
Karmína, interviewed by Peter Birke

On “The Tragedy of the Ukrainian Working Class”

When Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, at first we were speechless. For the war had raised many questions that are hard to answer clearly and unambiguously. A first reaction, supported by the editorial board of this journal, was to point out the frightening geopolitical dimensions of this war and oppose the ongoing militarization “at home.”¹ In the editorial of the last issue of this journal, we then formulated further questions.² First of all, as a historical journal, we came up with the question of the disposal of historical knowledge by calling this war, for example, “the first one in Europe after 1945” (and thus implicitly removing Southeastern Europe from the map) or by labeling it a “war of extermination” (and thus trivializing the Nazi and Wehrmacht mass murder). The second question we asked was about the fate of those on whose backs this war primarily is being waged. As a first contribution to this question, a member of our editorial committee conducted an interview with Karmína collective, based on an analysis published some weeks ago – which we very much recommend to our readers as an introduction to the current class struggles in Ukraine.³

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Question: Your text includes a lot of information about the history of the labor movement in Ukraine. However, it remains at first sight a bit

¹ Manifesto against the War, [<https://sozialgeschichte-online.org/2022/03/15/manifest-gegen-den-krieg/>].

² Redaktion Sozial.Geschichte Online, Editorial in Kriegszeiten. Viele offene Fragen, in: Sozial.Geschichte Online, 32 (2022), pp. 5–7, [https://duepublico2.uni-due.de/receive/duepublico_mods_00076376].

³ Karmína, The Tragedy of the Ukrainian Working Class, 11.07.2022, [<https://karmina.red/posts/tragedy-of-ukrainian-working-class/>]. The interview took place in late August 2022.

unclear what exactly the “tragedy” of the workers consists of. How would you tell this story, like in a nutshell?

Karmína: A few words about the origin of our article and its title. Like many others on the internationalist left, we were shocked by the invasion in February. As a small collective blog that tries to follow working class struggles and conditions in our home countries (Slovakia and the Czech Republic) and beyond, we started working on a text about the war right away. In the meantime, other radicals around the world, including people we know, put out their responses to the war. We found some of them quite formulaic, often revolving around ready-made slogans such as “No war but the class war!,” and full of factual inaccuracies (e. g., the now standard tune of “eight years of bombing the Donbas” and “14,000 dead”). We thought that this lack of a more historically and empirically grounded approach was unfortunate and not in the tradition of critical historical materialism at all. We tried to compensate for it by providing a longer history of post-independence Ukraine from a working class perspective.

This meant that all work on our “text about the war” had to be postponed indefinitely. Instead, we spent the next four months looking at events which preceded the invasion. Although we are from countries which have close historical and geographical links with Ukraine, we had little to work with at the beginning – we were, for the most part, ignorant of its history. Thankfully, there is a wealth of resources and perspectives, mostly by Ukrainian left-wing academics and activists, that we could study and link to in our text. We mention this not just to acknowledge this mountain of existing work without which our own text would not have been possible, but also to emphasize that we are in no way experts on the subject – the article is just a synthesis and interpretation of other people’s research. What we produced is by no means original and should be viewed simply as an attempt by amateur enthusiasts at making sense of what happened in Ukraine between circa 1990 and 2022.

As we studied the last thirty years of Ukrainian history, we realized there is a tragic arc to them, which is perhaps most apparent when looked at through the prism of the Eastern regions. In the late 1980s, the miners in the Donbas (but also in the Western part of Ukraine) joined strikes initiated by their colleagues in Siberia's Kuzbas. At first, they demanded better working conditions and higher living standards. Soon, the movement became more politicized, demanding wider democratization and, in Ukraine, independence from the USSR. Some even believed that privatizing the mines would give workers more autonomy and control. Instead, the economic transition of the 1990s and beyond decimated the material basis of the "old" Ukrainian working class and its way of life. These merciless processes pushed workers to ever more desperate forms of struggle, such as hunger strikes, self-immolation or a 600 km march on foot from the Donbas to Kyiv in 1998. The aim of these struggles was often simply limited to preserve the "right" to be a wage worker – to be paid for one's work instead of working for free or for remuneration in kind. We think of this twist – from fighting for more freedoms to struggling for bare existence as wage workers – as the first act of the tragedy.

In the 2000s, Ukraine's new capitalist class, divided into sectoral and geographic "clans" with different material interests, began to use the national question to mobilize political support. The "Anti-Maidan" movement of 2013/2014, which later morphed, to some extent, into "separatism," dreamed of resurrecting the old industrial base in the East. The idea was that up to then, Donbas workers had been forced to feed the rest of the country (note that this was a fantasy), but once the region becomes autonomous within a federalized Ukraine, gains complete independence, or joins the Russian Federation, things will finally turn around. Turn around they did, but in an even more desperate direction. The self-appointed administrations of the unrecognized "people's republics" closed down most of the mines and crushed independent trade unions. Their Russian overlords (or, as they say in Ukraine, "curators") did not bother investing in the extractivist and manufacturing base of

the Donbas – or in its conversion in a more sustainable and/or competitive direction – at all. Looking for stable employment, many former miners saw no other option than to sign a contract with the “people’s militia,” i. e., the Russia-controlled military. This was the second act of the tragedy.

The current, third act has been unfolding since 24 February 2022. Donbas workers from the occupied territories aged 18 to 55 are being forcibly mobilized, snatched directly from the street or their workplace, and sent to the front, regardless of any chronic health conditions they may have, without training and with ancient, Soviet-era helmets. More enterprises close down or are destroyed by the war – including on previously unoccupied territory, such as the Azovstal steel works (Mariupol) or the Azot chemical plant (Sievierodonetsk). All of this is accompanied by massive civilian casualties, brutality, displacement, and dispossession. However, if we look at just the material side of things and focus on the fate of the Soviet-era fixed capital base, what we see is a continuation of the processes of decomposition and destruction that began with the economic transition after the demise of the USSR. What the impersonal forces of capitalist competition were not able to accomplish is now being completed by the brute force of artillery shells. Only now, the process also extends to plants that it had been quite profitable to operate.

By using the term “tragedy,” we do not wish to paint Ukrainian workers simply as passive victims. On the contrary, they were often the ones taking the initiative. It is just that in the ensuing whirlwind of events, their moves often had unintended consequences – “tragic” in the ancient Greek sense of the term. There is a sense of heroism and hope as well, because through it all, the flame of working class resistance from below was weakened, but never completely extinguished.

The re-composition of the working-class

Question: And what is the working class in Ukraine? You describe a strong social differentiation since the 1990s. What is the common

ground, from your point of view, between workers in different industries, of different genders and origins?

Karmína: Processes of class recomposition and social differentiation in Ukraine were mostly analogous to those in other post-Soviet and Eastern European countries. However, Slovakia's post-socialist industrial base, for example, was mostly destroyed or quickly shrinking, despite desperate struggles, by the early 2000s (it was, of course, much smaller, at least in absolute terms). It was replaced by Foreign Direct Investment driven manufacturing, mostly in the burgeoning automotive sector and its suppliers. In Ukraine, by contrast, the old base was never completely dismantled. True, it was decimated, but some of it survived. There are still more than a thousand state-owned enterprises operating in Ukraine. In 2020, they accounted for ten percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP). The corresponding layer of Ukraine's working class (along with public sector workers) appears to be quite militant and has a long history of organization and conflict. One recent example are struggles in the Kryvyi Rih mining and steel industry in 2018–2021, briefly discussed in our text.

Another layer would be the “new working class,” concentrated around greenfield investments in the Western part of Ukraine – notably, in wiring and electronics manufacturing, which is often linked to the European automotive industry. A still other stratum of Ukrainian workers are the highly-skilled tech workers in the information and communications technology sector, along with their colleagues, “office proletarians,” from shared service centers in cities like Kharkiv or Lviv. Or, take the couriers and others in the new “platform” or “gig economy,” which of course also exists in Ukraine. All of these newer sectors have shown less militancy so far, which also seems to have been the case in most other Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries.

What unites all of these strata is the antagonism between their material interests and those of capital and its state. But this is only “in theory,” and unfortunately, it cannot be easily translated into practical existence by leftist activists. Only the workers themselves can discover

points of unity in the course of their struggles. In any case, we think one should be wary of any “exoticization” of Ukraine that puts too much emphasis on the supposed national divisions inside the working class – namely, between the Ukrainian-speaking and the Russian-speaking parts of the population. These divisions were largely whipped up by the political rivalry of the “clans,” with key support from the Russian state’s propaganda machine. Pre-invasion polls show that “national issues” (e. g., the state language question) play a rather negligible role in most people’s consciousness, regardless of their origin or language. People find questions of material survival much more pressing.

The relations between Ukraine and the occupied territories are a different matter. There does not seem to be any deep-seated hostility, at least from the Ukrainian side, where polls consistently show that Ukrainians view people in the “people’s republics” as either “victims of circumstance” or “hostages of illegal armed groups” (we just do not have comparable data from the occupied Donbas). But conditions for struggle in the “republics” are very difficult, not to mention possibilities for practical solidarity across the (unrecognized) border. From the Ukrainian side, important work in this regard is carried out by the Eastern Human Rights Group, founded by former trade union activists from the Donbas.

Question: What role does migration play in the economy of the working class in Ukraine (as migration into Ukraine, out of the Donbas, but also into the EU and Russia)?

Karmína: The Ukrainian working class has been very mobile since the 1990s, undoubtedly because of the catastrophic transition that unfolded. Over time, this dynamic has accelerated. In recent years, remittances from abroad amounted to as much as ten per cent of Ukraine’s annual GDP.

Russia, due to the many economic links and the absence of a language barrier, had long been the chief destination for Ukraine’s migrant workers. This began to change significantly after 2014. By 2016, Poland became the main source of remittances. It was estimated by Polish re-

searchers that in 2013–2018, Ukraine’s migrants have added about 0.5 percentage points per annum to Poland’s economic growth.⁴ Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, Italy has also been an important destination for Ukrainian workers, as well as the, less surprising, Czech Republic. After the EU Association Agreement enabled easier movement, workers from Ukraine quickly became the most important migrant group on Slovakia’s labor market as well.

Today, we are witnessing a significant shift, as some of the (“post-socialist”) CEE countries which are EU members move from being net exporters of labor power to being net importers. As their national wage levels rise, they become dependent on inflows of cheap migrant labor. Ukraine is one of the source countries enabling this change. In this respect, the plight of Ukraine’s migrants is not significantly different from those from other “third countries” (e. g., Serbia): low wages, long hours, semi-legal schemes of employment, predatory work agencies that keep workers at an arm’s length from their real employers, which are often transnational corporations – and little to no union representation. Ukraine’s internal migrants from the war-torn Donbas since 2014 (some 1.4 million people before 2022) have faced different kinds of problems. Upon moving westward inside Ukraine, many of them were left to their own devices, with no easy access to housing, jobs, and public services. Incidentally, one reason why even today, people from the villages and towns near the front line are returning home, to a very dangerous situation and a life among ruins, is that the state is unable to provide dignified conditions in the safer parts of the country – with NGOs desperately trying to substitute for that.

Development and significance of labor unrest

Question: In your text, you report about labor unrest especially for the years since 2020, in the Donbas, but also in the western part of the

⁴ Paweł Strzelecki / Jakub Growiec / Robert Wyszynski, The contribution of immigration from Ukraine to economic growth in Poland, in: *Review of World Economics*, 158 (2022), pp. 365–399.

Ukraine. This is very interesting. What was the course and significance of these struggles? What organizational and political forms have, if so, accompanied them? What has happened to them since the beginning of the war?

Karmína: Firstly, it is important to note that workers' struggles in the occupied Donbas have to deal with very specific conditions: There are no independent trade unions, there is no freedom of the press, and there is no freedom of assembly. The early waves of repression, when hundreds of journalists, pro-Ukrainian activists and others experienced illegal detention and torture in improvised prisons, are still a living memory. Of course, in the rest of Ukraine, as in many other countries, the state also sometimes resorts to repression and police harassment of worker activists, but people do not simply disappear in basements of the secret police, as they did in the occupied Donbas.

In 2020, the pent-up anger of miners, who had not been receiving their full wages for almost two years, finally exploded. The spark was probably a leaked list of more mines that the administration was planning to close. Miners at the Nykanor-Nova mine (near Zorynsk, "Lugansk People's Republic," "LPR") refused to surface after their shift. They achieved that the wages owed were paid, at least in part. This, then, inspired miners at four other mines. About 100 miners at the Komsomolskaya mine (near Antratsyt, "LPR") staged an underground protest, but word got out to the authorities before workers at other mines could join them. Another underground protest broke out when the mining company failed to meet the next agreed-upon payment date. This time, the authorities were well-prepared: They cut the electricity underground, blocked cell phone networks and internet access on the surface, and cordoned off the town to prevent solidarity actions. The MGB, which is basically a local version of the FSB / KGB, then started an investigation of the "ringleaders" and their families. Over twenty people were detained, which provoked a demonstration by colleagues and relatives in front of the building of local authorities. In 2021, conflict was brewing at the Alchevsk metallurgical plant (in the "LPR") as

well. Not much is known about the way these struggles are organized. There are no formal organizations that we know of, and so word of mouth and private groups on the Telegram instant messaging platform probably play a key role. There also appear to be contacts between people on the territory of the republics and trade union or human rights activists on the Ukrainian side. As regards the significance of these struggles, it is difficult to tell. On the one hand, they were able to secure some concessions, including the payment of some of the wage arrears. The company that originally managed the illegal export of coal and other products from the “republics,” Vneshtorgservis, was eventually replaced by a new investor, YuGMK, which promised to pay back all it owed. As of early 2022, its wage debts in the “DPR” still amounted to about € 29 million.

On the other hand, these early successes of workers in the occupied Donbas were interrupted by the beginning of the full-scale war in February 2022. Forcibly mobilized soldiers from the “republics” are quite literally used as cannon fodder, and many workers – perhaps including some of those involved in these struggles – will be killed or maimed on the front.

Question: To what extent can the labor struggles in Ukraine be compared with those in other (former) Commonwealth of Independent States countries? Are there similar tendencies there (thinking of Belarus, for example, but also of Russia)? Are there possible connections?

Karmína: Alas, we know far too little about countries like Belarus or Kazakhstan to provide any interesting insights. Superficially, there still seem to be important material connections between the economies of post-Soviet countries which could serve as the basis for solidarity and common struggles, notably in the fossil fuel–heavy industry nexus. In many of these countries, ruled as they are by authoritarian capitalist regimes, economic issues faced by the working class seem to be inextricably linked with questions of freedom and democracy, even in the sense of elementary bourgeois democracy that some of our Western

friends would scoff at. Any democratic movement in these countries seems hopeless without the participation (and hopefully a leading role) of the masses of working-class people. We have seen hints in this direction in the summer of 2020, when a wave of demonstrations and, significantly, strikes swept parts of Belarus.

This brings us to an important point: The Lukashenko regime was only able to survive thanks to various forms of Russian assistance. Today, the Russian state is once again a transnational gendarme – albeit not of all Europe, as in the times of Nicholas I, but of the post-Soviet space, which it views as its sphere of influence. Before the current invasion, the most recent example of the utterly reactionary role that Russia plays in this region was provided by its intervention in Kazakhstan, where (mostly) Russian troops helped crush an emerging working-class insurrection in the very early days of 2022.⁵ In the future, the defeat of the Putinist regime could serve as a clarion call for the working class across the CIS to rise up. The disintegration of this regime could come about through military defeat in the current war of attrition in Ukraine, but it can also be brought about by a mass movement – at the very least, a democratic movement – in Russia itself. For everyone’s sake, we would very much prefer the latter option.

On the significance of the Russian intervention

Question: In your analysis you speak of “colonialism” – about Ukraine as a whole, but also about the Donbas. I find this reference rather problematic and unconvincing, especially in view of colonialism as a historical crime of incomparable scale. What is the case for using this comparison?

Karmína: We are aware of the difficulties, which is why a close look at the text reveals that the term “colonialism” does not actually appear

⁵ Cf. Shaun Walker, Kazakhstan president says he gave order to “open fire with lethal force,” *The Guardian*, 07.01.2022, [<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/07/kazakhstan-protests-thousands-detained-as-president-says-order-mostly-restored>].

in it, not even once! There are some veiled references to it, but not in the sense the question suggests.

As regards the territory of Ukraine as whole, we think that its position in Tsarist Russia is best thought of as that of an “internal colony,” similarly to other regions on the periphery of the Russian Empire, such as Siberia. The Soviet period was somewhat specific: On the one hand, we saw murderous repression, massive dispossession, large-scale starvation as a result of economic policy (similar to, e. g., British India), proletarianization, and forced population displacement going hand-in-hand with Russification and Russophone settlement (with a brief interlude in the 1920s, the heyday of both Ukrainian Bolshevism and local cultural development).

On the other hand, we also saw intense modernization, state-led development, urbanization and upward social mobility. We are not sure what to call this deeply contradictory process, but we hesitate at using the term “colonialism” without adjectives. Perhaps a special theory of the relation between the Stalinist center and its periphery is required – in our view, this would be quite fitting, since we tend to view Soviet-type economies as not fully capitalist, but also not in the least socialist. Maybe such a theory already exists in the vast work of post-Soviet researchers, largely untranslated and unknown in the West.

As far as the occupied Donbas is concerned, we suggest a parallel in the text between the authoritarian apparatus of the two “people’s republics” and a “colonial administration.” We use this term because the apparatus is completely subservient to the Russian state. The latter directly determines the composition of the ruling elite through appointment and repression (including assassination); some elements of this elite are Russian citizens with no history in Ukraine. Moreover, the relation between Russia and the occupied regions in the last eight years has been completely parasitic. The Donbas is viewed simply as a source of cheap coal, which was exported to Russia and beyond through Vneshtorgservis, a semi-legal scheme based in another Russia-controlled quasi-state, South Ossetia. The region also serves as a source of cheap

and flexible labor power for the neighboring regions of Russia (or, today, as a source of cannon fodder). As noted above, there have been no significant investments from Russia (or anywhere else, for that matter) in the Donbas, no development to speak of – only plunder, including the export of scrap metal from abandoned production facilities, and “spontaneous” decay. Hence our comparison of Pushilin [leader of the “DPR,” P. B.], Pasechnik [leader of the “LPR,” P. B.], and others, with a “colonial administration.”

Some have also called the 2022 invasion a colonial war. We still owe our readers (and ourselves, really) a text on these events, where we want to take a closer look at this question. In the text we published, we opted for calling the present war an “irredentist” one.⁶ We took cue from the many declarations by various representatives of the Russian state and its media, who have clearly stated the goal is for the state of Ukraine – and its civil society – in its original form to cease to exist, and to annex at least some parts of this alleged primordial Russian territory. Now, some would perhaps argue that all this is just for show, and that the true motives of Russia’s invasion are different: to deflate internal contradictions of Russian society, to make a run for a position as an important global power, or to consolidate the current clique’s hold on the Russian state. But whatever it is, it does not seem to matter much from the point of view of the Ukrainian population.

The Russian army’s practical actions are no different from what an irredentist expedition would do: Signs in Ukrainian are replaced by ones in Russian, teachers are interrogated by the secret police, the education system is being switched to instruction in Russian only, and civilians are put in “filtration camps” where they are sorted based on their perceived harmfulness to the Russian project. Whatever the “true motives” might be, from the Ukrainian side it really does look like a war of territorial expansion whose goal is to fully subdue the population and

⁶ An “irredentist” is defined “as a person who favors the acquisition of territory that once was part of his or her country or is considered to have been,” cf. Entry “irredentist”, in: [<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/de/worterbuch/englisch/irredentist>].

install subservient administrations similar to the ones in the “people’s republics.”

“Euromaidan” and transnational social movements

Question: A most striking part of your text is the reference to Greece (concerning the depth of the crisis and the social upheavals after 2008 and 2014), but also the worldwide social movements since 2011. But you do not name any left wing social movement dynamics, in contrast to Greece, not even a trace of it, but mainly the strengthening of right-wing forces, in Russia, but also in Ukraine. Are there no such remnants at all?

Karmína: As regards movements since 2011 (or since the 2008 crisis more generally), they are a rather disparate group – some included explicitly leftist elements and were motivated more by material grievances, while the focus of others was simply democratization. Some were coupled with left-wing electoral mobilization, others were not. What united them, in our view, were their roots in the 2008 crisis and its aftermath, their heterogeneity in terms of social composition (i. e., they were cross-class movements and were also not led by the working class), and their specific tactics (i. e., occupation of urban space, such as squares, sometimes including attempts at blocking the circulation of commodities – but no significant strikes, for example). Some of these movements elicited a lot of enthusiasm in certain left-wing quarters and were hailed as exemplifying a new mode of struggle. After about a decade, we think it is fair to state the obvious: Such hopes were misplaced. These movements have not left much behind, regardless of the extent to which they engaged in leftist rhetoric. The Euromaidan of 2013/2014 fits into this group precisely because of its cross-class – or “civic” – nature, its tactics, the vagueness of its demands (it is now also known as “The Revolution of Dignity”), as well as the quickness with which it became co-opted by established political forces and then demobilized without much fanfare. Unlike in some of these other movements, the left did not play a significant role in the Euromaidan, though

not for a lack of trying. Socialist, anarchist and feminist activists were often simply pushed out of the movement by far-right threats or violence. Many then decided to pull back or at least to operate more covertly, without openly stating their affiliation with the left. The overall strengthening of the far right was, at first, due to the escalation of violence at the Euromaidan by the state and then, in 2014, a result of the Russia-sponsored violence in the Donbas.

However, we think that to judge the state of working-class or wider social movements in Ukraine, one has to look beyond the Euromaidan. Similarly, when looking at the current state of the left in the US, it would not be wise to focus on “Occupy Wall Street,” which is now a rather distant memory. And, at least before the 2022 invasion, there were significant struggles in different sectors of the Ukrainian economy, some of which we summarize in the text, or struggles beyond the workplace, such as against real estate development.

We think the presence of such struggles is more important than the outward appearance of there being a lot of leftist activists and visible organizations (though these do exist: We want to mention specifically the Kharkiv-based anarchist group, Assambleya / Assembly, the broad-left, democratic socialist Sotsialnyi Rukh / Social Movement, as well as the journal, Spilne / Commons). To put it another way: We know Ukraine is much bigger than the Czech Republic or Slovakia, in all respects, but still, when we look at the activity of its working class pre-2022, we do get a little jealous. The same applies to the level of sophistication of the debates on the left which, to be honest, is far beyond what we experience in our own country. Of course, this may not be enough for our friends in the West, where working-class movements are so much more powerful and the debates so much more exciting. Or are they?

Question: Immediately before the war, you speak – with a view to the election of Zelensky and the deselection of Poroshenko – of fatigue in the face of nationalist mobilization. What does that mean today? Has this social tendency of “fatigue” disappeared? What will happen next?

What perspectives do you see for the Ukrainian working class facing the war? And what are the possibilities of solidarity?

Karmína: The landslide victory of Zelensky and the defeat of Poroshenko indeed showed that efforts at a mobilization under the banner of “Army! Language! Faith!” do not resonate with the majority of Ukraine’s electorate. It appears that in the months before the invasion, Ukraine was on a course to further moderation in terms of nationalism – as even Zelensky was quickly losing popularity, unable to deliver what he promised, including any substantial progress on the eastern front (and also because of continuing with the hugely unpopular “reforms,” such as creating a market in agricultural land).

With the beginning of the full-scale war, most of the population (to the extent that we can trust the polls and other, more anecdotal evidence) rallied around the president and the army. This does not mean, in itself, that divisions along national lines within Ukraine will deepen. After all, the brunt of the war’s destruction is borne by cities and towns with a substantial Russian-speaking population, such as Kharkiv – the very population whose language rights the “special military operation” is supposed to protect. Many are now saying openly that they have lost any sympathy they may have had for this version of the “Russian world.”

But the broader perspectives for the Ukrainian working class are, of course, bleak. They can only get bleaker as the war drags on – which it most probably will, in a form that will be more or less desperate. Its level of desperation will be inversely proportional to the amount and sophistication of military aid sent from the West. It is a convenient pacifist fairy-tale that the bloodbath would stop immediately if there were no weapon deliveries from the West. Firstly, there are other sources of weapons and ammunition, though much less high-tech, on the world market, including on the black market. And, secondly, even if there were not, the war could continue for quite some time in a much more primitive, though no less brutal form of a Ukrainian insurgency and “punitive expeditions” by Russia. The past two decades provide

plenty of examples of the efficacy of this form of warfare, of the sort of difficulties it can create for even the most sophisticated military in the world, as well as of the effects it has on the civilian population. It is not difficult to predict what political forces would inevitably try to take control of such an insurgency on the Ukrainian side – the far right.

A range of bad alternatives

Question: I understand the reference to Afghanistan etc. But, in my opinion, that does not mean that the arms deliveries will more or less automatically (like the as the mathematical metaphor suggests) lead to shortening or ending the war. Couldn't the delivery of "sophisticated" weapons and the development of a proxy war also prolong and brutalize it, see for example the ongoing war in Syria? Aren't there situations, in terms of the dynamics of wars, where there are just several bad alternatives?

Karmína: There being a range of bad alternatives might be a good way of describing it. We would underscore, though, that unlike us, the mass of Ukrainian people do not have the luxury of remaining aloof, at the level of description. These alternatives are forced on them in a very real way. Even if they hesitate or abstain from choosing, a choice will be made for them and will shape the reality they face – a reality more brutal than inflation or a recession. It seems to us that for many on the Left outside Ukraine, the chief task seems to be to "get it over with" and quickly come to some definite conclusion (e. g., that the war can in no way be won; that the Ukrainian state is this or that anyway, so why care; that there is no fundamental difference between bourgeois democracy and a "D/LPR"-style society, since both are forms of capitalist rule, etc.). Once this is done, people move on to thinking and writing about other issues. But even if such reasoning were correct, for people in Ukraine, the bad alternatives are a lived reality and there are few "other issues" to think about at the moment. Unfortunately, most of the commentators stop short of providing any (realistic) pointers as to what they should do. Perhaps this leftist desire to be done with the war on

the verbal level of declarations is also an expression of our collective powerlessness on a practical level. Meanwhile, the majority of Ukrainian workers still seem to bet on an alternative they prefer over others: the vision of an unoccupied, independent Ukraine. The idea that they are unaware of the immense costs is ludicrous, as they bear them every day. Still, their views are ignored in much of Western leftist discourse on the war.

The way we see it, the rather piecemeal military aid from the West (quite restrictive, for example, in the kinds of long-range capabilities it includes) has enabled the Ukrainian armed forces to halt the Russian advance and, as we are writing this, to try to push it back. This would not have been possible, for example, without the deliveries of artillery shells which Ukraine had been running short on. On the one hand, this does prolong the conventional war and is directly responsible for casualties on both sides. But the proportionality metaphor concerns something else: Western military aid has so far prevented a descent into a desperate insurgency and a brutal occupation, while also tiring and demoralizing the invading force. Foreign weapons also provide some measure of safety to people in places further from the front which have been targeted. We can ask ourselves: If we had to remain in Kharkiv, for whatever reason (as many people have), would we prefer that an anti-aircraft missile system be stationed near the city or not? This, as opposed to the fanciful dichotomies of “an immediate ceasefire vs. continued attacks” or “a peaceful handover of state power to Russia vs. more war,” is one of the immediate questions. It is an other-worldly question for people like us, who only know the sound of air-raid sirens from quarterly test runs – but one such missile system was in fact donated by Slovakia, to the protests of local pacifists and opponents of “escalation.”

For these reasons, we were critical of workplace actions in Italian ports that sought to prevent the transfer of arms to Ukraine. Nor would we go out and demonstrate against weapons deliveries (and in defense of the national economy), as tens of thousands of people have recently

done in Prague. Unless such disruption becomes commonplace in Russia, such actions objectively amount to supporting the military aggression. On the other hand, we think anyone, including men of military age, should be free to flee the war or, as many labor migrants have done, not to go back to Ukraine to join the war effort. The people whom the Ukrainian state views as draft dodgers deserve our solidarity. Moreover, unlike some comrades in Ukraine, we are wary of the idea that this is simply an emancipatory “people’s war” that can somehow strengthen pro-worker forces – such illusions can in fact be quite dangerous. Finally, attempts by EU governments to shift the costs of the war and its inflationary effects on the working class can and should be resisted, though in a way that does not turn Ukrainian workers into scapegoats. Admittedly, our position is contradictory. We prefer the headaches that such contradictions lead to over the sort of satisfying but reality-independent thinking mentioned above.

Question: A final question. What does the ongoing war mean, in your opinion, for the development of class struggles in Ukraine?

Karmína: The current conditions of occupation appear to foretell the “DPR- / LPR-ization” of new territories such as the Kherson Oblast – that is, unless they are liberated by the Ukrainian army, which can only be done at terrible human cost. The destruction of lives and productive capacity in other regions has already brought about immense suffering and an unprecedented decline of the economy. Even if the war would end tomorrow, in whatever compromise, it will still have set Ukraine’s development back by years, deepening the country’s dependence on international financial aid and precipitating further outflows of labor power. Moreover, the ruling class in Ukraine is already using the war as a pretext for rolling back basic freedoms and protections of workers in ways which appear to be incompatible with EU legislation, even though European integration (and approximation of legal norms) is its proclaimed goal. See, for example, the recently passed law no. 5371 that robs workers employed in small and medium-sized enterprises of any Labor Code protections and leaves everything up to

shop-floor negotiation. A draft of the law had been submitted to parliament already in April 2021, but the economic difficulties created by the war provided new “arguments” in favor of passing it, allegedly as a temporary measure.

The key to the situation is, of course, the Russian working class, although its obligations to act (obligations, firstly, to itself, but also to the global working class) are only rarely mentioned in the declarations of the Western left. Through strikes, sabotage, and well-planned acts of terror against military and government targets, it could suffocate the war. The level of resistance that the Russian population has already put up, in quite difficult conditions, should not be underestimated. Note that in the West, there were plenty of peaceful demonstrations before and during the Iraq war, but we don’t remember seeing US recruiting offices on fire or supply trains derailed. Alas, actions on a more massive scale are needed to make a dent in the Russian war effort. In short, our solidarity with Ukraine must be with those who fight on both fronts – against the Russian occupation and against the homegrown policies of austerity and repression. Such forces do exist. Our solidarity with Russia can only be with those who throw wrenches in Putin’s war machine.

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