

The war in Ukraine and how to stop it: Online meeting advances a socialist anti-war strategy for the international working class

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Saturday's online meeting "The war in Ukraine and how to stop it: an online discussion of socialist anti-war strategy" was a major contribution in the struggle to construct an international anti-war movement led by the working class.

Co-sponsored by the *World Socialist Web Site* and International Youth and Students for Social Equality, the panel discussion provided a perspective that can be found nowhere else. What emerged throughout the event was the profound connection between the historical analysis of the causes of the war and the socialist and internationalist program for fighting it.

In both its form and content, the discussion was international in character. Panelists spoke from three different countries and addressed an audience of hundreds of workers and youth from the UK, US, France, Germany, Sri Lanka, India, Russia, Ukraine, Romania, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Turkey and dozens of other countries.

Opening the meeting, Socialist Equality Party (US) National Secretary Joseph Kishore, who co-moderated the event with WSWs writer Andrea Peters, stressed that as the war enters its second year, a rapid escalation of the conflict is taking place. Summing up the present state of the conflict, WSWs writer Andre Damon emphasized that it is the largest war in Europe since the end of World War II.

The United States and its European imperialist allies, Damon stated, "have entirely staked their credibility on the military defeat of Russia," in a war which has killed 200,000 people and threatens to develop into a nuclear conflagration.

Christoph Vandreier, chairman of the *Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei*, the German section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), noted that Germany has tripled its military budget and has resurrected an aggressive imperialist foreign policy to challenge for global hegemony.

The historical origins of the present war

The discussion quickly focused on the underlying historical and political roots of the war.

Speaking to this question, WSWs International Editorial Board Chairman David North said:

Coverage in the media is dominated by a total absence of any historical perspective. From the first day of the war, the narrative was fixed in the media. The slogan was Putin's "unprovoked" war,

which became as generic to explaining this war as "weapons of mass destruction" had for the war in Iraq.

North explained that all wars arise out of complex historical, social, political and economic conditions. Refuting the media obsession with the question of who fired the first shot, he noted that no war has ever been explained on this basis. The First World War began 108 years ago, and debates about the real factors that produced it continue to this day.

More important than Putin's motivation, North said, is the question of the interests guiding the imperialist powers. "It is remarkable that in the entire discussion of this war, at least as it is presented in the media and as it has been accepted by the cowardly academic fraternity—historians who have forgotten history—no one wants to talk about any of the wars that have been waged by the United States over the past 30 years since the dissolution of the USSR."

The extended campaign of the United States to control the Eurasian landmass is treated as if it is irrelevant to the US-NATO war against Russia. In contrast, North said, "The Trotskyist movement is a historical movement. It has a historical memory, and it bases its politics on an understanding of the contradictions of the epoch."

Nick Beams, a longstanding leader of the Socialist Equality Party in Australia and an expert on Marxist political economy, focused his comments on the economic factors driving American imperialism. The two world wars of the 20th century, he said, were fought to determine "who would attain global supremacy." The United States emerged as the dominant capitalist power after World War II and sought to regulate global relations, including through the Bretton Woods system, which was based on Washington's gold backing for the dollar. However, the contradictions of capitalism reemerged so forcefully that President Nixon was compelled to end the Bretton Woods agreement a mere 27 years after it began.

Beams emphasized that the massive onslaught on the working class launched in the 1970s and the unrestrained growth of financial speculation from the 1980s onward only deepened the crisis. He concluded, "One of the factors driving the United States to this ever more aggressive military posture... is its worsening and weakening economic position.

"US imperialism seeks to resolve its crisis, as it has sought to do in the past, by developing new resources, new areas of conquest, new means of exploitation, particularly the conquest of the European landmass and also against what it sees as its growing threat in China... This is the opening phase of a new global conflict, in which the United States... must seek to crush all possible and potential rivals."

The consequences of the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union

A major focus of the discussion on the historical background to the conflict was on the significance of the dissolution of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy in 1991.

Pointing to a WSWS timeline on the end of the Soviet Union, WSWS writer Clara Weiss stressed that the Trotskyist movement recognized at the time that the dissolution of the USSR marked “a new stage in the crisis of imperialism and the capitalist system as a whole.”

Weiss referred to two fundamental developments following 1991 with relevance for the present war: “The first was that the restoration of capitalism in these countries led to the rule of criminal oligarchic regimes that are now in power in Russia and Ukraine... The second is that it really opened the floodgates for a veritable explosion of US militarism throughout the globe.” One of the Stalinists’ last acts of betrayal before dissolving the USSR was their approval of the US bombardment of Iraq in early 1991, which marked the beginning of 30 years of uninterrupted war.

Capitalist restoration created the conditions for the revival of the fascist traditions of the Ukrainian bourgeoisie, a process which was aided and abetted by the imperialist powers. Weiss reviewed the record of Stepan Bandera, a Ukrainian fascist who led the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists during World War II as it collaborated with the Nazis and participated in the massacre of hundreds of thousands of Jews and Poles. She noted that the commander-in-chief of the Ukrainian army is a declared admirer of Bandera.

In his discussion of the consequences of capitalist restoration in the Soviet Union, North pointed to the disastrous miscalculation of the bureaucracy and its supporters within the intelligentsia, who thought Russia could be integrated peacefully into the world economy. Recalling a visit to the USSR just prior to its dissolution, North said, “What one encountered among a thoroughly disoriented, naive, unserious intelligentsia... was an almost giddy conception that the restoration of capitalism would bring about democracy, universal prosperity, money would grow on trees throughout the former Soviet Union, and universal peace and brotherhood.”

Turning to the policy of the Putin regime, North said, “The first thing that one must understand from a socialist standpoint is that Putin is not engaged in the defense of the Russian people, the Russian working class. He represents a significant faction of the Russian oligarchy that came to power on the basis of the plundering of the assets of the USSR in the aftermath of 1991... He wants, on behalf of that layer, to be allowed to exploit and plunder the massive resources of Russia without hindrance from imperialism.”

“This war can go in two directions. It can lead to total catastrophe or it can lead to socialist revolution”

The review of the historical background to the war led directly to a discussion of the political program upon which it must be opposed. In particular, the panelists took up an international tendency of disoriented middle-class elements that claim it is possible to oppose war on the basis of a coalition with the most far-right and even fascist organizations.

Vandreier drew attention to a demonstration for “peace” held the same day in Berlin by Left Party politician Sahra Wagenknecht. “One of the main organizers and speakers today was the extreme right-wing ex-general Erich Vad,” Vandreier noted. “He is a declared fan of the Nazi lawyer Carl Schmitt... He’s a proponent of rearmament. They want to direct this rearmament more openly against the United States...”

Wagenknecht made very clear before this demonstration that politicians from the fascist AfD (Alternative for Germany) are welcome.”

“With these people,” Vandreier stated, “you are not building up an anti-war movement, you are building up a war movement.”

North addressed a similar coalition developing in the United States with the “Rage against the war machine” rally.

“They might have better called it the rage against thinking rally, the rage against socialist politics,” North commented. “The concept of a left-right coalition against war precludes, rules out any possibility of basing the struggle against war on an understanding of the origins of war, and it precludes the possibility of organizing a struggle against war on the basis of a fight against capitalism.”

He continued:

The struggle against war requires first of all that one identify its causes. You can’t cure a political disease unless you understand its origins. You can’t oppose a war if you don’t understand its causes...

What is the social force, objectively, in every country, which has an interest, an objective interest, whether or not it fully understands it? It is the working class, the international working class. The social force that is being driven by catastrophic inflation, the impact of the pandemic that has claimed millions and millions of lives, this is the social force that has to be mobilized.

Concluding the discussion, North again referred to the lessons of history: “The great insight of Lenin in 1914... under conditions in which the entire Second International had capitulated to their respective governments when the war began” was that he “said that this is an imperialist war, and it is necessary to construct the policy of the working class on the basis of an understanding of the contradictions that produced the war... He insisted that it had to be understood that the very contradictions that led to the eruption of 1914... would generate revolution throughout the world, and that is what happened. It broke out first in Russia, and it rapidly extended throughout the world.”

North argued that the same conditions are present today, due to the “gale force winds of an escalating social crisis.” The decisive task is to politically arm this emerging movement, because “from political clarity comes great action.”

He concluded with the fundamental tasks that flow from this understanding:

We are going to educate the workers, and those of you in the audience who are looking for a way to fight, who understand what the historical stakes are, and are willing to accept the fact that there aren’t easy answers, easy solutions, to great historical questions, you should get involved in sections of the International Committee.

This war can go in two directions. It can lead to total catastrophe or it can lead to socialist revolution... Is the outcome guaranteed? No, it will be determined in struggle.

The discussion as a whole provided the political clarity upon which “great action” must be based. The meeting concluded with a call for all those listening to join the International Committee of the Fourth International and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, and to take up the fight to build an international socialist movement of the working class against imperialist war and the capitalist system.



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