What way forward for workers in Ukraine?

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Unilateral decrees of mass layoffs and deep austerity measures by the unelected, Western-backed regime in Kiev underscore the mortal dangers confronting Ukrainian workers, in the west and in the majority Russian-speaking east of the country. The reactionary character of last month's putsch, financed and directed by the United States and Germany, is becoming ever clearer.

Based on discussions with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk said yesterday that he would lay off 10 percent of Ukraine's civil service—24,000 workers—and impose a 50 percent increase in natural gas prices. This price hike, dismantling subsidies that survived the restoration of capitalism in the USSR, will have a devastating impact on the living conditions of millions of Ukrainians.

These measures are only a foretaste of the offensive being prepared by European and US finance capital. After elections are held, the puppet government in Kiev will implement even more onerous austerity measures.

The EU and especially German imperialism view Ukraine not only as a critical staging ground for future operations against Russia, but also as an important source of cheap labor. In a revealing comment, German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble said yesterday: "If we were ever to reach a situation in which we had to stabilize Ukraine, we would have many experiences in Greece [to draw on]."

Workers are being brought face to face with the disastrous social and geo-strategic consequences of the dissolution of the USSR in 1991. The policy of the imperialist powers is to transform Ukraine and the other ex-Soviet republics into impoverished, neo-colonial outposts for reckless diplomatic and military provocations against Russia that threaten war.

Yesterday's UN General Assembly resolution, drawn up by the new Ukrainian government, condemning the referendum in Crimea, which voted for secession from Ukraine and annexation by Russia, is a masterpiece of cynicism and hypocrisy. Denouncing the referendum as having "no validity," it calls upon all parties to pursue peaceful dialogue and refrain from "inflammatory rhetoric that may increase tensions."

What hypocritical rubbish! The Kiev regime came to power based on the clubs and Molotov cocktails of fascist groups like the Right Sector, supported by the EU and the United States—which reserves, as a matter of policy, the right to attack any country, from Iraq to Libya, which it declares to be a threat.

The Western powers continued to back the Kiev regime after it named six ministers from the fascist Svoboda party, whose inflammatory rhetoric includes calls on the Internet to "physically liquidate" all Russian intellectuals and persons Svoboda deems to be "Ukrainophobes."

Former Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, a leading Western-backed oligarch, yesterday announced her candidacy for president. In a leaked phone conversation, Tymoshenko called for the annihilation of Russians in Ukraine. "I will use all of my means to make the entire world rise up, so that there wouldn't be even a scorched field left in Russia," she declared.

The regime of Russian President Vladimir Putin, for its part, has reacted by threatening to withhold or compel higher payments by Ukraine for Russian natural gas—a measure that would only deepen the financial burden on Ukrainian workers.

The working class of Ukraine is caught between the reactionary politics of the pro-Western puppet regime in Kiev and their fascist gunmen, on the one hand, and the bankrupt Russian nationalist politics of Putin, reflecting the interests of Russia's capitalist oligarchs, on the other.

This outcome confirms the correctness of the perspective and analysis laid out by the International

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Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) on the eve of the dissolution of the USSR. The only progressive path for workers in the former USSR, as in Western Europe and the United States, is a unified struggle against both finance capital and the post-Soviet capitalist ruling class.

On October 3, 1991, in a lecture delivered less than three months before the dissolution of the USSR at a workers club in Kiev, David North, now the chairman of the World Socialist Web Site International Editorial Board, warned of the consequences of the nationalist policies of the Soviet bureaucracy and the pro-capitalist nationalists in the republics, including Ukraine. “The conflict between the Stalinists and the democrats,” he stated, “resembles that between rival mafia gangs.”

North continued: “In the republics, the nationalists proclaim that the solution to all problems lies in the creation of new ‘independent’ states. Allow us to ask, independent of whom? Declaring ‘independence’ from Moscow, the nationalists can do nothing more than place all the vital decisions relating to the future of their new states in the hands of Germany, Britain, France, Japan and the United States. [Leonid] Kravchuk [then the chairman of the Ukrainian parliament, soon to be Ukrainian president] goes to Washington and squirms in his seat like a schoolboy while he is lectured by President Bush.

“The Fourth International has always defended the right of nations to self-determination, and Trotsky spoke eloquently in 1939 of the right of the Ukraine to secede from a Soviet state dominated by the Kremlin oligarchy. This remains the political position of the Fourth International. However, we do not pretend that secession can, of itself, provide an answer to the grave problems which confront the Ukraine and other republics. Indeed, even after achieving formal independence, the independent republics would confront, in a concentrated form, all the same problems which they formerly faced within the framework of the USSR—but without any of the advantages conferred by the existence of a large state with an ‘economy of scale’…

“What path, then, should the working people of the USSR follow? What is the alternative? The only solution which can be found is that which is based on the program of revolutionary internationalism. The return to capitalism, for which the chauvinist agitation of the nationalists is only one guise, can only lead to a new form of oppression. Rather than each of the Soviet nationalities approaching the imperialists separately with their heads bowed and their knees bent, begging for alms and favors, the Soviet workers of all nationalities should forge a new relationship, based on the principles of real social equality and democracy, and on this basis undertake the revolutionary defense of all that is worth preserving of the heritage of 1917.”

The ruthless offensive of imperialism in the countries of the former Soviet Union invests these remarks with renewed significance.

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