Peoples' Unity Against Fascism is slippery in action: A reflection on campism in our midst

written by Ivan Drury Zarin | March 31, 2026

After a busy first day of meetings, discussions, and panels that were challenging in good ways, as revolutionary activists from different countries, involved in different struggles, shared and contrasted their ideas, the end-of-day panel came as a shock. Speakers called for criticism of Venezuela's Maduro government to be silenced, denounced Ukraine for slaughtering Russians in the east, and, most alarmingly, denounced young demonstrators in Iran as brainwashed agents of Hollywood. Although there was not an opportunity for rebuttal, other speakers on the same stage anticipated these claims and took them apart, countering them with a consistent anti-fascist, anti-imperialist, feminist critique.

What became clear is that a deep fracture underlies the "peoples' unity against fascism," which was the title of this particular panel and a central premise of the Porto Alegre anti-fascist conference. Do we mean unity of peoples in struggle? Including when they move against the same states that are targeted by US imperialism? Or must the unity of the people be organized through the nation-states that pretend to represent them?

Through a "campist" maneuver, the "peoples" are collapsed into the tidy forms defined by nation-states. Blanca Eekhout, congresswoman and president of the Simon Bolivar Institute in Venezuela, exemplified this approach when she said, by video message, "It is impossible to fight and defeat imperialism without the unity of the peoples. Not a unity that repeats the lies of the imperialist press, but a real, deep unity… That's the solidarity that can defeat fascism." With such a "deep unity," no dissent or critique can be part of the support of states against imperialism. There can be no texture to the composition of our cooperation: deep unity must be a smooth unity, a unity polished like stone ground down and made smooth.

Is this anti-fascism? Is it anti-imperialism? The Cuban delegate didn't think so. Fernando Rojas from Havana's Casa de las Americas also called for unity, but as "integrative lines" between places and movements, for the sake of "our own existence and our own struggles." His brief talk, which was written before he could have heard Venezuela's conditions, read as a retort against demanding uncritical support. Rojas said, "The defense of Cuba must be militant: not uncritical, not artificially sweet, but militant. There are concrete examples of solidarity like this conference. We are here not only to receive support but also for critical exchange. We are giving time to this work."

There is a programmatic problem here. The unity of peoples-as-states presupposes that state

repression is legitimate and necessary to its appearance as a unified body, something that is impossible and requires a suspension of disbelief. This is also a philosophical problem. If we must accept rigid formulas in place of careful research, and rhetoric and slogans in place of critical thought, then we will be disarmed before the rise of new fascism. Fascism is not intelligent, but we must be intelligent to understand it and to fight it.

The next morning and throughout the second day of the conference, I talked with people about that "unity" panel. A comrade from Puerto Rico said it shows the need for discussion and debate, or else the differences that lurk beneath our slogans for unity will weaken this desperately needed coalition. I decided to focus on this problem with this report in order to make a contribution to that discussion, in the interest of deepening our unities, understanding each other, and also to work on the problem of action. I fear that a unity that is so broad that it includes both states and the peoples they repress will not be a coalition capable of common strategic action against fascism and imperialism.

The "antifascist" defense of Putin

There was only one speaker on the "Unity of the Peoples" panel who supported Putin's invasion of Ukraine, and he was included as a respondent, not a full panelist, but the callousness of his claim that Ukraine is the butcher of Russians, not the other way around, stood out for its audacity. What he said is not new, it is a Putin talking point, and it is consistent with the general argument against Ukraine's war of self-defense. And it represented the feelings of an important political current at the anti-fascist conference.

Earlier that night, Rafael Bernabe, former Puerto Rico senator, addressed this problem. "In the name of our struggle against US imperialism, we cannot afford to ignore the repression and brutality and complicity of other states," he said. "We condemn Israel for genocide in Palestine. And we also condemn the Russian Federation for its military invasion and aggression in Ukraine. And we condemn the theocratic and authoritarian brutality of the Iranian government against their people." And he added, "We are aware of the arguments against our position: that Putin was responding to encirclement of Russia. But that encirclement is a product of the competition between rival imperialist powers, with Russia's imperialist designs on Ukraine being one side of that competition. And people say Zelensky's is a rightwing capitalist government. That's why we don't support them but do support the Ukrainian people's fight for their sovereignty. We affirm that union rights, freedom of assembly and association, the right to strike, the rights and freedoms of women: these are not Western values. These are values held by the international working class."

Sushovan Dhar, from the Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debt (CADTM) India, argued that uniting international anti-fascism with and behind repressive states is a false start. Dhar said, "As we fight imperialism, we must be careful not to create new imperialisms. Multipolarity is a counter against the existing US world order, yes. But does it offer us a different path to a better future? No. Look at BRICS." He said, "It is composed of countries that rule without respect for the rights of people, for democratic rights, that have economies based on extractivism. These countries will not lead us out of the imperialist, capitalist trap we are caught in."

Rafael Bernabe said uncritical unity also defers political action and decision-making to governments of so-called progressive states, which are busy navigating Trump's pressures in the interests of maintaining their own capitalist economies. That means subordinating the defense of those countries directly under attack to the whims of their erstwhile allies. Bernabe said, "Solidarity with Cuba must also extend to so-called progressive governments. By bowing to Trump's pressure to cut off oil to Cuba, they think they are buying time and currying favor with Trump. But by allowing Trump to control their actions and to attack Cuba, they are guaranteeing their weakness before Trump's aggression."

At a breakout panel on the second day, Eric Toussaint said the old camp of for-or-against the US makes less sense than ever with a shakeup in the organization of global power. “Trump said he wants to convince Putin to stop cooperating with China,” Toussaint said. “For him, relations with Russia are about reducing the influence of China. Trump said, Let me do whatever I want with Iran and Cuba, who are your allies, and I’ll leave you alone about Ukraine.”

Vasyl, a Ukrainian trade unionist, said, “Ukraine has been subjected to control by great powers because Ukraine also has many natural resources: gas, minerals, as well as agricultural products and land. Russia’s war is about domination of Ukraine’s land and resources. And now, with Trump, we also see that he too is hungry for resources.” The Ukrainian constitution says that the resources of the nation are to be held and enjoyed by the people. In fact, Vasyl said, “That’s not how it goes.” Corporations control and profit from the exploitation of the Ukrainian people’s resources. It is necessary now to defend Ukraine’s sovereignty from Russia’s assault because the conquest of Ukrainian lands by Russia would even further interrupt and set back class struggles against corporate power, whether EU/US or Ukrainian.

It is true that US and EU imperialists have their own designs for Ukraine’s energy wealth and sovereignty, but that does not mean socialists elsewhere should wash their hands of the Ukrainian war of national self-determination. To the contrary, it demands solidarity with the Ukrainian working class regardless of the forms their struggle takes, based on the imperialist pressures they face on all sides.

Disposing of women to defend Iran

More outrageous was the inclusion on the panel of Hossein Khaliloo, from the Iman Al Mahdi Dialogue Center in Brazil, as an informal ambassador for the Islamic Republic of Iran. Khaliloo said that US imperialism has entered Iran “through the economy, through the culture, through the cinema, in order to get into the minds of the new generation.” Referencing the mass protests of December and January, which were put down with bloody violence by government forces and the Revolutionary Guard, Khaliloo blamed Hollywood for colonizing the minds of young Iranians. After being exposed to “imperialist and Zionist” culture and cinema for a while, “the imperialist culture grows in the country,” he said.

Of course mass cultural propaganda pours out of US culture factories. But the argument that these ideas take root and rot the minds of young people is idealist. People make use of cultural products through their own activity, interpreting and reworking cultural products as historical agents themselves. Culture does not make the world in a unitary, top-down, conspiratorial way. The idea that people are puppets mastered by a vast cultural apparatus has its roots in authoritarian politics, in patriarchy, and leads to antisemitic conspiracy theories. The truth is more challenging because it requires anti-imperialist and socialist forces to deal with fundamental contradictions in society, including their expression and reiteration culturally. If ideas do not contribute to understanding or resolving contradictions, then they do not take root.

The same respondent who rolled out the Putinist talking point about Ukraine also reinforced Khaliloo’s argument that uprisings in Iran have roots in foreign intervention. Acting flummoxed that anyone could criticize Iran for criminalizing, sexually regulating, and, just weeks ago, slaughtering women, he said that 60% of Iranian medical students are women. This, evidently, was his proof that regardless of the theology of the government, women are not *really* oppressed in Iran. It’s impossible to take seriously the patriarchal foundations of fascism and capitalism and say these things.

Although she spoke before them, Patricia Pol, from Attac in France, offered a feminist critique of this

disposal of women in the name of anti-imperialism. Pol said, “A social dynamic that allows Trump, Bolsonaro, Millei, Netanyahu to develop fascist politics and policies is misogyny. We cannot fight fascism without fighting patriarchy.” She said, “We need a war on war. A war on sexism. A war on fascism.” Feminist social movements, she said, must be built up in and against the home and in the streets, in workplaces and in movements, persistently and regardless of the popularity of feminist slogans — especially when feminist politics are under attack — in order to counter the patriarchal assault. That includes centering the freedom movements of women in countries targeted by imperialism as constitutive of the militant anti-imperialist struggle.

We can talk, but can we act?

A couple months before the conference began, I reached out to other socialist groups in the US and Canada and encouraged them to endorse and send people to the conference. Some replied with hesitation, saying they heard it was being led by campists, groups that support Putin against Ukraine and politically support Maduro, so didn’t want to go. That’s why it wasn’t a surprise to me to hear these sentiments at a main panel, though I admit the degree of support, particularly for the Iranian government, was a shock. Solidarity knew about these dynamics and decided to go anyway because we also knew a lot of groups were going, especially those affiliated with the Fourth International, who support peoples movements against their governments, even when those governments are also at odds with the US.

The overly broad terms for inclusion in the antifascist conference has not hampered good discussion and sharp, open-hearted critique. It’s been encouraging to be amongst so many critical, curious, and militant thinkers. But sharing a table with parties calculating the practical needs of BRICS alliances and people who dogmatically support any governments under attack by the US has its limits when it comes to strategy and action. And there are hard political and strategic questions that need to be answered by the end of this conference. Alongside commitments to building a mass feminist, anti-racist, pro-migrant, pro-LGBTQ+, anti-fascist movement, I want a conference resolution that calls on Brazil and Mexico to ship oil to Cuba. I want solidarity with Palestine against Israel and with Ukraine against Russia. I want a declaration that refuses the US war on Iran, while offering our hand in political solidarity to the working class and oppressed nationalities in Iran.

That is unlikely. So, what strategic actions can we take? And what organizational forms can we use, if this whole body can’t move effectively as one? It seems to me that more discussion is needed, with a focus on common action and strategies to effectively confront the coordinated imperialist assault on our world. But to have the unity needed to go beyond discussion and take common action, we’ll have to be clear that states and their defenders cannot be part of our peoples’ unity against fascism.

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