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War in Ukraine

'Russia will only negotiate if it suffers some defeats'

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Speaking from Kyiv, Denys Pilash addressed the panel “Ukraine, imperialism and the left” as part of Green Left’s Ecosocialism 2022 conference. Below is a heavily abridged and edited transcription, which has been revised by Pilash, of his presentation, along with some responses to questions raised in discussion. This transcript was published in [Green Left](#).

We are in the midst of one of the worst tragedies in our country’s history. Not since the Nazi invasion of World War II has Ukraine seen the magnitude of devastation and terror brought upon us by [Russian President Vladimir] Putin's unilateral decision to aggressively invade Ukraine.

This invasion has devastated entire cities and towns. Many places in eastern and southern Ukraine have been almost completely destroyed. There are also places around Kyiv and Kharkiv — where Ukrainians successfully repelled the aggressors — where countless civilian bodies have been found, such as in Irpin, Bucha and Izium.

There is constant shelling of cities in the south and east targeting civilian infrastructure and homes. In Kyiv, the city has been targeted by hundreds of missiles and drones.

But Ukrainian people have withstood this imperialist aggression — one that follows in the footsteps of Western imperialist aggressions such as in Iraq. And if Russia succeeds, it will set a precedent for all other imperialist powers to invade even more countries.

Resistance and solidarity

People have managed to resist this nightmare mostly due to the very spontaneous, solidarity-based resistance that emerged from the first minutes of the invasion.

Russia’s army was met with all types of resistance, not just people resisting with weapons but with their hands in the occupied regions. There were huge rallies in Kherson and other occupied cities, involving Ukrainian speakers, Russian speakers and other ethnic communities, until these protests were suppressed.

The people working behind the frontline have also been essential. Millions have been involved in the humanitarian effort to assist people from war-torn areas. This resistance has involved countless numbers of Ukrainian working-class people.

These people are the target of Russian imperialism, because it is clear that Putin wants to erase Ukraine as a separate entity.

At the same time, these essential workers are being targeted by our own ruling class. You can see disaster capitalism at work in Ukraine, because the ruling class is grabbing this opportunity to push through its shock doctrine of neoliberal austerity, anti-worker legislation, and curtailment of social rights.

This is the double challenge that the people of Ukraine face.

The left

Since the beginning of the invasion, the majority of leftists — trade unionist, feminists, socialists, anarchists — have in one way or another participated in different humanitarian and war efforts.

Some joined the ranks of the Territorial Defence Units and the Armed Forces of Ukraine in general — even anti-authoritarian anarchists have created their own units within the military. Social Movement has comrades in the military, alongside many unionists who volunteered or were drafted.

Some activists, mainly anarchists, have created networks like Solidarity Collectives to provide help for comrades in the armed resistance. Some are involved in everyday humanitarian work to provide housing, food and assistance to those who need it.

We, as Social Movement, have, together with this humanitarian work, sought to put forward political demands that reflect the needs of the Ukrainian population in times of war, while linking them to a broader, global agenda for a more egalitarian world.

That is why we are promoting demands such as the cancellation of Ukraine’s debt. Debt is an issue that affects Ukraine, as a peripheral country in Eastern Europe, just as it affects many countries in the Global South.

We are also promoting the need for a more socially-orientated, gender equal and ecologically just reconstruction of Ukraine, one that is done not in the interests of a handful of national and transnational capitalists, but for the benefit of the working majority. This includes demands for protecting labour and creating a renewable and sustainable economy.

Far right

The Ukrainian far right is given a lot of coverage by the pro-Russian media, but also by many pro-Ukrainian media who hero-ise them. There is lots of talks around Azov, a regiment under the Interior Ministry; and the narrative of the defence of Mariupol was centred around Azov, though marines and other Ukrainian units constituted no lesser part of the city defenders.

But if we look at the role of far-right nationalism in the current Ukrainian resistance and compare it to eight years ago, when Russia annexed Crimea and instigated the war in the Donbas, the far right is not as significant as it once was.

This is because you have people from diverse backgrounds who have joined the resistance, so the far right has no exclusive ability to pose as the primary defenders of Ukraine. You have people from all backgrounds who have joined the ranks of the armed forces: inhabitants of all Ukrainian regions, Jews, Muslims, like the Crimean Tatars, Belarusian émigrés including anarchists, Roma people who are probably the most dispossessed and excluded in Ukrainian society.

What we have are two tendencies: one that leans more towards an ethno-nationalist vision of Ukraine, and another that embraces a pluralist and multiculturalist Ukraine.

This was evident in the last presidential elections, where [Petro] Poroshenko ran on a conservative nationalist

platform, while [Volodymyr] Zelensky promoted a more inclusive and anti-nationalist platform. Zelensky defeated the incumbent, winning 75% of the vote in the run-off.

In general, extreme right-wing views are rejected by Ukrainian society.

Russian speakers

Millions of Russian-speaking people, including those who used to be pro-Russia, have lost faith in everything associated with Russia.

Many Russian speakers voted for Zelensky and voted for a peace process. In the first year of his presidency, Zelensky took steps towards negotiating lasting peace. But Putin was very reluctant, saying he would only speak with Washington, as if Ukrainians did not exist.

Putin sought to avoid any kind of direct negotiation and then opted to invade. Obviously, when you are targeted by Russian bombs and Russian missiles, any pro-Russian sentiments you might have tend to disappear.

Many of the most ruined cities had predominantly Russian-speaking populations. They were levelled to the ground by the same Russian army that was claiming to somehow be protecting the Russian-speaking population.

The majority of Russian speakers in the parts of Ukraine that have been recently occupied clearly reject the occupation. You can see this in the participation of Russian speakers in the war effort.

Proxy war?

Victims of aggression have the legitimate right to obtain the weapons they need to defend themselves, even if they might come from nasty places. Look at the Kurds, who at one point were supported by the United States and were then abandoned by them.

But given this example, we have to understand that imperialist powers who support liberation movements do so for pragmatic interests, not because they feel some kind of solidarity. We should not place any illusions in these imperialist powers.

We should not forget that the West was a co-culprit in the consolidation of the new capitalist Russia of [Boris] Yeltsin and Putin, as it was with many other dictatorships. Just like with Suharto's Indonesia, Putin's Russia was initially a right-authoritarian, anti-Communist regime that secured the consent of the West for a brutal military campaign to conquer a peripheral republic.

But parallels with the occupation of East Timor can be drawn not only in the context of the Chechen wars. In 1999, progressive activists in Australia, Portugal, and the US, remaining critical of their own countries' history of colonialism and their previous role in the conflict, nevertheless urged their governments and the UN to protect Timor-Leste's population and self-determination.

Likewise, international support is needed by all other victims of aggression, including the people in Ukraine.

The Ukrainian government also acts in its own class interest. At some points, this interest coincides with the interest of the general population, for example the shared interest of preserving Ukraine. There's also significant support for Ukraine from several countries in the region that share concerns about Russian expansionism.

At some points, it coincides with the intentions of Western capital who want to open up the country for their companies.

And at some points, the interests of Western capital and Western powers do not coincide with each other, as France, Germany, UK, US, etc have different interests.

But Ukrainians take offence when they are regarded as some kind of proxies, because Ukrainians are fighting on their own. There is no direct military assistance involving people from other countries fighting here. There are only millions of Ukrainians resisting.

This cliché of “fighting to the last Ukrainian” has parallels with German propaganda during World War I, which said the British were fighting to the last French in France. It is derogatory towards these millions that are wilfully resisting the invaders.

Ukrainians are very conscious of what they are doing: they understand that this is an existential threat to their families, their friends, their community and their country.

Negotiations

In the first months of the war, the Ukrainian side pitched its proposal for negotiations: essentially, restore the pre-February 24 status quo and engage in long-term negotiations about the fate of Donbas and Crimea in return for Ukraine remaining neutral, not joining NATO and mutually guaranteeing language rights with Russia.

But negotiations stalled and Russia dropped out of the talks because their strategy is to grab as much land in Ukraine as they can.

In this scenario, providing weapons to Ukraine is like union organising, where in order to force the bosses to negotiate, you need to have some power behind you. Ukraine needs some military strength to counter Russian military strength and force Russia into a proper negotiation.

We should add that military and financial aid for Ukraine is only a tiny fraction of Western budgets and that there is really no need to increase military budgets to support Ukraine.

We can distinguish between these two questions — the issue of defending Ukraine is in no way justifying the appetites of the military industrial complex.

It seems the Kremlin will only be pushed into negotiations after it suffers some defeats. Perhaps after Ukrainian forces take Kherson — hopefully — this may influence Russian thinking.

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The majority of Ukrainians see the need to continue fighting to stop further terror and annexations — at least until we are able to achieve a reasonable diplomatic conclusion.

Because if Ukraine surrenders, it is not just surrendering its territories, it is surrendering millions of people who will be left under Russian occupation, where mass killings, rapes and other kinds of violence are regular occurrences.

Kyiv

November 3, 2022

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