

# Text of David North's remarks to Sri Lankan press conference on Trotskyism

David North  
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*The following remarks were delivered by David North, chairman of the WSWWS International Editorial Board, at a press briefing in Colombo's National Library Conference Hall on Monday, October 1. North will address two meetings organized by the Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka on October 3 and October 7. Journalists from the national television channel Rupavahini, the state-owned Independent Television Network (ITN), Capitol Radio and Lanka Web News attended the press conference.*

First, I would like to thank the Socialist Equality Party for inviting me to Sri Lanka to deliver two lectures on the occasion of the eightieth anniversary of the Fourth International. Actually, we are celebrating this year a double anniversary, for the SEP is also marking the fiftieth anniversary of its own founding, as the Sri Lankan section of the Fourth International, in 1968. The principled and courageous struggle that the SEP has waged, over a period of a half century, for the unity of all sections of the working class in Sri Lanka, regardless of ethnic or religious background, is well known to and has inspired socialists throughout the world.

The focus of my lectures in Colombo and Kandy will be a major event in the political history of the twentieth century: the founding of the Fourth International by Leon Trotsky in September 1938. It was the culmination of the struggle that Trotsky had begun fifteen years earlier, in 1923, when he founded the Left Opposition to fight against the bureaucratic degeneration of the Bolshevik Party and the Soviet regime, in which Stalin was coming to play an increasingly powerful and treacherous role. This struggle assumed international dimensions, as the Stalinist regime—under the false and anti-Marxist banner of socialism in one country—subordinated the struggle for world socialism to the defense of the material interests and privileges of the ruling bureaucracy within the Soviet Union.

Stalin's nationalist repudiation of the revolutionary internationalist program of Marxism led to a series of crushing defeats of the working class, such as in China in 1927 and Germany in 1933. In fact, it was the rise of the Nazis to power in Germany in January 1933—the consequence of the disastrous policies pursued by the Stalinists—that directly precipitated Trotsky's call for the formation of a new revolutionary

international. The events that followed—such as the Stalinist betrayal of the Spanish Revolution and Stalin's launching, in 1936, of the counter-revolutionary terror that swept through the Soviet Union—confirmed the correctness of Trotsky's call for the Fourth International.

These events are, without question, of great historical significance; and it is certainly appropriate to devote lectures to their review and analysis. But, you might justly ask, in what way are the events that transpired so many years ago of contemporary interest? And why should workers, students and intellectuals, who are not presently involved in the activities of the Fourth International, attend these lectures?

In answering these legitimate questions, allow me to recall the world situation that existed in 1938. The capitalist system was in the grip of a global economic crisis that had begun a decade earlier, with the Wall Street crash of 1929. The Great Depression inflicted massive suffering on the working class in the advanced capitalist countries. Democracy was in retreat throughout the world. To sustain its political rule in the face of mounting social anger, the ruling elites created various forms of authoritarian regimes, of which the Nazi Third Reich was only the most brutal. The foreign policy of the imperialist powers assumed an increasingly militaristic character, which found expression, first of all, in savage colonialist wars. The Japanese imperialists seized Manchuria in 1932. Mussolini invaded Ethiopia in 1935. Great power conflicts were intensifying relentlessly, and it was apparent that humanity was about to be plunged into a second world war, even more terrible than the first.

This was the world situation that existed when the founding congress of the Fourth International was held in September 1938. The programmatic document that Trotsky had written for the congress defined the epoch as the "death agony of capitalism." Permit me to quote just two paragraphs from this extraordinary document:

The economic prerequisite for the proletarian revolution has already in general achieved the highest point of fruition that can be reached under capitalism. Mankind's productive forces stagnate. Already new

inventions and improvements fail to raise the level of material wealth. Conjunctural crises under the conditions of the social crisis of the whole capitalist system inflict ever heavier deprivations and sufferings upon the masses. Growing unemployment, in its turn, deepens the financial crisis of the state and undermines the unstable monetary systems. Democratic regimes, as well as fascist, stagger on from one bankruptcy to another.

The bourgeoisie itself sees no way out. In countries where it has already been forced to stake its last upon the card of fascism, it now toboggans with closed eyes toward an economic and military catastrophe. In the historically privileged countries, i.e., in those where the bourgeoisie can still for a certain period permit itself the luxury of democracy at the expense of national accumulations (Great Britain, France, United States, etc.), all of capital's traditional parties are in a state of perplexity bordering on a paralysis of will.

Without changing too many words, Trotsky's description of the capitalist world in 1938 could serve very well as a description of the conditions that exist in 2018. Were he alive today, I do not think that Trotsky would find the contemporary world so hard to understand. Of course, he would have to learn how to use computers, cell phones and social media. But he would have no reason to change his historical and political prognosis. The contemporary epoch is still that of capitalism's "death agony." Indeed, there are many indications that we are rapidly approaching a convulsive and violent stage in that historical death agony.

Nearly 30 years ago, following the dissolution of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and within the Soviet Union, the ideologists of the capitalist ruling elites proclaimed the "End of History." Capitalism had proved, once and for all, its unchallengeable superiority over socialism, and that mankind would henceforth dally happily, beneath the warm glow of global financial markets, in the luxuriant garden of rising prosperity, universal democracy, and eternal peace.

As we now know, these boastful predictions were not realized. The global capitalist system is beset by mounting economic, social and political crises. No less than the crash of 1929, the crash of 2008 exposed the fragility of the entire economic system. Its legacy is mountainous levels of debt and massive social inequality. Capitalist governments, first of all in the United States, bailed out the rich at the expense of the overwhelming mass of the population. In the process, they discredited capitalist democracy as a political fraud, a cover for the rule of billionaire oligarchs who rule the world economy. This accounts for the rise of right-wing demagogues and fascist movements. In the United States, the White House is occupied by an out-and-out gangster by the name of Donald

Trump. In Germany, fascism is once again on the rise. Throughout the world, desperate refugees—the victims of economic crises and the brutal military operations launched by the imperialists under the banner of the "war on terror"—are being blamed and victimized for the conditions created by capitalism.

And as in the 1930s, the relentless intensification of geopolitical conflicts is leading inexorably to a third world war, a war which will be fought with nuclear weapons, with horrific consequences. The words written by Trotsky in the founding document of the Fourth International acquire an intensely contemporary relevance:

The bourgeoisie, of course, is aware of the mortal danger to its domination represented by a new war. But that class is now immeasurably less capable of averting war than on the eve of 1914 ... Without a socialist revolution, in the next historical period at that, a catastrophe threatens the whole culture of mankind.

The "next historical period" of which Trotsky wrote is now the one in which we live. Humanity is searching for a progressive answer to the prevailing capitalist chaos. It wants a future without poverty, exploitation, and war. The working people want a world based not on religious, ethnic and national hatreds, but on human solidarity. That is why, all over the world—and even in the United States, the citadel of capitalist greed and reaction—there is a growing interest in and support for socialism. But the fight for socialism today must be informed by historical knowledge. And that is why an examination of the founding of the Fourth International in 1938, and the struggles through which it has passed in the course of its eighty-year history, is of immense contemporary relevance.



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