalinist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the ideological apologists of the ruling class proclaimed the irreversible triumph of capitalism over socialism. This triumphalism was based on the lie that Stalinism—the reactionary nationalist falsification of Marxism—represented socialism.

The perpetuation of this lie required that the entire history of socialist opposition to Stalinism, of which the struggle waged by Leon Trotsky and the Fourth International was the most advanced expression, be distorted, falsified and even suppressed.

The most delusional of the capitalist triumphalists proclaimed the “End of History.” The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, they claimed, proved that bourgeois democracy, based upon the capitalist organization of economic life, is the unsurpassable and final stage of human progress. What a mockery history has made of these myopic soothsayers! The last 20 years have witnessed the relentless and accelerating breakdown of capitalist society. The signs of societal dysfunction are everywhere. Since the early 1990s, the world capitalist economy has staggered from one crisis to another. Speculative booms that have enriched a minuscule fraction of the world's population have been followed again and again by devastating financial crashes that have shattered the lives of hundreds of millions.

The financial collapse of 2008—in which the criminal practices of the Wall Street elite played a major role—has left the world mired in an unending recession. Entire cities and even countries have been bankrupted. As unemployment rates remain at levels unknown since the Great Depression of the 1930s, a generation of young people has been shut out of the “labor market” and faces a future without opportunities or hope. For middle-aged and older workers, the gains won and concessions extracted in the course of decades of struggle have been repudiated. In the United States, the corrupt bastion of “free enterprise,” pensions are being gutted. Elderly workers, in their seventies and even their eighties, who should be enjoying the fruits of their past labors, are now being compelled to haul their tired bodies to work, for which they are paid the minimum wage. In the meantime, the government and employers work relentlessly to substantially reduce, if not eliminate, the access of working people to decent medical care.

Amidst mounting social misery, staggering wealth is being concentrated in an infinitesimal segment of the world's population. A study released by Oxfam, the international confederation of anti-poverty organizations, revealed that the richest 85 people in the world possess greater wealth than the poorest half of the world's population, that is, 3.5 billion human beings. This means that, taken as an average, each of these 85 richest individuals possesses as much wealth as that of approximately 41,176,000 people. Is any further commentary necessary on the irrationality and perversity of modern capitalism?

Every aspect of the existing social structure and political order is corrupted by the power that such disgusting levels of wealth confer on a handful of billionaires. Ensnared in their world of unlimited wealth and privilege, these self-styled “masters of the universe” have themselves become detached from any sense of a social reality beyond their own

desires. Karl Marx long ago described the mentality that prevails among the possessors of unfathomable wealth. If you were privy to their deepest thoughts, this, wrote Marx, is what you would hear:

I am bad, dishonest, unscrupulous, stupid; but money is honored, and hence its possessor. Money is the supreme good, therefore its possessor is good. Money, besides, saves me from the trouble of being dishonest: I am therefore presumed honest. I am *brainless*, but money is the *real brain* of all things and how then should its possessor be brainless?... Do not I, who thanks to money am capable of *all* that the human heart longs for, possess all human capabilities? Does not my money, therefore, transform all my incapacities into their contrary?

The political principle that governs contemporary capitalist society is that of oligarchy, not democracy. The oligarchs in the United States and Britain have nothing to learn from their lesser imitators in Russia and China. The social pressures generated by the malignant growth of social inequality—bound up with intensified exploitation of the working class—cannot be managed within the traditional structures of bourgeois democracy. Within the United States, the invocations of democracy clash ever more openly with reality. Not a single banker went to jail for the sociopathic behavior responsible for the economic meltdown of September 2008. But a deeply corrupted legal system shows no mercy to the poorest and most vulnerable sections of American society, whose desperate conditions are the direct consequence of the economic system that enriched the financial speculators and rewarded their criminality.

In “the land of the free,” more than two million people are imprisoned within the sprawling network of state and federal penitentiaries that comprise the American gulag. All the inhumanity inherent in American capitalism finds its concentrated expression in the barbaric practice of capital punishment. Last week, the entire world could not conceal its revulsion in the face of the hideous state murder of an inmate in Oklahoma, whose horrible death by poisoning evoked images of medieval torture.

Since 2001, the “War on Terror” has served as a pretext for the evisceration of democratic rights within the United States. Constitutional safeguards have been systematically dismantled. American citizens have been, by order of the president, deprived of life and liberty, without due process of law. The United States has become the most ruthless practitioner of the imperialist lawlessness and violence that, during the last fifteen years, have introduced into the world’s vocabulary, as synonyms for boundless brutality, such words as *Abu Ghraib*, *Guantánamo*, *drone*, *rendition*, and *water-boarding*. The crimes of the US government have been aided and abetted by a spineless media that defines “freedom of the press”—to cite the words of former *New York Times* editor Bill Keller—as the right of the press *not* to publish information. Those who seek to warn the public of the threat to its democratic rights by exposing the crimes of the state are subjected to brutal persecution. Julian Assange has been confined to the Ecuadorian embassy in London for more than two years. Edward Snowden has been compelled to seek asylum in Russia. Chelsea Bradley Manning has been sentenced to decades in prison.

The grotesque accumulation of private wealth by a money-mad few at the expense of the great mass of the world’s population exposes the irrationality of an economic system that is based upon and sanctifies private capitalist ownership of the world’s productive forces. But alongside the archaic irrationality of the capitalist market, the escalating pattern of military conflict throughout the world—in which, once again, the United States plays the dominant role—provides more and more evidence of the historical bankruptcy of the nation-state system.

This is a year of anniversaries. In 2014, mankind is observing the centenary of the outbreak of World War I (in July-August 1914) and the seventy-fifth anniversary of World War II (in September 1939). These two wars resulted in the violent deaths of approximately 80 million people. According to the theorists of history’s end, such catastrophes belong to the past and can never be repeated. And yet, the crisis in Ukraine has, within the space of just a few months, once again raised the specter of a world war—a war that could be fought with nuclear weapons and lead to the deaths of hundreds of millions of people.

Other speakers—in particular, Comrade Chris Marsden—will examine in greater detail the development of this crisis. He will explain that the Ukrainian crisis was instigated deliberately by the United States and Germany through the orchestration of a coup in Kiev. The purpose of this coup was to bring to power a regime that would place Ukraine under the direct control of US and German imperialism. The plotters in Washington and Berlin understood that this coup would lead to a confrontation with Russia. Indeed, far from seeking to avoid a confrontation, both Germany and the United States believe that a clash with Russia is required for the realization of their far-reaching geopolitical interests.

For German imperialism, the confrontation with Russia is welcomed as a pretext for the repudiation of the constraints on militarism imposed in the wake of the unspeakable crimes committed during the years of Hitler’s Third Reich. In recent months, the German media has been engaged in an increasingly frenzied propaganda campaign directed against not only Russia, but also against the deeply rooted anti-war sentiments of the German working class. The time has come, the media declares, for the German people to abandon the pacifist and anti-war sentiments of the “post-heroic” (i.e., post-Hitler) age. Along with the propaganda for a revival of militarism, an increasingly vocal segment of German professors is devoting its energies—with the encouragement of the media—to the refurbishment of Hitler’s reputation.

Behind the propaganda stand definite economic and geopolitical interests. The German president has declared that his country’s weight in the world economy requires that it obtain the military force necessary to secure its broader geopolitical interests. As in the twentieth century, Germany is once again gazing longingly upon the Black Sea region, the Caucasus, the Middle East, Central Asia and the vast land mass of Russia.

As for American imperialism, Washington is once again employing the cynical rhetoric of “human rights” to justify yet another military operation. But this exercise in hypocrisy is encountering growing skepticism from the public. Too many wars have been waged on the basis of lies. The contradictions in the Ukrainian narrative are particularly blatant. As Washington orchestrated the putsch in Kiev, employing shock troops provided by fascist and anti-Semitic organizations, the Obama administration condemned as morally unconscionable and politically unacceptable measures taken by the elected Ukrainian government to defend itself. However, once President Yanukovich had been overthrown, Obama dispatched CIA Director Brennan and Vice President Biden to demand and oversee preparations for the ruthless repression of mass popular opposition to the Kiev regime among the people in eastern Ukraine.

In 2011, the Obama administration justified its military operations against the Libyan regime of Muammar Gaddafi—who was eventually murdered—as necessary to defend the people of Benghazi, in eastern Libya, against a government assault. But now Washington demands that the Kiev regime dispatch tanks and troops to crush the growing rebellion in eastern Ukraine. The media, as is to be expected, takes no notice of the contradiction between the past and present positions of Washington.

Even if this crisis is resolved without war, it will be followed by others. For the past 20 years, the United States has been involved almost continuously in war. During the last 12 months, the United States has been engaged in escalating conflicts with Iran, Syria, and now Russia. And in

the midst of the on-going confrontation with Russia, Obama traveled to Asia to incite Japanese militarism and intensify pressure against China. There is an extraordinary level of recklessness in the conduct of American foreign policy. One or another of the confrontations provoked by Washington could spiral out of control with disastrous consequences for the United States and the entire planet.

But Washington's reckless brinksmanship is, in the final analysis, the manifestation of the extreme crisis of American capitalism. The imperialist strategists in Washington see no other means to counteract the protracted decline in the global economic position of American capitalism other than through the mechanism of war. The fact that China, according to the most recent reports, is poised to overtake the United States as the world's largest economy by the end of 2014 will increase Washington's propensity to use military force to shift the balance of power in its favor. A no less significant factor driving the American ruling elite toward war is the buildup of social tensions within the United States. As anger mounts over economic stagnation, declining living standards, deteriorating social services, and the concentration of obscene levels of wealth within the richest one percent, the ruling elite looks to war as a means of deflecting popular anger away from social protest against capitalism.

Mankind confronts immense dangers. But, as Marx and Engels, the great founders of modern scientific socialism, explained long ago, history poses no task for which there is not a solution. The world socialist revolution is the means by which the great problems of our age can and must be solved. No doubt, the position of the working class, exploited and oppressed, is difficult. But that of the ruling class is, in a historic sense, hopeless. It is incapable of offering the people any progressive way forward out of the impasse at which capitalism has arrived. Its program is that of irrational violence. Its perspective is one of mindless greed, contempt for human life, and, ultimately, utter despair.

The perspective of socialist internationalism, upheld by the International Committee of the Fourth International, is based on a scientific assessment of the contradictions of the world capitalist system. The crisis of American capitalism is the concentrated expression of not merely national, but global contradictions. The breakdown of capitalism is international and systemic. For this very reason, the solution to this crisis can be realized only through the coordinated struggle of the international working class on the basis of the program of world socialist revolution.

It would be a politically fatal error to believe that workers in different countries can resist the attacks of capitalism, let alone secure the victory of socialism, on the basis of programs that take national conditions as their basic point of departure. Such an approach—characteristic of all opportunist organizations—leads inevitably to capitulation and defeat. The bitter lessons of the class struggle in the Twentieth Century demonstrated again and again the decisive significance of an international strategy and program to guide the struggles of the working class in all countries.

History has not ended. Indeed, the working class is faced with the task of resolving in this new century all the unsolved historical problems of the Twentieth Century. Of those problems, the most critical of all is that to which Leon Trotsky called attention in the very first sentence of the founding program of the Fourth International. "The world political situation as a whole," he wrote in 1938, "is chiefly characterized by a historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat."

The entire history of the Fourth International and of its leadership, the International Committee, is the record of the difficult struggle, spanning decades, to resolve the crisis of leadership. All the efforts of the sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International and the *World Socialist Web Site* are concentrated on this strategic task. There is no other movement in the world today, outside the International Committee of the Fourth International, which can plausibly claim to advance the struggle for international socialism. Our movement bases its work on an immense heritage of the most advanced theoretical and political thought.

We call upon you to join us and take forward the struggle for international socialism. Make the necessary political, intellectual and moral commitment to the struggle for humanity's future. Study the writings of Leon Trotsky, the greatest strategist of world socialist revolution in the Twentieth Century! Read attentively the daily postings of the *World Socialist Web Site*! We call upon our listeners to join the Socialist Equality Party of the country in which you live. To those in our audience who live in countries where such parties do not yet exist, we urge you to contact the International Committee and initiate the fight to establish a new section of our world movement.

This rally is undoubtedly a milestone in the fight for the renewal of socialist internationalism in the working class. But the success of this rally depends not simply on what we say today, but what we all do, collectively, in the days, weeks and months ahead to bring the Marxist program and principles of the Fourth International into the struggles of the working class all over the world.



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