Report from a young Ukrainian in Germany: “The working class in Ukraine does not want a war against Russia at all”

Our reporters
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The WSWS recently spoke to Semyon [1], who fled to Germany at the outbreak of the war in Ukraine and is now studying and working in Germany. Due to the recent refusal of the German authorities to extend refugees’ residence papers, Semyon—like thousands of other Ukrainian refugees—fears being sent back and used as cannon fodder in the war against Russia.

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In the first three months after I arrived at the main station, we were only supported by volunteer organisations. Some volunteers even made part of their flat available to us for a short time. The state hardly supported us at first. In the beginning, neither the authorities, nor the aid organisations, nor we Ukrainians, had any idea what to expect here or what we were supposed to do.

After a few weeks, the bureaucratic mechanism turned round and allowed us to apply for Section 24 almost silently [2]—the confusion about this only disappeared after about two months. Most of us have had to learn a lot about German bureaucracy and the welfare system here: it’s confusing, slow and barely funded. Explanations of how the bureaucracy works come mainly either from the voluntary aid organisations or from us Ukrainians ourselves.

The refugee shelters for Ukrainians were roughly the same in all cases—regardless of whether they were financed and set up by volunteers or by the state. When I remember the food in these shelters, what comes to mind are apples and hot dogs. The dormitories, of course, had curtains instead of doors, and in our case only curtains instead of walls.

The German ruling class often talks about the “struggle of the Ukrainians,” but the working class in Ukraine doesn’t want a war against Russia at all. In reality, the German government doesn’t give a damn about Ukrainian refugees. It only cares about its imperialist interests and those of its partners—for example, the US, which has provoked this war since 2014. Who really cared about the Ukrainians were the workers.

I am therefore not very surprised that more and more politicians are now calling for Ukrainian refugees to be sent back to the front. The media, the government and the entire ruling class have never considered the early return to Ukraine to be dangerous. They claim it is “reasonable” for refugees to travel to Ukraine and fulfill their compulsory military service.

The Ukrainian government does not have enough human materiel to slaughter at the moment. Even in the “safe” zones, life is not really possible. There is often no electricity and the economy is destroyed. I keep asking myself how the Ukrainians who stay there manage.

However, if you enter Ukrainian soil as a male Ukrainian, you are not allowed to leave again—unless you are a minor. Even in that case, things are becoming increasingly dangerous: even 16- and 17-year-olds are now being drafted. Even if you return to Ukraine for just one day, it is not possible to leave the country again in 90 percent of cases.

It is only possible if you are a millionaire, but not for ordinary workers. People are treated differently. Those who are in a position to do so can simply hand over a bribe to leave Ukraine. I have heard from my acquaintances that it is no longer possible to leave Ukraine without risking your life.

In fact, Ukraine, like all states of the former Soviet Union, is known for its corruption. Any law can be circumvented if there is enough money flowing. However, most workers do not have enough money to do so because of the starvation wages.

As in every other country, there is a ruling class in Ukraine that profits from the war. Millionaires and oligarchs are deeply integrated into the state apparatus. Of course, they use various rhetoric to make the working class believe that they are “servants of the people.” However, the fact that this is a capitalist oligarchy—and not a democracy—is common knowledge among Ukrainian workers.

Of course, opposition to this is developing, but it is opposition under conditions of dictatorship. For

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example, Bogdan Syrotiuk was imprisoned because of his political understanding and socialist consciousness. The criminal methods used by the SBU [Ukraine's domestic intelligence service] and other forces are no longer concealed. It may be unusual for people in the West to see such police state measures being taken, but for Ukrainians and Russians it is part of everyday life.

All state bodies are corrupt. This has been known since the dissolution of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist government. The oligarchy and the state now control all companies that are still in Ukraine in one way or another.

The situation is becoming increasingly fascist. Ukrainian nationalism is becoming a state ideology. Stephan Bandera has been proclaimed a hero and national monuments have been erected in his honour. Ukrainian nationalist paramilitary divisions are being integrated into the state. It can be said that Ukraine is in the process of turning into a complete Nazi dictatorship.

However, there have been few job opportunities for workers for years; the working class has always been in a very difficult situation. Even before the war, conditions were not humane and wages were very low.

The war and fascism made it even worse, although I can hardly imagine how it could get any worse. Public institutions are hardly funded at all.

Democratic rights and the right to strike were completely abolished. Even before the war, strikes were not well regarded, as the police and the state always sided with the employers. When the war started and Ukrainian nationalism rose, this got so much worse that it is now impossible to exercise democratic rights.

In 2014, a coup by Ukrainian nationalist forces took place, and Ukrainian nationalism declared itself the enemy of the Russians from the outset. This was already largely a state ideology in 2014. This has intensified with the war.

Russian is denounced as the language of the enemy. Everything to do with the Soviet Union is also criminalised: Monuments are destroyed and streets are renamed. The unity of the peoples that still existed in the Soviet Union is being destroyed by both Ukrainian and Russian nationalism.

The arrest of Bogdan Syrotiuk is deeply unjust and sad. We must fight against it. Trotskyism has declared war on war, the police state and social inequality. Bogdan was arrested because he fought politically against all this. These police state tendencies will intensify as the war develops until there is nothing left of democratic rights.

But of course, it doesn't have to be that way. With the help of the international working class, the Ukrainian working class can take up the fight against it. We must not accept that socialist thinkers and political activists are arrested because of their convictions and consistent political work. These police state measures are also taking place in other countries, for example against Gaza protesters. Strikes and every democratic right are also being violated.

We must also fight against the rise of the AfD (Alternative for Germany). It is being promoted by the German government with its hatred of workers and immigrants. If we build an international workers' movement, we can not only free Bogdan Syrotjuk, but also defend our own democratic rights.

The aim of the movement must be for the working class to take power. The ruling class does not want to and will not end the war. It does not want to and will not abolish the police state.

We must demand an immediate end to the war in Ukraine, Gaza and all over the world. We need wage increases for all. But to realise this, the working class will inevitably be driven to take power. It is the only progressive force in society. It must reverse all these imprisonments and only it can solve the world's problems.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei [Socialist Equality Party] and the International Committee of the Fourth International will lead this movement. They present a Marxist, Trotskyist understanding of events, and they will, in my opinion, build and lead this international workers' movement.

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[1] Semyon is not his real name. To ensure his safety, no further personal information will be published.

[2] Paragraph 24 of the Residence Act (AufenthG), which provides for temporary protection, is based on an EU decision and was last extended until 4 March 2025.

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