

Ukraine and the Left

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Dave Kellaway looks at the different 'left' responses to the war in Ukraine.

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Big political events always trigger intense debates on the socialist left. Sometimes it seems the heat is in inverse proportion to how close to home the events are. Wars or struggles happening in unfamiliar national contexts can produce a lot of confusion since we know less about their politics and culture. In the past we have even seen major splits and developments on the left as a result of international events – just think of Hungary 1956, the Cuban revolution in 1958 or the 1968 events in Europe, Vietnam and Czechoslovakia.

At times over the last few weeks you can get the impression that different currents on the left have widely different appreciations of what is going on. Heated discussion in person or online is taking place about the causes of the war and what to do now. I have been called a war monger because I am in solidarity with the Ukrainian resistance and for their right to arm themselves.

Do we call for Russian troops out now, are sanctions necessary and what sort of solidarity do we organise for the Ukrainian people? Certainly the war will clarify the different perspectives and analyses of all political currents, not just on the left.

Building a mass anti-war campaign

Before examining some of these topics it is important to recognise that despite the differences we can all contribute to building the widest possible mass campaign around the slogans nearly everyone supports: Russian Troops Out Now and No To War. Indeed, prioritising these two slogans as the main rallying call would enable the largest anti-war movements such as Stop the War (STW) and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) to work together with the Ukrainian Solidarity Campaign (USC) to build the huge demonstrations we have seen in other countries. The USC has been particularly effective in mobilising Ukrainian and Eastern European workers and students currently in Britain.

Within any mass campaign the different organisations can communicate whatever analyses or positions they have on the invasion. Mobilisations against the Iraq war or even earlier on Vietnam

were organised on those lines. Platforms were inclusive, not exclusive of people who were not historic friends of the left. For example pro-NATO politicians spoke from STW platforms during the Iraq war.

This method is shamefully not shared by the current Labour party leadership who have launched an unjustifiable witch-hunt against STW and has banned any of its MPs, on pain of exclusion from the Parliamentary Labour Party, from speaking on STW platforms. We completely disagree with Keir Starmer's decision on this and on his total loyalty to NATO which is not a purely defensive organisation. It is not something Labour should be proud of helping to establish. In no way is it, as Starmer suggests, analogous to the establishment of the NHS.

What are the differences on the left today regarding Ukraine?

Are we against escalation of the war?

Escalation needs to be looked at more forensically here. Putin's army is already escalating the invasion. Resistance by the Ukrainian armed forces and the people in arms has certainly slowed down the invasion plans. In response the cities are being surrounded, then suffocated of supplies and civilian areas are bombed. Given the experience of Aleppo in Syria and Grozny in Chechnya we know what this escalation looks like.

If by escalation we mean the left should be arguing for the No Fly Zone then we are against escalation. Implementing such a zone would require direct conflict between NATO planes and Russian aviation and air defences. This could lead to the use of nuclear weapons. But should the Ukrainians refuse to use the Polish MIG fighter planes offered to them by Poland? Since it is Russian planes which are bombing civilians why should Ukraine not benefit from additional air power to save the numbers of their people being killed? These planes will be flown by Ukrainians not Polish or Americans. In general socialists should support the Ukrainian people's right to receive non-nuclear arms to defend the continued existence of their country. Faced with escalation from Putin this is their right.

Is it an inter-imperialist war?

Some socialists oppose this elementary right by defining the conflict as an inter-imperialist war such as the First World War. In that instance working people had no interest in the victory of either side and socialists (a minority unfortunately) adopted the revolutionary defeatism proclaimed by Lenin and Luxemburg. It is difficult to see this war through the same lens. Ukraine is facing one of the three most powerful imperialist powers. It has seen what this power has done to back Assad in Syria or take over part of Georgia or subdue the Chechen people. Ukraine is a much weaker country. It is not a member of NATO and the Western imperialist powers have not taken over its government. The government in Kyiv is not fascist - the extreme right got about 2% in the last elections. Russia attacked Ukraine. NATO did not invade Russia and nor did Ukraine.

Some socialists deny the obvious right to fight for self-determination by counter posing the Ukrainian government's refusal to recognise autonomy or self-determination of Crimea or the Donbass regions. The Minsk accords left these issues open for further discussion but Russia tore that agreement up by first recognising the so-called Donbass republic and then invading to defend it against a 'genocide' that no international human rights association has registered at all.

In some ways socialists who oppose the Ukrainians' right to fight back have partially swallowed the

Putin argument that Ukraine is an artificial state and needs reconfiguring. Putin in fact denies it very right to exist if you carefully read what he has written. He assumed he could walk in and many Russian speaking Ukrainians would welcome his liberation army. Patently that has not happened.

Self-determination is a right

Reports from Ukraine that you can see on many videos are evidence of a people's defence of self-determination. The resistance is also happening in Eastern areas like Kharkiv that Putin considered would roll over. Even when their towns are occupied hundreds of people are protesting, unarmed, against startled Russian troops. Tens of thousands of Ukrainians are pouring in from abroad to defend their country. What some people on the left have not taken on board is that they know the difference between Putin's regime in Russia and the imperfect reality of their own country. They might not consider Zelenskyy's government has been any sort of progressive regime but at least they know they can vote the guy out, unlike with Putin in Russia. The myriad of family and other links between Russia and Ukraine makes this basic deduction easy to understand.

Perhaps behind this inter-imperialist war framework that some hold is an ultra-left error which says there is not much difference between an increasingly totalitarian regime in Russia and a liberal capitalist one in Ukraine. Recognising that difference does not mean you give up the class struggle in Ukraine but it does mean you fight against getting a worse regime foisted on you. It is no surprise that some of the inter-imperialist war positions are held by people on the left who refused to recognise the reactionary project behind Brexit and suggested remain and leave were both backed by capitalist states so there was no real difference anyway.

Pacifist positions and the war

Opposition to escalation by the Ukrainian side against the already escalating invader is a position also adopted by pacifist supporters within the anti-war movement. This current is historically quite strong inside STW and CND and we have full respect for their position since they call for Russia to de-escalate and to withdraw. We welcome them in the solidarity campaign. However some of their argument goes along the lines - *well, Russia looks like it will win anyway so the more resistance carried out with Western supplied weapons will lead to a longer war, more Russian bombing and therefore more deaths.*

It assumes if the Ukrainians fight back less the Russians will back off and that this will encourage peace negotiations. Indeed some versions of this argument link opposition to getting more weapons into the Ukrainian hands with calls for Ukraine to negotiate now, more or less on Russian terms. Putin does not look like he will negotiate unless he looks like he will receive big concessions or if he knows the game is up and he has over reached. Neither looks likely just yet so the resistance remains key.

Are sanctions against Russia wrong

The left is also divided on sanctions. If you follow the inter-imperialist war framework or even the no escalation line then it could follow that you are against sanctions although you could accept them from the pacifist position.

The main arguments used against sanctions are that we are against Putin not the Russian people

who may suffer as a result and they could be ineffective if it evokes a nationalist response. Also it looks as if Putin took the decision to invade a while ago and has prepared a war chest and plans to withstand them.

Tougher than expected sanctions have been taken by the US, Canada, Europe and others. Putin did not expect such unity, he believed that countries dependent on Russian gas and oil would be more reticent. Ukrainians who have been interviewed in their country or elsewhere are in favour. The position taken by the ACR has been that we are in favour of targeted sanctions:

Sanctions against Russia should hit its oligarchs and Putin's war machine, not its populations. The London mansions of the oligarchs should be seized to house refugees and the homeless. We support workers in Britain boycotting and taking industrial action against Russian companies.

The latest STW bulletin does state: *We will oppose sanctions that will harm ordinary Russians*. If we assume that this means sanctions against the oligarchs are acceptable this is a better position than some left currents are taking. Of course you could read the sentence to mean all sanctions do harm ordinary Russians but I hope this is not the sense. Certainly I have not seen denunciations from the left of the dockers' actions to stop Russian ships

In reality it will be difficult to shield Russian workers from all the effects of sanctions but any discomfort they suffer has to be balanced against the way such sanctions may shorten the war and the killings of Ukrainians. In other words not being able to buy the latest smart phone with your Visa card has to be put against a family dying in an apartment block. In the past imperialist sanctions have been used against semi-colonial countries like Iraq with devastating, inhumane consequences. These sanctions are aimed at an imperialist power with bigger resources which is invading another country. We would campaign against any sanctions leading to a food or medical crisis in Russia. The existence of a very brave anti-war movement on the streets in Russia will hopefully make a nationalist pro-Putin boost less likely as a result of sanctions. One result of hitting the oligarchs and political leadership may be a challenge to Putin from within the bunker.

Is there a big upsurge of Russia phobia?

A number of people on the left have also become agitated about a rise in Russia phobia. The banning of Russian cats from competitions or talk about removing Engels's statue in Manchester have all encouraged this. However we should distinguish between a cultural and sporting boycott to put pressure on the Putin regime to withdraw its troops and racist Russia phobia. You can be in favour of cancelling the Bolshoi Ballet as a Russian company but still enjoy recordings of their shows. Nobody is banning Russian music. I have just checked and Tchaikovsky is on in a few minutes on Classic FM. Rimsky Korsakov's opera, the Golden Cockerel was performed at the Hackney Empire last night.

Sporting boycotts are not racist and there is no evidence that they have caused an upsurge in anti-Russian racism among the general public. Putin's regime lays great store in cultural and sporting soft power. A boycott helps weaken this. It sends a message to the world that you cannot just sit there and see a state sponsored ballet company perform blithely unaware of Russian bombs falling on Kharkiv.

Looking at the solidarity with Ukraine shown at the football grounds this Saturday it was not tainted by racism against Russia. Waving Ukrainian flags or wearing its colours as many ordinary people are doing does not make you a racist. People are identifying with a just struggle, a people's war against an imperialist aggressor. Nor was the solidarity action of the dockworkers stopping Russian ships

accompanied with racist statements. Of course the tabloid press is another matter, racist stereotyping is part of their DNA

Some commentators also need denouncing for making a distinction between this war and others because it is being fought against blue eyed blond-haired people. Somehow they are surprised that wars do not just happen in developing countries between dark skinned, less civilised people. We have of course the same hypocrisy on refugees. Home Secretary Priti Patel, one week is arguing for the navy to push back Afghan refugees in boats in the channel while the next week is at the Polish border welcoming Ukrainians. Predictably the Tory government is still being more restrictive than EU countries on who they will let in.

Is there a carnival of reaction?

Some of the left are solely focussing on the 'carnival of reaction' that the invasion and reaction to it has provoked. Ironically some of this left failed to see the actual carnival of reaction that Brexit bred. It is true that Putin's rash move has led to Germany shifting to vastly increased military spending and a number of countries actively considering joining NATO. In fact if Putin was really fighting against NATO expansion his invasion has probably guaranteed the opposite result. A victory for the Ukrainian resistance, far from being reactionary, could lead to positive changes both in Ukraine, in Russia and across Eastern Europe. A victory for Putin would mean the opposite. The growing signs of solidarity in Britain with the Ukrainians who are fighting back is not reactionary. Attitudes to refugees could improve generally. A mass anti-war campaign could also prevent the rise of reaction

Johnson's government could also deflect concerns over 'partygate' and the cost of living crisis through their surfing on the world condemnation and isolation of Russia. Some of their moves could lead to dangerous escalation. Their concern for Ukraine and its refugees contrasts sharply with its support for Israel bombing Gaza in the past or in favour of intervention in Iraq or Afghanistan. Starmer's complete support for the government line and for NATO will make Johnson stronger.

Finally one of the most useful things people on the left in Britain can do is to listen to what activists in Ukraine are saying.

I had discussions with leftist people from other countries and I am sometimes surprised of how they are afraid of putting too little blame on NATO and they are trying to put in every phrase that 'It is also NATO to blame'. Sure, NATO can be blamed to some point in time, but when the bombs start falling from the sky - only Russia can be blamed for bombing. From here on the ground the situation looks differently because we see how Russian government behaves. They are not willing to give up their plans. We can hardly say let's keep Russia and NATO away from here, because it is only Russia who invaded Ukraine. Because it is not NATO who is bombing the cities, it is very obvious here.

You cannot say: Let's not take sides. You cannot avoid taking sides, especially when you are here. I don't advise people from Western or Eastern European countries left to say that we are not taking sides. Not taking sides here would mean washing their hands.

A friend told me that it is also NATO's guilt and after everything will be over we will have a very nationalism, xenophobic country and other problems. So I answered him: Sure, we probably will, but I will think about it later when there will be no shelling of cities and when there will be no Russian army here. Now we cannot solve these problems. We can talk about them, but we cannot ignore the elephant in the room.

Some leftist people are saying that the way out is to negotiate and agree on the neutrality of Ukraine. It is hard for me to support this point at the moment. This position is a little bit colonial: denying also the sovereignty of a country. It is up to the people in the country to decide what they want to do and for them being able to decide, there should be no war. As I've said, this war made decisions for many Ukrainians. People say there is always a choice. But most Ukrainians don't see a choice now.

We are not denying our agency. Some people on the Left - in Western Left - are denying our agency, telling us what Ukrainians should do.

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P.S.

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