

David North introduces *Tsar to Lenin* film screening in Detroit

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On April 4, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) and the Socialist Equality Party screened the film *Tsar to Lenin*—the documentary of the Russian Revolution of 1917 produced by Herman Axelbank and narrated by Max Eastman—at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan.

The film shows events in Russia beginning in 1916, when the most unequal country in the world was ruled by the ruthless autocrat Tsar Nicholas II; the February Revolutions of 1917, when the working masses of Russia ousted the tsar; the seizure of power by the working class, led by the Bolshevik Party of Lenin and Trotsky in October; the ensuing civil war, in which 14 imperialist powers backed an attempted counterrevolution; concluding with the final victory of the Red Army and the consolidation of Soviet power over one sixth of the world's land.

The film was introduced by David North, the national chairman of the Socialist Equality Party (US) and the chairman of the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site*. North recounted the tumultuous story of how the film came to be made and released. (Read about the fascinating history of the film [here](#).)

After the film, a lively and lengthy discussion took place on the content of the film and its relevance to today.

One person questioned the film's favorable portrayal of Felix Dzerzhinsky, appointed by Lenin in December 1917 to head the Soviet Cheka. North explained that Dzerzhinsky was a revolutionary fighting to defend Soviet power against counter-revolution, and the actions of the early Soviet state were very different from Stalin's political genocide of the 1930s.

"Everyone understood what they had to expect if the counterrevolution succeeded. They all knew the fate of

the Paris Commune [of 1871]. In one week, the army of the French bourgeoisie shot 20,000 workers. They had gone through the experience of the defeated Russian Revolution of 1905, the punitive expeditions which killed thousands, the pogroms which killed thousands of Jews." He added, "So many of the figures you see in this film, particularly the leaders of the Communist International, were murdered by Stalin in 1937 and 1938."

An immigrant worker from Eastern Europe commented, "It seems in Russia, there will be no celebration of the centenary of the Revolution. The Putin regime is not interested in it."

North replied, "I don't think they're uninterested, I think they're terrified of it. Putin himself is a product of the Stalinist secret police in the final stages of its degeneration, with no connection at all to a revolutionary past. They're frightened by any invocation of the history of the Russian Revolution.

"It remains a great problem for the Russian masses, because any way out of the immense problems they face, both from the standpoint of the reactionary character of the regime in Russia, and the enormous threats from world imperialism—to deal with that they require a knowledge of their past, of the Revolution."

The question and answer period concluded with a discussion of the contemporary relevance of the film. As in the film, North said, today in America "tens of millions of people are living on the brink, everyone knows that. We live in what has become an aristocratic society. A government composed of billionaires. When you look at the scenes of the Tsar and his family and entourage, you think of the present situation. I think later on there will be very high quality videos of today's events, not grainy footage like this, and people will say, 'What a mess that was! How could there not

be a revolution?”

“However,” he added, “revolutions do not just happen automatically. What is unique about the 1917 revolution, never equaled to this day, is the intersection of a mass movement with the presence of a sufficient level of Marxist leadership, to provide an orientation to the masses. That’s the decisive issue. And that role was played by Bolshevik Party.”

Wayne State University IYSSE member Phil said after the meeting that the events depicted in the film were “a lot different from what I’ve been told about the Russian Revolution in the past. It’s awesome to see the power of working class people coming together and organizing against a horrible administration. It’s a different case from today, in the sense that it was an autocracy, but it definitely rhymes. I hope the Russian Revolution can be used as a model to learn from, in order to ensure the success of a revolution today, when people do inevitably rise up.”

Isabelle, a neuroscience student from University of Michigan, said, “I had heard that this film has the original footage of the Russian Revolution, but I didn’t expect such a comprehensive narration. It was really powerful. I’ve been listening to the lecture series on the centenary of the Russian Revolution and it was great to see how it played out and how happy they were in toppling the Czar. The workers and peasants were starving while the Czar and the court were celebrating.

“You could see the unrest of the soldiers who were sent into the slaughter, sometimes without rifles. The war also had an effect at home with the scarcity of food. The soldiers were ordered to fight the people, but they fought the government.

“There are definitely similarities to today. It’s less visible. There aren’t necessarily as many people starving in the streets. But the oppressed are forced into wars to slaughter other working class people. Funding for schools and other necessities is being cut. That is creating discontent. The rich are promoting wars to stay in power. The attack on science and the promotion of religion today is reminiscent of the church supporting the Czar.

“I worked at a golf course during the summer near where I’m from in Flint. The workers barely got paid while we were serving whatever elite is left in the city. It was sickening to see people struggling to pay their water bills for water that they can’t even drink.”



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