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More Arms, Support Urged for Zelensky's Ukraine at UK Labour Party Conference

Monday 10 October 2022, by [LELIW Tony](#) (Date first published: 4 October 2022).

A delegation of Ukrainians and their British supporters gave a loud call at the annual Labour Party Conference for more arms to be provided to end the war in Ukraine. Speaking at the conference, one Labour Member of Parliament said no other country had experienced three separate genocides in a 100-year period.

Alex Sobel, MP for the English constituency of Leeds North West, and Shadow Minister for Nature, Water and Flooding, said his father's parents were from the Western Ukrainian city of Lviv, and had lived through the Holodomor and Holocaust, and now a third genocide had fallen on the Ukrainian people, by the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Annual conferences are held by political parties in Britain at which delegates discuss and vote on policy decisions. It also gives opportunities for speeches to be made, including a unifying one by the party leader. This year's Labour Party Conference was held from Sep. 25-28 in Liverpool.

Speaking at a fringe meeting of the conference, Sobel said: "Whether you have connections with Ukraine or not, you and the Labour Party have a moral responsibility to support Ukraine, not just now, but in the future."

Sobel said it was important Labour politicians visited Ukraine, as there was a perception that because of former Prime Minister Boris Johnson's trips, only the ruling Conservative British Government supported Ukraine which, he said, was not the case. The Labour Party is the main opposition party to the ruling Conservative Party.

He said he was confident that Ukraine would win the war, and when that would happen, he expected a Labour government would step up and get fully involved in the rebuilding of Ukraine. "They will need a Marshall Plan, which happened in Western Europe after the Second World War," said Sobel. "The funding would come from sanctioned money in the UK, Europe and USA. That money needs not to go back to Russian oligarchs, but in the reconstruction of Ukraine. It is not business as usual."

Olesia Briazgunova, from the KVPU (International Secretary of the Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Ukraine), spoke from a live link to the meeting, and underlined that Ukraine needed help. "Russia is trying not only to blackmail Ukraine but the whole world, by the attempts to use nuclear weapons.

"Russia should be stopped, and that is why our trade unions are asking for financial and military support, because we are fighting for our freedom," she said. "Our workers are now soldiers in the Ukrainian army - they are medical workers, railway workers, and miners, and they are fighting for peace."

Simon Weller, assistant general secretary of ASLEF, the train drivers' union, had visited Ukraine in

August. He was taken to a railway depot where he met a guard and a fitter dressed in military uniform. They had come to see their mates before going back to the front.

Weller told them he was 54, they were in their 40s, and asked them why they were going to fight. He was blown away by their response: "We've had our children, we are fighting so that the young people who haven't had children, get a chance to have children."

Weller said the best way to help Ukraine was to start dispelling myths that this is NATO aggression. "It is not NATO's tanks that are rolling into people's towns and villages. It is not NATO's missiles hitting the suburbs of Kyiv, while we were there," he said.

"There is nothing more chilling than air raid sirens across an entire city. This is grinding reality. What we are seeing is colonialism. The best thing we can do is call out those lies."

Ivanna Khrapko, chair of the Youth Council of Federation of Trade Unions of Ukraine, was here on a fact-finding mission, and explained how Trade Unions were helping to deliver aid. In particular, she praised the railway workers, who she called "deliver angels", as they also helped evacuate people from the east of Ukraine. Khrapko said: "We can't negotiate with Russians when they are bombing a nuclear power station, mobilising troops and talking about nuclear weapons."

Stephen Doughty, Shadow Minister For International Development, said: "This will be a long and hard battle, which must be won not just for Ukraine, but for Europe and the world." Doughty had spent time in Canada and had many Ukrainian-Canadian friends, and was able to muster a hopak dance when he was younger and slimmer. He said: "We need to do a lot more on the Left [wing of the party], talking to our sister movements across Europe. I want to set up a Friends of Ukraine Group in Europe."

Chris Ford, a founder of Ukraine Solidarity Campaign, said: "We have argued that Western nations have not provided sufficient weapons to Ukraine to win the war. I looked at a report to find out how much aid the Labour government gave to the Soviet Union to help defeat the Nazis. We supplied 5,218 tanks and 7,411 aircraft. UK has given no tanks to Ukraine.

"When the Nazis were driven from Kyiv, there were British tanks on Khreschatyk, today there are no British tanks. There are Russian tanks which are destroyed, which is most welcome."

Ford said the British Ministry of Defence were upgrading Challenger tanks and by his calculation, there would shortly be 79 spare tanks going to Ukraine. However, Poland, a country that is not as rich as the UK, had provided Ukraine with 200 tanks.

A day before attending the Labour Party Conference, a rally was held in North London on the subject: 'Resisting Russian Imperialism in a time of the cost of living crisis'.

The speakers included Magda Biejat, a RAZEM Member of the Polish Parliament, who spoke about the need to get away from fossil fuels and to pursue a green agenda, and author and journalist Paul Mason, who explained the history of Labour's pacifist tradition and how it changed with the onset of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, and Italian leader Mussolini invading Abyssinia in 1935.

"The British workers realised the pacifist tradition was of no use anymore, they were facing a European civil war for values of civilisation, democracy, human rights and working class struggle," he said.

"They were persuaded to change, and that is what I hope we can do in supporting Ukraine, sending them more arms, forgiving the debt, and gearing our own industries to produce weapons in this just

war for independence and self-determination.”

Yuliya Yurchenko, of the Social Movement Ukraine: “My message to the Conference is they need to get their house in order and get a consolidated position on supporting Ukraine.

“There are some members of the Labour Party that are clear on what kind of support should be, and there are those so blinded by their disdain of American imperialism that they are willing to support Russian imperialism just to spite it.”

Yurchenko said they had to support the Ukrainian workers and trade unions and to emancipate Russian labour from Putin’s regime. “He is throwing anybody he can into the mincer of war, students being physically taken from their lecture halls,” she added.

For Yurchenko it was clear that those with money would escape being drafted into the Russian army, but the “distressed regions” full of ethnic minorities would not be so lucky.

“The genocidal nature of Russian imperialism has returned and needs to be stopped,” she added. “We need the Labour Party to have a strong position on this, because even those with doubts, will have seen the masks have now come down.”

Chris Ford, from Ukrainian Solidarity Campaign, said there was a danger with the cost of living crisis in Britain and Europe [rise in fuel and food price] that the Kremlin would exploit this situation and undermine support for Ukraine.

He said: “They will get Western powers to pressurise the Ukrainian government to enter into a peace agreement with Russia. What we shouldn’t misunderstand is that part of the reason the British government is helping Ukraine is there is popular support for Ukraine, and if that erodes, then that can weaken the aim.”

Ford had been part of a group that had visited Ukraine last August (2022).

This had included Simon Weller, Assistant General Secretary of ASLEF train drivers’ union, and Alena Ivanova of Another Europe is Possible, who were accompanied by the leader of the Confederation of Free Trade Unions (KVPU) Mykhaylo Volynets, and Olesia Briazgunova, his International Secretary.

The group had the opportunity to see firsthand the devastation of Russian occupation in Borodyanka, Bucha and Irpin, suburbs north of Kyiv. Ford said: “We met survivors who described how the Russians first subjected them to bombing, then when they came they started to murder civilians as if on a safari shoot. They looted their homes, shot and tortured them, and then left them to starve under occupation.”

While they were there the group delivered much-needed medical supplies. They visited the rail workers depot in Kyiv, where they met many railway workers who had taken in refugees. With Putin targeting Ukraine’s infrastructure, they had become top targets, and many had been killed.

Going back to the conference, the recurring theme was about Labour supporting a call for more weapons to end the war and save lives. One thing that struck home was what Ivanna Khrapko said: “We need to talk about support for more weapons. A bullet vest is not a weapon.”

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