

Twenty years of the *World Socialist Web Site*: 1998–2018

David North, Joseph Kishore
13 February 2018

Today marks the 20th anniversary of the publication of the *World Socialist Web Site*. On February 14, 1998, the International Committee of the Fourth International launched the WSWS, posting articles five days a week. In April 1999, the WSWS extended its schedule to posting articles six days a week. In the course of 20 years, the *World Socialist Web Site* has not missed a single day of scheduled publication.

This anniversary represents a significant milestone in the history of the international socialist and workers' movement. The WSWS was the first, and remains the only, daily socialist and Marxist international publication. The WSWS operates on a 24-hour schedule, with each day's postings the product of intense collaboration by editorial boards operating on four continents.

The WSWS is the publication of record of the international working class. In the course of the past 20 years, there is scarcely a major world event that has not been covered, analyzed and commented upon in the *World Socialist Web Site*. It has posted approximately 66,000 articles in 22 different languages, including English, German, French, Spanish, Italian, Sinhala, Tamil, Norwegian, Mandarin, Turkish, Greek, Arabic, Russian and Portuguese.

In addition to posting more than 17,500 articles relating to events in the United States and Canada, the WSWS has published 1,300 articles on Latin America; 1,400 articles on Africa; 6,000 articles on Asia and the Indian sub-continent; 5,300 articles on Australia; 13,000 articles on Europe and 6,300 articles on the Middle East and Central Asia. The WSWS has also posted over 1,000 articles analyzing the world capitalist economy.

There is not another website in the world that has reported so extensively and critically on the struggles of the international working class. More than 11,000 articles have been posted on events relating to the development of the class struggle in all parts of the world. In fact, the themes of class struggle and social inequality are so deeply embedded in the work of the WSWS that it is not really possible to quantify precisely how many articles relate to these subjects. Suffice it to say that they number in the thousands.

But the *World Socialist Web Site* has recognized that the working class requires more than reports on its daily struggles, as important as these are. The WSWS, as it produces each day a record of current struggles, is mindful of its responsibility to prepare the working class for its future tasks. The central aim of the WSWS has been to develop a socialist consciousness within the international working class. This has required an intense focus on questions of history and culture. In its initial 1998 statement, announcing the new publication, the WSWS wrote that it would "strive for an encyclopedic breadth of historical knowledge, cultural criticism, scientific enlightenment and revolutionary strategy. Its goal is to raise the level of political and cultural discourse, which is indispensable for the rebirth of a modern socialist workers' movement."

This commitment has been substantiated in the publication of more than 2,000 film, theater and music reviews, and another 1,500 articles on a

wide range of historical events and scientific topics, ranging from cosmology and physics to evolutionary biology and archaeology.

The quantity of material posted on the WSWS has not detracted from the website's quality. Since the founding of the *World Socialist Web Site*, the capitalist world has been wracked by a series of economic shocks, military interventions in the unending War on Terror, increasing political dysfunctionality in every part of the globe, and daily manifestations of societal breakdown. Amidst the immense turmoil of contemporary developments, the WSWS has been able to publish, day after day, analyses and commentary that stand the test of time.

The historical foundations of the WSWS

The unique character of the *World Socialist Web Site* is derived from its perspective, which is consciously based on Marxist theory and the assimilation and constant reworking of the essential strategic experiences of the international class struggle, spanning the entirety of the twentieth century. In contrast to the pragmatic impressionism that prevails in the bourgeois media—and, in an even more vulgar form, in the postings of the petty-bourgeois left and pseudo-left websites—the WSWS places daily events in their appropriate historical context.

The *World Socialist Web Site* commenced publication just over six years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. That event set into motion a wave of political reaction. While the ruling class celebrated the "end of history," demoralized middle-class radicals and mildly left intellectuals proclaimed the "end of socialism." For decades, they had adapted their politics to the fraudulent "real existing socialism" of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, and of the Maoist regime in China. In the aftermath of the dissolution of the USSR and the restoration of capitalism in China, broad swaths of the petty-bourgeois left abandoned all pretenses of revolutionary opposition to capitalism and imperialism, and immersed themselves in the reactionary miasma of self-obsessed ethnic, racial, gender and sexual politics.

The International Committee of the Fourth International, grounded in the theoretical heritage of Leon Trotsky's struggle against the Stalinist betrayal of the October Revolution, was neither surprised nor disoriented by the collapse of the USSR. The dissolution of the Soviet Union was the final act of betrayal by the counterrevolutionary Stalinist bureaucracy and its reactionary and nationalist perspective of "socialism in one country." While the breakdown of the USSR was a significant defeat for the international working class, it confirmed the correctness of Trotsky's struggle against Stalinism, his decision to found the Fourth International, and the International Committee's opposition to all forms of conciliation with and adaptation to the Stalinist regimes and parties.

For six decades, the Stalinist bureaucracy, with the help of many

accomplices, used its vast resources to confuse, disorient and defeat the struggles of the working class. But the cataclysmic collapse of Stalinism created unprecedented opportunities for the expansion of Trotskyist, i.e., revolutionary Marxist, influence in the working class and the building of the Fourth International.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union was the most extreme expression of the historical bankruptcy of all of the nationally-based workers' organizations and parties. Major changes in the structure of world economy fatally undermined all national reformist programs. As early as 1988, the ICFI drew attention to the significance of the globalization of capitalist production, the emergence of transnational corporations, and the revolutionary changes in telecommunications with which these developments were associated.

The International Committee's analysis of the significance of these global transformations meant that it was highly attuned to the potential of the Internet, which would make possible a level of international integration and coordination of the working class movement previously unimaginable. In February 1997, when the proposal to shift publication from printed newspapers to an Internet-based website was first made, only 40 million people accessed the Internet *worldwide*. Just 55 percent of major American corporations even hosted a website.

The decision to move to an Internet-based publication and end the production of printed newspapers showed great political foresight. It recognized a potential that even major capitalist publications had not yet foreseen. The reason, however, was not that the ICFI had a better understanding of the underlying technology. Rather, it had found in the new technology what it had been looking for: a means of reaching masses of workers throughout the world with the most powerful revolutionary ideas.

In its introduction to the site in February 1998, the international editorial board stated:

We are confident that the WSWS will become an unprecedented tool for the political education and unification of the working class on an international scale. It will help working people of different countries coordinate their struggles against capital, just as the transnational corporations organize their war against labor across national boundaries. It will facilitate discussion between workers of all nations, allowing them to compare their experiences and elaborate a common strategy.

The ICFI expects the world audience for the *World Socialist Web Site* to grow as the Internet expands. As a rapid and global form of communication, the Internet has extraordinary democratic and revolutionary implications. It can enable a mass audience to gain access to the intellectual resources of the world, from libraries and archives to museums.

The analysis and expectations of the *World Socialist Web Site* have been confirmed. Internet usage grew from approximately 147 million in December 1998 (3.6 percent of the global population) to 3.8 billion by June 2017 (51.7 percent). The widespread use of smartphones has expanded access to the Internet to broad sections of the working class, including in more economically backward countries. The proliferation of hand-held devices and social media platforms has also allowed workers on the job to access information, severely undermining the actions taken by the ruling class, particularly in the US, to cut workers off from political material by isolating the major plants and transferring them out of city centers.

The WSWS and the Fourth International

The *World Socialist Web Site* is published on and circulated through the Internet, which is a product of the revolution in digital information and communications technology. But while making innovative use of these scientific and technological advances, the International Committee's creation and use of the WSWS are rooted in fundamental theoretical, political and organizational conceptions of the central role of the "party press" in the building of the revolutionary party of the working class.

At the turn of the 20th century, as he was striving to lay the foundations of a powerful socialist organization throughout the vast expanse of Russia, Lenin wrote:

In our opinion, the starting-point of our activities, the first step towards creating the desired organization, or, let us say, the main thread which, if followed, would enable us steadily to develop, deepen and extend that organization, should be the founding of an All-Russian political newspaper. A newspaper is what we most of all need; without it we cannot conduct that systematic, all-round propaganda and agitation, consistent in principle, which is the chief and permanent task of Social-Democracy in general and, in particular, the pressing task of the moment, when interest in politics and in questions of socialism has been aroused among the broadest strata of the population... Without a political organ, a political movement deserving that name is inconceivable in the Europe of today. Without such a newspaper we cannot possibly fulfill our task—that of concentrating all the elements of political discontent and protest, of vitalizing thereby the revolutionary movement of the proletariat. ["Where to Begin," in *Lenin Collected Works*, Volume 5 (Moscow, 1961), pp. 20-21]

Lenin's publication was *Iskra*, an "All-Russian" printed newspaper. A century later, the *World Socialist Web Site* is a *global* publication posted on the Internet. With a daily readership that numbers in the tens of thousands, it is having an ever-more significant impact on the development of socialist consciousness throughout the world. For workers, student youth and intellectuals who have come of age in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the WSWS has played a central and decisive role in their political education on the basis of Marxist theory and Trotskyist principles. Confronted with the chauvinist propaganda and lies of the capitalist media, readers depend upon the WSWS for their political orientation.

They find in the WSWS not only a Marxist analysis of the events of the day, but also explanations of and answers to the critical theoretical, political and cultural questions arising out of the history of the revolutionary Marxist movement. The WSWS has played an essential role in overcoming the devastating legacies of Stalinism and Social Democracy, and in exposing the contemporary debasement and falsification of socialist theory and politics by petty-bourgeois, pseudo-left identity politics. In the course of 20 years, it has laid down firm political foundations for the renewal of the struggle for socialism in the 21st century.

As the political situation grows increasingly acute and the class struggle intensifies, an ever-greater share of WSWS readers are becoming politically active, making the decision to fight for the socialist alternative to capitalist inequality and imperialist war, and to join and build the World Party of Socialist Revolution.

The censorship of the Internet and the blacklisting of the WSWS

Led by the United States, all of the imperialist powers are preparing for world war. Social inequality and wealth concentration have reached unsustainable levels. The capitalist ruling elites, deeply discredited and beset by internal political conflicts, are turning toward authoritarian forms of rule. Everywhere, the ruling class is terrified of the growth of social opposition in the working class.

It is this fear that underlies the coordinated campaign to censor and control the Internet, under the guise of combating “fake news.” When it founded the WSWS, the ICFI warned that, once the ruling class became aware of the revolutionary implications of the Internet, it would seek to control it or shut it down. This is what is now taking place.

The US government, in collaboration with Google, Facebook, Twitter and other corporations, is implementing massive restrictions on Internet access. In 2017, the Trump administration announced its decision to abolish net neutrality, giving powerful information technology monopolies a stranglehold over the flow of information online. Capitalist governments in Europe and throughout the world are enacting similar repressive policies.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has been a central target of this attack. In March 2017, in response to the campaign of the *Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei* (the SEP of Germany) against the revival of German militarism, the country’s main capitalist newspapers published denunciations of the WSWS. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Germany’s leading capitalist newspaper, described the WSWS as “extremely effective” [*Wirkungsmächtig*]. In meetings held with Google representatives in Berlin, in early April 2017, German government officials pressured the corporation to restrict access to the WSWS.

In late April 2017, Google announced the implementation of new algorithms aimed at limiting or blocking access to the WSWS and other left wing, anti-war and progressive websites. Similar measures to deny Internet users access to revolutionary socialist and oppositional information and commentary have been implemented by Facebook and Twitter.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has taken the lead in exposing this conspiracy to censor the Internet and issued a call for the formation of an International Coalition of Socialist, Anti-War and Progressive Websites to fight back against this attack on freedom of speech and basic democratic rights.

The dictatorial measures of the ruling elites and their censors must be defeated. This requires the political mobilization of the international working class, the most powerful social force on the planet. The defense of free speech and all democratic rights is inseparable from the struggle against war, social inequality and authoritarianism. It requires the abolition of the capitalist system and its replacement with a globally coordinated and democratically controlled socialist society.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the future

As it marks 20 years of publication, the WSWS is being drawn into the maelstrom of expanding social struggles all over the world. Our writers are not only observers; they are participants in the developing class battles. The same can be said of a steadily growing number of WSWS readers. Young people who were only toddlers or had not yet come into the world when the WSWS was launched are now joining and becoming active in the work of the national sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International and its world-wide youth movement, the

International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE). The *World Socialist Web Site* exemplifies the union and interaction of Marxist analysis and revolutionary practice.

Over the past year, we have been particularly gratified by the very rapid and significant growth in readership among workers. The *World Socialist Web Site* and its auxiliary publications, such as the *Autoworker Newsletter*, are accessed every month by thousands of rank-and-file workers.

In order to keep pace with a growing readership, we are continually expanding the technical foundations of the site and utilizing video, livestreaming and other forms of multi-media. The *World Socialist Web Site* is now in the final stages of a comprehensive redesign, which will greatly improve readability and functionality.

We urge all our readers to take up the fight for the *World Socialist Web Site*. Help break internet censorship by sharing WSWS articles, printing them out and distributing them to your friends, classmates and co-workers. Become a correspondent for the WSWS by sending in reports on developments in your workplace and area.

The last 20 years have been decades of theoretical and political clarification and preparation. We are now entering a period of intense class conflict and social upheaval. The *World Socialist Web Site* must and will become the voice of the international working class in the struggle against capitalist exploitation and imperialist militarism, and for the rebuilding of the world on socialist foundations.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact