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Ukraine

The left's dilemma amid a crumbling world order: Prepare to fight or let others determine the outcome?

- Features -

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With a madman in the White House, all pretences have fallen away and raw power again reigns supreme. Trade wars, huge aid cuts, explicit demands to annex Greenland and depopulate Gaza — every new day brings forth another crisis that throws into question internationally recognised collective and individual rights and undermines global institutions that supposedly exist to defend them. Is this genuinely the world we were hoping for when we criticised the hypocrisy of the West? Is the internationalist left simply going to accept this new state of affairs?

Negotiations to end the war in Ukraine, so desired by many commentators, now seem closer than ever — even if Ukraine currently has little say in the matter. What kind of deal are the great powers preparing for us? A gentleman's agreement to give Russian President Vladimir Putin a slice of our land and a veto over our future in return for US President Donald Trump receiving 50% of our natural wealth? Of course, there is also no room in such talks for the pleas of the Russian anti-war opposition. But who cares about nuance when “peace” is on the table?

An armistice may very well be needed — for Ukraine to catch its breath. Prolonged war has not made us stronger, and this is even more true for the left which has barely survived. However, to avoid wasting time before a potential new round of fighting resumes — whether in Ukraine or on a larger scale — we must soberly assess the new environment and identify its pressure points. Moral appeals only work when someone can be made to feel shame, which is clearly not the case anymore. A credible left response needs to be rooted in reality, respond to material conditions and leverage political openings, rather than cling onto eternal truths.

Instability is growing and, as a result, smaller nations are increasingly vulnerable — especially when strategic locations, resources or trade corridors are at stake. Therefore, when dealing with defense matters, the left's approach should not focus on exploiting and spreading fear but rather on how to avoid becoming easy prey for imperialistic predators. Given this, there are several key points worth keeping in mind when it comes to security.

First, insisting on having the means to defend oneself is not warmongering. Without these means, diplomacy is reduced to little more than pleading for mercy. Rather than hiding away in a bubble, the left must take an active role in deciding how weapons are procured, produced, distributed and used. This cannot be left to lobbyists, oligarchs, arms dealers and foreign powers.

Second, crisis preparedness is a significant asset. In war, natural disaster or even revolution, those who are best organised and know what to do determine the outcome. Speaking from our own bitter experience, the left, which has been largely confined to safe spaces in universities, NGOs or social media, has been sidelined. In crisis situations, practical skills, resoluteness, access to useful social networks, and the ability to mobilise resources make one indispensable. In Ukraine, too often, it was the right who could provide these.

Third, social infrastructure is critical for resilience. As has become evident in Ukraine, a country at war needs functioning railways, hospitals and energy systems, as well as an adequate housing stock and qualified personnel to run all those. Whatever is unreliable in peacetime will surely fail once a crisis breaks out. Weakening social investments under the pretext of defence or fiscal austerity, as well as loosening state controls and coordination for the sake of freedom of competition, are acts of sabotage and must be called out as such. The sooner individual voices consolidate into a single loud voice, the greater the likelihood of putting these issues on the agenda and giving the neoliberals a good fight.

Fourth, regardless of what munitions are at our disposal, wars are ultimately fought by people. Strong military defence depends on popular participation and willingness, neither of which are permanent. No amount of coercion can completely replace consent. It is enough to recall the story of the French-trained Anne of Kyiv brigade [which was disbanded due to mass desertions]. A conscription-based army with a large reserve force is not the only affordable and realistic way to guarantee self-determination. But it is important to understand that this creates a structural dependency, which necessitates ensuring the legitimacy of actions and that people's trust is won.

Finally, no one can survive alone. Pooling resources, sharing knowledge, leveraging economies of scale, and even entering into a common defence agreement can all contribute to mutual security and saving costs. While cooperation is crucial for countries, it is even more critical at the grassroots level, where solidarity and joint efforts are essential for effectively organising on a global scale and delivering results. Simply listening and hearing each other would be a vital first step.

One could, of course, say that instead of seeking to influence decision-making, the left should identify mounting frustrations, amplify them and channel them toward systemic subversion. Yet even if we believe the left's odds of winning amid this chaos as good, unless the global situation changes drastically, similar questions about guaranteeing security and peace will continue to reappear.

Ruling elites face a looming legitimacy crisis due to their incapacity to respond to a growing number of external threats and the rise of extreme right forces at home — both of which are the fruits of the neoliberal turn these same elites orchestrated. This vulnerability provides an opening that the left can seize to reshape the debate and win, at least, some of our key demands.

Acting in a quick and determined manner now can help give peace a chance. Even where collapse is imminent, the left can best position itself by joining the battle to strengthen the power resources of the working class today, rather than wait until the only remaining option is underground resistance to a fascist dictatorship, whether home-grown or imposed from outside.

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