

David North addresses historical context of Ukraine war at San Diego State University

Rena Cassimeda, Norisa Diaz
2 May 2023

On April 25, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at San Diego State University in California hosted a public lecture, “The war in Ukraine and how to stop it,” presented by David North, the International Editorial Board Chairman of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The event was part of an international meeting series that has included events in Brazil, the UK, Canada, Sri Lanka, Germany, Australia and New Zealand, centered on explaining the historical background to the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and elaborating a socialist and internationalist strategy to stop the war.

Over 120 students attended the meeting in San Diego, filling the room to capacity. An image taken of the meeting showing the audience nearly universally wearing masks drew enthusiastic support from workers, scientists and Long COVID advocacy groups.

In addition to the revolutionary perspective put forward on the need for an internationalist, socialist and anti-war movement to prevent a third nuclear war, the meeting also signified a major advance in the fight against mass infection. It proved that, contrary to the narrative promoted by the bourgeois media, workers, students and youth are more than willing to accept mitigation measures that protect themselves and those around them.

North began his lecture by helping students to place the current war in Ukraine in the broader historical, political and economic framework of the imperialist wars of the 20th and 21st centuries, all of which have been accompanied by atrocity propaganda designed to paint political enemies as inhuman in order to justify war.

North laid out the propaganda campaigns that accompanied World Wars I and II, the Vietnam War, and the more recent wars in Serbia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria and now Ukraine, stating, “Monsters are created as they are needed. Today it is Putin, who is also being joined by another monster being built up—Chinese president Xi Jinping. There is an inexhaustible supply, depending on the immediate geopolitical need. ... people can be made monsters and monsters can be made heroes.”

The invocation of “national defense” and the use of atrocity propaganda to justify war were major themes throughout the talk. North explained that the causes of war cannot be measured by who fired the first shot, just as the complex processes which led to World War I could not be understood by the assassination of the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo.

The attempts by the US-NATO imperialist powers to pin the war entirely on Putin’s invasion of Ukraine are both reductive and intentionally disingenuous, as they seek to conceal the larger historical encirclement of Russia by NATO, particularly since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the ensuing three decades of unending

war.

North explained that the ICFI and IYSSE oppose the Putin government and its invasion of Ukraine, as well as the Zelensky government, while tearing apart the false claims that Zelensky is conducting a war of “national defense.” Drawing connections between the present lies of “national defense” and those of World War I, North stated:

After all, the German socialists said the war was legitimate because they were fighting Russian barbarism. The French socialists said, ignoring the fact that they were allied with that very Russian barbarism, that they were fighting Prussian barbarism. The British said they were defending the integrity of the Belgian nation, ignoring the fact, of course, that they presided over a vast empire of colonial slaves, and that Belgium, the pretext for Britain’s entry into the war, was itself presiding over a colonial empire which conducted atrocities in the Congo which were only exceeded in a later period by the Nazis in Germany.

During the question and answer portion after the lecture, North spoke further on this question, stating, “The more fundamental question is not who fired the first shot, because that’s an incident. The real implications of the war emerge later on. So, if you want to evoke the question of defense, what about the issue of the expansion of NATO? Could Russia claim that it is threatened? After all, since 1991, the boundaries of NATO have moved forward 800 miles to the east. They are now ringed by NATO states. Is that a threat?”

North added:

We don’t accept the concept of national defense. Every country is divided into classes. ... Every bourgeoisie is defending its economic interests, which it presents as the defense of the nation, even though the workers themselves have no interest in defending the access of American multinational corporations and transnational corporations to lithium in Russia or copper, rare earths. What does it benefit from all of this?

The concept of national defense is a reactionary concept. Because the basic problem, the most fundamental contradiction in the world today, is the contradiction between the objective development of a globalized economy and the

archaic nation-state system. The imperialists try to break out of that contradiction by conquering ever more territories. And yes, and then using propaganda, the ideology of national defense to justify whatever they're doing.

North then stressed the deeply reactionary character of both the Ukrainian and Russian bourgeoisie and how both national governments are diametrically opposed to the interests of the working class, stating, "We don't recognize the concept of Russian national defense either. This is a lie. Putin is an enemy of the Russian working class. But our policy in response to this is to unify the Ukrainian and Russian working class, which share a revolutionary history."

North explained that the litmus test of any political organization which claims to be socialist and represent the international working class is its stance on imperialist war. This was proven decisively by the betrayal of the Second International at the outbreak of World War I. He emphasized that Lenin sought to cut through the lies and propaganda to explain imperialist war on the basis of a deeper examination of its underlying socioeconomic causes.

Describing Lenin's argument, that the same contradictions of capitalism which produce imperialist war also lead to socialist revolution, North stated:

No matter how isolated the revolutionary forces appeared to be, they were articulating policies and interests which would eventually find mass support. And they were confirmed in February 1917, when out of the crisis generated by the war, the chain of imperialism broke at its weakest link. The masses came into action in Russia and set into motion a process of revolutionary struggle that was to change the world, and even the United States. Remember, the American working class had nothing, not even the most elementary form of effective industrial unions, until the Russian Revolution, which transformed the consciousness of masses of people.

In concluding his lecture, North highlighted the developments in world economy since 1914, including globalization and the vast advances in technology and communications, which have tremendous revolutionary potential. He noted, "If I can say anything which is really optimistic, it is that at a very early stage of this unfolding conflict, we already see a level of activity by the working class which was not apparent in 1914, 1915 or even 1916. The war is accompanied even in its initial stages by a growing radicalization of masses of workers around the world."

Throughout the meeting, North encouraged students to attend the *World Socialist Web Site's* International Online May Day Rally on Sunday, April 30, emphasizing that the primary question confronting the working class and youth is to build a revolutionary socialist leadership to put an end to imperialist war.

Reporters with the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with a number of students after the meeting who shared their assessment of the lecture.

One student said, "I understand that there is a deep-rooted context to war, that it doesn't just happen overnight, and I think North's talk really emphasized this."

He added, "When the war broke out in Ukraine, I dove back into studying world politics and looked into some declassified documents

from the '90s prior to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. There was a promise made to Gorbachev that not an inch eastward would be taken by the US and its allies. Since 1991 and the dissolution of the USSR, there has been a massive movement eastward."

The student also raised the economic interests involved in US imperialist interests in the war in Ukraine, saying, "The current challenges to the US dollar have to be one of the biggest motivations for the US to start war. This war, although fought against Russia now and heading towards a conflict with China, is also war against the US' own allies.

"Like David North said, There is an 'evil power' perspective that is put forward: 'insert name here' wakes up one morning and decides to attack somebody else, and that becomes the US' justification to get involved, because we are supposedly so virtuous and have to protect the little guy, when we are the one bombing the little guy, bombing countries that can't defend themselves."

On the question of uniting Russian and Ukrainian workers and workers internationally to build a socialist anti-war movement, he said, "I fully agree with that. It is optimistic—some would say idealist—and it has failed in the past. But I would say that it is up to us to make sure that it doesn't fail again."

The role played by Lenin and Trotsky as central to the preservation of genuine socialism and opposition to imperialist war also resonated with students, who made clear that they view the International Committee of the Fourth International and the IYSSE as the bearers of the historical legacy of Leninism and Bolshevism, what Trotsky referred to as "The party of irreconcilable revolutionary opposition to all capitalist regimes."

One student commented, "It's all connected. ... you can apply what Lenin said then to right now." Another added, "I think the question of building effective leftist political parties after what did exist as a leftist political movement had abandoned those principles, and the difficulty to getting back to a real Marxist analysis and movement, has strong implications for us as students. It's strengthening to know that that was rebuilt and it's definitely a task that's in front of us as well."



To contact the WWSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)