

Desperation, delusion, and recklessness: The war in Ukraine threatens to go nuclear

Statement of the World Socialist Web Site Editorial Board
21 September 2022

On Wednesday, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the partial mobilization of the Russian military, calling up some 300,000 reservists, marking a new and dangerous phase in the seven-month-old US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine.

Referring to “statements made by some high-ranking representatives of the leading NATO countries on the possibility and admissibility of using weapons of mass destruction—nuclear weapons—against Russia,” Putin said:

I would like to remind those who make such statements regarding Russia that our country has different types of weapons as well, and some of them are more modern than the weapons NATO countries have. In the event of a threat to the territorial integrity of our country and to defend Russia and our people, we will certainly make use of all weapon systems available to us. This is not a bluff.

The reference to “all weapon systems available to us” was unmistakable. Putin was threatening nuclear war.

In his speech, Putin said, “The goal of that part of the West is to weaken, divide and ultimately destroy our country. They are saying openly now that in 1991 they managed to split up the Soviet Union and now is the time to do the same to Russia, which must be divided into numerous regions that would be at deadly feud with each other.”

He asserted that NATO “turned the Ukrainian people into cannon fodder and pushed them into a war with Russia.” He said the Ukrainian military was being “trained according to NATO standards and receiving orders from Western advisers,” adding, “Today our armed forces” are fighting against “the entire military machine of the collective West.”

Putin’s account of the aims of the US and its NATO allies are, on the whole, correct. The Ukrainian military has been transformed into a wholly-owned subsidiary of NATO. The United States is directly training, leading and arming it with the aim of the destabilization and ultimate breakup of Russia.

Putin was likely responding to the *New York Times* article on the “debate” within the US political establishment over the

provision to Ukraine of long-range missiles that would be capable of striking within Russian territory. With regard to aiming “to weaken, divide and ultimately destroy our country,” this much was acknowledged by former US Army Europe Commander Ben Hodges, who said last week, “We may be looking at the beginning of the collapse of the Russian Federation.”

His statement comes in the aftermath of the military disaster suffered by Russia in Northern Ukraine, in which Ukrainian forces captured dozens of miles of territory in the span of just several days. In the aftermath of the Kharkiv debacle, the WSWs wrote:

It is not ruled out that the Kremlin will conclude from this military catastrophe that it is necessary to wage a massive military escalation, which would itself only lead to an escalation by NATO. Paradoxically, the desperate efforts by the Kremlin to reach an accommodation with imperialism do not preclude a series of actions that could trigger a thermonuclear war.

This is now what is happening. In response to the warning from Putin that the present conflict threatens a nuclear conflagration, Biden responded hours after Putin gave his speech by throwing fuel on the fire. Speaking at the United Nations, Biden declared that the largest land war in Europe since the Second World War was “a war chosen by one man,” asserting that Putin’s concerns are imaginary. “Putin claims he had to act because Russia was threatened,” Biden said. “But no one threatened Russia, and no one other than Russia sought conflict.”

Biden obviously does not believe these statements, which are contradicted by innumerable statements from US civilian and military officials.

In his speech, Biden combined a lying presentation of the origins of the war with the brazen hypocrisy that is a permanent characteristic of American imperialism. He denounced Russia for “shamelessly violating the core tenets of the United Nations Charter—none more important than the clear prohibition against

countries taking the territory of their neighbor by force.”

Biden would have the world forget that the US has repeatedly and flagrantly violated the UN Charter, which bans the use of war to achieve political aims. The most egregious of many examples was the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which then UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said was “not in conformity with the UN charter” and “illegal.” But this was only one of many countries destroyed by the American military, including Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria, to which one must add the US-backed war of Saudi Arabia against Yemen and Israel against Palestine.

Biden’s hypocritical moralizing was an attempt to cover up the fact that, confronted with an explicit statement that a major international crisis was leading toward nuclear war, he had absolutely no proposal for how to avert this catastrophe.

At the height of the Cold War in the 1960s, US President John F. Kennedy declared, “Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate.” When the Cuban Missile Crisis erupted, both Kennedy and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev made concerted efforts to step back from the brink and barely managed to avoid a nuclear war.

By contrast, faced with what is arguably a more overt and explicit threat of the use of nuclear weapons than at any time during the Cold War, the US and its allies have completely rejected any outcome of the war short of the achievement of Ukraine’s military objectives. This can only be explained by the crisis and desperation confronting the ruling class.

Putin, as a representative of the Russian ruling class, is advancing the historically bankrupt policies of Russian nationalism. Confronted with the disastrous consequences of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, while pursuing the illusion that Russia would be welcomed into the “community of nations,” the Russian oligarchy is now facing the reality of imperialism.

The imperialist powers are, in their own way, no less desperate. The ruling class in the US and the European powers are sitting on a social powder keg, ruling over working classes whose standards of living have been collapsing for decades and who are growing increasingly dissatisfied with the capitalist order that promises only exploitation and misery.

The White House and NATO, smelling blood in the water after Russia’s military debacle, are becoming increasingly unrestrained in their actions, taking massive risks. The triumphalist tone in the media was expressed by *The Economist*, which proclaimed that “victory” in Ukraine could be secured if the United States provided even more weapons to the country, such as the longer-range ATACMS missile.

Either they are convinced that the threat of nuclear war is fictitious, or the prospect of thermonuclear war is not something that unduly concerns them. Having walked up to the edge of the abyss, the response of the American ruling class is: “Forward to victory!”

The imperialists’ desperation is mixed with self-delusion, to

the point where it’s impossible to tell where one ends and the other begins. On the one hand, they claim Putin is a “monster” and a madman who would use weapons of mass destruction in a heartbeat. On the other hand, they dismiss the danger of nuclear war, summed up in the response of Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, who declared that Putin’s “rhetoric on nuclear weapons leaves us cold.”

Even if the worst is averted, and the situation does not descend into nuclear war, the escalatory spiral threatens death for hundreds of thousands of people, and poverty and dislocation for millions, including the workers of Ukraine, who are viewed by the imperialist powers as entirely expendable in their conflict with Russia.

No one in the media has bothered to ask Biden how many lives he is prepared to sacrifice in the pursuit of the geostrategic imperatives of American imperialism. However, the answer is evident in the response of the ruling class to the COVID-19 pandemic, in which the deaths of over 1 million people in the United States were viewed as an acceptable cost in ensuring that there is no disruption of the profit-making operations of American corporations.

The only way out of this disastrous escalatory spiral is through the intervention of the masses into the crisis. There exists a powerful social force that is capable of opposing imperialist war: the international working class. The war is being accompanied by a sweeping attack on the living standards of workers around the world, with wages plummeting in real terms.

The crisis created by the collapse in living standards has led to a global surge of the class struggle, which is powerfully demonstrated in the movement among rail workers in the US, as well as the eruption of strikes throughout Europe, Latin America, the Middle East and Africa.

The working class must reject both the warmongering of the imperialist powers and the reactionary response of the Putin regime and the Russian oligarchy. As they enter into struggle, workers all over the world must raise the demand for an end to the war. To the ruling class’s policy of world war, workers must counterpose the strategy of class war and the struggle for the socialist transformation of society.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact