

USA: Howie Hawkins (Ukraine Solidarity Network US): ‘ The anti-imperialist position is to support the national liberation struggle of the Ukrainian people’

Thursday 2 February 2023, by [FUENTES Federico](#), [HAWKINS Howie](#) (Date first published: 28 January 2023).

Howie Hawkins is a retired Teamsters union warehouse worker, the US Green Party 2020 presidential candidate and an ecosocialist. Together with a range of other leftists, socialists, unionists and academics, he recently helped set up the Ukraine Solidarity Network (US). Hawkins spoke to Federico Fuentes about the initiative and the challenges of building solidarity with Ukraine while opposing US imperialism.

Could you tell us a bit about how and why the Ukraine Solidarity Network came about, and what the fundamental aim of the network is? What practical solidarity does the network plan to carry out?

The [Ukraine Solidarity Network](#) was initiated at a meeting at the [Socialism 2022](#) conference in Chicago in early September. We convened following a talk on “Ukraine, Self-Determination, and Imperialist War” by Yuliya Yurchenko of [Sotsialnyi Rukh](#) (Social Movement), a democratic socialist organisation in Ukraine. Though initiated by socialists, we agreed to build a broader network of people to support the Ukrainian people’s national liberation struggle. Our fundamental aim is to build moral, political and material support in labour and social movements for the people of Ukraine in their resistance to Russia’s invasion and their struggle for independence, democracy and social justice. We want to nurture links between progressive labor and social organizations in Ukraine and the United States.

Public education is an immediate priority. We want to counter the narratives of significant parts of the old left and the peace movement in the United States who have decided that if the US is sending arms to Ukraine, they must automatically oppose that support. Given the vicious history of US imperialism, that stance may be understandable. But a one-size-fits-all conclusion is not justified without a critical examination of each conflict. Would these people have opposed US military aid to the anti-fascist forces in the Spanish Civil War because it came from the US imperialist state? Or the military aid the US gave to the Soviet Union in World War II? Or the US arms and special forces the US sent to the Viet Minh resisting the Japanese invasion during that war? In the case of Ukraine, the knee-jerk conclusion of no US aid to the Ukrainian national liberation struggle reveals a US-centric colonial mindset. It sees US imperialism as the cause of what they call “the US proxy war on Russia.” It renders the Ukrainians invisible. Ukrainian perspectives on the causes of the war and why they want arms for self-defence are ignored, including the views of progressive trade union, socialist, anarchist, feminist, LGBT and environmental movements in Ukraine.

The Ukraine Solidarity Network wants to be a voice on the US left that opposes all imperialisms — Russian as well as US — and supports the right of historically colonised and oppressed nations like

Ukraine to self-determination and to self-defence against aggression. We are concerned that those on the US left who oppose aid to Ukraine and, in some quarters, openly support a Russian victory, are alienating progressive- and peace-minded people in the US and internationally from the left.

While US military and economic support for Ukraine currently has wide support in the political centre and left, it is [fast eroding](#) in the Republican Party. The US right admires Putin's authoritarian strongman rule and his conservative Christian, ethnonationalist, patriarchal, anti-gay, anti-trans and climate change-denying policies and pronouncements. US aid to Ukraine will be challenged by the Republican majority in the House of Representatives when the next round of funding is considered later this year. By next fall, far-right "peace" candidates, who will campaign on cutting aid to Ukraine and redirecting those military resources to Pacific deployments against China and Mexican border deployments against migrants, are likely to gain traction in the Republican presidential primaries. I hope the Ukraine Solidarity Network will have a significant influence on the Ukraine debate in US politics with a progressive perspective that supports Ukraine's self-determination and opposes both Russian and US imperialism.

One of the biggest challenges facing those in the Western left who stand in solidarity with the Ukrainian people has been navigating through a situation in which our own ruling class is also ostensibly backing Ukraine. How do you view the war and the role of the US in it? How do you respond to the idea that a Russian defeat in this war will strengthen US imperialism? Is it possible to both support Ukraine and oppose US/NATO's aims in this war?

The left is for the liberation of working class and oppressed people. We should start with supporting the Ukrainian people's rights to self-determination and self-defence against Russia's aggression. We should reject using the imperialist framework of big power geopolitical competition to choose sides between rival camps of capitalist states. The anti-imperialist position is to support the national liberation struggle of the Ukrainian people against Russian imperialism.

Inter-imperialist antagonisms between capitalist states inevitably inject themselves into any national liberation struggle in this world of global capitalism. But that does not mean the left should subordinate Ukrainians' democratic demand for national liberation to the interests of one or another imperialist camp. It means we should support Ukraine's national liberation against both Russia's primarily military imperialism and the West's primarily economic imperialism.

Imperialism is a global system of rival imperialist states, not a system in which the US is the only imperialist power. The campists who support Russia's victory over Ukraine as the supposed proxy for US imperialism say it will weaken US imperialism. They say Ukraine's self-determination must be subordinated to the goal of a Russian defeat of US imperialism in Ukraine. They view as anti-imperialist any state in conflict with the US, no matter how authoritarian, capitalist or imperialist it is. They call for a multi-polar world in which US imperialism is diminished, which supposedly opens space for socialist development.

This emerging multi-polar world is really a return to a multi-polar imperialist world with inter-imperialist rivalries that breed wars. Supporting an authoritarian capitalist and imperialist state like Russia, supposedly because it is an anti-imperialist check on US imperialism, will not open the path to socialism. US imperialism will not be defeated by other imperialist powers. The people of the US will have to reject US imperialism. It will take an international socialist left to replace capitalist states and the global imperialist system with a socialist multi-polarity of cooperation and equality among nations.

Anti-US states like Russia, China, Iran, and their client states from Belarus to Syria, may have less

power than the US/NATO alliance in the hierarchy of nation states. But the anti-US big powers also cooperate with US/NATO in the global imperialist system that exploits and dominates the world's weaker nations. Global imperialism is a multi-lateral, multi-polar system of both competition and cooperation between capitalist states. The bigger anti-US imperialist powers, such as Russia and China, share management of global capitalism with Western imperialist nations through multilateral institutions like the International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organisation, where they jointly promote neoliberal austerity, deregulation and privatisation, and in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, where they stood together in favour of no binding greenhouse gas reductions, no reparations for climate-related damages, and privatising Earth's atmosphere through carbon markets and offsets.

Our support for military, economic and humanitarian aid for the Ukrainian people's war of military and civil resistance should not mean political support for US imperialism or the Volodymyr Zelensky government. We should give our political support to the progressive movements of socialists, anarchists, feminists, LGBT people, environmentalists and trade unionists in Ukraine who are fighting both Russian and Western imperialism, as well as the neoliberal and authoritarian policies of the Zelensky government. As long as Ukraine is fighting for its national liberation, the class struggle for economic justice and the social struggles against the oppression of ethnic minorities, women and LGBT people, and against environmental degradation will inevitably take a back seat to the multi-class struggle for national liberation. National liberation is a prerequisite for sharpening class and social struggles from below by the exploited and oppressed in Ukraine.

Ukraine's national liberation will not necessarily strengthen US imperialism. It depends on what the Ukrainians and those of us in solidarity with them make of it. The Ukrainians who have organised their people's war of mass participation in both military and civil resistance to Russia's invasion are developing the experience and sense of empowerment that can be employed to resist Western economic imperialism as well as domestic reaction. A defeat for Russian imperialism will be a defeat for the interconnected structure of world imperialism and a deterrent on other would-be aggressors. A victory for Ukraine will open possibilities for progressive class and social struggles against the same global capitalist system that we also fight at home. Progressive movements in Ukraine are clear that their prospects are far better under Ukraine's flawed but relatively open democracy than under the brutally repressive rule of Russia. International solidarity with Ukraine's national liberation helps us all advance toward a world of socialist democracy.

This challenge of supporting Ukraine while opposing NATO imperialism is perhaps presented most sharply with the issue of arms supplies to Ukraine. How do you view this question? How can one at the same time be anti-war while supporting sending weapons to a warzone? Isn't it the arms industry that most benefits from this war the longer it drags on?

If you say you support Ukraine's right to self-determination, but oppose sending them the arms they need to defend themselves, you do not really support Ukraine's self-determination. You support disarming Ukraine and Russia's recolonisation of Ukraine. We should be against wars of aggression, but not against armed self-defence against such aggression. We must distinguish between the violence of the oppressor and the fight back of the oppressed. The arms industry benefits from any war. But it would be moral bankruptcy to say Ukraine does not deserve self-determination because arms manufacturers are making profits.

In the US, we should support US military aid to Ukraine at the same time as we campaign against US militarism and imperialism. There are plenty of peace policies for which the US left and the peace movement should be campaigning, perhaps starting with nationalising the arms companies under democratic control to take the profits out of war and to eliminate the arms industry's election

campaign donations and lobbying for ever-growing military budgets. To shrink the market for arms industry profits, we should demand deep cuts in military spending, a radical reduction in arms sales abroad, and a phase out of the more than 800 foreign US military bases. We should demand an end to US support for authoritarian regimes, like the dictatorship in Haiti, and for the wars and occupations of sub-imperial allies, including the Saudis and Emiratis in Yemen, the Moroccans in Western Sahara, and the Israelis in the Palestinian territories.

Russia's extortionist nuclear sabre-rattling in its war on Ukraine should push nuclear disarmament to the top of the US and world agenda. We should be demanding that the US stop its destabilising modernisation of nuclear weapons, pledge No First Use, and seek direct talks with Russia to re-establish and renew the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM), Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE), Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF), Open Skies, and Strategic Arms Reduction (START) treaties. We should call on the US to initiate aggressive diplomacy toward mutual disarmament among all the nuclear states to bring them all into compliance with the new Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW).

We should also support the demand of the Ukrainian left for the cancellation of the unjust foreign debts owed by Ukraine to the IMF and Western banks and expand that campaign into generalised demands for international debt justice and reparations for the damages to the Global South of colonialism, neocolonialism, and climate change.

With so much to do for peace and disarmament, it is disappointing that the most vigorous campaigning by a significant section of the US peace movement is to cut off US arms for Ukraine, which would not stop Russia's war of aggression.

The USN statement reads: "It is urgent to end this war as soon as possible. This can only be achieved through the success of Ukraine's resistance to Russia's invasion. Ukraine is fighting a legitimate war of self-defense, indeed a war for its survival as a nation. Calling for "peace" in the abstract is meaningless in these circumstances." Does this mean the network sees a military victory as the only possible outcome favourable to Ukrainians? What if this is not possible? Shouldn't the left campaign for negotiations as a means to bring the war to an end as soon as possible? What, if any role, do you see for diplomacy and negotiations?

The Ukraine Solidarity Network supports the Ukrainian resistance and believes it is up to Ukrainians to define what victory ultimately means to them. We are not opposed to diplomacy and negotiations. We are opposed to the US negotiating a settlement with Russia over the heads of the Ukrainians.

The call for negotiations we are hearing in the US from the campists and some pacifists is really a call for the US to use the leverage of its military and economic aid to force Ukraine to accept an unjust peace based on Ukrainian land concessions to Russia. The most prominent proponent of that position in the US peace movement, Medea Benjamin of Code Pink, says that Ukraine will never win back all its land in the Russian-occupied territories and therefore a land-for-peace deal is the only way to stop the war. This call for a land-for-peace settlement is a call to carve up Ukraine between the US-led and Russian imperialist camps.

The Ukrainians aren't having it. The monthly polls by the Kiev International Institute of Sociology on whether Ukraine should accept a peace settlement that concedes land to Russia shows consistently overwhelming opposition. Its December [poll](#) shows 85% of Ukrainians oppose, and only 8% support, conceding territory to Russia in exchange for peace.

Ukraine's current [10-point peace plan](#) calls for Russian withdrawal from all occupied territories.

Russia says it is ready to negotiate, but that Russian-occupied territories are [non-negotiable](#). So both sides continue fighting for more land to strengthen their positions at some future negotiations.

Speaking for myself and not the Ukraine Solidarity Network, because we have not discussed it, I think the US and NATO should pursue negotiations with Russia about pan-European security arrangements that could provide a background foundation for a just and enduring peace in Ukraine. The US was [attempting](#) to negotiate such mutual security concerns in response to Russia's ultimatum in December 2021 that NATO quickly agree to withdraw to the 1997 military deployments it had before it expanded east, or else — the “or else” being what the 150,000 or so Russian troops amassed on Ukraine's borders might do. The US should be offering publicly and aggressively to resume talks with Russia on a mutual security framework. If the US, NATO and Russia could agree on mutual security arrangements, which would surely include the renewal of conventional and nuclear arms treaties I mentioned before, it could give Putin a politically acceptable way for Russia to withdraw from Ukraine, claiming that his security objectives have been achieved.

Your position is not one that is supported by all Green Party leaders. What can you tell us about the discussion on Ukraine within the Green Party and the party's official position?

The Green Party of the US is divided on Ukraine like the rest of the US left is. The party seems to be split right down the middle at this point. A [resolution](#) calling for a cut-off of arms to Ukraine, an end to sanctions on Russia and negotiations, was adopted by the National Committee in October in a close 48-44 vote, with 8 abstentions. The resolution did not call for Russian troops to withdraw or support Ukraine's right to self-determination. The text and supporting documents leaned heavily toward Russian narratives such as the US is fighting a proxy war with Russia, Ukraine is losing the war, and US-funded public health biolabs in Ukraine produce bioweapons.

The authors of the resolution argued that Ukraine is a puppet regime that the US can compel to compromise to get a peace deal with Russia. A few proponents of the resolution openly supported a Russian takeover of Ukraine. Some said opposing US imperialism takes priority over supporting Ukraine's self-determination. The largest group of proponents just liked the idea of negotiations, although none provided a plausible scenario for how negotiations might lead to a just and sustainable peace. Others were dogmatic pacifists who oppose arms to anybody anywhere anytime, even for self-defence — which is easy to say from privileged perches in the US where no bombs are raining down.

The opponents of the resolution argued that Greens should condemn Russia's aggression, demand Russian troops out, and support US military, economic and humanitarian aid for Ukraine's self-defence and survival. Many who voted no on the resolution were appalled at Russia's war of aggression and opposed the Greens giving it backhanded support. Opponents argued that a cut-off of arms to Ukraine and an end to sanctions on Russia would not stop the war and only encourage Russia to continue its take over of Ukraine. Opponents also implored Greens to learn about the perspectives and appeals for solidarity of Ukrainians, who were not consulted by authors of the Green Party Peace Action Committee (GPAX) resolution. Opponents shared writings and videos from Ukrainian and other European Green parties, from Ukrainian socialists, feminists, environmentalists, and trade unionists, and from Russian antiwar leftists and feminists.

Greens and the wider left in the US, like Americans generally, have been insularly focused on domestic affairs and not well-informed on international affairs. The left is just beginning to learn about the history and contemporary nature of Ukraine, Russia and other post-Soviet countries. It is just beginning to grapple with the inadequacies of the old theories of imperialism derived from the Cold War and unipolar eras for the changing structure and dynamics of world imperialism today in an increasingly multi-polar world. The Ukraine crisis has instigated a debate on these issues that has

only begun.

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