

Stand-off in Ukrainian power struggle continues

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The result of the power struggle in Ukraine remains open. On Tuesday night riot police sought to clear the areas occupied by protesters on Independence Square and the Town Hall which has been occupied by government opponents. They withdrew, however, in the early morning. The opposition called for new mass protests for Wednesday evening.

The police were apparently instructed to act with moderation. They dismantled barricades, sought to push back demonstrators with their shields and only occasionally resorted to the use of batons and tear gas. On November 30 the very different and brutal treatment of protesters by the Berkut (Golden Eagle) special unit led to a demonstration against the government by over a hundred thousand people the next day.

On Wednesday, Prime Minister Mykola Azarov and Interior Minister Vitaliy Zakharchenko assured that no violence would be used against peaceful demonstrators. “I want to reassure everyone—the square will not be stormed,” Zakharchenko said.

President Viktor Yanukovich, whose resignation the protesters are demanding, met on Tuesday with his three predecessors, Leonid Kravchuk, Leonid Kuchma and Viktor Yushchenko, in a meeting broadcast live on television. The trio called for a negotiated solution. Kravchuk invited the opposition to participate in a “round table” with the government, which the latter promptly rejected.

Julia Tymoshenko demanded the immediate resignation of the president and his entourage. “No negotiations with this gang, no round table with them,” read the text issued by the imprisoned leader of the Fatherland party. Oleh Tjahnybok of the far-right Svoboda (Freedom) party called the proposal a spurious conspiracy.

Vitali Klitschko declared that “there can be no compromises with cutthroats and dictators.” The professional boxer and leader of the Udar party called for

the “resignation of Yanukovich and his whole rotten government.”

The opposition leaders feel strengthened by the support of the European Union and the US government. The EU Representative for Foreign Affairs Catherine Ashton arrived in Kiev on Tuesday and after a meeting with President Yanukovich walked arm in arm with Fatherland speaker Arseniy Yatsenyuk over the besieged central Independence Square.

On Thursday the European Parliament will vote on a joint resolution put forward by its four largest groups—the conservative European People’s Party (EPP), the Socialists, the Liberals and the Greens. They are all demanding a peaceful solution “that meets the expectations of Ukrainian society.” To this end, a mediator group of representatives “from the highest political level” from the European Commission, the Council and the European Parliament are to be sent to Kiev.

US State Secretary John Kerry issued a statement which reads: “The United States expresses its disgust with the decision of Ukrainian authorities to meet the peaceful protest in Kiev’s Maidan Square with riot police, bulldozers and batons, rather than with respect for democratic rights and human dignity. This response is neither acceptable nor does it befit a democracy.”

Kerry’s deputy Victoria Nuland, who also arrived in Kiev on Tuesday, distributed biscuits and tea to demonstrators and held talks with opposition leaders in the occupied city hall.

The trial of strength between the state and demonstrators on Independence Square is only the surface under which the EU and the US on one side, and Russia on the other, fight out a geopolitical dispute over Ukraine and various groups of Ukrainian oligarchs struggle for influence.

Notwithstanding its own claims, the opposition does

not represent the “Ukrainian people” or “Ukrainian civil society.” A survey by the pro-EU European Center for a Modern Ukraine has recorded that only 13 percent of the population in the east of the country support the protests against the government compared to 84 percent in the west. Yanukovych’s decision not to sign an Association Agreement with the EU, which was the impulse for the demonstrations, is rejected by a majority in the west, but supported by 70 percent in the east.

A number of studies also make clear that there is considerable distrust of opposition leaders among the demonstrators. According to a recent report by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation, many protesters regard opposition politicians as “potential collaborators of the ruling elite.”

What has led many to take to the streets is not so much the political goals of the opposition, but rather deep-seated anger over economic decay, corruption at the top levels of state and society and the brutality of the police against opposition forces.

Basic policy decisions are neither taken by the government nor by the opposition, but rather by the oligarchs, who in Ukraine—even more so than in Russia—dominate economic and political life.

The attempt by the opposition to rush through a no-confidence vote against the government in the parliament on December 3 was based on the hope that an oligarch supporting the president would break ranks. The head of the chancellery, Serhiy Levochkin, a close confidant of the oligarch Dmytro Firtash, had criticized the violence used by police against demonstrators, and the deputy, Inna Bogoslovskaya, who also belongs to the Firtash camp, even resigned from the president’s party in protest.

Firtash made his billions in the gas trade and the chemical industry based on his close relations with the Russian gas monopoly Gazprom, and his change of line came somewhat as a surprise. In the no-confidence vote, however, enough of his MPs supported the government, and the no-confidence vote failed.

Rinat Akhmetov, the richest man in Ukraine, who controls coal mines and steel mills in the east of the country and is closely associated with the “family” of the president, also remained loyal to the government. Akhmetov also made it clear, however, that he is interested in closer relations with the EU.

The *Frankfurter Allgemeine* quoted an “insider” who stated that, faced with the rivalry between Kremlin and the EU, Ukraine’s oligarchs are seeking to protect their wealth by “putting eggs in every basket.”

After his meeting with Ashton, President Yanukovych indicated that he as well is ready to cooperate more closely with the EU. In the televised discussion with his three predecessors, he announced he would send a delegation to Brussels on Wednesday to ensure that the Association Agreement with the EU could be signed next March.

As a prerequisite, however, Prime Minister Mykola Azarov demanded aid loans to the tune of €20 billion to ward off the impending bankruptcy of the country and compensate for the economic impact of the EU Agreement. His proposal was immediately rejected by a spokesman for the German government.

Under the terms of the Association Agreement, the EU is demanding comprehensive “reforms”—devaluation of the national currency, an increase in energy prices for consumers, and cuts to wages and pensions. In addition many Ukrainian industrial enterprises are expected to collapse under pressure from European competitors. Fear of the political consequences of such policies is what initially led Yanukovych not to sign the Association Agreement.

Neither the government camp nor the opposition have anything to offer the working class. The opposition parties are quite prepared to support and implement the radical “reform” program of the EU, which means abject poverty for the vast majority of the people. The government is also ready to take the same road but does not want to jeopardize its relations with the billionaire oligarchs in Ukraine and Russia.

The only way forward for the Ukrainian working class is a joint struggle with the workers of Europe and Russia for a society based on the principle of social equality, rather than the enrichment of a few based at the expense of the vast majority—the struggle for the United Socialist States of Europe.



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