WSWS German editor Johannes Stern: Stop the Ukraine war! Free Bogdan Syrotiuk!

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At the election rally of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP-Socialist Equality Party) on August 15 in the Berlin district of Wedding, Johannes Stern, editor-in-chief of the German edition of the World Socialist Web Site *and a leading member of the SGP, spoke against the Ukraine war and the sentencing of 27-year-old Ukrainian socialist Bogdan Syrotiuk to 15 years in prison. We are publishing here a video of the speech and the manuscript.*

Dear comrades, dear friends,

On August 10, a Ukrainian court sentenced our Comrade Bogdan Syrotiuk to 15 years in prison. Fifteen years! And for what?

Not for espionage. Not for sabotage. Not for passing on military secrets. Not for collaborating with the Russian army. Bogdan was sentenced to 15 years in prison for six political articles.

For articles in which he spoke out against war, fascism and nationalism. For texts in which he denounced the glorification of Stepan Bandera, the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, the Waffen-SS Division "Galicia" and other Nazi collaborators in Ukraine. And above all, for advocating the unity of the Russian and Ukrainian working class against the war.

The court did not merely impose a 15-year prison sentence. It also ordered the confiscation of his property and electronic devices—and the destruction of his socialist books, leaflets and programmatic documents.

We have to understand clearly what has happened here.

A state that is financed with billions by Germany, the United States and the other NATO powers and armed to the teeth has sentenced a socialist opponent of war to 15 years in prison and ordered the destruction of his political writings.

This is political persecution by the courts. This is a show trial. These are the methods of a fascistic regime.

And this verdict shatters in one blow the entire propaganda with which the war in Ukraine has been sold to us for more than four years. Every day we are told that NATO is defending "democracy" and "freedom" in Ukraine. What a mockery!

Ukraine is under martial law. Elections are not being held. Opposition parties have been banned. Socialist and left-wing forces are persecuted. The *World Socialist Web Site* was blocked in Ukraine on June 6, 2024—just six weeks after Bogdan's arrest. Tens of thousands of people have been prosecuted under the sweeping laws on "high treason" and "collaboration."

And now a Ukrainian court has officially declared socialist opposition to the war to be high treason. That is the reality behind the so-called "war for democracy." And that is precisely why the German media are silent about Bogdan.

Where are the major headlines in *Der Spiegel*? Where are the commentaries in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*? Where are the special broadcasts on ARD and ZDF? They do not exist.

And the reason is clear. Bogdan's case exposes the entire official war propaganda. When an opponent of the Putin regime in Russia is imprisoned because of his political convictions, the media exploit the case relentlessly and use it for war propaganda.

But when a Ukrainian socialist receives 15 years in prison for anti-war articles, there is deafening silence. Because reporting on it would raise the obvious question: What kind of "democracy" is the German government actually defending with tanks, missiles and billions of euros?

Bogdan is 27 years old. He is a leading member of the Young Guard of Bolshevik-Leninists, a Trotskyist youth organization in the former Soviet Union. And his actual political convictions demonstrate the fraudulent character of the charges.

Bogdan is not a supporter of Putin. He and the Young Guard opposed the Russian invasion of Ukraine from the very beginning. They explained that the Putin regime represents the interests of the Russian oligarchy that emerged out of the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism.

But Bogdan has at the same time explained: Opposition to the Russian invasion does not mean lining up behind NATO, Washington, Berlin and the Zelensky regime, which systematically provoked the Russian invasion.

His perspective is: Against Putin and against the NATO imperialists! For the unity of Russian and Ukrainian workers! For international socialism!

That is his "crime." That is precisely the perspective the verdict seeks to criminalize. The absurdity of the proceedings can hardly be overstated.

An independent expert assessment by a leading Ukrainian criminologist concluded that Bogdan's texts contained no propaganda in support of the Russian invasion. The court then commissioned another expert report. But this report, too, found no calls for the overthrow of the government, no calls to seize power, no subversive acts and no demands for changes to Ukraine's borders.

And Bogdan was convicted anyway. Why? Because this trial was never about a criminal offense. It is about thoughts and political convictions. The verdict itself speaks of the alleged "socially dangerous consequences" of his political positions.

What is it about Bogdan's position that is so dangerous from the standpoint of the Ukrainian oligarchy and its imperialist backers? That he does not want to see Russian and Ukrainian workers dying against one another in the trenches. That he says: You have no reason to kill one another! Your enemies are not sitting in the trench opposite you. Your enemies are the oligarchs and capitalists on both sides of the front, the imperialist governments and corporations that are waging this war for their own interests. Russian and Ukrainian workers: Unite!

That is the message the ruling classes fear. And they have every reason to fear it.

Hundreds of thousands of Russian and Ukrainian workers and young people have already been killed or maimed. Millions have been displaced. In Ukraine, ever more young men are being forcibly mobilized into the army.

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The claim that the entire Ukrainian population stands united behind continuing the war is false. Since 2022, more than 300,000 criminal proceedings have been initiated against soldiers for desertion or unauthorized absence. In 2025, a clear majority of Ukrainians said in a Gallup poll that an end to the war should be pursued through negotiations. The greater the catastrophe of the war becomes and the more opposition grows, the more brutally it is suppressed.

And at the same time, the NATO powers are escalating the war ever further. At the NATO summit in Ankara in July, the NATO states pledged €70 billion in military equipment, support and training for Ukraine this year. At the same time, NATO is expanding capabilities for so-called "Deep Precision Strikes"—long-range precision attacks deep inside Russia.

In other words, as ever more Ukrainians and Russians die, no way out of the catastrophe is being sought. The war is being expanded, raising the danger of a nuclear escalation that could wipe out all of Europe and even the entire planet. And German imperialism is playing a leading role.

We say this quite consciously and with the historical sharpness that is necessary: For the third time in little more than a century, German imperialism is pointing its weapons eastward against Russia. In the First World War, the German Empire sought to bring Eastern Europe and large parts of what was then the Russian Empire under its control.

The second attempt was Hitler's war of annihilation against the Soviet Union. On June 22, 1941, Operation Barbarossa began. German imperialism sought to smash the Soviet Union, colonize its territory, plunder its raw materials, and enslave and exterminate its population.

The German invasion led to the Holocaust, and at least 27 million Soviet citizens paid with their lives for this war of annihilation. And today—85 years later—German tanks and German soldiers once again stand on Russia's border.

On the 85th anniversary of the German invasion of the Soviet Union, of all days, Defense Minister Boris Pistorius visited the Bundeswehr brigade in Lithuania.

There, Armored Brigade 45 is being built up. It is to comprise almost 5,000 soldiers and civilian employees. It is the first permanent deployment of a German combat formation abroad since the end of the Second World War.

In the exercise Pistorius attended, almost 3,000 soldiers from eight NATO countries trained with tanks, artillery and hundreds of drones—just a few kilometers from Belarus and in the immediate vicinity of Russia.

This is no coincidence. The German ruling class is using the Ukraine war to cast off all the restraints imposed upon it after the crimes of the Second World War. The German government now speaks quite openly of making Germany "war-ready" again. And it is implementing this policy at a speed that would have been unimaginable only a few years ago.

The regular budget of the Defense Ministry is rising within a single year from €82.7 billion to €109.7 billion—a jump of 32.7 percent. Added to this are €30 billion from the so-called special fund for the Bundeswehr and €11.6 billion for support to Ukraine. These three items alone total €151.3 billion.

And this is only the beginning. According to the government's adopted financial plan, the regular defense budget alone will rise to €153.9 billion in 2028, €162.9 billion in 2029 and €183.7 billion in 2030. Compared to 2026, it will more than double within four years.

The NATO states have committed themselves to increasing their military and military-related spending to a total of five percent of gross domestic product, and the German government boasts that it is moving ahead most aggressively.

Since the beginning of this year, the new military service system has been in force, amounting to the de facto reintroduction of conscription.

The active strength of the Bundeswehr is to rise to 260,000 soldiers, with the reserve increasing to 200,000. That means almost half a million active soldiers and reservists. What does Germany need an army of this size for?

Why does it need hundreds of billions for tanks, missiles, fighter jets and drones? Why are roads, bridges and rail networks being adapted to military requirements? Not for "peace." You do not build up an army on this scale in order never to use it.

The German bourgeoisie is de facto already at war with Russia, and it is preparing even more comprehensive wars. The Ukraine war is a central front in an already developing third world war over the imperialist redivision of the world. The same governments that claim to defend "democracy" and "human rights" in Ukraine support the genocide in Gaza.

They support the US-Israeli war offensive against Iran. They are arming against China. They are increasing military spending beyond all measure. And who is supposed to pay for it? The working class.

Every additional billion for tanks and missiles is taken away from schools, hospitals, housing, pensions and wages. That is why this war policy and social devastation are directly connected. And that is why war and attacks on democratic rights go hand in hand.

The ruling class knows that millions of workers and young people are not prepared to die for its geopolitical interests, its hunger for raw materials and markets, its profits and its claims to power.

That is why the buildup is not only directed outward. The state apparatus is also being strengthened at home. And this is where Bogdan's case acquires its full international significance. We must not say: That is just Ukraine. It has nothing to do with us. It does! It has everything to do with us.

The tendencies toward authoritarianism, dictatorship and fascism are growing in all capitalist countries. War abroad requires repression at home.

The working class is supposed to pay for rearmament, sacrifice its living standards and ultimately send its children onto the battlefields.

Such a policy cannot be imposed democratically. That is precisely why the extreme right is being built up and strengthened. That is precisely why democratic rights are being restricted. That is precisely why socialist opposition is increasingly treated as extremist and dangerous.

And that is why we defend Bogdan not only out of solidarity with an individual political prisoner. In defending Bogdan, we defend the right of the international working class to organize against war. We defend the right to speak the truth about the war.

We defend the right to call upon Russian and Ukrainian workers to fight jointly against their governments. And we defend and fight for the socialist perspective for which Bogdan is sitting in prison. His life is directly at stake.

Prison conditions in Ukraine are catastrophic. The UN Committee Against Torture has criticized overcrowding, inadequate access to food and water, insufficient medical care and a rising number of deaths in custody. The Council of Europe has documented conditions that may amount to inhuman and degrading treatment.

Bogdan himself was denied necessary medical treatment for a prolonged period. Only a few days ago, 162 Ukrainian prisoners, including 92 political prisoners, took part in a hunger strike against inhumane prison conditions, abuse and torture. Prisoners at the pretrial detention center in Nikolaev, where Bogdan is being held, also participated.

That is why we say: Fifteen years in such a prison system could amount to a death sentence for Bogdan. We must not allow this to happen. Nor can we leave Bogdan's fate in the hands of the governments that bear political responsibility for his persecution.

What can we expect from the German government? It finances and arms the regime that has imprisoned Bogdan! It suppresses all mention of his case! It is itself leading the military buildup against Russia!

Bogdan's freedom must be won through an international political

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movement from below—by workers, young people and students, by artists and intellectuals and by everyone who defends democratic rights.

And that is precisely the kind of movement we are building. The international campaign for Bogdan is growing. Historians, intellectuals, artists, workers and young people around the world have begun protesting against the verdict.

We must now massively expand this campaign. Sign the petition for Bogdan's freedom! Distribute it in your workplaces, schools and universities. Speak with coworkers, friends and fellow students about his case.

Demand that trade unions and organizations adopt protest resolutions. Write to the court in Pervomaisk and demand that the verdict be overturned and Bogdan immediately released.

Distribute our book, *The Ukraine War and the Fight for Socialism: The Case of Bogdan Syrotiuk*. It documents the political show trial, Bogdan's own writings and the socialist perspective for which he is being persecuted.

But above all: Make the fight for Bogdan's freedom part of the fight against war!

That is also what our campaign for the September 20 elections to the Berlin House of Representatives is about.

The Socialist Equality Party is standing in this election because none of the established parties opposes the war. The CDU and SPD, as the current governing parties, are organizing the rearmament and war offensive of German imperialism. The Greens are among the most aggressive warmongers. The AfD demands even more brutal rearmament and nationalism.

And the Left Party, too, is part of this war coalition. It supported the war credits in the Bundesrat and offers itself up as a reliable pillar of the existing order.

The SGP is the only party on the Berlin ballot that opposes this all-party coalition for war, rearmament and social cuts with a socialist perspective. Since the beginning of this year, the new military service system has been in force, amounting de facto to the reintroduction of conscription.

Our election campaign is being conducted under the slogan:

Socialism instead of war!

And this slogan is not an election campaign phrase.

It is the central political question of our time.

Capitalism is once again driving humanity into a world war.

The wars in Ukraine, Gaza and the Middle East, the confrontation with Iran, the war preparations against China—All these conflicts are growing together into a global war.

And this time nuclear powers are confronting one another.

The danger of a nuclear catastrophe is real.

But this development is not inevitable.

There is a social force that can stop it.

It is the international working class.

Workers in Berlin have no interests that require them to kill Russian workers.

Russian workers have no interests that require them to kill Ukrainian workers.

Ukrainian workers have no interests that require them to die as cannon fodder for NATO.

Workers in every country have a common enemy: the capitalist system, which places profits, markets, raw materials and geopolitical power above human life.

And they have a common perspective:

Internationalism and socialism.

That is precisely what Bogdan is fighting for.

That is why he is in prison.

And that is why the fight for his freedom is our fight.

We call on all workers and young people:

Break the silence about Bogdan!

Demand that the verdict be overturned!

Demand his immediate release!

Stop German rearmament and the war drive against Russia!

Not one euro for militarism and war!

Build with us a powerful international socialist anti-war movement in the working class!

Support the election campaign of the Socialist Equality Party!

Vote SGP on September 20!

Get involved!

And fight with us for the program for which Bogdan is being persecuted:

For the unity of the Ukrainian, Russian, German and international working class!

Against imperialism and war!

For international socialism!

Freedom for Bogdan Syrotiuk!

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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