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Building the anti-war movement

Comments on the “Feminist Manifesto Against War”

- Debate - 2022 - Ukraine -

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I did not sign the [Feminist Manifesto Against War](#), although I share (as I told the comrade who sent it to me) many aspects of this Manifesto, signed by women whom I hold in high esteem. I hope that my text will be interpreted as a contribution to a necessary dialogue.

My main disagreement concerns the “concrete analysis of the concrete situation” – or the nature of this war. Such an analysis always determines the formulation of internationalist positions – and I also believe that such a requirement of analysis of specific situations is necessary for the determination of feminist responses. However, in this respect, the formulations of the Manifesto tend on the contrary towards the expression of a general pacifist posture – no doubt associated with a political analysis that does not distinguish between aggressive war and legitimate resistance. In any case, I would not subscribe to a feminism that defends the idea that women should “by nature” never take up arms.

The main point of the debate is therefore in our understanding of the causes of this war, which is presented as a conflict between imperialisms. If this were the case, I would support a radical pacifism. It would be similar to that advocated by Jaurès on the eve of the first world inter-imperialist war, in the face of which the revolutionary defeatism of the Zimmerwaldians was totally justified. I would add that, obviously, against the current war launched by Putin, a pacifism is totally justified in Russia, notably feminist pacifism, which the Manifesto evokes – but without distinguishing between the anchoring of this point of view in the aggressor country and that of women in the aggressed country. Because of its analysis of the conflict, the Manifesto cannot establish any link with Ukrainian feminists engaged in a resistance struggle. I hope and believe that the role of the mothers, wives and sisters of Russian soldiers who were supposedly sent on “military operations” and who will die in a dirty war against their Ukrainian brothers will be fundamental in defeating Putin. On the other hand, as I said in my negative response to the initiators of the Manifesto, I respect both the Ukrainian women who have fled the country and the war to protect their children and those who have stayed behind to join in the defence (unarmed and armed) of their country.

But this means recognizing that the armed resistance in Ukraine is a “just war”, a defensive war, waged by a people whose autonomous existence Putin explicitly wanted to challenge. On the eve of his “operation”, he clearly evoked – far from the arguments about NATO – what for him was the artificial “creation” of Lenin, who inscribed in the constitution of the USSR a full recognition of Ukraine and Belarus as distinct from Russia and endowed with the right of peoples to self-determination. Putin assumed the tsarist past and Stalin against Lenin and such rights when he launched his “operation” – which he thought would be easy. The resistance he is meeting is that of an entire Ukrainian people – men and women from all regions – including Russian speakers (as is President Zelensky). The first effect of this war is and will be (against any puppet regime) the consolidation of the Ukrainian nation under construction, fighting for its dignity and its right to self-determination.

In any case, in the face of the war launched by Russia against Ukraine, calls for “peace” and diplomatic negotiations – refusing armed resistance (and the means to carry it out) – mean in practice calls to submit to both Putin and the great powers. One can debate the different ways of challenging an unjust order and responding to violence, denouncing and rejecting aggression. But the emphasis on the choices expressed by the populations aggressed – in this case the right of the Ukrainian people to self-determination in the face of this war and in the internal and international relations in which it is embedded – seems to me essential. Such an emphasis on concrete society is contradictory to “geo-strategic” readings of conflicts that reduce peoples to pawns instrumentalized by one side or the other.

Unfortunately, analysing the nature of concrete aggression does not exhaust the debate on analyses and tasks for emancipatory struggles. It is certain that every conflict is exploited by the great powers of the world. Biden hopes to

sell his shale gas against Russia's. And the arms industries forced to record the fallout from the US defeat in Afghanistan are delighted with the other immediate effect of Putin's war (which he did not expect) – the consolidation, at least immediately, of NATO and the EU and their military budgets.

But the Ukrainian people who are resisting are using – in addition to what they produce themselves – weapons made in NATO factories. This is not enough to negate the autonomy of their commitment to struggle, and thus their motivation. Nor does it (so far) change the nature of the war – which NATO forces do not want to turn into a war with Russia. But this is why the criticism and questioning of NATO – which is a global and current issue, especially since 1991 – cannot be understood in Ukraine and in the face of the horrors and threats of Putin's war if it is expressed by slogans refusing to send defensive weapons to the Ukrainian people – or placing Russia and NATO back to back in the analysis of this war. Similarly, the internationalist slogan – fight your own imperialism – loses all its meaning and scope if anti-imperialists are indifferent to the fate inflicted by ... another imperialism.

Another thing – which does not justify this war for a minute – is the radically critical questioning of the economic, political and military institutions and relations which have structured the European continent – East and West – and the rest of the world since 1989/1991. But this is in a different temporality of analysis and slogans.

The war will produce polarizations in Ukraine and in the world, including the growth of an ultra-militarist, fascist far-right component in the Ukrainian resistance: it made death threats against Zelensky with death during his first attempts at dialogue in the Donbas and with Putin. The Ukrainian president-combatant is in fact surrounded by two (very dissymmetrical) far-right forces: the Putinian Great-Russian one (with its state power and mercenaries) and the other, defending an “anti-Russian” Ukrainianness. He himself is neither a fascist, nor the pawn that Putin despised – nor Ho Chi Minh. And his profile of apologist for the liberal order, dependent on the oligarchs – and unable to see the plight of his people as resembling that of the Palestinians, as shown dramatically in his speech in Israel – demands that internationalist support for the Ukrainian resistance be given with critical independence.

We must do everything possible to ensure that weighing in the defeat of the Putin aggressor is the consolidation from below of a Ukrainianness that is much broader, more inclusive and rooted in society than that of the racist extreme right, with a left that fights against all the neo-fascisms of Ukraine and Russia; a left that also addresses Zelensky in time of war so that the workers do not bear the costs of the Ukrainian debt and the costs of the war in place of the oligarchs. It is in support of this fragile but essential left in Ukraine and in connection with the anti-war movement in Russia that we must build an internationalism from below.

This task confronts a context marked by historical legacies – from the old empires to Stalinism, via the struggle against Nazism and the disasters of post-1989 capitalist globalization – which must be examined from a radically emancipatory perspective, against all oppressive relations. Internationalist feminism has a major role to play in this process.

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