

Five years since Ukraine's "Orange Revolution"

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Viktor Yushchenko won an unprecedented third round vote in the country's disputed presidential election December 26, 2004. The Ukrainian Supreme Court had ordered the third vote after widespread allegations of fraud brought thousands of protesters to the streets of Kiev following the second round held in November, in which his opponent Viktor Yanukovich had been proclaimed the winner.

Five years later, Yanukovich and Yushchenko are again standing against each other in next month's presidential election. Deeply unpopular, Yushchenko is expected to lose badly in the first round. Yushchenko's ally in the 2004 "Orange Revolution," Yulia Tymoshenko, who has since become a bitter opponent of the president, is also standing in the January 17 poll.

As in 2004, the Ukrainian people face a choice between candidates that represent the interests of Ukraine's elite. No distinctions of political principle can be found among them, a fact that has been confirmed over the past five years as Yushchenko, Tymoshenko and Yanukovich have formed and broken alliances with each other solely according to political expediency. Meanwhile the social position of Ukrainian working people has deteriorated sharply.

Yushchenko's bid for the presidency in 2004, and his subsequent campaign to overturn the declared electoral victory of the more pro-Russian candidate Viktor Yanukovich, was backed by the United States. Washington saw in Yushchenko a pliant tool in its efforts to weaken the strategic position of Moscow. Ukraine provides a major transit route for the export of Russian natural gas to the European Union and the Ukrainian port of Sevastopol, in Crimea, houses Russia's Black Sea Fleet.

During the 1990s Yushchenko earned the attention of Washington as head of the central bank of Ukraine, where he was a key architect of the restructuring of the former-Soviet economy that resulted in the plundering of former nationalized property and the development of a vastly wealthy and corrupt oligarchic elite.

Former president Leonid Kuchma appointed Yushchenko prime minister in 1999 as a "reformer" who favored an reorientation of the Ukrainian economy, still closely tied to Russia, towards the US and Western Europe. Kuchma hoped that the technocrat Yushchenko could improve relations with

Western capital following the severe recession brought on by Ukraine's close economic ties to Russia, which had just suffered from a major financial crisis.

During his premiership a major rift opened up between Yushchenko and leading oligarchs engaged in the coal, natural gas and metallurgical industries. Yushchenko favored a more "free market" economic approach to attract foreign investment in Ukraine's industrial infrastructure. His opponents, mainly based in the east of the country, feared the government's plans, including reviewing cut-price privatizations to politically connected industrialists, would jeopardize their control over industry.

In this Yushchenko was not only backed by Western capital but by a section of Ukrainian big business interests that saw an opportunity to steal a march on their rivals. Yushchenko's deputy prime minister, Yulia Tymoshenko, who with her husband had made a fortune from the natural gas export industry, engaged in a political battle with her business rivals over the sale of highly lucrative former nationalized industries.

Using their power in the Ukrainian parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, in 2001 the eastern Ukrainian oligarchs secured a vote of no confidence in Yushchenko and Tymoshenko. Spurned by Kuchma, who feared an open breach with his industrialist allies, Yushchenko found himself out of favor with the presidential regime, but the darling of the West and a section of the Ukrainian bourgeoisie who resented the domination of the country by Kuchma and his cronies.

On this basis, Yushchenko and Tymoshenko set up their own parties, Our Ukraine and the Bloc Yulia Tymoshenko, securing a plurality in the 2002 parliamentary elections.

In 2004 Kuchma's second term as president expired. With a constitutional two-term limit preventing him from standing again, he backed Viktor Yanukovich for the presidency. Yanukovich is closely associated with Kuchma and the oligarchic families of Ukraine's industrial Donetsk region, where he led the local government from 1997 until he was appointed to replace Yushchenko as prime minister in 2001.

Yanukovich's bid to take over from Kuchma was backed by the administration of Vladimir Putin in Russia. The Kremlin, though wary of the fact that Kuchma had courted the West and made moves toward the US-led NATO military alliance, still

avored Yanukovich over Yushchenko, who strongly backed Ukrainian membership of NATO.

Yushchenko's bid for the presidency of Ukraine won support, especially among youth and Ukrainian speakers from the western parts of the country, largely based on opposition to the corrupt Kuchma administration. However, Yushchenko received far less support in the largely Russian-speaking eastern regions of Ukraine, where Yanukovich was stronger. Millions of workers in that area rely on industries closely tied to Russia and did not support Yushchenko's "free market" prescriptions or his campaign's appeals to Ukrainian chauvinism.

Both Yushchenko and Yanukovich won just less than 40 percent of the first round presidential vote in October 2004. In the second round, held November 21, Yanukovich went on to win a majority amid opposition accusations of electoral fraud, widely repeated in the Western media.

Following the November vote, mass protests backing Yushchenko's claims of electoral fraud gathered in Kiev. Largely comprised of young people, the protests expressed hostility to the Kuchma-Yanukovich government and illusions in Yushchenko as a democratic reformer.

Yushchenko and Tymoshenko led these demonstrations, which were dubbed the "Orange Revolution" after the 2003 US-sponsored "Rose Revolution" in the ex-Soviet republic of Georgia that brought Mikhail Saakashvili to power.

The support of US imperialism for the orange-themed campaign in Kiev was clear. The pro-Yushchenko student movement Pora was trained and staffed by several former Saakashvili activists from Georgia. Other Our Ukraine personnel received support from the US State Department and various American NGOs.

The US government, with the American media following dutifully, refused to accept the victory of Yanukovich in the November vote and uncritically backed Yushchenko's claims that he was cheated, while ignoring claims of voter fraud allegedly carried out by Our Ukraine supporters.

Since being sworn into office in January 2005 Yushchenko has shattered the illusions of many of the youth who backed him in 2004. As the reactionary political character of his administration has become clear his popularity has plummeted, with Yushchenko recently getting around 3 percent in an opinion poll.

Yushchenko has presided over a regime as corrupt as that of Kuchma. Bribery, cronyism and the enrichment of a tiny number of oligarchs have continued unabated. The country's politics remain dominated by the super-rich, who use the levers of state power to advance their own interests and settle scores with their rivals.

Economic and social conditions for Ukrainian workers have deteriorated since Yushchenko won power, with the country's economy badly affected by the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent global recession. Ukraine's industrial exports have

fallen sharply and the country's financial system remains in crisis.

In common with most other countries around the world, the government in Kiev has made billions of dollars available to financiers and industrialists in bailout measures while living conditions for most Ukrainians have suffered from rising unemployment, falling incomes and the erosion of savings by high inflation.

Ukraine was only saved from bankruptcy by an emergency loan earlier this year from the International Monetary Fund of over \$16 billion. The fund and the Ukrainian elite will recoup this money, as well as other losses accrued from the crisis, by slashing public spending and further driving down the wages and living standards of Ukrainian workers.

The official unemployment rate is around 9 percent, while the real number of jobless is likely to be far higher. Government statistics do not take into account the large number of people who work in the so-called "shadow economy" of illegal businesses, which amounts to 45 percent of the Ukrainian gross domestic product according to research by the newspaper *Delo*.

There is no constituency for democratic and social reform in the Ukrainian bourgeoisie, whose enormous wealth and privileges gained through the looting of the economy since the liquidation of the Soviet Union divide them from the working class by a vast chasm. The change in personnel at the top in Kiev did nothing to arrest the attack on workers' living standards or to establish stable parliamentary rule. Rather, the events of five years ago marked a coup by one clique of oligarchs, backed by US imperialism, to assume power at the expense of their rivals, who received support from the Russian elite. Complaints about "stolen elections" and invocations of democratic rights, both in Ukraine and the Western media, merely provided a political cover for predatory aims.

The realization of the social and democratic aspirations of the Ukrainian workers and youth, like those of their Russian and European brothers, can only be achieved through a politically independent movement of the working class on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective.



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