

The International Socialist Organization and the Ukraine crisis

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Approaching two months after the US-backed, fascist-led coup in Ukraine, the former Soviet republic is being pushed to the brink of civil war and has become the focal point of an imperialist offensive in Eastern Europe that has the potential of unleashing a nuclear third world war.

In the course of this escalating and deadly dangerous global crisis, the American public has been subjected to a ceaseless barrage of pro-imperialist propaganda that turns reality inside out. The fascist thugs of the Right Sector and Svoboda are portrayed as crusaders for democracy; Russia is cast as a powerful imperialist bully bent on conquest; and Washington and NATO are depicted as selfless defenders of small nations.

It is not just the corrupt and servile corporate media that serves as the transmission belt for these lies, which are designed to overcome the overwhelming hostility of the American working class to any US military intervention. They find a particularly insidious form in the coverage of the Ukraine crisis by the International Socialist Organization, whose “left” twist on the media’s version of events is merely a pseudo-left justification for the policies and aims of US imperialism.

This is by no means a sudden political departure for this organization. It is of a piece with the line it developed first in Libya, where it provided a “democratic” and “human rights” cover for the US-NATO war for regime-change against Gaddafi, and then in Syria, where it cast the US-backed right-wing Islamists fighting to topple the Assad regime as a popular “revolution” and defended the supposed right of these “revolutionaries” to accept CIA weapons and money and even to support direct US military intervention.

In its response to the Ukrainian events, the ISO adopts essentially the same formula, portraying a violent coup by a minority led by right-wing and fascist parties and orchestrated by Washington and its allies as a mass popular democratic uprising.

In this, it in no way distinguishes itself from its counterparts among the pseudo-left parties of Europe, such as the French New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA), which hailed the clashes on Kiev’s Maidan (Independence Square) as a “mass revolt for democracy,” and the German Left Party, whose leading members reacted to the events by voting in favor of an anti-Russian military deployment.

The ISO seeks to cover its naked apology for US-backed regime-change by adopting the formal standpoint that what is involved is a conflict between two rival imperialist blocs—Russia, on the one hand, and the US and its NATO allies, on the other. In doing so, it revives a slogan that was employed by its ideological forebears during the period of the Cold War—“Neither Washington, Nor Moscow”—a subject to which we will return.

In reading the ISO’s publication *Socialist Worker*, however, there is no mistaking which of these supposed imperialist blocs it sees as the main aggressor and enemy. In a March 12 article written in the run-up to the referendum in Crimea, it demonizes Russian President Vladimir Putin as “the butcher of Chechnya, persecutor of LGBT people and jailer of

political dissidents.”

By contrast, the name Barack Obama is never mentioned in the ISO’s coverage, much less any description of him as the butcher of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, etc., or as the director of drone assassinations, repression and spying the world over.

The same article condemns “some on the left in the US and Europe” for insisting that the “‘main enemy,’ imperialism, is ‘at home.’” To take this position, the ISO argues, means “renouncing the mass uprising that overthrew the Yanukovich regime and accepting the lying justifications of Russian imperialists for trying to maintain power in *their* ‘backyard.’”

The “main enemy is at home” was a slogan popularized by the German revolutionary and anti-militarist Karl Liebknecht in seeking to mobilize the working class against the betrayal carried out by the German Social Democratic Party in supporting German imperialism during the First World War. It has been the bedrock principle of any genuine socialist response to imperialist war ever since.

The explicit renunciation of this principle by a political organization operating inside the United States, the world’s foremost imperialist power and source of militarism, has unmistakable implications. In its Solomon-like wisdom of condemning all “imperialisms” equally, the ISO defines itself as a willing tool of US imperialist policy.

The equation of US imperialism and Russia—while, in fact, branding Russia as the principal aggressor—is ludicrous. Washington and its NATO allies spend ten times as much on their military machines as Russia. In terms of its share of global gross domestic product (GDP), Russia accounts for roughly 3 percent as opposed to nearly 19 percent for the US. Dependent on energy exports, the Russian economy has more in common with Iran than it does with a major imperialist power.

The Putin government, resting upon a corrupt layer of oligarchs who enriched themselves by looting state property after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, confronts a relentless threat from US and European imperialism from a position of weakness. While resorting to military maneuvers and appeals to Great Russian chauvinism, it is desperately seeking some means of accommodation with Washington.

US imperialism has shown no desire for a compromise. Having steadily encircled Russia with military bases, a missile shield and the transformation of former Soviet bloc countries into NATO members, it is determined to eliminate Moscow as even a regional rival and turn Russia into a semi-colony.

As for “renouncing the mass uprising that overthrew the Yanukovich regime,” nowhere does the ISO even approach a class analysis of this “uprising” or an examination of its programmatic aims. By all accounts, the class composition of those who occupied Kiev’s Maidan was overwhelmingly petty-bourgeois and drawn from the more conservative and rural west of the country. No strike movement accompanied the clashes in the capital, and there was no involvement by the Ukrainian working class as a class in this movement. The domination of right-wing and fascist forces was not some accident, but reflected the social elements

involved.

The main demand that accompanied the beginning of the anti-Yanukovich demonstrations last November was reactionary—the demand for the integration of Ukraine into the European Union. This demand reflected the interests of privileged layers of the middle classes and sections of the bourgeoisie, not the working class, which has learned in recent years that the EU stands for austerity, poverty and repression. The Maidan protests promoted a brutal International Monetary Fund austerity program that will, in addition to slashing wages and social benefits and increasing utility prices, result in the wholesale closure of mines and factories and the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs, especially in the industrialized east of the country.

Even some of the ISO's own periphery found the organization's largely uncritical attitude toward the Maidan protests and its refusal to oppose US imperialism's machinations in the region unsettling.

The ISO, one reader commented in a letter posted March 6, "underestimates the impact of the fascists and neo-Nazis on the protest movement." The reader continued, "Not every protest movement is intrinsically progressive. It is important for socialists to be able to determine the class nature of mass mobilizations in a world that is increasingly unstable."

The letter concluded, "It seems to me that our primary obligation, as socialists in the US, is to oppose any war moves by our own imperialism."

The ISO did not bother to reply.

What is most striking about *Socialist Worker's* coverage of the Ukrainian events is its utter silence on the role played by the United States and Germany in instigating the crisis in Ukraine for the purpose of installing a right-wing nationalist regime completely subservient to Washington and NATO.

Victoria Nuland, the State Department's top official on Europe and Eurasia—a former chief of staff to Dick Cheney and wife of Project for a New Century founding chairman Robert Kagan—played the lead role in the regime-change operation in Ukraine. Her machinations are passed over in silence.

There has been no mention by *Socialist Worker* of her infamous recorded phone call with the US ambassador to Ukraine, Geoffrey Pyatt, in which Nuland specified which of the US-backed right-wing opposition leaders should be included in the new government. She decreed that Arseniy Yatsenyuk of the Fatherland Party—whom she refers to as "Yats"—should head up the new regime. Sure enough, once the right-wing violence in Kiev forced Yanukovich to flee the country, "Yats" was installed as prime minister.

Nor is there any mention of her bragging in a videotaped speech last December that Washington had funneled some \$5 billion into Ukraine to back right-wing forces seeking to install a pro-NATO regime.

Curiously, the only reference to Nuland by *Socialist Worker* was over her meeting with then-President Viktor Yanukovich in December of 2013, in which she demanded that he subordinate his government to the International Monetary Fund and the EU and warned him that a crackdown on the Maidan demonstrators would be "impermissible." *Socialist Worker* helpfully includes a link to a Radio Free Europe video of Nuland's speech following this meeting.

The real content of the ISO's supposedly even-handed approach toward US imperialism and Russia is spelled out in a March 11 article posted in the run-up to the referendum on Crimea's annexation. The article demands that Russia's maneuvers in Crimea "be unconditionally condemned by all revolutionaries claiming to be anti-imperialists."

The article then goes on to state, "But it should be obvious that condemning Russian imperialism does not by any means amount to a defense of Western interests... Intervention by the US and European Union (EU)—whether in the form of diplomatic or economic pressure or the actual military operations—won't be carried out because of concerns for

democracy or the conditions of ordinary people in Ukraine."

The fact that the ISO feels compelled to assert that it "should be obvious" that it is not backing Western imperialism only reveals that it is anything *but* obvious. Its formulations, demanding "unconditional condemnation" of Russia while casting Western intervention in Ukraine as a hypothetical, point clearly to its real position.

In this context, the ISO's dusting off of the old state capitalist slogan, "Neither Washington, Nor Moscow," is meant only to mask the organization's real role, which is to serve as a consistent apologist for US imperialism.

Nonetheless, the revival of this slogan—which dovetails with the resurgence within the capitalist media and political establishment of the kind of demonization of Russia that was cultivated during the Cold War—is significant. By pointing to the political origins of the ISO, it helps explain how and why this tendency has ended up in the camp of imperialism.

"Neither Washington nor Moscow, but International Socialism"—it is noteworthy that the ISO has dropped this last phrase—was the slogan initiated by Tony Cliff when he broke with the Fourth International in 1950. Adapting to a wave of anti-communist hysteria, Cliff rejected the defense of North Korea against US imperialism, which waged a near-genocidal war that claimed the lives of over 3 million people.

Cliff, who founded the International Socialists (later the Socialist Workers Party) in Britain, adopted the "theory" of state capitalism, which proclaimed the Soviet Union a new form of class society and the Stalinist bureaucracy a new ruling class. In addition to renouncing the defense against imperialism of the Soviet Union and the nationalized property relations established by the October 1917 Revolution, this demoralized and essentially anti-communist perspective wrote off the revolutionary role of the working class and its ability to establish its own state and new forms of property relations.

This retrograde perspective was definitively demolished by the fate of the Soviet Union itself. Far from being a ruling class playing a necessary role within a new form of class society, the Stalinist bureaucracy—unlike any ruling class in history—did nothing to defend the existing property relations in the USSR. Instead, it played the central role in dismantling them and reestablishing capitalism, with many leading Stalinists transforming themselves into wealthy businessmen in the bargain.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union is a matter of complete indifference to the ISO. To the extent it is even mentioned in its writings on Ukraine, it is presented as a generally progressive development that allowed a flowering of Ukrainian nationalism.

From the ISO's writings, one would have no inkling of the catastrophe capitalist restoration unleashed upon workers in Ukraine, where wages were cut by two-thirds and more than half of the population was driven below the poverty level. Ukraine's GDP per capita plummeted from \$1,979 in 1990 to \$837 in 1998.

This strategic experience, repeated across the former USSR, is the essential starting point for understanding the origins of the current crisis and developing a genuine socialist response to both the threat of imperialist war and the corrupt and oppressive rule of the capitalist oligarchs in both Russia and Ukraine.

The ISO has no interest in developing such an alternative. In both its perspective and social composition, there is little to distinguish it from the privileged middle class layers that direct outfits such as USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy, which have served as the conduits for Washington's funding of the ultra-right in Ukraine. The ISO is in all essentials a specific breed of NGO, whose job is to provide the crimes of US imperialism with a pseudo-left cover.



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