

The election of Zelensky in Ukraine and the way forward for the working class

Clara Weiss
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Comedian Volodymyr Zelensky won the Ukrainian presidential elections Sunday with over 73 percent of the vote, in a massive repudiation of the incumbent president, Petro Poroshenko, and the imperialist-orchestrated 2014 coup that brought him to power.

The “chocolate oligarch” Poroshenko became president in the wake of the operation in February 2014 that toppled the pro-Russian government of Viktor Yanukovich. Behind the coup stood the major imperialist powers, above all the US and Germany. Basing themselves on sections of the Ukrainian oligarchy and upper middle class, they mobilized fascist forces to install a puppet regime that would be immediately subservient to their economic interests and war preparations against Russia.

The bourgeois media hailed this fascist-led coup as a “democratic revolution.” They were joined by the middle-class left, including organizations such as the now-defunct International Socialist Organization, which systematically worked to downplay the role played by the extreme right and the US State Department in the creation of this “revolution.”

The results of the 2014 coup for the working class have been nothing less than catastrophic. In the past five years, the Poroshenko regime has stood at the forefront of the imperialist military buildup against Russia. Ukrainian military spending has risen to a staggering 6 percent of GDP. The systematic ratcheting up of tensions with Russia by the Kiev regime, most recently with its reckless provocation in the Azov Sea, have dramatically heightened the danger of a full-scale war in Europe, which could quickly escalate into another world war. The ongoing civil war in the Eastern Ukraine has cost the lives of over 13,000 people.

At the same time, the Ukrainian oligarchy has undertaken the most far-reaching attacks on the already low living standards of the Ukrainian working class since the restoration of capitalism. Almost one million

Ukrainians are now living on the brink of starvation; tens of thousands are left to freeze in the winter.

For the implementation of these policies, the Poroshenko regime mobilized fascist forces such as the notorious Azov battalion. The glorification of the Nazi collaborators of the UPA and the OUN-B, which massacred thousands of Jews, Poles and Ukrainians during World War II, has become official state policy. References to communism and symbols of the Soviet Red Army, which defeated the Nazis in the war, have been criminalized. Russian artists and works of art have been banned from entering the country.

It is these conditions that propelled the vast majority of the Ukrainian population to either abstain from the elections—the voter turnout was just 62 percent—or vote for Zelensky. Poroshenko was unable to garner any significant support outside a small province in West Ukraine and the district in Kiev where the country’s super rich reside.

Yet whatever his appeals to antiwar sentiments and the enormous anger about social austerity during the campaign, Zelensky will defend the interests of the Ukrainian oligarchy against the working class, and work in alliance with imperialism.

Throughout the entire election campaign, Zelensky deliberately concealed his real political and economic agenda. He instead relied almost exclusively on demagogic appeals to the widespread hatred of Poroshenko. During the campaign, Zelensky made promises to enter direct negotiations with Russian President Vladimir Putin for a peaceful settlement of the war in East Ukraine. Yet in an interview published days before the election, he called Putin an “enemy” and stated that it was “perfectly fine and great” that people considered the Nazi collaborator Bandera as a “hero.”

On April 12, Zelensky met with French President Emmanuel Macron. His team has hired a PR firm in

Washington to arrange meetings with officials of the Trump administration and influential think tank figures. Zelensky also maintains close connections to the oligarch Ihor Kolkomoisky, and now seeks to work together with Mikheil Saakashvili, the former president of Georgia, who had been installed through a US-backed “color revolution.”

The enormous opposition within the working class to imperialism and the policies of austerity and war of the oligarchy has found only an initial, highly distorted expression in the vote for Zelensky. However, under conditions of an international upsurge of the working class, this opposition will sooner rather than later take the form of open class struggle.

In France, hundreds of thousands of “yellow vests” have been protesting against social inequality and the Macron government for months. Earlier this year, auto parts workers in Matamoros, Mexico launched what has been the biggest strike on the North American continent in two decades. In the United States, the center of world imperialism, the past year has seen a 20-fold increase in the number of workers on strike. On the northwestern border of Ukraine, over 300,000 Polish teachers are striking against the right-wing government of the Law and Justice Party (PiS).

The reemergence of the class struggle raises fundamental questions of historical perspective and leadership. In the unfolding political and military crisis in Ukraine, workers are faced with the outcome of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

In order to fight the dangers they are confronting, workers must take up a socialist program. But this is only possible by assimilating the lessons of the October Revolution and the struggle waged by the Trotskyist movement against Stalinism.

The Left Opposition, formed by Leon Trotsky in 1923, recognized in Stalinism and its program of “socialism in one country” a nationalist reaction against the internationalist revolutionary program of permanent revolution that had formed the basis of the October Revolution. In the following decades, the national opportunist policies of Stalinism led to countless betrayals and defeats of revolutionary struggles by the working class in Europe and Asia. The crimes of the Stalinist bureaucracy culminated in the Great Terror—which physically exterminated the leaders of the Russian Revolution and entire generations of socialist revolutionaries—and the assassination of Leon Trotsky himself in 1940.

The Fourth International, founded by Trotsky in 1938, warned that, unless overthrown in a political revolution by the working class, the Stalinist bureaucracy would eventually destroy the Soviet Union, restore capitalism and transform itself into a new ruling class. This is exactly what happened in 1989-1991.

Opposition within the working class to the bureaucracy exploded into the open in the late 1980s when a powerful mass movement of workers developed in Poland. The struggles in Poland helped encourage a major strike of coal miners in the Soviet Union, centered in Siberia and Eastern Ukraine.

However, decades of Stalinism had severely undermined the political and historical consciousness of the working class. The equation of the Stalinist dictatorship with socialism and Marxism dragged the program of socialist revolution through the mud. At the same time, the Pabloites, a revisionist tendency that had emerged within the Fourth International, provided a “left” fig leaf for the counterrevolutionary policies of Stalinism. The Pabloites intervened in the workers’ strikes, hailing the bureaucracy as a progressive historical force and its program of capitalist restoration as “self-reform.”

This made it possible for the Stalinist bureaucracy to liquidate the Soviet Union, massively enriching themselves by privatizing social resources through the restoration of capitalism. The social and political disaster that followed with the restoration of capitalism found a particularly sharp expression in Ukraine, which has since been ruled by a profoundly corrupt and ultranationalist oligarchy, continuously maneuvering between the different imperialist powers.

Today, as workers are again entering into struggle, they must base themselves on lessons of these critical historical experiences. The way forward lies in the fight to build a Trotskyist party, that is a Ukrainian section of the ICFI, to lead the coming struggles of the working class.



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