

USA: Which side are you on? — Bill Fletcher & Medea Benjamin debate

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Bill Fletcher, Jr. (Ukraine Solidarity Network) debated Medea Benjamin (Code Pink) last Sunday (Jan. 29) on the issue of Ukraine. The debate helped clarify some points, and raised some previously less clear issues.

Benjamin

Benjamin started off by saying how much she respected Bill Fletcher, how she'd worked with him in the past, etc. etc. She made the ritual statement that the invasion is "unjustified" and gave recognition to the suffering of Ukrainian civilians and soldiers "on both sides".

She then gave her usual cover for Putin. "This war was provoked" by the US/NATO through its long history of threats and aggression to Ukraine, she claimed. Chief among them is an "aggressive military alliance that has gotten right up to Russia's borders." She cited US and NATO aggression in Afghanistan, Libya and the proxy war in Ukraine. She claimed that Zelensky was prepared to negotiate an end to the war back at the start of the invasion and that "the Russians were willing to accept the idea that the troops would leave," but for the role of then-British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and US Secretary of Defense Lloys Austin.

The one point at which she discussed what happened inside Ukraine was in discussing the Maidan uprising of 2014. She gave heavy emphasis to the visits to Ukraine by right wing US politician John McCain, then State Department representative Victoria Nuland and the role of the National Endowment for Democracy in that uprising, and claimed that it was "an uprising that turned into a (right wing) coup."

Her concluding point was that the US should put pressure on Zelensky to negotiate with Putin. Her clear implication was that part of this negotiation process must be a willingness of Zelensky (Ukraine) to surrender some territory to Russia.

Prominent in what she didn't mention was the fact of Russia's deep intervention into Donbas in 2014 and the fact that Putin has repeatedly said that Ukraine has no right to exist. Nor did she mention Putin's imperialist interventions throughout the world - his support for the junta in Burma, his brutal intervention in Syria, etc. Nor did she mention, of course, Putin's connection with the Iranian regime which she (Benjamin) herself supports. As for her claim that early on Putin was ready to accept the departure of his troops from Ukraine - that is simply false.

Bill Fletcher

In his opening statement, Bill Fletcher returned the flattering phrases, saying that "it's a pleasure to interact with Medea on this.... Medea is my friend."

He then criticized NATO's expansion, but explained that there was the "fear factor" - that countries

neighboring on Russia wanted to join NATO in order to gain protection from their larger and expansionist neighbor. If the invasion of Ukraine can be justified as a preemptive act, then how about the US invasion of Iraq? He asked. Both are “illegal”, he said.

It is similar with the issue of Nazi groups inside Ukraine. If that even partly justified the invasion, he said, then the same argument can be used to justify the US invasion of Granada in 1983.

From there, he emphasized how Putin’s invasion broke all sorts of treaties and international laws. He also commented on the reactionary nature of the Putin regime, including its connections with fascists inside Russia itself.

“People have a right to resist, and those who place the burden on the Ukrainians to negotiate” are in effect saying that the Ukrainians should surrender, he said.

“Our role is to support resistancem, not to tell people to surrender,” he said. He concluded with three main calls:

1. Russia out of Ukraine
2. Encourage the development of an international negotiating team composed of the governments of China, South Africa, Brazil and Mexico.
3. For reparations by Russia to Ukraine for the enormous damage its responsible for.

I will comment on point #2 later, but first some more general points:

Maidan

First: As is usual with the pro-Putin “left”, Benjamin almost entirely ignored the developments inside Ukraine, and where she did mention it – Maidan in 2014 – she was wrong. Maidan was not a right wing coup. It was a popular mass uprising that objected to then president Yanukovych’s tilt towards Russia. Because of the higher standard of living in Western Europe, as well as the greater corruption and repression in Russia and probably because of the history of Russian invasions of Ukraine, the great majority of Ukrainians wanted their country to orient towards the European Union. (Not NATO, though.) As explained by Ukrainian writer Andrey Kurkov, after the protesters were assaulted by the police, they turned to those who were accomplished street fighters. That happened to be the thugs in Pravy Sektor (Right Sector). In no way was it a coup; The corrupt Yanukovych was chased out of office (and out of the country) by a popular uprising.

In the background to these protests was also the extreme corruption of Yanukovych.

Following the uprising, Russia sent its forces – both agitators and armed forces, many of whom were fascists themselves – into Eastern Ukraine to foment an uprising and form the fake independent “republics”, which were never independent; they were always just figments of the Russian government.

Azov and fascism in Ukraine

Also implied in Benjamin’s claims is the image presented by most of the pro-Putin left that Ukraine is overrun by fascists, as represented by Azov. Since being absorbed into the regular army, the outright fascist leaders of Azov have been dismissed and, in any case, the influence of Azov can be seen in the collapse of their attempt to create their own political party.

This is important because there is no way to understand the present without understanding what happened at that time. And that is why we should reject the entire approach of Benjamin and the

pro-Putin “left”, whose focus is on geopolitics while in general ignoring the actual internal developments. Or, more accurately expressed, they ignore the role of the working class and its allies in history. If the role of the working class and the masses of people doesn’t matter, then neither is their experiences. That is why Benjamin ignores to Putin’s massive war crimes in Ukraine. It is why it doesn’t matter to her whether Ukrainians have to live under Putin’s boot. (It’s also why she supports the Iran dictatorship.) How then can their approach be differentiated from that of any capitalist representative?

I must say that Fletcher too, while he did deal with some of this actual history, tended too much to take a similar approach, placing much emphasis on international law and government treaties. After all, as Marx said, law is the recognition of accomplished fact, and so are treaties. And when the accomplished facts change, then the laws and treaties simply become dead letters on a page. So it is on the “accomplished facts” that we must focus. Overall, of course, Fletcher’s presentation was much more balanced and accurate and drew some (but only some) correct conclusions. However, his time would have been better spent on the dynamics within Ukraine and within Russia.

China, South Africa, Brazil and Mexico

One of the most bewildering of his conclusions was the call for the governments of China, South Africa, Brazil and Mexico to form some sort of mediating team that would help start a negotiating process. How can those governments possibly be counted on to help Ukraine, or more exactly the masses of the Ukrainian people? Let’s consider them in order:

First is the **Chinese regime**, which is brutally undemocratic and imperialist. Not only is it guilty for the near genocidal repression of the Uighyrs, it also suppresses workers’ rights in the country as a whole. As for Xi Jinping himself, while he has taken a bit of distance from Putin, he clearly is in alliance with him.

Second we have the **South African** regime. We should never forget its massacre of the [striking miners in Marikana](#) in 2014 as well as the general corrupt nature of the regime. While officially neutral, the South African regime “is a strategic military and trade partner for Moscow” according to [an article](#) in *al Jazeera*. Here are two examples: In early January, a Russian ship secretly docked at a South African port and unloaded and loaded goods in the dead of the night there. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russian-ships-secretive-south-africa-stop-prompts-u-s-questions-11673265353> The ship is known to carry military goods. A representative of the South African government refused to comment on what the ship was carrying. Another example of this is the plans announced later this month for joint drills between the navies of South Africa, China and Russia.

Perhaps a portion of this alliance is due to the close trading relationship between South Africa and Russia. According to Wikipedia, South Africa exports \$410.78bn worth of goods to Russia, vs. only \$24.59 bn. worth of goods to Europe and \$15.7 bn. to the US. Another aspect is undoubtedly the prominent role the South African Communist Party plays in the ANC, the ruling party in South Africa. Almost all these Stalinist parties support the Putin regime.

Or consider the **Brazilian** government of Lula da Silva. Lula is part of the Sao Paulo Forum, [which supports Putin](#), if not directly then indirectly. Lula himself, in a May 4, 2022 *Time* magazine [interview](#) took the “proxy war/blame both sides” position on Ukraine. This is due to two influences: First is that Lula represents the international aspirations of the Brazilian capitalist government to play a global role. One clear example of this is the government’s participation in the “core group” that has intervened in Haiti, supposedly to maintain peace there but in actuality to help stabilize Haitian capitalism, including putting down any insurgent groups in Haiti. so what Lula and his regime are doing is playing or balancing between both imperialist camps in order to increase their

own stature in the capitalist world. Also, as with many other countries in Latin America (and in fact around the world), much of the Brazilian left – including in Lula’s own party – supports Putin, and Lula is bowing to this pressure.

It is strange that Fletcher should mention **Mexico**, whose global or even regional role is minimal. In the past, Mexican president Lopez Obrador bowed to US imperialism in repressing Central American migrants hoping to reach the US. On the other side, more recently, *AP News* [reported](#) that he attacked US and NATO’s sending arms to Ukraine. “I’ll supply the weapons, and you supply the dead. It is immoral,” he said. In March, some legislators from his party established a “Mexico-Russia Friendship Committee” and a youth group apparently affiliated with his party directly supported Russia’s invasion. So he, too, probably has aspirations for Mexican capitalism to play a wider role as well as bowing to pressures from within his own party.

It is mystifying why Fletcher should call for these governments to play any sort of role in this war, given that he opposes the invasion and calls for Russian troops out of Ukraine. Presumably Fletcher also supports the “no Russian annexation demand, although he did not mention it.

In the first place, the Ukrainian people cannot have the least bit of confidence in representatives of these regimes not to favor the Russian invaders, as their regimes already do. Second, and at least as important, all these regimes represent their respective capitalist classes and therefore it is certain that they would take an anti-working class position with regard to the Ukrainian working class.

Why?

How can Fletcher’s position on this be explained?

I think we have to go back to his personal friendliness between him and Medea Benjamin. How can one consider a proponent of the fascist-connected Putin – and the extremely repressive Iranian regime – be considered a “friend”? How can one give respect to somebody like that? (Note: this is not to advocate emotional hostility.) This is not a “personal” issue; it is a matter of playing to a certain crowd, not wanting to antagonize that crowd. That is the audience of mainly middle-class liberals and left liberals who inhabit the world of the NGO’s, DSA, academia, etc. George Orwell, writing in 1942, perfectly described the mindset of this world in general, when he talked about fascism and support (in practice) for fascism on the part of pacifists (which is the position of Benjamin in effect). Orwell talked about “the money-sheltered ignorance” and “the intellectual cowardice” of those who don’t want to be bothered with the horrors of war. So, some of these tend towards the Medea Benjamin pacifist “solution” while others tend towards searching for another mediation “solution”. Fletcher, of course, does recognize that the fascist-connected Putin must be fought, but at the same time his approach seems geared to avoid offending these pacifists, some of which are pacifist in all but name only.

Socialist Role

Socialists should ask themselves how the working class can play its own role.

Of course, we and the working class should support Ukraine’s right to defend itself with the only means available, which is arms in hand. Rather than opposing Ukraine’s receiving arms (which in itself amounts to a call for Ukraine to surrender), we should point out the extreme reluctance with which the NATO nations are supplying arms. Why, for example, did the US government wait so long to supply Ukraine with medium range missiles? Right now, the NATO nations are discussing supplying Ukraine with tanks, which it desperately needs to defend itself. Why has it waited to this day to do so (aside from a pitiful few)?

Then consider the issue of seizure of Russian oligarchs' property: So far, the US has seized a few luxury yachts and private jets of these oligarchs. This is just a show. Their real assets lie in real estate investments, but the US government won't touch that because that threatens the US based real estate investors. Those assets should be seized along with the real estate investments of the Ukrainian oligarchs, such as Ihor Kolomoisky, who robbed his country blind and then took the stolen loot and invested it in US real estate.

Lastly we need direct international links between the Ukrainian working class and their counterparts the world over. Among other things, that is the only means to impose real, effective sanctions against Russia.

The Democratic Party in the US will never even approach such steps. In order to even start to move in that direction, we need the a working class party. Building that involves building a campaign to defend the interests of US workers both abroad and at home.

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