

Imperialist rivalries fuel Russia-Ukraine gas war

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The tensions over gas supplies between Russia and the Ukraine reveal deeper problems which are getting worse, argues Mike Tate

The gas dispute between Russia and Ukraine, which left 18 countries across the EU with gas shortages, has abated but the underlying issues are still bubbling away. The dispute started with Ukraine wanting to pay a subsidised rate for the oil and gas it transports in its pipelines, while Russia is demanding it pays the full market price. The recent deal, struck on 19 January, may yet come apart, especially if it transpires it was reached under pressure.

This deal, between Gazprom (the state-owned Russian gas giant) and Naftogaz (Ukrainian counterpart) would see a 20 per cent discount on the market price. This has caused a rift in the Ukrainian government between Viktor Yuschenko and Yulia Tymoshenko, the president and prime minister of Ukraine respectively - Tymoshenko supports the deal, while Yuschenko rejects it.

Although the 'gas wars' have been ongoing since 1992, it is recent geopolitical events that have brought this issue to the fore. Russia is the world's energy superpower, controlling a large proportion of the oil and gas reserves in Central Asia. The Russian economy is seriously suffering due to the credit crisis; its unemployment rate rose to 20 per cent in November and December.

When the oil price dropped, it negatively impacted Russia's seven per cent annual growth rate. Russia needs to squeeze as much revenue from these reserves and maintain control of its satellite states that contain oil and gas. The fracas in South Ossetia and Georgia, when the US-backed Georgia invaded South Ossetia in August 2008, saw Russia respond with a flexing of its military muscles, trying to maintain a firm hold on the oil-rich Caucasus region and the strategic routes of present and planned oil pipelines from central Asian oilfields. Its support of South Ossetia's right to self-determination was only a piece of propaganda ' what about Chechnya's rights?

The US clearly showed its ambitions in the region and its need to neutralise Russia as a competing power. The US's ally Ukraine has much to gain from not cooperating with Russia. Viktor Yuschenko, who led the Orange revolution in 2004, is aiming to join the EU and NATO and needs to show himself to be on the side of the US and the European powers. George Bush's plan of stationing parts of the so-called US missile shield in Poland is a clear threat to Russia, intended to neutralise Russia's nuclear deterrent. By stoking up anti-Russian sentiment, the Bush-Cheney administration hoped to gain influence and mineral wealth in the smaller countries of the region. In Georgia their calculations misfired and their encouragement of Ukraine's Nato ambitions stirred up conflict with Russia and thus within Ukraine. A recent census revealed that 29.6 per cent of the country's population are Russian speakers located in the eastern third of the country and any attempt to take Ukraine into a still anti-Russian Nato would in all probability split the country, taking most of the coal and steel production facilities and much of its hydroelectric power production, without even considering gas supplies.

The EU has shown a less aggressive stance on the Russian question ' why is that' The recent events have shown how reliant they are on the oil/gas pipelines running through the Ukraine. Germany's Merkel, France's Sarkozy and senior Italian ministers have all sought to negotiate with Russia, which also may be seen as acting as a counterweight to US global hegemony.

Workers Power opposes the expansion of Russia's military power - and supports the right national self-determination for the people of central Asia, in particular the Chechens. We oppose Russian imperialism as a form of division, re-division and plunder of the resources of the world and should be condemned alongside US imperialism. But we also recognise that the USA and the European Union are imperialist blocs- ones far more powerful than the Russian Federation. They have been pressing forward ' the Americans with their military alliance, the Europeans with the lure of EU membership. They are equally if not more to blame for the rising tensions in the region.

Barack Obama, through his vice president Joe Biden has assured the Russian that he wants to 'press the reset button' in its dealings with Moscow. In reply the Russians have made some appreciative noises about the new US administration. In the short term a degree of d'tente may be in both country's interests Russia's economy too is heading deep into recession, with strikes breaking out and, despite heavy repression, street demonstrations too. The bonapartist, semi-dictatorial nature of the Putin regime is clear from the frequent murders of oppositional journalists who exposed human rights violations in Chechnya or corruption in the upper echelons of the state machine. The most recent was the brutal slaying human rights attorney Stanislav Markelov and young journalist Anastasia Barbuova in January.

Bleak as the situation looks in Russia for trade unionists, genuine socialists and defenders of free speech and human rights human rights, the growth of opposition, especially amongst workers, indicates stormy years ahead for premier Vladimir Putin and his handpicked president Dmitry Medvedev. There are now widespread rumours of differences between president and prime minister and any divisions within the corrupt oligarchy and repressive police regime that rule Russia could open the way to an eruption of the masses back into politics- in short a revolutionary situation. And indeed the rebirth of Russia's revolutionary traditions and the working class are the real hope for the oppressed peoples of the Caucasus and peace between the two ethnic communities in Ukraine.

A socialist confederation of the Caucasus and indeed such a federation for all the newly states of the region- a new USSR, a free and voluntary union such as Lenin envisaged it is the only long-term solution to the national antagonisms fomented by the imperialist powers. As for the highly corrupt oil companies like Gazprom, socialists in Russia should fight, as part of their revolution, for their nationalisation under workers control. Only then can the resources, squandered and traded by corrupt bureaucrats for political gain, be used to efficiently provide for society. The deprivation of fuel for heating and lighting for the workers of Europe is a harsh indictment of the current system east and west. Only an internationally and democratically planned socialist economy can provide a lasting solution.

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