

Revolt and Resistance in Ukraine

KD Tait Fri, 07/11/2014 - 13:01

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The crisis in Ukraine has divided the international left and produced the deepest international crisis in Europe in 15 years. KD Tait argues that the conflict and our response must be situated in the context of a new period of inter-imperialist rivalry.

The capitalist crisis, which began in 2007-08, has developed into a phase of open inter-imperialist rivalry. This is expressed most sharply in the conflict between Russia and the EU-US bloc over Ukraine. The protests were initially provoked by President Viktor Yanukovich's decision to suspend negotiations aimed at Ukraine's eventual entry into the European Union.

EuroMaidan: From protest to power

On 30 November, Berkut riot police brutally attacked a small pro-EU demonstration in Kiev's Maidan Square. This event transformed a movement from one of a few thousands demanding the signing of the EU Association Agreement to one aimed at bringing about the downfall of the Yanukovich government.

It led to the fortification of the protest camp in Maidan Square and the domination of it by Yulia Tymoshenko's Fatherland Front and Vitali Klitschko's UDAR party, in alliance with the fascist Svoboda party who, together, established a 'Headquarters of National Resistance'.

The tenacity and bitterness of the confrontations were clear evidence that the Maidan movement gave expression to very real and deep-seated problems within Ukrainian society. If it had only been about the Association Agreement, this would not explain the development of a mass movement.

Equally, had it just been a protest against heavy-handed repression, Yanukovich's corruption, or the rule of the oligarchs, this would not explain how it rapidly developed a leadership made up of corrupt oligarchs and involving a brutally repressive, fascist-dominated, militia.

Nor would it explain the stampede of EU commissioners and US representatives to appear in the Maidan, to support the movement and to give more and more overt endorsement to its regime change objectives.

Oligarchs

After Ukraine gained independence in 1991, the restoration of capitalism was accompanied by the enforcement of the IMF's usual 'shock therapy'. This led to a slump in gross domestic product of 60 per cent in the years 1992-95. In the wake of the stabilisation of the Russian economy, at the turn of the millennium, Ukraine achieved relatively high annual growth rates averaging seven per cent.

But Ukraine was hit particularly hard by the global economic crisis. In 2009 alone, economic output decreased by 18 per cent. Industry collapsed and the national currency, the hryvnia, was massively devalued. The national debt increased dramatically and with that came the permanent problem of making

payments to meet the conditions of the IMF.

The living conditions of the masses have been at rock bottom for practically two decades. The unemployment rate, though not particularly high at first glance, 8.5 per cent in 2012 and 8.24 per cent for 2013, does not show a true picture. A look at the incomes in industry, trade and agriculture, gives a far more accurate one. The average wage is just €300 per month, the minimum wage is €110.

By comparison, the average wage in Poland is about three times as high, and in Russia or Belarus about 2.5 times. That hundreds of thousands work as cheap labourers in these countries gives an added dynamic to the identification of east and west Ukrainians with the EU or with Russia.

It is not only the working class that suffers deplorable living conditions. Agriculture also lies prostrate. Especially in the west of the country, it is extremely unproductive; the individual peasant farms are sufficient for little more than subsistence. It is therefore no wonder that poverty rates are even higher and average incomes much lower in western Ukraine than in the more industrialised East.

Since the restoration of capitalism, the Ukrainian economy has not only been firmly embedded in a global capitalist division of labour, it is internally dominated by around 100 'oligarchs', big capitalists who ripped off the former state owned industries and built huge economic empires. It is estimated that the 50 richest of them control some 85 per cent of the economy.

Rinat Akhmetov is the wealthiest of them with \$11.4 billion in steel and iron ore assets and a three-storey penthouse at One Hyde Park, for which he paid \$228 million. A former Yanukovich supporter, he rallied to the Maidan government and is 'mediating' in Donetsk, his hometown.

Victor Pinchuk is the second richest, worth \$3.2 billion and a media magnate who controls his assets from London and is 'personal friends' with Bill Clinton, Tony Blair and George Soros. After the Maidan coup, he lost no time in switching sides.

Igor Kolomoysky, is Ukraine's third-wealthiest man, with an estimated fortune of \$2.4 billion. He co-owns the informal commercial group Privat, which includes Ukraine's largest bank Privatbank, as well as assets in oil, ferroalloys and food industries, agriculture and transport.

The new governor of Donetsk Region is Sergey Taruta, whose wealth is estimated at US \$2 billion. He heads ISD, one of the biggest mining and smelting companies in the world, and also owns the Donetsk-based Metallurg Football Club.

Dmitry Firtash (\$2 billion) is one of the leading investors in the power sector and chemical industry in central and eastern Europe. His plants and companies are present in Ukraine, Germany, Italy, Cyprus, Tajikistan, Switzerland, Hungary, Austria, and Estonia. He also owns Ukraine's most watched TV channel, Inter.

Petro Poroshenko (\$1 billion) widely tipped by the western media to win the presidency in the May elections, owns confectioneries, car plants and also a TV channel.

The main political parties are dominated by groups of such oligarchs and their 'clans'. Thus we find, on the one hand, the 'Western' block of parties around Batkivshchyna (Fatherland) and 'Udar' (Fist) and, on the other, the 'Party of the Regions', along with their auxiliaries in the Communist Party of Ukraine (KPU).

The oligarchs have not only more or less divided the land among themselves, they have also succeeded in

ensuring that their class interests are 'respected' by each government. Most control blocks of deputies in the Verkhovna Rada, Ukraine's parliament, making it one of the most thoroughly corrupt in the world.

Not only is their private property sacrosanct but also none of the parties represented in parliament, including Svoboda and the Communist Party, has ever questioned the de facto tax exemption of these multi-billionaires.

Russia and Ukraine

The sheer difference in size of the Ukrainian economy, the relative underdevelopment of its central and western regions, and the fact that the industries of the east were planned, constructed and integrated into the economy of the USSR, meant that there would inevitably be a tension between west and east.

Ukraine's agreement to the removal of all nuclear weapons from its territory and the agreement between NATO and the Russian Federation meant that Ukraine could not and would not develop into a new imperialist power once capitalism was restored. Things turned out differently with Russia.

Russia, like Ukraine, has a ruling class made up of super-rich oligarchs who managed to seize the state assets of the former USSR at knockdown prices and then used their monopoly positions to become billionaires. However, the political development in the two countries was radically different.

The best-known Russian oligarch in the West is Roman Abramovich (\$9 billion) who lives in London and owns Chelsea FC. But there are others far richer than he. Alisher Usmanov, owner of Metalloinvest, is, according to the Forbes 500 List, the richest (\$17.6 billion). Close behind him is Alfa Bank's Mikhail Fridman (\$16.5 billion) and in third place is gas company Novatek's Leonid Michelson (\$15.4 billion).

When Vladimir Putin (head of the FSB, the successor of the Soviet secret police, the KGB) came to power in 1999-2000, he inherited a state torn between the conflicting private interests of the oligarchs. Indeed, some of them had financed Putin's bid for the presidency, in order to replace the incapable drunk Boris Yeltsin and head-off the danger of Gennady Zyuganov, the candidate of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation.

Amongst the most powerful oligarchs then was Mikhail Khodorkovsky (\$15 billion), owner of a 78 per cent share of the oil and gas giant Yukos. In 2003-04, after Khordakovsy made the mistake of seeking to spread his bets and finance some of Putin's political rivals, he was arrested and thrown in jail on charges of fraud and tax evasion. Another top oligarch, Boris Berezovsky (\$3 billion) of Sibneft, yet another oil giant, also came in for the chop for having threatened to back alternative candidates to Putin.

Effectively, what happened in Russia in the first decade of the century was that Putin restored the power of a strong state (what Marxists call bonapartism) over the oligarchs at home and began to stand up for Russia's economic and military strategic interests abroad.

The hugely monopolised character of Russian capitalism, though very dependent on its extractive industries and exports, plus the country's nuclear weaponry and large army, all enabled Russia to join the elite club of imperialist states, rather than be turned into the semi-colony that Europe and the USA hoped it was heading for in the 1990s.

This is what the West objects to, far more than Putin's undoubtedly authoritarian and illiberal regime with his harassment of Gay Pride marches or the imprisonment of Pussy Riot; after all, many of Washington's friends around the world would not score highly on this front. It explains why Washington has set out to launch a new Cold War.

Nonetheless, it would be completely false to swallow the narrative of the West Ukrainian ethnic-linguistic nationalists and see Ukraine as oppressed and exploited entirely or predominantly by Russian imperialism. This narrative conveniently slides from undoubted historic examples of cruel Russian oppression to a supposed contemporary Russian domination of Ukraine and/or an attempt to reconquer it.

No one could, or should, ignore the Russification under the Tsars from the 1860s to 1917, or Stalin's suppression of Ukrainian national culture in the 1930s and 1940s. To this must be added the effects of Stalin's brutal collectivisation of the peasantry, the terrible famine this entailed in Ukraine, and the Great Purges, which hit the Ukrainian CP. To this must be added the de facto denial of the right to self-determination of the Ukrainian people throughout the six decades or so of the 'Soviet' bureaucratic dictatorship. Against this, Leon Trotsky called for an independent soviet (workers' council) Ukraine.

In fact, Ukraine gained its independence in 1991, unfortunately not thanks to a political revolution led by the working class, organised in workers' councils, but as a result of the dissolution of the USSR by the bureaucratic castes ruling in Moscow and Kyiv, headed by Boris Yeltsin and Leonid Kravchuk respectively. A dominant section of the Ukrainian nationalist movement, Rukh, pursued a policy known as the Grand Bargain, a historic compromise with the post-Soviet managerial and state bureaucracy, by which Ukraine gained its independence and the latter gained its industries and factories and mines. Under this kleptocracy, the country became a semi-colony, at first shared by Russia and the EU/USA and latterly fought over by them.

After the exit of the second major leader of the grand Bargain, Leonid Kuchmar, the bargain fell apart with the ethno-linguistic nationalists and their oligarchs striking a Faustian pact with the USA and Germany, and the oligarchs of the east orienting towards Russia. This included the famous Orange Revolution, which brought the warring oligarchs Yulia Tymoshenko and Viktor Yushchenko to power.

With the ending of the bureaucratic 'bargain', however, went the agreement to respect neutrality and to seek to benefit (and play off against one another) Russia and the EU/USA. With this 'pivot to the West' by Ukrainian ethnic nationalism went the ability to maintain the voluntary unity of east and west and its two linguistic and historic backgrounds.

This polarisation became the destructive element in the country's bourgeois politics. One side promised that stronger integration with the West would develop the country. However, the examples of Bulgaria and Romania show that EU-sponsored development would be applied in the interests of Franco-German finance capital, certainly not that of Ukrainian workers. While the EU is associated with illusory hopes of liberty and looks like a 'safer' place in comparison to Ukraine and Russia, Russian imperialism can offer a market for the industries, not simply extractive ones but some high-tech defence industries, too, of eastern Ukraine.

The East-West pull necessarily opens up an unresolved national antagonism. From the time of the crystallisation of nations and states in central and eastern Europe, the Ukrainian speaking population was divided and exploited by the prison houses of Tsarist Russia and the Habsburg Empire. After a brief but vital flourishing of Ukrainian culture in the Soviet Russia of the 1920s, and the fixing of its northern and eastern borders, oppression as we have seen, continued under Stalinism and under the Polish and the Nazi regimes.

Even today, the political parties in the country, even if they are formally 'pan-Ukrainian', are still set up along these lines. Thus, the former Yanukovich government and the Communist Party are based in the Russian-speaking east and south, while the newly installed government of Yatsenyuk and Svoboda are dominant in the Ukrainian-speaking west and north of the country.

It is an irony of the current development that the bourgeois forces, despite all their invocations of the 'overall interests of the Ukrainian nation' inevitably exacerbate divisions within the country, rather than pulling it together. The right-wing elements, for example, present themselves as the most consistent advocate of the movement and, above all, of the impoverished farmers and workers of western Ukraine. In keeping with their racist and chauvinist views, they blame their poverty not on capitalism or the oligarchs but on Jews, Communists and Russians. Their reactionary nationalist politics is, contrary to all their claims, a policy that deepens the division of the country along national lines.

A chauvinistic force like Svoboda, which presents itself as anti-Russian, is excluded from gaining a mass base in eastern and southern Ukraine. However what it can do is to lead to the formation of similar right wing nationalist forces in the east of the country. The social breeding ground for it is there: the mass impoverishment of the rural petty-bourgeoisie, as well as of the 'middle class' in the cities and the majority of workers.

The recent history of Ukraine shows that the power-sharing nature of the competing oligarchic blocs was unable to solve any of the fundamental problems of the country. On the contrary, the existence of any civil government in the country is inextricably linked to the maintenance of the causes of all its problems.

The labour movement in crisis

The risk of the further strengthening of reactionary mass movements is all the greater because of the labour movement's weakness. The 'Communist Party' has been for a long while a political and parliamentary appendage of the ruling 'Party of the Regions'. It supported the government of Yanukovich and is, of course, responsible for its policies. In addition, it is, above all, a 'Russian' party that has little influence and few members in the Ukrainian-speaking parts of the country, a deserved consequence of its own chauvinist policy.

A break from political subordination to the bourgeois parties, whether pro-Russian or pro-Western, is a precondition for building an independent all-Ukrainian labour movement. At the same time, that has also to mean independence from both Western and Russian imperialisms. This goes not only for the political, but also for the trade union level, where large parts are still closely tied to 'their' employers and 'their' oligarchs and where unions are also usually split along East-West lines.

In this respect, the dominant Federation of Ukrainian Trades Unions (FPU) has a relatively high level of organisation, representing around three quarters of all unionised workers. However, its primary function is to distribute social benefits provided either by the state or the employers. As the successor union of the Stalinist state unions, it has no tradition of militant representation of workers' interests; not only does it not organise strikes, it does not even organise disputes over wages. At the same time, workers are dependent on the medical care, the holiday pay and resorts provided by the union and this explains the high degree of organisation, higher than in Russia and almost twice as high as in Germany.

The second largest union in the country is called the Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Ukraine (KVPU) and is concentrated in the east of the country because it was created there in the early 1990s out of the miners' protests. It organises fewer than 300,000 workers. There are also a number of new organisations, such as Sahyst Pratsi, that have gained a foothold in the labour force in the supermarkets of international distributors, such as Metro and Auchan, but usually include only a few activists.

The Ukrainian left is very weak. The anarchists and the anarcho-syndicalist organisations were part of the opposition movement against the threatened, or even established, 'fascism' of the Yanukovich government. Others, groupings such as 'Borotba', campaign with the slogan 'No to a civil war! Against

the impossible behaviour of the government and the Right!? and are against joining any of the bourgeois factions. They have correctly called for resistance to the Kyiv government, self-defence of the workers and a referendum on autonomy from the right-wing regime. They also call for a relentless struggle against the oligarchs and for the renationalisation of all the large-scale means of production. As a result they have come under attack from the forces of the Kyiv regime and it is clearly vital for socialists in the west to support them against this.

With the exception of these small forces, the working class, the vast majority of the population, has not appeared as an independent social force in the crisis engulfing Ukraine. Such a development would, of course, only be possible if no political concessions were made to the various bourgeois forces.

But the labour movement must also become the champion of the needs and concerns of the masses. This implies developing and presenting an action plan that can resolve the central democratic and economic problems of the workers and peasants. For this, the working class needs its own organisations of struggle. That means, first of all, independent, national unions organised on a democratic and class struggle basis. Secondly, it means creating a workers' party whose programme gets to the roots of the most important problems and is based on a revolutionary action programme for the creation of a workers' and peasants' republic.

Ukraine: facing both ways

The Association Agreement, or the 'Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement', came with strings attached. In return for free access to European markets, the EU demanded savage neoliberal 'reforms'. The content of these reforms were to do to Ukraine what Yeltsin's 'shock therapy' did to Russia in the early 1990s ? and what the IMF's austerity is doing to Greece today.

The effects, in terms of mass unemployment, inflation and the slashing of social services would have fallen most heavily on the Russian-speaking eastern Ukraine, where much of the former Soviet Union's heavy industry was located.

Certainly, it was not the horrific social cost of the 'reforms' that convinced Yanukovich to suspend negotiations. Rather, it was cold political calculation - the need to avoid undermining his own base of support located in the east, particularly in the Donbas mining region.

This was the heartland of Yanukovich and his wing of the capitalist class, drawn from former bureaucrats who grew rich from privatisation. They could not survive against 'free' competition from the West. The rival wing of the ruling class, based in the Ukrainian-speaking west and centre of the country, want to liquidate much of this industry that they call a rustbelt. They hope to act as the local agents for what they hope will be a massive inflow of German capital seeking cheap Ukrainian labour.

Yanukovich was not opposed to attracting EU capital, but he wanted to do so on his terms. His political strategy was founded on extracting sweeteners to ease the bitter EU pill, while at the same time avoiding a break with Russia's President Vladimir Putin.

A complete turn to the West, however, would have simply destroyed Yanukovich's economic and electoral base. It would also have threatened the prospect of devastating economic retaliation from Russia. Ukraine is massively in debt to Russia for its oil and gas supplies; Putin could literally turn the country's lights off. But the West can exert some quite painful pressure of its own; Ukraine has \$17 billion in loans due to be repaid this year. Yanukovich well knew that the EU, mired in a deep economic crisis, would not be able to compensate the loss of Russian subsidies. Stuck between a rock and a hard place, Yanukovich

had little alternative to playing off both rival imperialist blocs against each other.

Ukraine's internal dispute thereby overlapped with the growing imperialist rivalry. Both Chinese and Russian officials have protested at increasing US and EU interference in Ukraine. These two new imperialist powers have been pulled closer by Washington's "Pivot to Asia" and by Germany's economic "Drang nach Osten" or "Drive to the East" for markets and labour.

There is no doubt that Putin exerted pressure on Yanukovich behind the scenes to escape the EU's embrace, and offered bridging loans. But, at an economic level, Russia cannot match Germany and its EU partners. The political crisis surrounding the EU deal provided the opportunity for a section of the US ruling class, humiliated by Putin in Syria, to demand the acceleration of Ukraine's integration into the western powers' economic order via the IMF and EU.

The protest camp in Independence Square was visited by Republican Senator John McCain, who addressed a rally alongside MEP Elmar Brok of Germany's ruling Christian Democratic Union (CDU). He met with Arseniy Yatsenyuk of the Batkivshchyna (Fatherland) party, the CDU protege Vitali Klitschko and Oleh Tyahnybok of the openly fascist Svoboda (Freedom) party.

Tyahnybok is an anti-Semite who claimed Ukraine needed to be liberated from the "Muscovite Jewish Mafia" and the country's 400,000 Jews expelled. Yet McCain and the EU emissaries sat down to dinner with him. This outside sponsorship of Ukraine's rival camps, by Moscow, Berlin and Washington made Ukraine a political tinderbox.

Independence Square

The three-month occupation of the Maidan in Kiev began as a protest against Yanukovich's last minute refusal to sign the Association Agreement and Free Trade deal with the EU. That agreement was seen as the only way forward by those capitalists, like Dmitry Firtash and Petr Poroshenko, the third and fourth richest capitalists in the country, who were outside Yanukovich's "Party of the Regions".

However, for Ukraine's workers, the deal would have meant a 40 per cent hike in the price of gas, a freeze in wages, pensions and social security and a slashing of state expenditure, in short, being force-fed the IMF medicine which has shredded the living standards of workers in Greece, Latvia and many other countries. Despite widespread discontent at falling living standards, this was not a prospect that could inspire the great majority of Ukrainian peasants and workers. Thus, for all the talk about ending Yanukovich's egregious corruption and the repressive actions of his police, the presence of the oligarchs behind of the Maidan movement made a nonsense of the claim that this was a democracy movement analogous to Tahrir Square.

So, too, did the fact that it became a focus for all varieties of right wing, nationalist forces, including the anti-EU fascists of the Right Sector, who steadily gained in influence with their combination of intransigent opposition to any deal with Yanukovich and their leading role in street fighting against the police.

In the first few weeks, the "face" of the movement appeared to be the politically undefined boxer, Klitschko, whose "pro-European" Udar had little more for a programme than a few banal phrases. With anyone else it would not have been accepted that he really believed in all the "western" talk of liberty and "honesty" and "the fight against corruption". Of course, Klitschko was in reality not as "blank" and "selfless" as he presented himself; both he and his party were a product of the Adenauer Foundation of the German Christian Democrats, without whose financial aid and political "advice" they would probably not exist.

The other 'respectable' opposition leader, Arseniy Yatsenyuk, could not play this innocent role. His 'Fatherland Party' openly stands for a section of the Ukrainian oligarchs, a layer of multi-billion dollar 'business leaders' who enriched themselves mercilessly after independence and the restoration of capitalism.

It goes without saying that the leader of the fascist 'freedom movement', Svoboda, whose undisguised racism and anti-Semitism and murders of antifascists was even criticised a few months ago by the EU Commission as 'alarming', could hardly present himself as a 'guardian of human rights'. Supporters of the Maidan Movement simply had to play down his involvement.

Klitschko and Yatsenyuk did not want Svoboda to play a major leadership role in the opposition. The same applies to Western imperialists from the EU, especially Germany, but also the United States, who stood behind the opposition. They simply thought they could use the organisational strength of the Right for their own purposes and, when they had done with it, turn it out to grass. Easier said than done, as events have shown.

To harness the masses to their carts, Klitschko and Yatsenyuk could not openly express their actual social objectives, they had to disguise them with talk of 'freedom' and 'democracy' and also take up, at least superficially, the real despair of the masses after two decades of economic and social decline. The ubiquitous despotism, of course, went on unabated even during the reign of the 'Fatherland Party', but now they take up the issues of corruption and the intimidation of political activists.

No compromise

However, the Yanukovich government badly miscalculated when it sought to tighten up the already extremely limited right to protest in mid-January 2014 and began to take police action against the demonstrators. Their brutal and clumsy attempts at eviction failed and misfired completely.

Although the feared special police unit 'Berkut' certainly left many injured, abused detainees inhumanely and killed at least three, possibly even six, demonstrators, they were not able to break the protest movement simply by repression. That had consequences; when a state power has to rely on an intensification of oppression but fails - it not only loses legitimacy in the eyes of the people but it is also no longer feared. Yanukovich was forced onto the defensive.

He offered the opposition leaders Klitschko, Yatsenyuk and Tyahnybok the withdrawal of the repressive January laws, the release of hundreds of prisoners and even the post of prime minister. After only two weeks, the limitations on the right to demonstrate were unconditionally repealed. He offered to release the arrested activists but made this conditional on ending the occupation of the ministries and other state buildings and calling off the protest movement from the streets.

It was all too little, too late. The movement and its leaders openly demanded the downfall of the whole regime. The majority of the provinces in the west, including the regional administrations and their police forces, were slipping from Yanukovich's control. Moreover, the oligarch backers of Yanukovich and his Party of the Regions also began to leave his sinking ship.

Yanukovich was forced by the intransigence of the opposition to try one more effort at crushing the Maidan occupation. Yet the resort to such measures is usually ineffective against a growing movement. They are doubly so when faced, not by an unarmed crowd, but a large and well-organised alliance of fascist and nationalist militias who speedily drove the police back from their positions.

This provoked a full-scale bloodbath with dozens of police officers and protesters shot dead by the same

snipers whom both sides now admit were not police marksmen; one side claiming them to be fascist militia, the other Russian agents. Whatever evidence any investigation turns up (and the new regime in Kyiv is in no hurry to pursue any such investigation), it is clear that the beneficiary of these actions was the opposition not Yanukovich and, in particular, the beneficiary was Svoboda and the Right Sector. The militias refused to hand over their weapons; instead they bussed in reinforcements from Lviv, which had already declared independence from the Kyiv government.

In the aftermath, the formal leaders of the opposition could no longer rein in the fascists. The EU-brokered peace deal collapsed when the fascists and the mutinous police refused to accept any sort of government of national salvation. So the EU's attempt to broker a compromise, an outcome favourable to German imperialism, came too late. Of course, it also had an element of sound political calculation: to keep Ukraine together as a state requires a regime that does not completely exclude or alienate the 30 to 40 per cent of the country's population who are Russian speakers.

US Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland's now infamous intercepted telephone call revealed the extent of the USA's role in determining the composition of the transitional government. Her comment 'fuck the EU' left little doubt about the USA's attitude toward its allies in Berlin. She also insisted that 'Yats'(Yatsenyuk) not Klitschko, should be prime minister, and conceded that Svoboda could have several ministries as long as Tyahnybok did not receive a major post.

By Friday, 22 February, the Euromaidan forces had taken over the government buildings in Kiev; while in western Ukraine, in Lviv, the regional authorities and the police had gone over to the uprising and sent far right activists and then rebel police forces went to Kyiv to help oust Yanukovich. The new government, elected by the Verkhovna Rada on 28 February, a parliament from which over a hundred of Yanukovich's Party of the Regions' members had fled, was presented to the Maidan for approval.

The executive was headed by acting President Oleksandr Turchynov and Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk. But Oleksandr Sych, a leader of Svoboda, was appointed deputy prime minister. Other fascist ministers include Andriy Parubiy, commander of the Maidan self-defence forces and a founding member of Svoboda. He was appointed Secretary of the National Security and Defence Council, which presides over the defence ministry and the armed forces. His deputy is Dmytro Yarosh, leader of the Right Sector coalition and a former mercenary who fought alongside the Chechen resistance.

Right Sector commandant Stepan Kubiv is the new chairman of the National Bank of Ukraine. Dmytro Bulatov and Tetiana Chornovol, both linked to the anti-Semitic and ultra-nationalist paramilitary organisation Ukrainian National Assembly ' Ukrainian National Self Defence were rewarded with the Youth and Sports ministry and the government's new 'anti-corruption committee' respectively.

More important than these ministerial portfolios, is the way that the various fascist militias purged and linked up with the police forces in major cities in west and central Ukraine. So, if this is a neoliberal-dominated government, it is one with fascist ministers and one that allows fascists to penetrate the repressive machinery of the state. It is moreover fully approved of by the USA and the EU (the 'democratic imperialists?').

The social crisis in Ukraine has allowed the two wings of Ukrainian fascism, the street fighters and the politicians, to capture key levers of state power. The government has committed to elections by 25 May. The fascists, however, did not waste a single day in driving through as much of their agenda as possible.

their first hours in office they released dozens of their imprisoned comrades and tabled motions to terminate the official status of Russian and other minority languages, to rescind Crimean autonomy and to

outlaw the Communist Party of Ukraine (KPU). Although the new president vetoed these measures, they nevertheless provoked a wave of pro-Russian chauvinism in the east and particularly in the Crimea.

?Welcome to hell?

When new President Arseniy Yatsenyuk, the candidate handpicked by Victoria Nuland, Barack Obama's secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs, took power in February, he admitted ?extremely unpopular measures? would be necessary to restore economic stability. He said: ?We are on the brink of a disaster and this is the government of political suicides. So, welcome to hell.?

Now, Ukrainians, including those naïve enough to think victory for the Maidan movement would lead to prosperity and democracy, can see what he meant. The measures amount to a series of standard neoliberal ?reforms? in return for billions of dollars in loans, not to be spent on the welfare of the people but to make debt repayments to international banks and billionaires.

The Ukrainian Finance Ministry says it needs \$35 billion over the next two years to avoid default. The Finance Minister is Oleksandr Shlapak, a former banker and a representative of Ukraine's second richest oligarch, Ihor Kolomoisky. The new government is backed by many of Ukraine's richest billionaires who have been imposed as governors of key towns in the East, whose populations opposed the Maidan ?revolution?.

Many of these oligarchs previously backed Yanukovich. They have joined the new government to protect the economic empires they gained by fraud and theft following the collapse of the USSR.

A cabal of billionaires dominates the new government, with no interests other than defending their right to loot the national economy. They will use their influence to vigorously resist any attempt to challenge the monopoly of political and economic power that they have enjoyed for two decades. The idea that they represent in any way a triumph for the battle against corruption is a sick joke.

Almost 80,000 people will be dismissed from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Security Service, the Office of the State Guard, and the prosecutor's office. Given the announcement of a volunteer ?national guard?, it is clear that these cuts will purge the state apparatus of those who did not support the ?revolution? and make way for the fascists and extreme nationalists who did.

The cuts already outlined are only the first wave in a punishing austerity programme designed by the IMF. They will fall almost entirely on the backs of Ukraine's working class, which is itself disproportionately concentrated in the industrialised Russophone east. Gas prices will rise 50 per cent; other utilities by 40 per cent after the IMF insisted that the price consumers pay for energy should include a healthy margin of profit. Excise duties will rocket by 39 per cent on spirits, 31.5 per cent on tobacco and 42.5 per cent on beer, increasing the already regressive character of taxation and thus further privileging the rich.

The economy is forecast to contract by three per cent, while inflation will rise by 14 per cent. The minimum wage will not rise with inflation, meaning effectively a 14 per cent pay cut in a country with some of the lowest wages in Europe.

In return, the IMF will provide Ukraine with between \$14-\$18 billion in loans over the next two years. The World Bank is considering providing between \$1-\$3 billion. A further \$10 billion in loans will then come from the ?international community? (the major western imperialist powers) and the US has already given \$1 billion in loan guarantees. This almost equals Ukraine's debt payments. The racket of international finance capital means that Western imperialist governments will borrow money from banks to lend to Ukraine to cover its debts to the very same banks.

All this is only the thin end of the wedge. In May, the Maidan oligarchs have to win an election. The full scale of the 'hell' they and their Western masters are preparing will not be revealed before then. What the full consequences of taking the IMF's 'medicine' will be, can be seen in Greece where IMF bailouts were secured by wiping out pensions, sacking hundreds of thousands of workers, closing schools and hospitals and driving millions of ordinary Greeks into poverty.

The motive force for subordinating Ukraine to the diktat of the IMF is the need to monopolise access to its cheap labour and natural resources in order to boost the stagnant profit rates in the imperialist heartlands. The objective is to secure the integration of Ukraine as a semi-colony within the Western imperialists' orbit of exploitation.

The crisis in Ukraine and the Crimean referendum vote to secede were not instigated by Russian imperialism. Its military manoeuvres and annexation of the Crimea were a response to the putsch in Kyiv, sponsored, and probably funded, by the USA, which installed a pro-Nato, West Ukrainian chauvinist regime, backed by openly fascist elements. Confronted with an attempt by a hostile imperialist bloc to extend its military perimeter and to draw Ukraine into the orbit of the EU and USA, Russia certainly acted to defend its own imperialist interests; interests which are antagonistic to those of the EU-USA.

It is not the job of socialists to join in the blame Russia game manufactured by the capitalist media. We should explain the crisis in Ukraine as the consequence of inter-imperialist rivalry, sharpened by the economic crisis. The Russian annexation of Crimea is a response to the policy of the US and the EU to seize the natural resources of Ukraine, exploit its 'cheap labour' of its workers but, above all, to use the country strategically to surround and hem in Russia.

In short, the Western imperialists want Ukraine as their exclusive semi-colony and ultimately a military base for NATO. The scale of US military manoeuvres and the reinstatement of a Cold War-style isolation of Russia are designed to protect the gains the western imperialists have made in this coup. Their intervention represented far more of an 'interference in the affairs of a sovereign state' in international law than did the referendum in the Crimea, and they lacked - and still lack - the slightest democratic mandate for their actions.

Given the level of integration of the east Ukrainian economy with that of Russia, the looming neoliberal revolution will severely diminish Russian influence and disrupt a critical sector of Russian imperialist foreign trade and investment. Russian capital will not easily surrender its near monopoly access to east Ukraine's massive, if relatively economically unproductive, mining and manufacturing complex. This is to say nothing of the response of the working class whose livelihoods depend on these industries.

Imperialist rivals

Consequently, the 'shock therapy' planned for Ukraine requires the threat of force to underpin and guard it from its internal and external opponents. Hence the recent media hype about the Crimea and the supposedly imminent threat of a Russian invasion of eastern Ukraine. More importantly, Western advances on the economic front have been matched by a raising of the stakes militarily.

Britain, France and the USA have sent extra warplanes to Poland and the Baltic States under the transparently false pretext that these Nato members are somehow threatened by Russia. The USA has sent an aircraft carrier group to the Mediterranean and a destroyer into the Black Sea. Nato forces are currently undertaking their own war games in Bulgaria. Nato and Georgian officials met on 2 April to discuss a plan to fast track it into Nato membership. Most provocative of all, Nato will undertake joint military exercises on Ukrainian territory.

Of course, Russia is itself an imperialist power. Its occupation of Chechnya and support for Assad in Syria mirrors precisely the Western imperialist powers' disregard for democracy and human life. But, relative to the USA and EU, it is a much weaker imperialist power.

In the context of Ukraine, it is on the defensive against an attempt by the principal Nato powers to extend their territory. Russia's complaint is that the neoliberal and fascist putsch in Kyiv, which aims ultimately at EU and Nato membership, ends Ukraine's post-Cold War neutrality and makes it complicit in Nato's military encirclement of Russia. Though socialists have no time for the cynical protests of imperialist powers, Russia's concerns plainly have a material basis.

Russian tanks did not roll across Ukraine's border. There were no parachutists or amphibious landings. The troops and naval base at Sevastopol are there by international agreement and represent a strategic asset for Russian imperialism. Therefore, the Russian army mobilised to secure the peninsula against attempts by the nationalist regime in Kyiv to impose its rule.

This was an action motivated purely by selfish military concerns but, nevertheless, an action for which they had the support of the overwhelming majority of the population. The Crimeans did not want the Kyiv regime to impose an oligarch as governor of Crimea as it has in Kharkov, Donetsk and other towns opposed to the putschist government. The Kyiv regime refused to recognise the prime minister elected by the Crimean parliament, since that is the prerogative of the president of Ukraine.

However imperfect the referendum might have been, no one seriously challenges the fact that it represented the majority will of Crimeans. Conversely, the purge of the Verkhovna Rada, the austerity deal struck with the IMF, the integration of the fascist militias into a 'national guard', these had no democratic mandate whatsoever.

The oligarchs appointed to rule the eastern towns have banned demonstrations and encouraged fascist gangs to shoot protesters. In Kyiv, fascists patrol the streets and attack communists. In the west, the Communist Party of Ukraine (KPU) and other socialists have been driven off the streets. When the election comes, in May, it will be conducted under the rifle butts of Svoboda and the Right Sector.

The main enemy is at home

Nato's advance into eastern Europe, and its military exercises in central Asia, represent a continuation of its founding purpose; a military alliance between the western imperialist powers which seeks to contain and strategically outflank Russia. When the Warsaw Pact was dissolved, following the collapse of the USSR, the Nato powers promised that they would not advance 'one inch' into eastern Europe. However, as the movie producer Sam Goldwyn once put it: 'a verbal contract isn't worth the paper it's written on'.

Under the noses of the gullible Gorbachev and then the incompetent drunk Yeltsin, Nato absorbed Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. The states comprising the former Yugoslavia are now under Nato hegemony; Moldova has been subordinated to the imperialist EU Association Agreement. Of course, revolutionary socialists shed no tears over the misfortunes of any 'great power' like Russia. It being the weaker party makes no difference. But even less do we take as good coin the USA-EU's claims to be disinterestedly defending the national freedom of Ukraine, Georgia, the Baltic States or Poland by assimilating them into their neoliberal and military empires.

Certainly, Nato is not looking to provoke a direct military confrontation with Russia. But it is trying to force Moscow to accept its further expansion as part of its plan to surround Russia with potentially hostile states. The creeping extension of military force directed against Russia is simply the military aspect of western

imperialism's drive to deny Russia access to foreign markets. The struggle for the division and re-division of Europe can be achieved only through military threats aimed at achieving political capitulation. This is a dangerous game. Unstable compromises, like that over Ukraine, are increasingly untenable in a period of sharpening inter-imperialist rivalry.

What then is the task of revolutionary socialists in western and central Europe and North America? It is what it has been for a hundred years: to expose and mobilise against the designs of their own rulers. This does not mean covering up, much less supporting, the imperialist designs of those rulers' enemies. Russia's repression, from Chechnya to Syria, deserves the harshest exposure and condemnation. So, too, does the Putin regime's persecution of its political opponents and LGBT people.

Nonetheless, Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg's statement, 'The main enemy is in your own country', applies quite literally in this case, despite the billionaire and state media's high octane propaganda for the Maidan revolution, the least genuine and least democratic of all the colour revolutions.

The Nato encirclement of Russia is a strategy of hostile military aggression. Likewise, economic sanctions, boycotts and blockades are an act of economic war. The continued escalation of such measures creates the prospect of another cold war, another excuse for increased military spending, the danger of proxy wars between western and Russian allies and, ultimately, inter-imperialist war itself.

Down with the Kiev regime ? victory to the resistance

Our allies in this struggle are the people who feel the imperialist noose tightening around their necks, the working class of Ukraine. In east and west alike, they will be at the sharp end of the IMF austerity; they will populate the hell that Yatsenyuk and his fascist praetorians will unleash.

In the Western imperialist powers, revolutionaries should struggle for a working class response which aims to stop their own rulers' war machine, and condemns every imperialist regime, democratic or not. We should do this in concert with the working class of Russia in its struggle to stop Putin's military interventions and end the economic bullying of Russia's neighbours. Together, an internationalist and working class struggle is needed to support those workers in Ukraine fighting to resist austerity, throw out the imperialist puppet regime and enable Ukraine's working class to determine its future for itself.

Any attempt to divide Ukraine between Russia and the West must be as strongly opposed as the attempt to seize it in its entirety for the West. It is, however, clear that a united, democratic and independent Ukraine is impossible without a struggle to dispossess the political and economic dictatorship of the ruling elites, and for that power to be taken up exclusively by the working class who will use it in their own interests.

The workers of Ukraine, beset by imperialist enemies without and fascist and nationalist enemies within, cannot succeed in building a country where power is in the hands of ordinary people, where the economy is run in the interests of the many, not the few, without the support of their sisters and brothers in Europe. A Europe-wide struggle for the self-determination of Ukraine will be a defeat for imperialism and open up the road of struggle for a workers' Europe, a Europe based on the free association of independent socialist states. This is what we are fighting for.

In the German media, the protest movement in the south and east of Ukraine is presented only as disturbances manipulated by Moscow as an excuse for the Russian aggressor to put more pressure on the struggle for an independent Ukraine and perhaps to prepare for new annexations. Like all the propaganda in the media, this picture is painfully cheap and tendentious. Questions are raised about Putin sending

agitators to Ukraine, but Germany and the USA do that all the time. What is the difference between waving Russian flags in Kharkov and waving EU flags in Kiev's Maidan Square?

All the same, just as it is not enough to see the Maidan movement as only the plaything of Western imperialists and their paid politicians, boxers and NGOs, so the same goes for the protest movement in the south and east of Ukraine. For communists, there are always two questions that are important: first, what issues are mobilising the people; and secondly, who is leading and controlling the movement?

The crisis in eastern Ukraine has a very different character from the myth presented in the 'Western' media. Here, there are relentless reports that it is the Russian army and Russian tanks that are about to 'invade' Ukraine and violate its right to self-determination. In fact, it is the Ukrainian government of neoliberals and fascists that is organising columns of tanks and troops to invade the cities of eastern and southern Ukraine.

The populations of Kharkov, Donetsk and Odessa plainly do not want these 'saviours' to wage an 'anti-terrorist' campaign in their cities and villages. The forces of 'order' include Right Sector gangs. In collusion with the Kyiv regime, armed forces have launched attacks on leftists in Kharkov and other cities, arrested and detained unarmed demonstrators. They have wrecked offices of the Ukrainian Communist Party and beaten up their workers.

They have attacked and vandalised the offices of the 'Association Borotba' whose crime is not 'Russian nationalism' or 'separatism', but mobilising workers and youth on the streets to defy the neoliberals and the fascist gangs. Their banner is not the red-white-blue tricolour of Putin's Russia but the red flag of a democratic, workers' and socialist Ukraine. They want to see their country free of all corrupt oligarchs, whether of the Yanukovych or Tymoshenko variety, and to stop the savage austerity planned for all Ukraine's workers by the EU and the IMF. Their 'crime' is that they correctly refuse to recognise the putschists in Kyiv as the democratic government of the country.

The gang in Kyiv is trying to give itself a mandate to take over the whole country by running elections on 25 May. But elections conducted under the guns of the fascist militias and the 'National Guard' would be a fraudulent imitation of democracy. As long as the neoliberal right wing nationalists and their fascist allies are in government, the people of eastern Ukraine are absolutely right to refuse to recognise them and to demand complete autonomy for their cities and regions and a referendum on their future.

Socialists and anti-imperialist and anti-war activists should demand the release of all socialist and working class militants and the restoration of the property of socialists like Borotba and the Communist Party of Ukraine. We should demand the end of the interference in Ukraine by the EU and US forces and the end of attempts to force Ukraine to impose a Greek style austerity programme. At the same time, we should oppose the manoeuvres of Putin's regime, which does not care about the rights of the workers and farmers of either Russia or Ukraine, but only acts to protect its interests as an imperialist power.

Socialists and anti-war activists in Ukraine and in all the imperialist states should work together to build a common struggle against all preparations for war and intervention by Nato and Russia. This should include opposition to all economic sanctions and blackmail, opposition to the build up of Nato and Russian military forces and, above all, for an end to the military occupation of eastern Ukraine by the regular and paramilitary forces of the Kyiv junta.

Only the working class, poor farmers and youth of Ukraine, in alliance with their brothers and sisters in the East and West, can lead the struggle against all imperialist exploitation and fight for an independent, unitary Ukraine, which guarantees equality for all Ukrainians, whatever their ethnic background or language, within its borders.

It's clear that the clear majority of Ukrainians do not want to dismember the country and have part of it handed over to Russia, they want all people there to be able to live and speak their own language and identify with their own culture freely, as they were, by and large, able to do before the Maidan coup.

The attempt by the Kiev government to use tanks, helicopters and fighter jets to suppress the people in the east, who do not want to be ruled by a neoliberal-fascist junta that came to power in a coup they did not support, is disgraceful. Only slightly less disgraceful is the behaviour of Western socialists who seem to think sending in tanks to suppress a legitimate resistance constitutes some kind of national liberation struggle.

We should support the popular resistance in the east and support efforts to build a real leadership based in the workers and peasants, who, when they are organised, will be able to kick out the self-appointed fascist ?leaders? and replace them with people who genuinely represent the wishes of the people there, and are accountable to them.

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