

Successful launch of *In Defence of Leon Trotsky* at Sydney's Gleebooks

By our correspondent
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An audience of more than 150 filled the upstairs auditorium of Sydney's Gleebooks bookstore last night to hear David North launch his *In Defence of Leon Trotsky: A Reply to the Falsifications of Robert Service*, published by Mehring Books.

The standing-room only crowd, including students and other young people, older workers and professionals, warmly applauded North's response to Professor Service's attempt to discredit Trotsky in his *Trotsky: A Biography*, published last year by Oxford University Press.

Gleebooks' Morgan Smith said the bookshop—an Australian institution—was happy to have North open what promised to be “another terrific year” for Gleebooks. The launch was the first in the bookstore's calendar of literary events for 2010.

North, the chairman of the *World Socialist Web Site* Editorial Board and national chairman of the US Socialist Equality Party (SEP), was introduced by Nick Beams, the national secretary of the SEP in Australia.

Beams said it was significant that renewed debate over Trotsky had “taken the form of a political controversy”. That was because unlike other historical figures, such as Cromwell or Napoleon, Trotsky's life and struggle were intimately bound up with the contemporary issues confronting humanity: capitalist economic crisis, wars, revolutions, bureaucracy, civil war and the degeneration of a revolution.

A decade ago, in the wake of the liquidation of the Soviet Union and amid what appeared to be the height of American power, such claims, Beams said, might have been regarded as “socialist rhetoric”. Today, however, things stood differently. The decade had culminated in a global financial crash and catastrophe, the worst since the 1930s, which was far from over.

Last night's launch in Sydney followed recent

lectures by North in reply to the Service biography in New York and London.

Opening his Gleebooks presentation, North noted that the “counter-campaign” by the International Committee of the Fourth International in defence of Trotsky was gathering support. He referred to a London bookshop event last week, at which Service had publicly noted North's lectures across three continents—including Australia—rebutting the Oxford University professor's assault on the legacy of Trotsky.

As Service had himself acknowledged, he had written his biography to overcome the lingering influence of Isaac Deutscher's trilogy—*The Prophet Armed*, *Unarmed* and *Outcast*—that in the 1960s and 1970s gave a new generation their first introduction to Trotsky's life and ideas. The reading of Deutscher's trilogy became a “major generational experience” for radicalised youth in Europe, the United States and Australia (for the text of North's remarks see “*In defence of Trotsky's 'immense and enduring historical significance'*”).

In further extemporaneous remarks, North pointed to claims by Service to have written a “full-length biography,” yet his book had been produced in just two years. Serious biographers of other major historical figures had mentally “lived” with their subjects and often taken decades to complete their works.

Service had eschewed any engagement with Trotsky's writings. This neglect was extraordinary, given that Trotsky's life as a political leader spanned four decades and included a leading role in the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917, command of the Red Army to defend the Soviet state in 1918–21 and the founding of the Left Opposition and the Fourth International to combat the Stalinist degeneration of the Soviet revolution. Trotsky's literary opus was

estimated to run to 100 to 150 volumes.

Factual errors could be found on virtually every page of Service's book. Clearly, what was involved were not merely methodological differences but basic factual distortions driven by a contemporary political agenda.

Asked by a member of the audience to clarify the parallels between Trotsky's struggles and the issues of today, North explained that in the founding program of the Fourth International—subtitled *The Death Agony of Capitalism*—and elsewhere in his writings, Trotsky had analysed that the fate of world capitalism was bound up with the contradictions of United States capitalism.

Processes that Trotsky identified at an earlier stage—in Trotsky's lifetime the US was a rising world power—were now far advanced. US capitalism faced a crisis of historic dimensions, and had become the major destabilising factor in world politics, triggering wars, and devastating the social conditions of millions of American working people.

“The resurgence of Trotskyism will be bound up with the resurgence of the working class in the United States and internationally. In the final analysis, Trotsky's political life, his career, his writings, his thought, is bound up with the concept and reality of the world socialist revolution.”

North noted that within little more than five years, three biographies of Trotsky had been published by British historians—Ian Thatcher, Geoffrey Swain and Service—all devoted to demolishing Trotsky. If Trotsky were so irrelevant, as each claimed, North asked, “what is the concern”? A new radicalisation of the working class and young people would find “no more powerful a political writer” than Leon Trotsky.

In response to a question about Service's affinity for Joseph Stalin, North recounted that Service had praised Stalin as a “great intellectual” while absurdly depicting Trotsky as lacking any intellectual originality. Moreover, Service had asserted, without any substantiation, that if Trotsky, rather than Stalin, had been in power, “the risks of a bloodbath in Europe would have been drastically increased”. North asked: “Compared to what?” By the time World War II had ended, as a result of the combined bloodbaths of the 1930s and 1940s, 80 million to 100 million people had been killed. Service's writings amounted to a justification for the crimes of Stalinism.

Afterward, North signed copies of his book for

audience members. Many had travelled long distances to hear the author speak and expressed their appreciation for his visit to Sydney. Numerous copies of *In Defence of Leon Trotsky* were sold, as well as David North's earlier titles *Leon Trotsky and the post-Soviet school of historical falsification* and *The Crisis of American Democracy*, along with copies of the new *World Socialist Web Site Perspectives* journal.

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