

What the DSA International Committee's Ukraine Statement Gets Wrong

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The Democratic Socialists of America's International Committee has issued a statement on Ukraine that fails to adhere to basic socialist principles. As socialists, we have a responsibility to speak out and to act against our own government's imperialist role in the world, but we also have a responsibility to condemn the imperialisms of other powers and stand with the victims of oppression everywhere. The statement's biggest weakness is its remarkable failure to say a word about Russia's role in this crisis, consequently creating an incomplete, slanted, and distorted view that makes it impossible to understand what's actually happening, much less to take a principled position on it.

One looks in vain in the DSA-IC statement for some reference to the scope of Russian military threats against Ukraine: the mobilization on Ukraine's borders of at least 100,000 troops, some from as far away as Siberia, and the prepositioning of equipment, including short-range ballistic missile launchers and artillery, helicopters and air assets. Additional thousands of Russian troops are gathering for 'joint exercises' in neighboring Belarus, near the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv.

Nor does the DSA-IC statement say anything about Russia's recent past aggression against Ukraine, surely not irrelevant to the current situation. Nothing is said about Russia's seizure of Crimea in 2014, the first time any great power conquered territory in Europe since the end of World War II, in a conquest soundly condemned by the UN General Assembly. Nor does the DSA-IC statement refer to Russia's continuing military involvement in eastern Ukraine, where fighting since 2014 has resulted in more than 13,000 deaths and a million displaced.

The DSA-IC statement is of course correct that the eastward expansion of NATO over the past several decades has been provocative and unjustified. The peace movement has long noted that this NATO behavior would only increase feelings of insecurity in Russia. But the peace movement has never accepted that a nation has the right to threaten to go to war, still less to actually launch a war, as the means of addressing its security concerns, real or alleged. If Russia feels insecure because of NATO expansion, it must utilize existing international mechanisms for conflict resolution, not mass troops and weapons on Ukraine's borders. The DSA-IC statement doesn't have a word to say about the largest military mobilization in Europe since the Cold War nor the obvious threat that this represents. Socialists should not support international bullying.

The DSA-IC statement raises the issue of Ukrainian neo-fascists. These elements did play an outsized role in the 2014 Maidan uprising and continue to be a worrying force in Ukrainian politics. Clearly Ukraine needs a broad left to counter the right. But it is also true that currently far-right parties have almost no electoral presence in Ukraine (unlike those in France and Germany, for example, or in Russia). Most far-right European parties support Putin. Marine Le Pen of France's Front National endorsed Russia's take-over of Crimea in 2014 and today believes that Ukraine belongs to Russia's sphere of influence. Putin himself leads an ultra-conservative party and jails and poisons his critics. And Russia's neo-fascist Rusich Task Force of its Wagner paramilitary group - unmentioned by the DSA-IC statement - is every bit as fearsome as Ukraine's Azov Battalion. Of course we must condemn the activities of neo-fascist forces in Ukraine, but it is problematic to focus on the Ukrainian far-right to the exclusion of the far-right in Russia.

The DSA-IC statement also fails to acknowledge the fact that Ukraine is a former colony of the Tsarist and then the Soviet empires - having suffered horrendous human costs. When Putin declares that "Ukraine is not even a State," Ukraine deserves socialist support, just as we have historically supported other colonies and neo-colonies fighting for their freedom.

The DSA-IC statement states that in Ukraine the United States has been "training far-right extremist groups with neo-Nazi sympathies such as the Azov Battalion." Though the IC states this as fact, the source they give for this claim is an article by Branko Marcetic much more tentatively titled "The CIA May Be Breeding Nazi Terror in Ukraine." And in fact, Marcetic overstates the matter. He reports that Congressional language that barred the training of the Azov group was removed from military appropriations in 2015, but he doesn't indicate that since 2017 U.S. legislation has explicitly prohibited funds from being used "to provide arms, training, or other assistance to the Azov Battalion."

To be sure, Ukraine is a country with many deep problems. On Transparency International's corruption scale it ranks as highly corrupt - but better than Russia. Its political system is far from democratic. But since 2014, voters have thrown out incumbent presidents at each election - something not likely to happen in autocratic Russia, or in the breakaway Donbas 'republics' or Crimea. Human rights defenders, journalists, trade unionists, and other social justice advocates have been subject to terrible abuses in Ukraine, as they have in Russia, Crimea, and Donbas. We stand with all these embattled activists. And we stand against all nationalist bigotries toward ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities in Ukraine.

The DSA-IC dismisses the Maidan Protest of 2014 as the "U.S. backed Maidan coup." It thus associates itself with others on the left - we call them "campists" - who claim that all popular insurgencies against leaders who seem to oppose U.S. imperialism are incited, manipulated, or controlled by Washington. There is a degree of condescension and even racism in the notion that movements from below of ordinary Ukrainian, Chinese, Iranian, or Nicaraguan working people are U.S. puppets. These people are perfectly capable of standing up for themselves and fighting back, even if they do so against overwhelming odds. Do the U.S. State Department and the CIA and NATO attempt to influence and, when they can, direct such movements? Of course. It is clear, however, that the Orange Revolution of 2004 and the Maidan uprising were fundamentally expressions of the democratic aspirations of the Ukrainian people - fed up with the brutality of their government's treatment of protesters - and their wish for self-determination, and not because they were being directed by Washington or by neo-Nazis. The Ukrainian people seek their independence, and we should stand with them against both the United States and NATO *and* against the immediate threat from Russia.

Like the DSA-IC, we fervently hope for a peaceful settlement of this crisis. In the longer term we hope for a solution that sharply reduces military dangers - offering genuine neutralization to

Ukraine and other countries, curtailing military exercises, and removing conventional and nuclear forces.

But peace will not come from pretending that the 100,000 Russian troops on the border don't exist or that the military maneuvers of the U.S. and NATO are all that matter.