

David North begins US speaking tour in Michigan to mark 80 years of the Fourth International

Our reporters
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Large audiences of youth, students and workers gathered at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and Wayne State University in Detroit on Monday and Tuesday to hear a lecture delivered by David North, the chairperson of the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site* and national chairman of the Socialist Equality Party (US).

These two events are part of a series of lectures around the world organized by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) to celebrate the 80th anniversary of the founding of the Fourth International by Leon Trotsky in 1938.

In the US, the meetings, titled “The class struggle, revolution, and socialism in the 21st century,” will be given in a dozen cities across the country. At both meetings North stressed that the development of a socialist movement had to be based on an understanding of history. He emphasized the centrality of internationalism and the struggle waged by Trotsky and the Left Opposition against the Stalinist theory of “socialism in one country.”

In opposition to pseudo-left politics that has written off the working class as a revolutionary force, North highlighted the rich history of working class struggle in the US, especially in the aftermath of the 1917 Russian Revolution, noting specifically the Minneapolis truckers’ strike of 1934 (led by Trotskyists), the Flint sit down strike in 1936-37, and the Memorial Day Massacre of 1937.

North stressed that any understanding of the present and any effort to build a socialist movement today required an understanding of history. However, he said in Ann Arbor, “a fundamental problem ... facing many young people today as they seek to orient themselves is an absence of adequate historical knowledge.”

“Youth want to find out about socialism. How is it to be achieved? What is the basic aim? All these questions cannot be answered in any serious way without concerning oneself with history.” The 20th century witnessed the most monumental revolutionary struggles in history, he noted,

including two catastrophic wars and fascism. “Far from witnessing a great capitalist resurgence,” he explained, “we are in a world that is seemingly plunging toward catastrophe.”

North exposed the pernicious role of postmodernism, which is based on a rejection of objective truth. The campus newspaper, the *Michigan Daily* highlighted this critique in their favorable review.

“There is an utterly reactionary climate that prevails in many of the humanities departments of many universities, such as the University of Michigan,” North said. “The prevailing philosophy is postmodernism, which ... is culled from the basement of bourgeois thought. It is the most backward, reactionary and dishonest of all approaches to the study or consideration of the past.”

He analyzed in detail conceptions contained in a recent book by Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, and connected the conceptions of postmodernism to the prevalence of identity politics. This pseudo-left politics, he explained, is bound up with the interests of a privileged layer of the upper-middle class.

“The top 10 percent, in relation to the rest of the population, has a highly privileged position,” he said. “If you are a tenured professor, you are well into the top 10 percent, probably closer to the top 5 percent. ... The assault on Marxism and the intellectual climate at so many universities ... reflects that very privileged layer.” Identity politics, he explained, “is not a fight to improve the conditions of the broad masses. It is a fight over how the wealth sloshing around within the top 10 percent will be divided up.”

The audience responded warmly to North’s presentation. Our reporters spoke to attendees from both meetings.

Daniel, a freshman at the University of Michigan Flint, drove for over an hour to hear North’s lecture in Ann Arbor. When asked what he found most interesting about the meeting, he said, “The issue of identity politics is very

important. I am opposed to it. Hearing the lecture confirmed my previous feelings. I learned more about the role that identity politics plays in disarming the class struggle, and how postmodernism plays the same role.”

Daniel explained why he was interested in socialism. “I have considered myself a communist since I was 13 years old. I come from a working class family. Capitalism is a system that ensures that those who control the means of production have everything and workers, those who have to work for a living, own nothing.”

He went on to explain his interest in history and the fate of the former Soviet Union. “My grandfather originally sparked my interest in politics. He fought in World War II, and I was always interested in what happened during the Cold War and during the dissolution [of the USSR].”

Another attendee, Becca, works at the University of Michigan. She said that she had learned about the *World Socialist Web Site* two months prior from a friend and has been reading it since then. She attended the lecture to learn more about socialism.

Becca said she appreciated, in particular, David North’s reply to a question about the viability of building an independent political party of the working class as opposed to seeking to pressure the bourgeois parties. “Building a mass party of the proletariat is the only viable option,” North had said. For Becca, this pointed to the bigger issues of historical perspective. “Reform has failed and is no longer possible,” she said. “Socialism is the cause in which to believe.”

When asked about the political climate at the university, Becca mentioned that there was considerable pressure to support the Democratic Party. She explained that those that do not give it verbal support find themselves “without a voice” in discussions at work.

Becca went on to note that North’s report, and the coverage on the WSWS, speak to her own situation. She said she finds herself struggling to provide for two children. “And I’m watching everyone else struggle” financially as well, she added. “The Democrats and Republicans do not work for the broad majority. They act to make the rich richer.”

Dom, a young student at Wayne State University, said he came to the meeting after seeing pamphlets on the IYSSE table on the role of Bernie Sanders. “I had followed him before. It really annoys me that he and other social democrats are basically watering down socialism. Sanders portrays himself as a socialist while still upholding capitalism. The Democrats’ foreign policy serves the same interests for the ruling class.”

Dom said he thought North’s emphasis on young people studying the lessons of the struggles of the working class

throughout the 20th century was very important.

“I’m majoring in history. We need it to understand the current situation and conditions. You need to understand history in order to fight for socialism. We have to learn what has worked and what hasn’t worked. The Popular Front issue that David spoke about was something new for me,” he said.

“I thought the issues raised about identity politics were enlightening. [North] talked about filling out the college applications for race. My dad is white, and my mom is Asian. I think it’s stupid to have to fill this out. My struggles are far more in common with a worker than someone who is just my same ethnic background.

“I’m 21. I was brought up in a working class family. My dad works at Ford. He was at the Brownstown factory and lost his job in 2008. Then our home was foreclosed on. We lost the home in 2011. We had to move. We ended up renting for the next five years. My parents just bought another house. I saw first-hand the destruction of working class jobs and opportunities because of capitalism.”

Dom explained that it was these experiences that led him to socialist politics. “When you’re in high school you don’t know much. Sanders ran when I wasn’t out of high school, and I got into it. But then you look more into deeper issues, like what it means for a class to own the means of production, and it makes you think.”

“At Wayne State I’ve taken some history classes and became more interested in the history of communism. I never understood the implications of it. I thought 1917 was just a new form of government, like they had just overthrown a king and had a new government. I didn’t see it as a massive event for working class history. Now I want to know more about the conflict between Stalin and Trotsky.”



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