Pro-imperialist pseudo-left event on Ukraine ends in debacle for organizers

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On Sunday, March 13, representatives of a variety of pro-imperialist pseudo-left tendencies held an online event in which they voiced support for the US/NATO war drive in Ukraine and echoed the accompanying propaganda campaign.

The event, titled "Against Imperialist War: Ukraine, Russia, NATO and the US," was sponsored by the Democratic Socialists of America-aligned Tempest Collective and was endorsed by *Against the Current*, Haymarket Books (the publication arm of the now-defunct International Socialist Organization), *New Politics*, the Madison, Wisconsin, branch of the DSA and a US group associated with the German *Marx21*. The event was moderated by former ISO member Lee Wengraf and speakers included Gilbert Achcar, Ilya Budraitskis of the Russian Socialist Movement (RSM), Johns Hopkins professor Ho-Fung Hung, and Erin Cass, a DSA member and former writer for the ISO's *Socialist Worker*.

Achcar was the featured speaker. The longtime Pabloite and professor at London's School of African and Oriental Studies is also a paid adviser to the British military.

Achcar's remarks set the tone for the discussion by ignoring the role played by US and European imperialism and focusing almost entirely on the right-wing role of the Putin government. To the extent he mentioned the US and NATO, it was to blame them for facilitating Putin's rise. Without criticizing the US or European powers, Achcar said, "There is no debate possible about the imperialist character of present day Russia."

Achcar equated opposition to US imperialism with support for Putin:

"You have these knee-jerk reactions which regarded every enemy of the US government as something that should be supported," he said. "Now, this kind of attitude we have seen Syria was an important moment of that kind of attitude, part of the left supporting in fact this terrible destructive war that Russia, that Russian imperialism launched in Syria in support of one the worst dictatorships in the world."

For more than a decade, Achcar's own support for imperialist war has become "knee jerk." He supported the US bombing of Libya, which killed 30,000 Libyans, as well as the US-backed civil war in Syria.

Earlier this month, Achcar called on the imperialist powers to send more weapons to Ukraine, writing that, "We are in favor of the delivery of defensive weapons to the victims of aggression with no strings attached."

What Achcar calls "knee-jerk" opposition to US/NATO imperialism is in reality a basic tenet of Marxism, which bases itself on an analysis of objective social relations and rejects attempts by the "democratic" imperialist powers to justify their actions under false humanitarian pretenses. By employing the language of a political renegade who has seen the light, Achcar attempts to deny that Marxism has any credible intellectual foundation. By the same logic, Achcar might denounce a hospital patient for their "knee-jerk" belief in medical science or a scientist for their "knee-jerk" belief in biology and physics. Achcar's references to "knee-jerk anti-imperialism" are merely attempts to justify his own rotten capitulation to imperialism.

Ilya Budraitskis of the Russian Socialist Movement (RSM) spoke next and seconded Achcar's attack on left-wing opponents of the US/NATO war drive. Budraitskis, who supported the US-led 2014 coup in Ukraine and called for a Red-Brown alliance with fascist opponents of Russia, said, "The western left should not bring any excuses for the reactionary, bloody and criminal dictatorship of Vladimir Putin in Russia." Budraitskis presented Russia as the only party guilty of spreading propaganda and misinformation and called for "international solidarity with the people of Ukraine."

Ho-Fung Hung then warned that an insufficiently aggressive response to Russia would only strengthen China, calling the two countries "modern empires." If Putin succeeds at gaining control of Ukraine, Hung said, "then China will feel much more empowered and comfortable and confident in doing a similar thing in Taiwan."

DSA member Erin Cass spoke last and said socialists should not speak out against pro-war demands raised by Ukrainian nationalists at demonstrations opposing Putin's invasion of Ukraine. Responding to the fact that the protests "have called for sanctions, the imposition of a no fly zone and generally for Western intervention," Cass added, "Where socialists have managed to actually show up to these actions they've unfortunately taken a more hostile approach by arguing against those demands."

Cass concluded, "I want to make clear that I think there's just one very basic position that US socialists should be taking right

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now together and that is the position of absolute support for Ukrainians' right to defend themselves against Russian imperialism."

Achcar spoke immediately after Cass and said, "I want to second what Erin said, Erin very clearly articulated what should be the socialist internationalist position in the United States and anywhere." He added, "The resistance of the Ukrainian people to Russian imperialism is a defining moment to all of us… It takes one to be completely blind to keep applauding Vladimir Putin in the name of anti-imperialism. This is really completely, sorry for the term, but idiotic."

Roughly 45 minutes into the discussion and after Achcar and Budraitskis' remarks, WSWS International Editorial Board Chairman David North posted a written message in the public chat, which the event moderator had encouraged all attendees to use. North, who had registered for the public event and identified himself by name, wrote:

"This is Shachtmanism on steroids. Forty minutes into this webinar of right-wing social democrats, there has not been a single word of condemnation of US-NATO imperialism. No connection is being made between the last 31 years of wars waged by US-NATO in the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa and the launching of this proxy war."

As the event continued, North provided additional commentary in the public chat. "This is not opposition to Putin from the Left," North wrote in one message. "It presents no perspective whatever to the Russian working class. Genuine socialists would be emphasizing that this war is the tragic and disastrous outcome of the dissolution of the Soviet Union by the Stalinists."

North continued in another chat comment: "The dissolution of the USSR was based on three delusional conceptions: 1) that the restoration of capitalism would shower riches on Russia; 2) that it would give rise to a flowering of democracy; and 3) that Russia would be embraced by the West. The totally disoriented intelligentsia and others tied to the nomenklatura would laugh when one raised the issue of imperialism, which they claimed was a bogeyman invented by the Bolsheviks."

As participants stated their agreement with North's points, Wengraf, the event moderator, nervously asked attendees "to be respectful and comradely to others in the chat." The speakers' faces grew sullen as they monitored the chat and the positive response to North's criticisms.

In response to the invocations of Ukraine's so-called right to defend itself, North left a comment stating, "Ukraine's right-wing bourgeois government is not fighting for self-determination, it is fighting for its right to be part of NATO."

In a subsequent chat message, North quoted from Leon Trotsky's *War and the Fourth International*. He wrote:

> Trotsky has just sent a message to the meeting: "A 'socialist' who preaches national defence is a petty-bourgeois reactionary at the service of decaying capitalism. Not to bind itself to the national state in time of war, to follow not the war map but the map of the class struggle, is possible only for that party that has already declared irreconcilable war on the national state in time of peace. Only by realizing fully the objectively reactionary role of the imperialist state can the proletarian vanguard become invulnerable to all types of social patriotism. This means that a real break with the ideology and policy of 'national defence' is possible only from the standpoint of the international proletarian revolution."

This hit too close to home for the event hosts, who promptly expelled North from the meeting without warning.

When attendees were informed of North's removal, a substantial number of people began denouncing the event hosts as undemocratic proponents of censorship. The event speakers became hesitant to participate in the discussion further. They made hasty closing remarks, and the meeting was brought to an end.

The content of the meeting and the organizer's decision to expel David North for writing messages in the public chat reveal that the pseudo-left defenders of US imperialism are incapable of answering when confronted with opposition from the socialist left. For all their claims that American imperialism is fighting for "democracy" in Ukraine, the event organizers proved incapable of respecting democracy in their own event chat. The event was a political debacle for the organizers and the political tendencies associated with it.

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