

New Zealand's ISO backs US-NATO imperialism in Ukraine war against Russia

Tom Peters
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The International Socialist Organisation (ISO) in New Zealand has joined other pseudo-left groups throughout the world in lining up unambiguously behind the US and NATO imperialist powers in their proxy war with Russia over Ukraine.

A speech published on March 8, by ISO member Cory Kinnunen entitled “No War! Stop the Invasion of Ukraine!” argues in favour of Ukraine joining NATO and glorifies its war against Russia. The speech starkly demonstrates the gulf that separates the ISO from socialism: this is a middle-class tendency that backs imperialist war.

The *World Socialist Web Site* opposes Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which is the Russian ruling class's reactionary, nationalist response to military encroachment and threats from the US and European powers. The ISO seeks to obscure the predatory aims of Washington and its allies by presenting the war as the product of Putin's “drive to expand Russia's power and influence.” In fact, the principal responsibility for the war rests with the US and NATO, which deliberately provoked Russia in order to drag it into a drawn-out and debilitating conflict.

US imperialism seeks nothing less than the reduction of Russia as well as China to subservient, semi-colonial status. The American ruling class views this as the only way to reverse its long-term economic decline and maintain its global dominance. President Joe Biden has ratcheted up tensions with reckless threats against Putin, making clear that Washington wants nothing less than regime change in Moscow.

The only way to stop the war, which threatens to become a Third World War involving nuclear-armed powers, is through the mobilisation of the working classes of Russia, Ukraine, Europe, the Americas and internationally against the capitalist system that is the root cause of war.

This socialist and internationalist strategy is diametrically opposed to the ISO's embrace of the Ukrainian government and its imperialist backers. Kinnunen insists that Ukraine must have the “freedom” to join NATO, which would directly involve the European and American powers in a war with Russia. He declares that “to deny the right of Ukraine to choose its own security arrangements and foreign policy is to make concessions to Russian imperialism.”

In other words, anyone who refuses to support the expansion of the NATO military cabal dominated by the US is a tool of Russian “imperialism.” There is no difference between the ISO's position and the propaganda being churned out by the US State Department

and the corporate media, depicting the US/NATO support for Ukraine as legitimate and defensive.

The war in Ukraine has been prepared for years. In 2014, the US supported a coup in Ukraine, which removed a pro-Russia government. The fascist thugs of the Svoboda Party and Right Sector played a central role in the putsch, which sparked the civil war with separatist movements in the Donbas, and Russia's annexation, following a referendum, of Crimea. For the past eight years the US and NATO have flooded Ukraine with weapons, while tens of thousands of NATO troops have been stationed throughout Eastern Europe.

In fact, the ISO is supporting more direct imperialist intervention. On social media, it has promoted protests outside the Russian embassy, as well as a church service to “stand with Ukraine,” organised by the “Ukrainian Gromada of Wellington.” This NZ-based organisation calls for NATO to intervene directly in Ukraine to impose a “no fly zone,” which would mean shooting down Russian planes and greatly escalating the war.

The ISO paints the Ukrainian regime led by Volodymyr Zelensky in the brightest of colours, as progressive and even “internationalist.” Kinnunen dismisses “claims that the government is a far-right clique that exploits its people” as lies spread by Putin.

He claims that the Zelensky government has “emphasized that they are not the enemy of ordinary Russians.” Referring to reports that the Ukrainian forces set up “a telephone number which Russian people can call to find information on the fate of servicemen in Ukraine,” Kinnunen bizarrely declares: “This is genuine internationalism in action—and it gives us a glimpse at what a freer world looks like.”

These are grotesque lies. The Kiev government represents the country's capitalist oligarchy, which has been working for decades with the US and EU and driven the working class into poverty. The median household income in Ukraine is around \$4,400 a year, about on par with that of Iran. Meanwhile the country's richest 100 people, according to *Forbes*, grew their wealth by 42 percent in the space of one year.

Zelensky recently banned 11 opposition parties for the crime of supporting a negotiated peace with Russia. Far-right forces murder and terrorize political opponents, and whip up anti-Russia and anti-Semitic hatred to divide the working class. The commander of Ukraine's special forces has publicly stated that captured Russian artillerymen will be killed and “cut up like pigs.” This is the ISO's

“freer world.”

Contrary to the rose-tinted fantasy presented by the ISO, it is a well-known fact that the Ukrainian state and armed forces are full of fascists. The neo-Nazi Azov battalion and similar groups—which helped to inspire Christchurch terrorist Brenton Tarrant to carry out his massacre in 2019—are playing a major role in Ukraine’s war machine, armed with an endless supply of weapons from the US and its allies. The militias are recruiting fascists from around the world to join the war.

Ukrainian nationalism, which the ISO glorifies, has its roots in the country’s extreme right-wing movements, which collaborated with the Nazis in World War II and then with US imperialism during the Cold War. While denouncing Stalinist oppression of Ukraine, Kinnunen makes no mention of Nazi Germany’s invasion and its slaughter of millions of people, including the country’s Jewish population. The ruling elites in Kiev are now seeking to rewrite the history of WWII as a war for “freedom” from the Soviet Union, led by Nazi collaborators like Stepan Bandera, who has been elevated to the status of a national hero.

In justifying support for this reactionary regime and its US/NATO imperialist backers, Kinnunen declares that “socialists stand for the rights of the Ukrainian people for freedom and independence from their former oppressors,” adding that this means “principally” Russian “imperialism.”

The ISO is continuing the role that it and other pseudo-left groups played in promoting the US-backed Islamist forces in Syria, which continue to wage a civil war aimed at overthrowing the Assad regime. The New Zealand pseudo-lefts organised protests in 2016 accusing Russia of “genocide” for intervening in support of Assad.

The claim that Russia is “imperialist” is not backed by any economic or historical analysis. As Lenin, explained, a defining feature of imperialism is the domination of finance capital. The Russian economy, while certainly capitalist, is based mainly on the export of oil and natural gas; it is not a significant centre of finance capital, and is utterly dependent on the major imperialist powers. This is demonstrated by the fact that Russia’s economy has been crippled virtually overnight by sanctions imposed by the US and its allies; the value of the ruble has fallen to less than one US cent.

As can be seen from the ISO’s statements on Ukraine, the pseudo-lefts’ designation of Russia as “imperialist” serves a definite political purpose: to justify political support for US imperialism.

The ISO’s position has evolved from its false characterization of the former Soviet Union as “state capitalist.” The organisation has its roots in a split from the Socialist Workers Party, the US section of the Fourth International, in 1940. The tendency led by Max Shachtman rejected Leon Trotsky’s definition of the Soviet Union as a degenerated workers’ state that had to be defended against imperialism, in spite of the reactionary Stalinist bureaucracy.

The Shachtmanites’ claim that capitalism had been restored in the USSR served as a means of adapting to the anti-communism that dominated middle class layers in the US and Europe. The reactionary character of these positions found expression in Shachtman’s open support for US imperialism during the Korean War.

Revolutionary socialists fight for the unity of the Ukrainian and Russian working class, along with workers throughout Europe and internationally, to put an end to capitalist oppression. They do not fight for the freedom of “the Ukrainian people”—the ISO doesn’t mention the working class—to join an imperialist bloc against Russia.

Like its counterparts internationally, the ISO in New Zealand is part of a tendency within bourgeois politics. It speaks for layers of the middle class who orbit the trade unions, academia and the political establishment, and aim to secure their privileged position within capitalism.

In the United States, the ISO’s main centre imploded in 2019, and several of its leading members then joined Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), which functions as a faction of the Democratic Party. Prominent DSA and ex-ISO members have denounced socialist opposition to the US-NATO arming of Ukraine.

In New Zealand, the ISO promotes illusions in the Labour Party-Greens government, which has used the COVID-19 pandemic to engineer the biggest transfer of wealth to the rich in New Zealand’s history. Social inequality is soaring and the government is now allowing Omicron to spread out of control.

Jacinda Ardern’s government has joined in the US-led sanctions against Russia and is sending “aid,” including military gear, to Ukraine. New Zealand is a US ally and a minor imperialist power in the Pacific region, where the Ardern government also supports the US military build-up, aimed against China.

Workers and young people seeking to build a genuine anti-war movement should reject the pro-imperialist politics of the ISO. The first duty of socialists is to oppose their own ruling elite’s war plans. In New Zealand, this means opposing the Ardern government’s own military build-up and its support for US and NATO wars.

A genuine anti-war movement can only be based on a socialist program aimed at unifying the working class internationally. Workers and young people must reject the demands that they “sacrifice” their living standards, and their lives, to defend the profits of a tiny handful. The drive to another world war can only be halted by revolutionary struggle, aimed at abolishing capitalism and its reactionary division of the world into rival nation states.



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