

Which way forward for Ukrainian workers?

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The turbulent protests that have rocked Ukraine for the past three weeks reflect profound social tensions. In addition to right-wing support for the European Union, dissatisfaction with the country's economic decay, outrage over corruption at the summits of the state and of society, police brutality, and fears of Russian chauvinism have brought tens of thousands into the streets.

These moods, however, lack any progressive orientation. The protests are being led by reactionary figures: oligarch Yulya Tymoshenko, who has earned her fortune in the gas business with Russia and now trades in Ukrainian nationalism; professional boxer Vitali Klitschko, who is sponsored by Angela Merkel's conservative CDU; and an avowed anti-Semite and fascist. Pulling the strings in the background are oligarchs who have amassed billions by plundering the country and who have now concluded their wealth is more secure in an alliance with the European Union than in a customs union with Russia.

The official slogans of the protests are false and hypocritical. "National independence" means substituting the ruthlessness of the oligarchs in Moscow and Kiev with the tyranny of the financial oligarchy in Frankfurt, London and New York. "Democracy" means subordination to the dictatorship of the International Monetary Fund.

Brushing aside diplomatic protocol leading political figures from Germany, the EU and the US have plunged into Ukrainian political life to advise and manipulate the opposition leaders while strengthening their hand. What lures them is the prospect of cheap labor, a large domestic market and control of a region of great strategic importance. They make little effort to conceal their plans for the future for Ukraine.

According to the German Friedrich Naumann Foundation: "The opposition, which wants to cooperate with the IMF, will at some point have to explain

unpopular measures to the population, such as the devaluation of the national currency, increased energy costs for consumers and the revision of wages and pensions", i.e. another round of the shock therapy that has already plunged millions of pensioners and unemployed into bitter poverty. It is also common knowledge that large swathes of Ukrainian industry would not survive a free trade agreement with the EU.

This is known to many of the demonstrators, especially to those elements from the middle class who are indifferent to the fate of workers and pensioners and have set their sights on career advancement via an association agreement with the EU.

They should pay a visit to Athens. As the social devastation of Greece has shown, the EU's austerity dictates no longer spare the middle class.

Many workers have stayed away from the demonstrations, especially in the industrial areas in the east of the country, where only a small fraction of the population support the protests. They trust neither the opposition nor the government, but have no means of opposing them.

The absence of the working class as an independent and self-conscious force permits the opposition leaders and their backers to manipulate the emotions and expectations of the demonstrators in their favor. This, in turn, is bound up with the misunderstood history of Stalinism.

It was in the Ukraine that the Stalinist bureaucracy committed some of its worst historical crimes. "Nowhere did restrictions, purges, repressions and in general all forms of bureaucratic hooliganism assume such murderous sweep as they did in the Ukraine in the struggle against the powerful, deeply-rooted longings of the Ukrainian masses for greater freedom and independence," Leon Trotsky wrote in 1939.

The Russian October Revolution of 1917 and the subsequent founding of a Soviet Ukraine in 1919 was

initially a powerful pole of attraction for the workers, peasants and intellectuals of Ukraine including its western part, which was under Polish rule. However, initial enthusiasm gave way to bitterness and oppression when Stalin and the rising Soviet bureaucracy revitalized the Great Russian chauvinism which Lenin had bitterly opposed.

Millions starved to death during the forced collectivization which was carried out in Ukraine with particular brutality. In 1939 western Ukraine was not incorporated into the Soviet Union on a voluntary basis, but rather as a consequence of the infamous Hitler-Stalin Pact. The Stalinist secret police then killed thousands of political prisoners and deported a million people to Siberia.

In 1991 the Stalinist bureaucracy completed their counter-revolutionary work by dissolving the Soviet Union and finally liquidating the forms of social ownership established after the October Revolution.

The Ukrainian state that arose was neither independent nor democratic. It merely provided the framework for former Stalinist functionaries to ruthlessly plunder the country and transform themselves into capitalist oligarchs. The Communist Party of Ukraine supported this process. Today it is part of the camp of President Yanukovich, which has the backing of the “Donetsk clan” of the country’s richest man, the oligarch Rinat Akhmetov.

It is the lessons of this history and the writings of Leon Trotsky, the leading Marxist opponent of Stalinism, which can give a perspective for the working class to intervene independently in political events.

They should treat with the same contempt the bought-and-paid-for demagogues on Independence Square, who seek to sell the masses to Wall Street and the Frankfurt Stock Exchange in the name of “Ukrainian independence”, as they do the puppets of the Ukrainian and Russian oligarchs in the presidential palace and government. Real independence—not in the sense of national exclusion, but of social emancipation and equality—is only possible in a society based on the principle of social equality, rather than the enrichment of a few at the expense of the vast majority.

The allies of Ukrainian workers are to be found not in the Kremlin, the White House, the Chancellery in Berlin, or the Berlaymont building in Brussels, but rather in the factories and offices throughout Europe,

Russia and around the world. Workers in Greece, Germany, the US or China are all confronted with the same offensive conducted by a financial oligarchy whose capitalist system is in the deepest crisis since the Second World War.

The only way out of the impasse of poverty, economic backwardness and corruption is the struggle for a Ukrainian workers’ republic as part of the United Socialist States of Europe.



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