

Mass protests in Ukraine demand ouster of President Yanukovich

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Protesters marched in Kiev yesterday demanding the ouster of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, in the largest of a series of pro-European Union protests against Yanukovich's November 21 decision to abandon an association agreement with the EU.

The right-wing parties leading the protests in coordination with EU officials and politicians had called for a "million man march." Ultimately, some 250,000 to 300,000 people gathered on Maïdan (Independence) Square. It was the largest protest in Kiev since the 2004 "color revolution" organized by US and European imperialism—the so-called Orange Revolution that ousted the pro-Russian Yanukovich and brought the pro-Western tandem of President Viktor Yushchenko and Prime Minister Yulya Tymoshenko to power.

Protesters on Nezalezhnost Square chanted "Resignation! Resignation!" while listening to speeches on the square. Some subsequently fanned out to occupy government buildings in Kiev.

The reactionary assembly of speakers on Nezalezhnost Square included representatives of various billionaire oligarchs, far-right groups, and patriarchs of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Evgenia Tymoshenko, the daughter of former prime minister and billionaire natural gas magnate Yulya Tymoshenko, whom Yanukovich has jailed, read a message from her mother calling for Yanukovich's "immediate" ouster.

Oleg Tyagnibok, a neo-Nazi from the far-right nationalist Svoboda (Freedom) party notorious for his anti-Semitic statements, denounced Yanukovich's government for working out trade deals with Russia instead of the EU. He declared: "Today, they fall on their knees in front of the president of Russia and surrender us to the [Russian] customs union... We

demand to make public what these secret negotiations were about. They bring us back to the time of Stalinism."

A group of protesters carrying Svoboda party flags pulled down and destroyed a statue of Vladimir Lenin, the co-leader with Leon Trotsky of the October Revolution of 1917 that founded the Soviet Union.

The situation remains explosive, with protesters blockading government buildings and fearing a crackdown by the security forces. A bitter factional struggle is taking place between oligarchs such as Tymoshenko who are oriented to the EU, and others around Yanukovich who seek closer relations with Moscow.

After the failure of last week's motion of no-confidence in parliament against Yanukovich, there are signs of demoralization in the opposition.

The French daily *Le Monde* wrote, "On social media, the million man march was renamed 'last-chance march'... The leaders who speak each day on Nezalezhnost Square no longer call for 'revolution,' as they did at the beginning of the week, and 'behind-the-scenes' negotiations are ongoing with the government, indicated journalist Vitaly Portnikov," a journalist with the US government-backed Radio Free Europe.

The protest leaders themselves are aware that, even among the more right-wing social layers they have mobilized, there is only limited support for integration into the free-market EU. "People have dignity," protest organizer Svitlana Zalischuk told the *New York Times*. "This is why they are here: not because they are against Yanukovich, not because they are for the European Union, but because they have dignity, and they want to live with dignity."

Another protester added that he was primarily opposed to the government's decision to "beat students

and innocent people.” He continued, “The question of Europe doesn’t motivate everybody. We hope the people will be heard and the government will resign.”

The ability of such right-wing protests to proceed and win support among broader layers of the population, who do not necessarily support the EU’s social austerity agenda, reflects the deep crisis of political perspective facing the Eastern European working class.

The anti-communism that has come to dominate political life in the ex-Soviet republics has left these countries easy prey to looting by international capital and political manipulation by Western imperialism and corrupt Ukrainian and Russian oligarchs. The deep social discontent that exists finds expression mainly through movements that are exploited by reactionary, even fascist forces and agencies of imperialism. These movements are then used to turn the political situation even further to the right and mount further social attacks on the population.

Ukraine is one of Europe’s poorest countries, with the world’s second-highest mortality rate (15.75 per 1,000, second after South Africa). Social anger is rising after a budget crisis led the Yanukovich government to cut off unemployment insurance to hundreds of thousands of workers in June.

The major banks and financial markets have cut off lending to Ukraine, which is expected to need \$18 billion in emergency financing by March. The state currently has enough financing only for two months of operations. There is rising fear of a possible new devaluation of the national currency, the hryvnia, which collapsed during the hyper-inflation of the early 1990s, following the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 and the restoration of capitalism by the Stalinist bureaucracy.

The EU is working with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), demanding deep austerity measures—a 40 percent increase in gas and heating prices, state budget cuts, and freezes on minimum and average wages—in exchange for a \$15 billion loan. These cuts aim to deepen the exploitation of the working class and make Ukraine more profitable for European businesses that would set up operations after Ukraine established closer relations with the EU.

The pro-EU and pro-Russian oligarchic factions are both maneuvering to keep the billions they looted from the theft of state property and the restoration of capitalism and to place the full burden of the financial

crisis on the working class. This is the more fundamental reason why the Yanukovich government has not sought to mobilize other social layers against the right-wing, pro-EU protests.

The feuding between these different oligarchic factions offers free play for manipulation by European imperialism, which—while it savagely loots Greece and tramples on mass popular opposition to austerity at home—hypocritically poses as the defender of democracy in Ukraine.

Yesterday, Germany’s *Der Spiegel* reported that German Chancellor Angela Merkel had decided to “build up” Ukrainian professional boxer Vitaly Klitchko as the “leading oppositionist and rival candidate to President Viktor Yanukovich.” Klitchko is scheduled to travel to Brussels in the middle of the month to meet with Merkel and representatives of the European People’s Party, the federation of right-wing and Christian Democratic parties in the EU countries.

Klitchko’s Udar (“Punch”) party already receives “logistical support” from Merkel’s Christian Democratic Union and the CDU’s Konrad Adenauer Foundation, *Der Spiegel* reported.

As for Svoboda, it has close ties to France’s neo-fascist National Front (FN), working with the FN’s Bruno Gollnisch and Hungary’s anti-Semitic Jobbik Party within the Alliance of European National Movements.



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