Protests demanding a limit to front-line deployments continue, as infighting intensifies within Ukrainian ruling class

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This past week protests were again held throughout Ukraine demanding that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky limit deployments of troops to just 18 months. Many Ukrainian soldiers—if they have survived this long—have never been permitted to leave the front or return home. Despite the fact that protesters have circulated a petition gathering 25,000 signatures, Zelensky has thus far refused to clarify the terms of military deployment.

While they are relatively small in size, significantly, the protests have been held throughout the country, including in Western Ukraine where nationalist political forces have historically received the most support. Most participants are families of soldiers, and many have vowed to continue regular protests until their demands are met.

Though as yet in an embryonic form, the protests herald the emergence of mass popular opposition to a war that has claimed hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian lives. They come on the heels of a disastrously failed counter-offensive, which cost tens of thousands of lives, and amid a growing world-wide movement opposing the imperialist-backed genocide in Gaza. Under these conditions, the protests have provoked immense nervousness in the Ukrainian ruling class and have fueled bitter infighting within the state and military apparatus.

While political crisis and scandals have been a regular feature of the rule of the Ukrainian oligarchy that emerged from the Stalinist bureaucracy in 1991, the current struggle is significant in that the Zelensky regime is coming into open conflict with Valery Zaluzhnyi, the head of the general staff of its Western-funded Armed Forces, which is carrying out the imperialist proxy war against Russia.

In early November, Zaluzhnyi gave an interview to the British *Economist* in which he revealed that after over a combined 500,000 Ukrainian and Russian soldiers had been killed, the war was essentially at a stalemate, and a major breakthrough by Ukraine was unlikely. In a separate essay, Zaluzhnyi further warned that the stalemate posed "significant risks for both the Armed Forces of Ukraine and the state as a whole" and concluded with a plea for even more deadly weapons in order to "break the military parity with the enemy."

Such statements directly contradicted the official line of Zelensky and his associates that Ukraine would undoubtedly retake not only all of the Donbass region but Crimea as well if the West would continue to provide Kiev with an unending supply of weapons and money.

Zelensky and his entourage immediately went into damage control with Zelensky appearing on NBC's *Meet the Press* to reject Zaluzhnyi's statements and insist that no such stalemate existed. Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council's Center for Countering Disinformation absurdly stated that Moscow had launched the campaign to discredit Zaluzhnyi, trying to convince Ukrainians of a "split between the government and the military."

A day later, Zelensky then announced that the presidential elections, originally scheduled to take place next year, were canceled. Zaluzhnyi was considered his most likely main competitor. In popularity polls, Zaluzhnyi and the Armed Forces continue to garner more support than Zelensky.

The same day that Zelensky announced the cancellation of the presidential elections, Zaluzhnyi's assistant and close friend Hennadii Chastiakov was killed by an explosive device in his home that was given to him as a birthday present, reportedly by one of his associates.

There are also signs that a broader purge of the military command is underway. Last Monday, sources revealed to

Ukrainska Pravda that the Ministry of Defense under the newly appointed Rustem Umerov was preparing to dismiss three high-ranking military commanders.

According to the report, the commander of the Medical Forces of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, Tetyana Ostashchenko, the commander of the Operational and Strategic Group of the "Tavria" troops, Oleksandr Tarnavskyi, and the commander of the United Forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, Serhiy Naev, were all to be removed.

Tarnavskyi played a leading role in the failed counteroffensive, while Naev was reportedly implicated in the failed defense of the Kherson region against the Russian surprise invasion in February 2022. Meanwhile, Ostachenko's dismissal has long been called for by medics and volunteers within the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

The Defense Ministry has so far refused to comment on the report. Earlier on November 3, Zelensky himself dismissed Viktor Khorenko, former commander of Ukraine's Special Operations Forces. At the time, Khorenko claimed that no reason was given, and his firing was unknown even to Zaluzhnyi, who is clearly being undermined by Zelensky.

In a radio interview last Tuesday, Ukrainian parliament member Roman Kostenko of the pro-EU Holos Party stated that "it is unacceptable that the Supreme Commander-in-Chief can do this during the war (dismiss generals - ed.) without the approval of the Commander-in-Chief." A veteran of the war in Donbass, Kostemko is also the current secretary of the Verkhovna Rada Committee on National Security, Defense and Intelligence and is clearly speaking for a significant section of the military and ruling class in voicing his opposition to Zelensky.

Right-wing Ukrainian social media posts regularly call for Zelensky and his entourage to be arrested for treason due to the rapid losses in southern Ukraine in the weeks following the initial Russian invasion. Zaluzhnyi, an open admirer of the Ukrainian fascist leader and war criminal Stepan Bandera, would undoubtedly be viewed by such forces as an improvement over the former comedian Zelensky.

Ominously, on November 7 Volodymyr Ariev, a Ukrainian parliament member from the European Solidarity party of former President Petro Poroshenko posted on Facebook that Umerov planned to fire Zaluzhnyi as Commander-in-Chief. Ariev later deleted the post.

In an indication of the intervention of the imperialist powers in the conflict, last week, Zaluzhnyi was also publicly implicated in the destruction of the Russian-German Nord Stream 2 pipeline in September of last year, according to reports from both the *Washington Post* and *Der Spiegel.* Both outlets are closely tied to governments and intelligence agencies in Washington and Berlin, respectively.

According to the reports, Roman Chervinsky, a colonel in the Ukrainian Special Forces with experience both in military intelligence and the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU), coordinated the attack on both the Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines running under the Baltic Sea to Germany. If the reports are correct, it is clear that Chervinsky could not have acted alone. Rather, he would have received direct orders from higher ranking officers who all reported to Zaluzhnyi.

Regardless of the credibility of these publications—since the pipeline bombings, many different versions of the events leading up to the attacks, have appeared in the NATO-aligned bourgeois media—they are clearly bound up with the ongoing struggle between the government of President Volodymyr Zelensky and the Ukrainian Armed Forces, led by Zaluzhnyi.

No matter what faction and forces emerge victorious in the internal struggle to head the right-wing Ukrainian oligarchy, they will be undoubtedly committed to war and subservient to imperialism. Both trace their political heritage to the Stalinist bureaucracy, which betrayed the internationalist program of the October Revolution and restored capitalism in the USSR, paving the way for the current onslaught of Western imperialism in the region.

The development of an anti-war movement in the international and Ukrainian working class must be establish complete independence from all factions of the warring oligarchy and imperialism and combine the fight against the imperialist war against Russia with the struggle to end the genocide in Gaza.