Coal crisis hits Ukraine as far-right groups enforce blockade

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Vowing to end contraband from entering Ukraine, nationalist far-right militia groups have blockaded trains, roads and other conduits of goods from the separatist-controlled Lugansk and Donetsk provinces in the Donbass region. As a result, Ukrainian Prime Minister Volodymyr Groysman announced last week that the country had been forced into a state of emergency due to the loss of coal resources from the Donbass region.

The area has long been the major producer of anthracite coal that is used for heating and electricity both in Ukraine and throughout the former Soviet Union. Lacking coal, millions could be left without heat and electricity within weeks, including the major Ukrainian cities of Kiev and Kharkiv.

The far-right forces behind the coal blockade also regularly prevent food, water, medicine and other humanitarian assistance from reaching the Donbass, which is a direct violation of the Minsk II protocol agreements signed by the Ukrainian government in February 2015.

Due to the present crisis, Ukraine could be forced to import coal from Russia, according to Minister of Energy and Coal Industry Ihor Nasalyk. Other sources, such as South Africa, are experiencing high demand and would be unable to supply Ukraine with the coal necessary to keep the country running. Imported coal from Russia would likely also be seen as unacceptable to Ukraine's far-right militia groups that were essential in bringing the Poroshenko regime to power in a western-backed coup three years ago.

The coal crisis coincides with news of a forthcoming gas price hike of up to 40 percent on April 1, the date Ukraine agreed to deregulate its gas prices according to International Monetary Fund (IMF) agreements. According to Nafto-Gaz director Yuri Vitrenko, "If government regulation of consumers prices doesn't continue, so-called 'special obligations,' then going by current prices in the European market, the value of the Ukrainian currency and other factors, we can expect consumer prices for gas to grow by up to 40 percent."

The continuation of discounted gas prices for consumers would be a violation of the IMF agreements. It could jeopardize the continued financial backing of the IMF, which is essential to keeping the current government in power.

Poroshenko has responded to the coal crisis by vowing to end the blockade. Speaking before the country's National Security and Defence Council, he stated, "If the blockade is not lifted, the Ukrainian steel industry could lose up to 300,000 jobs. And the state will lose up to $2 billion in foreign exchange earnings." Poroshenko added that the militia forces were harming the Ukrainian government's attempts to protect its "territorial integrity" and accused the groups of carrying out a PR campaign "of blood."

Despite the Poroshenko government's public opposition to the blockade, it was well aware of the far-right militias' blockade plans for several months prior to the current energy crisis.

Anatoly Vinogrodsky, one of the main organizers of the blockade, claimed that blockade forces had notified the government in December 2016 of their plans.

Rinat Akhmetov, a coal and steel oligarch from Donetsk who possesses a net worth of over $3 billion, is often identified as one of the targets of the blockade. In October 2016, Russian opposition newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* published an investigative report into the smuggling operations of Donbass separatist groups. The report showed that, free from government taxes and regulations, separatist leaders and oligarchs such as Rinat Akhmetov have enriched themselves while war

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continues and the working class suffers the consequences. Despite backing the Donbass separatists for financial gain, Akhmetov himself lives in the capital of Kiev to stay close to the Poroshenko regime.

Fearful that the blockade could further undermine its allies in Kiev, the European Union (EU) has called for an immediate end to the action. “Those responsible for the blockade must cease their actions and the authorities must address this problem as a matter of priority,” stated an EU spokesman on February 16.

The US administration of President Donald Trump, still undecided in its attitude toward the Poroshenko regime, refused to offer outright support for the Ukrainian government, remarking only, “We are concerned by the current disruption to the coal supply from the on-government-controlled areas of Donetsk and Luhansk and its potential impact on Ukraine’s energy system, the Ukrainian economy, and the Ukrainian people.”

Due to Kiev’s domestic unpopularity and reliance on western imperialist backing, relatively small nationalist, far-right political parties in the country, such as Right Sector, have been able to gain a degree of power that is disproportionate to their size or level of support within the populations.

Regardless of its present confrontation with these forces, right-wing militia groups, such as the Azov Battalion, are essential to the Poroshenko government’s continued war against the Donbass.

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