

David North delivers address on Russian Revolution to large audience at Northern Virginia Community College

Our reporters
29 September 2017

On September 26, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) and Socialist Equality Party (SEP) hosted an event commemorating the Centenary of the Russian Revolution on the Northern Virginia Community College's (NOVA) Annandale campus. The meeting received a large turnout, with some 40 students and workers in attendance.

The meeting consisted of a lecture, delivered by David North on the historical significance and contemporary relevance of the October Revolution of 1917, followed by a lively Q&A session. Attendees showed great interest in the material presented, with many taking detailed notes. Attendees were young, almost all born after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and represented a cross-section of working class youth, containing those of all ethnic backgrounds, both native-born and immigrant.

In many ways, NOVA Annandale represents a snapshot of the major issues confronting working class youth. It is a commuter campus with a large working class student population desperately trying to secure a decent career to claw their way out of poverty. The school's surrounding region comprises the military-intelligence corridor surrounding the greater DC area. The campus itself is located a mere 11 miles away from the headquarters of the Central Intelligence Agency.

The military-intelligence apparatus exerts a strong influence on campuses like NOVA, seeking to funnel young people into its agencies. The fact that such a meeting could be held, let alone draw such a large and engaged audience of young students and workers in the very shadow of the Pentagon, demonstrates the growth of interest in socialism, despite the official anti-

communist propaganda.

"The October Revolution is the most complicated and contradictory historical experience of the 20th century," North explained. "First of all, it was an event unprecedented in history. It awoke hopes and aspirations like no other event. And yet, it gave rise to a regime ultimately profoundly different from what those who made the revolution had aspired."

He noted that the Trotskyist movement waged a decades-long struggle against the betrayals made by the Stalinist bureaucracy and the political degeneration that took place within the USSR.

"Nevertheless," he said, "we defended the USSR to the extent that the Soviet Union still embodied a colossal political achievement of the struggles of the working class. Nothing could be understood about the workers movement, nothing could be understood about the struggles of the 20th century, without understanding the relationship of those struggles in the October Revolution out of which the Soviet Union emerged."

North placed the Russian Revolution in a broad historical and international context:

"When speaking about history, and when speaking about the most unusual episodes of history—revolutions—the conventional yardsticks of political evaluation no longer apply. A revolution is not a one day event. It's not just something that happens and then moves on.

"Whenever mankind faces enormous problems which lead people to believe that the way life is organized simply cannot continue, when the whole structure appears inadequate—that its very existence seems to be an insult to anyone who really thinks seriously about social problems; that is when revolutionary

consciousness begins to emerge.”

North differentiated the unique character of the social revolution in that it was a far more conscious historical process in which humankind actively intervened to alter its own affairs on a scientific basis.

“Marxism,” he said, “explained the process of the development of social consciousness. In short, that material being is primary over consciousness, and that social being determines social consciousness.”

Participants were very interested in gaining historical analysis of a broad number of questions. Some students asked about subjects such as the material origins of the Stalinist bureaucracy, the differentiation between Stalinism and Marxism, the program of the Fourth International, the significance of state planning, and many other issues. After the meeting, several students gave their thoughts to WSWS reporters concerning what they found to be the most significant or interesting aspects of the lecture and Q&A.

Andres, an engineering student at NOVA, showed great interest in the significance of October. “I want to know more about the Russian Revolution,” he said. Referring to the latter part of North’s lecture that addressed the disastrous impact of the dissolution of the USSR, Andres said, “I learned a lot from the lecture. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, everything went berserk. The rich got richer and the poor got poorer, as the charts [in the lecture] showed.”

The perspective of materialist philosophy also had deeply affected him. “Consciousness is a reflection of your everyday life and not the other way around,” he said. “The lecturer really knows what he is talking about. I want to know more about revolution and getting rid of capitalism.” He agreed with the perspective of class unity against national, racial, or ethnic division. “Everybody is working class and socialism is for the unification of all people.”

Lowell, also an engineering major, spoke on the depth of the current crisis. “Capitalism is out of control. People are dying of poverty. Living in a capitalist country is like living in a casino: you can lose everything you have, be reduced to nothing. And the environment is also under attack under this system and politicians don’t care, they just want more money.”

He went on to discuss the gains made by the Russian Revolution despite the retrograde role played by the bureaucracy that developed in the Soviet Union. “Even

though Stalin was terrible,” he said, “the USSR had many great successes: mass industrialization, the spread of literacy and the Soviet space program.”

Another NOVA student, Thomas, found the lecture intellectually enriching. “I learned a lot of stuff that I didn’t know before,” he told reporters. He identified with the egalitarian spirit of October, noting “the revolution was a great way of putting down the oppressive royalty in Russia.”

He did not see the Russian Revolution as a distant historical event, but as something of contemporary relevance. “I see a lot of problems in the US,” he said. “Socialist views against war could help. There are so many problems at home that could be solved if we weren’t spending so much money on war.”

Nour, a political science major, said the “speech was extraordinary.”

“The problem of class oppression is the basis of all of our problems in society,” he said. “We need to turn to socialism to get free education, free health care. Right now corporations control our fate. People don’t have resources to develop themselves. They must choose to pay or die. It is immoral. We have to take control.”



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