"To be a socialist means that you tell the working people the truth"

# David North closes lecture tour in Ann Arbor with Marxist assessment of US midterms

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David North concluded his fall lecture tour, sponsored by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), Monday night at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, with the largest and most politically charged meeting of the series. Nearly 100 people heard North, chairman of the international editorial board of the *World Socialist Web Site* and of the Socialist Equality Party (US), assess the November 3 midterm elections.

The five meetings, held over four weeks at Wayne State and Michigan State, George Mason, UC Berkeley and the University of Michigan, drew hundreds of students and workers. In Ann Arbor, as with all previous meetings in the series, attendees bought large amounts of literature. At every meeting, workers attended alongside students, some bringing their teenage children to begin their political education.

North began his lecture by reviewing the results of the US midterm elections, explaining that the task now was "to try to understand not just what happened but why it happened." The election, he said, testifies to an "enormous change in the political outlook of broad masses of people, and that an alternative is being looked for."

The Democrats won 260 House seats, a gain of 45, and seven Senate seats taken from the Republicans. Yet both parties, North stressed, "are parties of the ruling class. They are capitalist parties."

Though an off-year contest, the election is "freighted with a certain historical significance," North said. He situated the 2026 midterms in their historical context by examining critical nodal points of modern American history, the elections of 1896, 1912, 1932 and 1980, for what each revealed about American society "and, above all, its class relationships."

The election of 1896, in which William McKinley defeated the populist Democrat William Jennings Bryan, "foreshadowed the imminent emergence of the United States as a major imperialist power." Within two years, McKinley went to war with Spain and seized Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines. "Little more than 30 years after the death of Lincoln," North said, America completed its transformation "into a major imperialist world power."

The election of 1912 mattered, North said, "not because Wilson, the Democrat, won but because for the first time in a significant way in an American national election, the interests of the working class were articulated independently by the great Eugene Debs."

North read from Debs' 1904 declaration that "the capitalist class is represented by the Republican, Democratic, Populist and Prohibition parties, all of which stand for private ownership of the means of production." When Debs turned to those who proposed "to reform the capitalist system without disturbing wage-slavery," North commented, "that is the DSA of its time." He added, "When the DSA, for celebratory purposes, praises Deb, they represent nothing of the political conceptions which motivated this pioneer American socialist."

Opening the Socialist Party's 1912 campaign, Debs asked, "How can any intelligent, self-respecting wageworker give his support to either of these corrupt capitalist parties? The emblem of a capitalist party on a working man is the badge of his ignorance, his servility and shame." Yet "of all the major capitalist countries," North said, "the United States is the only one in which the working class never achieved a break with capitalist politics."

Lenin, then leader of the Bolsheviks, who five years later would lead the working class to power in the Russian Revolution, wrote after the 1912 US election that its "world significance" lay "in the unusually clear and striking revelation of bourgeois reformism as a means of combating socialism." By 1912, North said, both parties were concentrated "on suppressing and preventing the emergence of an independent political movement of the working class."

The election of Franklin Roosevelt in 1932, "in the midst of what was the first massive shock to American capitalism," the Great Depression, required the ruling class "to make a certain shift in its class strategy." The New Deal, North explained, was "a program of limited reforms, not socialist reforms," whose "main purpose was to control and contain the powerful radicalization" of the Toledo Auto-Lite strike, the Minneapolis and San Francisco general strikes, and the sit-down strikes that built the CIO, the Congress of Industrial Organizations. "America came as close as it ever came to social revolution during those years," he said. Roosevelt's political skills, "combined with the collaboration of the Stalinist Communist Party and the emerging CIO bureaucracy," diverted the movement into reformist channels.

The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 was "the final death knell of the whole period of bourgeois reform." It "set into motion a wave of political reaction which has persisted for the last 46 years, regardless of whether the president was Democrat or Republican." Both parties "were thoroughly Reaganite," North said. "In the last 60 years, there has not been a single significant social reform implemented in the United States."

The result is a growth of social inequality "on a scale which is historically without precedent." Since 2000, North noted, after-tax corporate profits have grown 6.5 times while employee compensation grew 2.8 times, the wealth of the richest 0.1 percent of households has grown by $42,923 per day since 2020 compared with $14.47 for the bottom half, and the richest 1 percent now own more than the bottom 90 percent.

It was from this historical and social vantage point that North examined the responses to the election, beginning with "the bourgeois media, particularly exemplified by the *New York Times*," the voice of the Democratic Party and Wall Street. A November 7 *Times* editorial asked readers to "picture an economy in which those who have prospered most, including the titans of artificial intelligence, help build a bountiful future

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for everyone else." "In other words, the lion will lie down with the lamb," North said, recalling Leon Trotsky's question: "How is this better than praying for rain?"

After a video of Democrats, including DSA member Zohran Mamdani, Bernie Sanders, and DSA-backed Senator-elect Abdul El-Sayed, declaring their readiness to work with Trump, North asked, "They have a massive majority in the Senate. They have a massive majority in the House. Why do they want to work with them at all?"

To understand any political movement, North told the students, "you always have to ask, where do you come from? What's your history?" The DSA, he explained, "has its origins in the Trotskyist movement," through Max Shachtman, a founder of American Trotskyism.

In the 1939–40 faction fight in the Socialist Workers Party, Shachtman and New York University Professor James Burnham rejected the defense of the Soviet Union, while James P. Cannon, with Trotsky's support, defended it as a workers' state, "albeit one which was degenerated." Burnham soon broke with socialism and became a leading figure of American neoconservatism.

Shachtman became an adviser to the AFL-CIO bureaucracy and mentor to Michael Harrington, a founder of what became the DSA. Shachtman and his followers, known at the time as the "State Department Socialists," backed the Bay of Pigs invasion and the Vietnam War. "Our movement is descended from Cannon, the orthodox Trotskyists, who upheld socialist internationalism, opposed Stalinism from the left and upheld the principles of Bolshevism," North said.

North then turned to "the representatives of the so-called left of the Democratic Party, the DSA," which speaks for privileged layers of the upper-middle class seeking a larger share of wealth within the top 10 percent. In the DSA-aligned *Jacobin*, Jared Abbott celebrated that "twenty-one Democrats in the next Congress will have spent at least half of their working lives before politics in working class jobs."

North replied that "the nature of a political party is not determined by the original social background or jobs of its leaders. It's determined by the program." Nor can one change "the body of armed men that upholds private ownership of the means of production by trying to fill it with a reformist, quasi-socialist content." Meanwhile, 13 new "CIA Democrats," candidates drawn from the military-intelligence apparatus, won House seats, joining all 10 incumbents to more than double the faction's ranks. Their influence, North said, "is far greater than that of the DSA."

In his conclusion, North said, "The working class within the United States and internationally is undergoing a process of social and political radicalization. … I will make this prediction: You will see within the next year, year and a half, an enormous eruption of class struggle." The DSA, by contrast, presents socialism "as some sort of moral choice you make, not something which arises inevitably and necessarily out of the crisis of the existing system."

North urged those present to "immerse yourself in a study of Marxism, of the Trotskyist movement, of the long fight for socialism, learning the lessons of the past to avoid the tragedies and defeats that were suffered in the 20th century. They can't happen again because this time, there's no next time."

The first question from the audience came from a right-wing activist and self-described "Christian conservative." Invoking the millions of deaths he attributed to "communism," he asked, "why should we be communist when we can look at what communism has done to Cuba, has done to other countries?"

North replied that these were the crimes of Stalinism, not communism. "Stalinism is not socialism," he said. "Stalinism was a reaction against the Russian Revolution by a nationalist bureaucracy. And if you want to discuss the crimes of the 20th century, I think you should concern yourself with what happened in Nazi Germany, the extermination of millions of people as a consequence of a war instigated by capitalism, two world wars."

He pointed to the Koreans killed by American bombs between 1950 and 1953 and the wars in Yugoslavia and Iraq. "Countless crimes have been committed by capitalism," he said. For 65 years, "the United States government has sought to starve the Cuban people into submission." "So please don't come here and tell us that capitalism represents some defense of human rights," North said. "It is the source and cause of all the oppression in the world." The audience erupted in thunderous applause with many rising in a standing ovation, and Dashti and two right-wing companions quickly left the room.

Next to speak was George Shirley, who in 1961 became the first African American tenor to sing leading roles at the Metropolitan Opera and is now a professor emeritus at the University of Michigan. Recalling the seizure of Native land and slavery in American history, he asked what form revolution would take in the United States, "do you see violence," and how North "would approach revolution in this country where the DNA of this country is capitalism."

The resistance of the ruling class "will be ferocious and violent," North answered, but "to the extent that the working class is conscious and well organized, that is the best means of mitigating and suppressing and preventing violence on a horrific scale."

A student worried that the Democratic victory would leave workers "placated." Those who voted for El-Sayed expecting change, North said, are "going to find out that's not true." He urged students to "overcome your prejudices against the working class. Become active. Join the IYSSE. Go to the factories." In his final answer, he said, "To be a socialist means that you tell the working people the truth."

The powerful response to this lecture series is part of an international movement to the left among masses of youth and workers. As the WSWS explained, the midterm vote is bound up with the mass demonstrations across France, Italy, Greece, Belgium, Spain and Germany, with general strikes called in Spain on November 11 and Italy on November 20. With US debt above $40 trillion and bond markets in turmoil, the ruling class is preparing to make workers pay for the war against Iran, the NATO war against Russia, and preparations for war with China, fronts of a metastasizing world war.

The Democrats' pledge of "bipartisan common ground" with Trump will drive workers and youth into open conflict with them and their DSA auxiliaries. The IYSSE is growing, winning students to socialist internationalism and turning them toward the working class.

We call on all students and young people who want to fight for socialism to join the IYSSE and build a chapter at their school.




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