

“To oppose fascism at its roots is to oppose the economic foundations upon which fascism develops”

An interview with David North on fascism, Trump and the lessons of history

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On Tuesday, *World Socialist Web Site* International Editorial Board Chairman David North took part in a timely and urgent discussion with Professor Emanuele Saccarelli of San Diego State University’s Political Science Department, titled “It’s happening here: Fascism in 1933 Germany and today.”

Throughout the interview, North addressed questions that clarified the Marxist understanding of fascism, the historical processes that led to the rise of Hitler, the role of the working class in the fight against fascism, and the relevance of these lessons for today amid the Trump administration’s deepening efforts to establish a fascist dictatorship in the United States.

He underscored that the discussion of fascism is no longer merely historical but has “acquired intense contemporary relevance,” as many now ask whether the United States is confronted with fascism and what must be done to stop its advance.

When asked by Saccarelli to define fascism for a new generation entering political life, North stressed the necessity of a scientific and historical understanding, tracing the origins of fascism to the aftermath of the 1917 Russian Revolution and the wave of working class radicalization that followed the First World War. He emphasized that fascism arose as a mass movement mobilizing the petty bourgeoisie, demoralized workers and lumpen elements to smash the organizations of the working class, in the service of the big bourgeoisie.

North explained that Mussolini’s fascism in Italy and Hitler’s Nazism in Germany were direct responses to revolutionary threats from the working class. “The most distinctive element of Italian fascism was that it arose as a movement to suppress and beat back a radicalizing working class movement,” he said, noting that the failure of the socialist parties to lead the working class to power created the conditions for the rise of fascism. In Germany, the betrayal of the 1918-19 and 1923 revolutions by the Social Democratic and Communist parties gave the bourgeoisie time to regroup, paving the way for Hitler’s ascent.

Saccarelli asked North to address whether Hitler came to

power through a putsch or democratic means and the implications for today. North responded: “As a matter of historical fact, Hitler did not come to power in a putsch. He had attempted a putsch in 1923—it was unsuccessful.” Rather, North explained, “German democracy was itself on its last legs,” with the government increasingly ruling by decree and the forms of parliamentary democracy hollowed out. Despite the Nazi Party becoming the largest in the Reichstag, Hitler never achieved a parliamentary majority; his rise was facilitated by the refusal of the two mass working class parties—the Social Democrats and Communists—to form a united front against fascism.

North highlighted the catastrophic consequences of the Stalinist policy that branded the Social Democrats as “social fascists,” thereby equating them with the Nazis and blocking the possibility of a united working class resistance.

“The task of fascism was to annihilate the working class movement and save capitalism by destroying every fragment of working class democracy, even the social democracy itself,” North said. He stressed Trotsky’s insistence that “if fascism was to be stopped, it required that the Communist Party ... offer the Social Democrats a united front for the purpose of the defense of working class organizations against the Nazi threats.”

Turning to the present, North addressed whether the lessons of the united front are applicable today. He drew a sharp distinction between the united front—a strategy for the unified action of working class organizations—and the popular front, which subordinates the working class to alliances with bourgeois parties.

North asserted:

To oppose fascism at its roots is to oppose the economic foundations upon which fascism develops and to which fascism is committed.

He criticized contemporary pseudo-left organizations, such as the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), for promoting alliances with the Democratic Party, arguing that this “means the crippling of any serious struggle against fascism.”

On the question of whether Donald Trump represents a fascist threat, North commented:

There’s a lot about Trump’s movement and Trump himself which smells of fascism. It has that particular odor, or, I might say, stink. But what he lacks is a mass movement. He does not, at this point, have at his disposal, a mass movement of demoralized, embittered, petty bourgeois middle class elements, lumpen proletariat, stirred into rage against socialism and communism.

Instead, North observed, “the working class is moving to the left. I think that is the dominant movement from below.” He warned, however, that the danger of fascism remains real if the political confusion produced by decades of anti-communism is not overcome. North issued a powerful call for the building of a revolutionary party rooted in the working class and guided by Marxist consciousness, stating:

If you want to fight, you have to understand what you’re fighting. You have to turn to the working class. But turning to the working class is not something you do with a compass. It means that you take up a fight for Marxist consciousness in the working class, for the development of scientifically grounded class consciousness, that you build up within the workplaces, within the factories, a cadre of socialist workers.

Addressing the pseudo-anticapitalist rhetoric of both historical fascism and contemporary right-wing movements, North explained:

One of the critical elements of all fascist movements is extreme nationalism and the advancing of all sorts of really miraculous cures to the ailments of capitalism on a national basis. At times, and this was certainly true among certain elements even around the Nazi Party, this was given a certain fraudulent socialist coloration. But the national element, ultimately, is a defense of national capitalism.

Commenting on Trump’s sweeping attacks on democratic

rights, North drew direct parallels with the policies of the Nazis, stating:

Trump is proceeding now completely illegally. The constitutional framework does not exist for him. He is not restrained by any sort of constitutional norms, legal norms. As we have written in the *World Socialist Web Site*, he is working off of the conceptions which were associated with the Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt, the so-called “state of exception.” The Führer makes the laws. He has the power. He does with them what he wants.

And this has been ratified, in a sense, by the Supreme Court, and it’s not encountering any significant opposition within the Congress. It is encountering opposition within the population.

North concluded by urging all those concerned with the defense of democratic rights and the fight against fascism to join the Socialist Equality Party and attend the upcoming International May Day Online Rally hosted by the *World Socialist Web Site*, stating:

These are not, in the end, purely academic questions. These are questions of life and death. I think we all must sense this; anyone who really is thinking about what’s taking place as the world is changing. And what will take place over the next year, two years, three years, may very well decide the fate of humanity.



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