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Building the anti-war movement

# What sort of anti-war movement do we need today?

- Debate - 2022 - Ukraine -

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**In our first draft of this article we started by outlining in some detail the differences on the left about Ukraine. We outlined the now well-rehearsed arguments about:**

- **relative importance of NATO expansion versus Putin's imperial project, supporting the armed resistance or de-escalation/no arms from the West**
- **is it an inter imperialist war or a just war against an imperialist invader?.**
- **do we stand with the Ukrainian people or avoid taking sides because the US/UK/EU/NATO 'supports' the same side**
- **are we for or against sanctions and can we target them at the oligarchs and Putin's clique?**
- **do we defend 'independence' rights of people in Donbass or Crimea or support Ukrainian sovereignty and self-determination?**

But to be honest that was a big mistake. Our website is full of detailed articles on [all those issues](#).

## **Tactics to build a movement not a shopping list of correct demands**

The discussion about how to build a mass anti-war movement on Ukraine should not depend on this level of argument involving principles and political analyses about history and the current invasion. No, building a movement here is about tactics. How do we mobilise the biggest number of people so that we have an audience where we can put forward our respective arguments about the nature of Putin's Russia or the role of NATO? All those fine analyses will have no impact outside a narrow group of lefties if we are unable to build a mass audience. More importantly the left will fail in its duty to defend the interests of working people in Ukraine, Russia and elsewhere. We will end of doing little to stop the bombing and needless killing of both the Ukrainian people and young Russian conscripts.

Unfortunately today the movement around Ukraine is much weaker than in many other countries and is divided between the historic leadership of the anti-war movement, the Stop the War coalition (STW) and the Ukraine Solidarity Campaign (USC). STW is still supported and respected by many activists even if its campaigning on Syria was criticised by some of the left for avoiding clearly calling out Russia's reactionary role there. The USC has been supported by other parts of the left and has succeeded in mobilising the Ukrainian community quite effectively. Its leadership includes socialist activists from Ukraine. Some Ukrainians who campaign in Britain will argue for NATO action to 'close the sky'. We do not agree, it is a dangerous escalation, although we understand why they may call for that given the bombing. This specific demand should not prevent us being on the same mobilisations. Indeed we are better able to discuss why this demand is wrong if we are within the same movement.

At the same time there are tens of thousands of British people who have mobilised in support of the Ukrainian people by organising humanitarian and medical aid. Firefighters have brought fire engines and equipment to Ukraine. Dock unions have blocked Russian tankers. There is huge sympathy for the Ukrainian people and revulsion about the actions of Putin's regime. Some people – including soldiers – like others across Europe have gone across to Ukraine to work in medical support or to fight. We do not think volunteering to fight is the right thing to do but again it expresses the popular anger at what is happening.

So why don't the STW ([Stop the War](#)) and USC ([Ukraine Solidarity Campaign](#)) and other forces get together to

organise mass demonstrations and actions on a few simple demands we can all agree on such as:

- Russian troops out now
- Stop the war
- All refugees welcome

## Stop the War's wrong tactics on building the campaign

The historical leadership of anti-war campaigning, STW insists that these sort of broad slogans are not sufficient. They argue that slogans on NATO and war mongering have to be included in any slogans for a demonstration. They say it does not hold our government or the Labour leadership to account for its 'warmongering' and support of NATO. It does not want to organise a demonstration where somebody like Keir Starmer could feel he could participate. What is the result? Up to now there have been separate mobilisations by STW which has brought together its traditional base on the left and the USC which has organised a part of the left and the Ukrainian community. Overall the size of the demonstrations is much smaller than in other countries.

The paradox for STW is that their previous great success, the anti-Iraq war movement was not conceived in this narrow manner. Platforms included pro-NATO Liberals, pacifists and religious leaders. The slogans on the poster aimed to include the broadest number of people and not exclude them by demanding agreement about the nature of the war or the regimes involved. The lessons of the US anti- Vietnam war movement was to unify people around 'bring our troops home' and not 'victory to the NLF'. There were furious debates between the left and the ultra-left sectarian groups on that question. We remember the strongest movement during the Six Counties conflict from the 1970s was the Troops Out movement. Its leadership wisely focused on that demand rather than putting forward solidarity with the resistance or with the IRA which would have limited its appeal.

## Lessons of the Anti-Nazi League

The Anti-Nazi League was one of the more successful campaigns led from the revolutionary left which had a mass orientation against the growing threat of the NF/BNP at the time. The fascist groups were weakened as a result. We remember other left groups arguing that it should have been an anti-racist front rather than anti-fascist, that people in favour of immigration controls could have supported it. Some left people thought all the music stuff was not serious enough. Tariq Ali, a leader of the International Marxist Group at the time, recognised that we had been slow to understand the dynamic of the ANL and wrote an editorial in the party newspaper entitled, 'Hats off to the SWP'. We should be following this sort of successful practice rather than finding reasons for narrowing the basis for demonstrations on Ukraine.

Our priority is how to mobilise the majority of people in Britain who recognize the reactionary nature of Putin so that we can build the biggest possible movement in solidarity with Ukraine. Secondly we need to organise the biggest possible audience for voices from Ukraine. Once we have achieved that we can then talk to them about the reactionary nature of NATO. The insistence of STW on giving almost equal billing to stuff about NATO and withdrawal of Russian troops is a block to building a mass movement against Putin. It restricts the movement to the tiny minority who already agree that NATO is responsible for millions of deaths.

## Listening to Ukrainian voices

It also excludes Ukrainian voices. To the best of our knowledge the only Ukrainian speakers, other than at events organized by Ukraine Solidarity Campaign, have been at the protest organized on the steps of the Senedd in Cardiff: a protest organised by Mick Antoniw, Counsel General of the Welsh Labour government, who had just returned from a trade union visit to Ukraine with, among others, Adam Price, leader of Plaid Cymru. For which, incidentally, they were roundly criticised by the Welsh Tories. For those who don't know Antoniw happens to be of Ukrainian descent. So, up to now the only Ukrainian voices at the protests have been at protests organised by Ukrainians. That, unfortunately, is shocking but not surprising. STW has basically excluded anti-Assad Syrian voices from its campaign on Syria which is also very much centred around opposition to NATO.

Anti\*Capitalist Resistance has a clear position on NATO [published on our website](#) so we obviously think it is important to expose the utterly reactionary nature of the 'Nakedly Aggressive Terror Organisation'. We should call for the dissolution of NATO in our own leaflets and articles and defend the right of other currents to put forward their own views. But that is different to building a mass campaign in solidarity with Ukraine.

A mass campaign has to bring together the majority already convinced of the reactionary nature of Putin, the Ukrainian community in Britain, other communities in Britain from eastern Europe and the relatively small number of people who understand the real nature and role of NATO but are also willing to listen to voices from Ukraine and try to understand their fears and concerns. That is why we need to empathise (not sympathise) with those subject to Putin's bombs and shells. We don't have to agree with them but we do have to try to understand their feelings (yes, feelings, not just the ideas they may express). We have to try to imagine how it feels to be living in Kyiv, Kharkhiv, Mariupol at this time and understand why people in Ukraine call (wrongly and potentially disastrously) for NATO to impose a 'no fly zone'.

The primary slogan of the campaign should be 'Russian troops out now!', a slogan around which the broadest possible forces opposed to Putin's war can unite. Then you can start to talk to them about NATO, western hypocrisy over Yemen and Palestine etc. But if opposition to NATO is one of the major strands of the campaign then all those people having, at best, illusions in NATO simply won't participate in the solidarity movement. Your ability to engage with them in discussions about NATO is reduced to zero. You also have little chance of getting them to hear the views of left-wing forces from Ukraine and Eastern Europe.

Anti\*Capitalist Resistance has consistently presented views from Ukrainians and other eastern Europeans. But it would be much better if those views could reach the millions who already consider Putin reactionary (we would almost certainly need to clarify what exactly they mean by that; there are so many possible interpretations). We have helped give voice to the Ukraine Solidarity Campaign.

This Saturday 26 March the mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, has called a [demonstration](#) from 2pm to 5pm from Park Lane to Trafalgar square. It is an extremely broad-based call, simply saying we in London are in solidarity with the Ukrainian people, we stand with Ukraine. Yoko Ono's message of peace will light up Piccadilly circus. Back in the day the revolutionary left was happy to march with Yoko Ono and John Lennon over Vietnam. This could mobilise a good number of people, even if Sadiq Khan defends NATO along with the Labour leadership. STW should participate and make a call to support it. The Anti\*Capitalist Resistance will be present as part of the labour movement and [left bloc](#).

## Sign up to the appeal for a more united Ukrainian campaign

## What sort of anti-war movement do we need today?

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Fortunately a number of people on the left who are frustrated at the division of the movement on Ukraine have organised an appeal to bring about such a wider mobilisation. Anti\*Capitalist Resistance supports this appeal and urges everyone to [sign here](#).

### No war on Ukraine

This appeal was drafted after some informal discussion among anti-war activists, concerned at the small size of the anti-war protests against Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It aims to establish the central principles around which the broadest possible anti-war activity can be built.

"Massive demonstrations against war and in solidarity with the Ukrainian people all over Europe have not so far been matched in the UK, where protests have been small and often divided. We appeal to the entire Labour and trade union movement, pacifists, faith leaders, humanitarians, antiwar activists, those in solidarity with the Ukrainian people and all right-minded internationalists to build the broadest possible movement around three central demands:

- **Russian troops out of Ukraine!**
- **No to war!**
- **Refugees welcome here!"**

### Signatories so far:

Ken Loach, filmmaker

John Moloney, PCS Assistant General Secretary

Nick Dearden, Director, Global Justice Now

Zita Holbourne, Human Rights Campaigner, author, National Chair BARAC UK

Cllr Yasmine Dar, Manchester City Council

Cllr Maya Evans, Hastings Council

Cllr Alan Gibbons, Warbreck, Liverpool

Cllr Sue Lukes, Islington Council

Cllr John Whitworth, London Borough of Newham

Dr Mike Phipps, author, For the Many, Chair of Brent Stop the War

Angie Birtill, former Camden cllr

Dr Michael Calderbank, author, The Cost of Living Crisis

Michael Chessum, writer

Liz Davies, barrister

Peter Frankental, human rights activist

Kathryn Johnson, Hackney North & Stoke Newington CLP Policy Officer

Davy Jones, Green Party PPC, Brighton Kempton 2015

Paul Laverty, screenwriter

Dorothy Macedo, vice chair, West Sussex Co-operative Party

Kathy Meade, advocate for migrants

David Renton, barrister

Ian Saville, socialist magician

Joan Twelves, former Leader of Lambeth Council

Source [Anti\\*Capitalist resistance](#).

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