



Statement: The Danger of War over Ukraine

International Executive Committee, League for the Fifth International Mon, 24/01/2022 - 18:13

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For the first time since the 1990s, war drums are beating again in Europe. The issue is the escalating conflict between Russia and NATO over Ukraine. The western media place the blame for this squarely on Vladimir Putin and Russia who have mobilised over 100,000 troops on the borders of Ukraine. Putin's military manoeuvres are aimed at backing his demands on the USA and its NATO allies that Ukraine will never be allowed to join NATO and that the troops and missile systems of the Western powers, now stationed across Eastern Europe, should be withdrawn.

Putin's threat to invade, let alone any actual invasion, must be condemned by all socialists and democrats but this does not mean that in Europe and North America they should support the actions of the NATO powers in this conflict, real or potential. The American president and the British government are threatening sanctions that amount to a crippling economic blockade of Russia, which could itself become a prelude to acts of war. At the same time, they are sending large quantities of arms and military equipment to the Ukrainian government.

That government itself is not a helpless victim of Russian aggression but rather a provocative shill for the USA and NATO, who would like to make Ukraine their front line and integrate it as a semi-colonial possession within the EU. Indeed, the nationalist, pro-Western regime in Kyiv calls for arms in order to re-conquer the Donbas region. Since this would be impossible if Russia were prepared to intervene militarily, they hope that US, NATO and EU pressure, combining economic sanctions with expansion of NATO, might convince Putin to back down. On the other side, the Donbas republics are vassals of Russian imperialism and controlled by it. Even if neither side really wants a direct armed conflict between Russia and NATO both sides are playing with fire, the danger of war between the world's two strongest nuclear powers is very real.

Russia's revival

For Russia, the 1990s were a decade of economic devastation, comparable in scale to the Great Depression of the 1930s, due to the collapse of the USSR and its planned economy and made worse by neoliberal "shock therapy". The remorseless eastward expansion of NATO and the US openly fomenting "colour revolutions" to create neighbouring regimes hostile to Moscow, led to an inevitable reaction under Vladimir Putin. Russia turned once again into an adversary of the USA, a new imperialism. Germany and other EU powers, on the other hand, tried to court Russia as a strategic economic ally, much to the chagrin of the USA.

The struggle for Ukraine was a key factor in this. The Euro-Maidan movement led to a reactionary coup, spearheaded by right-wing and fascist militias, encouraged by Washington, and this shifted the balance of forces. The USA became the dominant power in Ukraine, aiming to draw EU countries into a new Cold War via NATO, and using states such as Poland and the Baltic states as allies. Within Ukraine, resistance against fascist forces in the Donbas and Crimea initially had a progressive character, but this changed the more it fell under the control of Russian imperialism. Today, the conflict in Ukraine is primarily a proxy conflict, even if the West appears as the defender of Ukrainian democracy and Russia the aggressor.

After the Maidan, the civil war in the Donbas and Russia's annexation of Crimea, the fronts were effectively frozen via the Minsk Agreement, which was bearable for Russia, even if it meant losing most of its influence in Ukraine, and favourable for the EU, because it restricted the US victory.

Today, both sides pretend to be standing up to aggression on behalf of national security and independence. In reality, Ukraine is only a bone of contention in a much larger and more dangerous global struggle. Both sides are asserting their own geo-strategic, political and economic interests in what is a struggle for the redivision of the world between the USA and the EU on the one side, that is, the old imperialist powers and, on the other, the new imperialist powers, Russia and China.

For Putin to invade Ukraine, bomb Kyiv and precipitate a full-scale land war, would be an incredible act of self-harm, a grotesque miscalculation. Short of an unlikely quick victory, it would not only draw down crippling sanctions but, after an initial chauvinist intoxication, major social upheaval in Russia itself, that could bring down Putin and his circle of oligarchs. In addition, all such threats and counter-threats carry global dangers in a period of intensifying inter-imperialist rivalry like the present. We need only think of the potential impact on the situation around Taiwan, with overflights by warplanes and flotillas of warships already skirting territorial waters.

The new arms race, rearmament, the popular mobilisation around nationalist or democratic slogans fostered by the press, broadcast and social media, all have their own logic, which intensifies the conflict. Putin is plainly trying to bolster his popularity at home by restoring Russia's prestige as a great power, joining the 'club' with the USA and China. Biden, too, is trying to prove 'the USA is back' as the world policeman, assembling European and Asian allies by expanding the NATO protection racket and building an equivalent in Asia.

A secondary objective for the USA (and Britain) is to weaken any moves to greater independence and self-reliance by the two big powers within the European Union, Germany and France. The fact that Biden did not consult them on his lightning withdrawal from Afghanistan, his trashing of France's submarine contract with Australia, the launch of the AUKUS pact and his clear aim of sabotaging Russia's NordStream2 gas pipeline to Europe, all underline this.

The USA is arm twisting the new German government to end the gas deal or even to see Russia excluded from the global electronic payment system, Swift, based in Belgium. This would cause chaos for Europe in international markets whilst barely impacting the US. It reveals the near-dictatorial powers Washington still exerts over the world economy, something it has hitherto only shown on a smaller scale in Iran, Cuba and Venezuela.

When ultimatums and threats like this are being hurled at one another, even if the intention is simply to produce a humiliating climbdown by an opponent, the possibilities of miscalculation and of stumbling into armed conflict become very great. If not this time, then the next, the 'victor' will be emboldened to score further victories and the defeated will take the first opportunity for revenge.

We should remember that such crises marked the decades before the twentieth century's two world wars. If an actual invasion by Russia were to take place in Ukraine, even on its eastern borders, this would not only be a cause of further suffering for the people of Ukraine, it would increase the danger of escalation into a direct clash between the imperialist powers themselves.

Stopping the War Threat

So, what should be the reaction of socialists and the labour movement globally? In the "West", the right-wing leaders of social democracy and the trade unions are either silent or parrot the positions of the NATO governments. Because they see their own governments through the lens of democracy, they see Russia and China as authoritarian, dictatorial powers attacking small nations. For them, this justifies social patriotism, as in 1914 or 1939, or in the many real wars of the so-called Cold War. Whilst some reformist leaders in Europe are in silent opposition to the war, because they would prefer a different imperialist orientation of their countries, that is, a closer relationship with Russia, in Germany, the most influential of the supposedly left wing Green Parties, like the Liberals, have become outspoken Russophobes.

What of those parts of the workers' movement worldwide that come from the Communist (Stalinist) tradition and maintain a greater degree of hostility to their "own" governments, which they see as the only imperialist powers? They lay the blame for any potential conflict solely on the USA and NATO. Even if they no longer see Russia and China as

the "socialist camp", they tend to see them at least as counterweights to imperialism that must not be treated in the same way as the real villains.

The position of revolutionaries, in all countries, ought to be that this is a conflict between imperialist powers and blocs and that the expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe after the total downfall of "Communism" was itself an act of aggression. It showed that the priority of the so-called "democratic" imperialisms was not the formation of genuinely independent states but the dragging of the countries previously hegemonised by Soviet Russia into their own system of semi-colonies.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Gorbachev and Yeltsin also dissolved the Warsaw Pact and pleaded either to join NATO or for its dissolution. Although, from the viewpoint of the world working class, it does not justify any invasion of Ukraine, Russia has historic reasons of state to be alarmed at the presence of NATO's missiles and troops on its very borders. The United States, it should be remembered, brought the world to the verge of nuclear war in 1962 in response to the siting of Soviet missiles in Cuba.

The USA, protected by two huge oceans, feels itself invulnerable and, therefore, able to meddle in, and create war situations on, all the other continents in pursuit of its "manifest destiny" of world domination. At present, this is aimed primarily at China, but it has similar ambitions with regard to Russia whose own reassertion has exposed US weakness in Syria.

Certainly, Russia has no justification for an invasion of Ukraine and revolutionary socialists should unequivocally condemn any such action. Ukrainian resistance against such aggression, however, could not be judged outside of the overall inter-imperialist conflict. Its own actions against its Russian speaking populations in Eastern Ukraine in 2014, its determination to join NATO and its repeated attempts to provoke NATO intervention, confirm that it is a tool of "western" imperialism.

Socialists should not only condemn NATO's expansion but its very existence. The US and its allies supported a series of colour revolutions (including the Euromaidan) to produce pro-Western regimes in Russia's near abroad which could potentially become military bases for them.

It is no surprise then that Putin, having felt empowered by the decline of the United States and its President's erratic policies to make America Great Again, is trying to restore Moscow's position in its "near abroad". We support neither of these rival imperialist pretensions. They are threatening to drag their peoples and those of Eastern Europe, of Europe as a whole, and even of the whole world, into an unforeseeable and brutal series of conflicts.

The question of which side is the initial aggressor, does not decide the political position to be taken. Rather, it is a question of waging the struggle against warmongering on both sides by means of class struggle; by exposing the inter-imperialist nature of the conflict and by rejecting support for either camp on the grounds that one is fighting for democracy or the other fighting against imperialism.

The working class in Europe, Russia and the USA needs to mobilise against all these war moves, to demand the withdrawal of all Russian troops from the borders of Ukraine and likewise all western weapons, war materiel and personnel from Ukraine, the Baltic States, Poland etc. We must demand the dissolution of both NATO and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation and oppose all existing or threatened economic sanctions.

We call on the labour and peace movements of Europe, America and Russia to take to the streets, demanding an end to all war preparations and the massive increases in arms spending which fill the pockets of the billionaire arms manufacturers and oligarchs while ordinary working people lack decent housing and healthcare.

To appeal to the Putins, the Xis the Bidens or the EU and British leaders to turn from imperialist tigers into pacifist lambs, however, would be quite futile. In the end, only the working class can put an end to the threat of war, including that of a Third World War. Workers in Russia, and in CSTO states like Kazakhstan, need to mobilise to bring down their autocratic rulers and link up with their class comrades in Europe and the Americas.

A first step today, in all countries, is to mobilise in our millions on the streets, as we did in 2003, to stop the rush to war. But, learning from those mobilisations, we must not stop at a few days of protest, but do all in our power to drive out the warmongers and take power into the hands of working people worldwide. These urgent tasks show, once again, the need for the workers' movements to come together to lay the foundations of a new, Fifth International.

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