



Ukraine: a critique of the Yalta Manifesto

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The anti-fascist resistance in Ukraine is debating what its goals and methods should be. Dave Stockton offers a critique of the Manifesto

On 6 July a conference took place in Yalta, in the Crimea, dedicated to opposing the war launched by the right wing nationalist and fascist government of Ukraine that was installed by the Nato-sponsored coup in February.

Its Russian and Ukrainian participants adopted a 'Manifesto of the People's Front for the Liberation of Ukraine, Novorossiia and Transcarpathian Rus'.

'Trotskyist' supporters of the February Maidan coup have accused this manifesto of being a Russian nationalist document. The accusers include members of Socialist Resistance, the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International and the Alliance for Workers' Liberty in Britain¹. The AWL brazenly supports the regime installed by the Maidan against the antifascist resistance, Socialist Resistance pretends to be neutral but repeats all the arguments that Ukraine is primarily a victim of Russian imperialism and those resisting in the east and in Crimea are tools of Putin and have no right to self-determination.²

Only from the standpoint of a Ukrainian nationalist, for whom the country is indivisible and every square inch inalienable, no matter what its inhabitants think, could this manifesto be judged as separatist let alone Russian nationalist

What the Manifesto is not

Of course, some of the people who attended the Yalta conference, and voted for the Manifesto, may have been separatists or Russian nationalists. Indeed, this is even likely after four months of bombardment and fascist pogroms that have been endorsed by the 'democratic' western imperialists who are determined to impose a Greek-style neoliberal austerity programme on the country and draw it into Nato. However, what they voted for does not call for the dismemberment of Ukraine, quite the opposite; it is absolutely explicit on this matter:

'Does the struggle in the south-east (Novorossiia) amount to separatism? No, the territory of the struggle is the entire territory of Ukraine? We shall establish a new, free, socially responsible people's power on the whole territory of Ukraine and Novorossiia.'

The Manifesto's goal is defined as 'a just, socially oriented, people's republic on the territory of Ukraine.'

For the drafters, this means, free medical care and liveable pensions, social security, and state capital as the dominant force in the economy, plus controls over large fortunes etc. In short, it is an anti-neoliberal, old-style, left social democratic definition of a 'social republic' or 'welfare state', one where capitalist property relations would still operate, though supposedly under the control of the democratic state.

Why this is a utopia we will deal with later.

Likewise, the method of bringing this state into existence is defined as 'a democratic revolution', no signs of authoritarian Russian Nationalism there, either.

Political power will be constructed in line with the principle of direct popular representation (people's power) from the bottom upward. Organs of people's power will be formed, beginning at the level of local Councils and extending upward to a Supreme Council, according to the principle of representation of delegates from territories, of delegates from labour collectives and from professional bodies and councils, and of delegates from political, religious and community organisations.

The Manifesto envisages a federal structure in which each region will have its own budget and taxes, an anti-crisis fund, and will safeguard overall state languages and specific regional ones. However, as well as this considerable autonomy, it envisages a central/national government, ensuring that each region will be obliged to observe the general state principles applying to the relations between labour and capital, and to civil and political freedoms.

The central government will be charged with defence, the maintenance of the central state apparatus, for the construction of objects of overall national importance, for scientific research, for maintaining health care and education, and for the development of infrastructure.

Revolutionary socialists certainly have fundamental criticisms of this; it is not a socialist, anticapitalist programme, but for sure it is also not a reactionary or Great Russian chauvinist document aimed at dismembering Ukraine and subjecting it to Moscow's control.

The Manifesto's description of what is happening in Ukraine is fundamentally correct:

A popular liberation uprising is under way against a liberal-fascist regime that seeks, through terror and propaganda, to impose a criminal oligarchic and comprador capitalism in our country.

The anti-terrorist campaign waged in the south and east of the country, the pogrom in Odessa, the indiscriminate bombardment of the civilian population of Mariupol, Donetsk and Luhansk and the driving out by these means of hundreds of thousands of people constitute a monstrous crime.

The plans to reform the country on the basis of a neoliberal destruction of its industries and social services, under a machine of state repression heavily staffed by outright fascists, makes it completely justifiable to refuse to recognise the Kiev regime and to rise in rebellion against it.

The fact that, for its own imperialist objectives, the Putin regime has given aid, does not invalidate this in the least even though the brutal Nato-supported offensive necessarily drives the resistance to greater and greater dependence on Moscow, just as Assad's brutality in Syria drove the popular resistance to appeals to Washington.

The media of the Nato countries have systematically covered up Kiev's atrocities because they are directly implicated in the coup and from the beginning have encouraged the right wing nationalists and fascists, with the purpose of dragging the country into the western sphere of domination and exploitation.

Criticisms

Nevertheless, despite its social, democratic (and social democratic) demands, this remains a very confused document with heavy debts to Stalinism and populism and completely insufficient criticism of Russian nationalism and imperialism.

The big problem of the document lies in its avoidance of a clear and explicit class analysis of what is happening in both Russia and Ukraine.

This is all the more important because the population of the country is still heavily working class and for seventy years Ukraine was a workers' state, albeit a bureaucratically degenerated one. By this we mean that, whilst the economy was state owned and centrally planned, the workers had lost political power to a privileged and repressive bureaucracy and the democracy of workers' soviets, rooted in the workplaces, had been replaced by a fake parliamentary system.

Last, but not least, in the case of Ukraine and other Soviet republics, the right to self-determination, up to and including full independence had not existed since the early 1920s.

Whilst the Manifesto correctly denounces the rapacious oligarchs who seized ownership of the state owned means of production in Ukraine in the 1990s, and correctly envisages their re-nationalisation, it ignores three major facts.

The oligarchs' pillage of state property was part of the restoration of capitalism. No adjectives are needed to qualify this. Of course, the neoliberal shock therapy and the seizure of assets by oligarchs from bureaucratic or criminal backgrounds are the specific form that it took. Nonetheless, it is capitalism in general that is the enemy of the workers and farmers of Ukraine and Russia alike. This needs to be recognised, and said openly because, otherwise, the road is open to the idea that some sort of 'social' or 'humane' capitalism is possible or desirable.

Capitalist restoration took a similar path in Russia, although on an even greater scale, and the regime of Vladimir Putin is just as much an emanation of this new capitalist class, dominated by oligarchs, as is the regime of Ukraine. The difference lies in the fact that, as a nuclear 'great power', it is able to play an independent role vis-a-vis the USA and the European Union headed by Germany.

Even if the highly corrupt seizure of assets had not taken place, even if the capitalists who bought up the industries and commerce of both countries had been as honest as the day is long, the means of production would still be in the hands of a few monopolists and they would still be pursuing the neoliberal policies that their class brothers and sisters have been pursuing in the USA and the European Union for decades.

Therefore, whilst it is natural to stigmatise the oligarchs as the ruthless band of crooks that they are, it is necessary to go further and identify them, first and foremost as capitalists.

More dangerously, the Manifesto only names and condemns 'usurious financial capitalism', as if those capitalists who lend money at inflated interest rates were the main problem. This identification is entirely within the bounds of populism, whose horizon is that of the small (petty) bourgeoisie, who find themselves crippled by the high interest rates of the banks and moneylenders and by the competition of the big firms. This is the kind of limited 'anti-capitalism' that even fascists adopted (whilst acting as the servants of the great industrial and financial monopolies). There is also a worse construction that can be put on the formulation: 'usurious capital' has in the past been used as a euphemism, or code word for 'Jewish'.

Given the history of Russia and Ukraine, this should be recognised and completely rejected. Likewise, drawing attention to Orthodoxy and the 'Christian tradition and heritage' is dangerous because of the role they played in White Guard reaction, proto-fascism and anti-Communism.

Even if the drafters were far from intending such meanings, any democratic, let alone a socialist, state should give no privileged position to church or mosque or synagogue. A secular state, which separates all religious institutions from the state and the school, will allow voluntary associations of believers of all faiths the freedom to practice them but will also ensure that non-believers and their children are not coerced or induced into religious observation.

The only genuine anti-capitalism is one that targets all capitalists, industrial and commercial, as well as those in banking and finance, who extract surplus value/profits from the unpaid labour of wage earners.

Nor does state ownership of the largest sectors of the economy, in itself, represent an anti-capitalist solution since, as long as the market dominates the goals and direction of the economy, and the state remains the state of the capitalist class, these sectors will act as state capitalist trusts.

To call the state a 'people's state' is only obfuscation in any class society. The 'people' includes all classes, the question is; which of the two essential classes of bourgeois society, the capitalists or the workers, the exploiters or the exploited, is to control the instruments of coercion?

If what is meant is that the working class should use its own state power to take over and consciously plan production and distribution in order to end social inequality and injustice, then it is necessary to say so. Not least because this identifies the prime agency for achieving 'social justice', the class that must lead the struggle.

True, the Manifesto talks of the state being the largest holder of capital and controlling the strategic sectors of the economy and of this capital being controlled by the people's representatives. But capital is a social power, inseparable from capitalists as a class whether or not they directly own this or that enterprise. There have been many states, especially in the so-called third world, where the state has controlled the 'commanding heights' of the economy, without them becoming either workers' states or socialist.

If the Manifesto is calling for working class control of the economy, then two related and essential levers are required to effect this; the seizure of political power by the working class via democratic workers' councils (soviets in the 1905 and 1917 sense) and the establishment of workers' control of production and distribution by those who work in the factories, offices, shops, the means of transport, the banks, etc.

'Workers' control' means control over the existing management, vetoing any decisions which are against the workers' interests, while at the same time learning from them all the techniques of organising production and distribution, exposing the exploitation and corruption which went on under the former owners, tracking down their robbery and restoring property to those whose labour created it.

With this knowledge, it will be possible to decide democratically the needs of workers as consumers, and develop a democratic plan to meet those needs. As planning becomes more widespread and efficient, the role of the market and all its inequalities will become narrower and narrower.

People's Front

The Manifesto presents itself as the basis for a popular front, that is, a political alliance between the working class and sections of the capitalist class on a programme that is acceptable to those sections. This is one of the historic differences between the Trotskyist and Stalinist traditions. Obviously, its main attraction to anti-fascist militants fighting in Ukraine today is that it is linked to the Communist International's strategy, after 1934, for the fight against fascism in Spain, France etc.

As Trotskyists, we believe that the popular front was then, and would be now, a disastrous distortion of the tactics and strategy of revolutionary communism. Moreover, it is a distortion that, since its adoption in the Thirties, has led to nothing but defeats for the working class and its allies. It is of fundamental significance that it had no place in the practice or theory of Bolshevism or the Communist International in Lenin's time.

We do recognise that, in its resistance to fascism, the working class should seek the support of forces from other classes and strata as well as itself. These could include the peasants, the petty bourgeoisie, the progressive intelligentsia, oppressed nationalities and races, even individual capitalists and military leaders. As Trotsky said, the working class does not reject the assistance of anyone in its own progressive struggles.

The problem with the popular front, as opposed to the alliances developed by Bolshevism and the Communist International of Lenin, such as the alliance with the peasantry and the anti-imperialist united front, is that it is a bloc not with an exploited or oppressed class or stratum, but one with a segment of an oppressor or ruling class and one that comes at too high a price; the postponement, or abandonment, of the class struggle of the proletariat, the motive force of the struggle for socialism.

For Stalin and Dimitroff³ the People's Front was a bloc with the liberal capitalist class (in France and Spain). Both of these were imperialist classes that oppressed and exploited colonies. Establishing and maintaining the Popular Front with them necessarily involved a pledge not to threaten their ownership of the large-scale means of production, industrial, financial and agrarian. It necessitated the working class limiting itself to defending democracy and fighting fascist and reactionary forces.

Worse still, the Popular Front deprived the anti-fascist struggle itself of its most powerful social force, the proletariat's class struggle. This meant not just the struggle for power but any serious anti-capitalist actions, such as factory occupations or the general strike, because, by definition, they would alienate the 'progressive bourgeoisie'. In addition, it denied anti-fascism the assistance of the force of the class struggle of the peasantry (land seizures) and the resistance of oppressed nations, or races, to their 'democratic' rulers.

Furthermore, by protecting the state power of 'progressive' sections of the bourgeoisie, it opened the working class to their sudden 'betrayal'. In short, Trotskyists predicted that this strategy would lead to catastrophic defeat. And it did. In Spain, most obviously, but later also in Indonesia and Chile.

What would it mean in Ukraine today? With which non-proletarian classes, who are not 'toilers', is such an alliance to be formed? Of course, there are middle classes and farmers, but they hardly constitute an independent class whose 'price' for an alliance is for the workers to abandon their struggles. If this was not the case in 1917, then how much less is it the case today? In fact, the more decisive and determined leadership the working class can offer to other popular classes, the more of them will rally to it.

Last, but not least, by envisaging and realising a common government with bourgeois forces, the Popular Front broke a principle that went back to the classical Marxists in the Second and early Third Internationals. Thus Karl Kautsky, when Lenin considered him an orthodox Marxist wrote:

'So long as the class contradiction between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat remains irreconcilable there can be no state power capable of attracting the confidence of both classes and for which both classes can simultaneously vote the means of existence.'

We also notice that the Manifesto uses the word 'Fascism' in a way that has its origin in Dimitrov and Stalin's definition, 'Fascism is the open terrorist and most reactionary, most chauvinist, and most imperialist elements of finance capital'. (Main Report delivered at the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International)

It is certainly true that fascism can be used by finance capital, but its own ranks are drawn from the outraged and frightened petty bourgeoisie and from the most backward elements of the working class and the lumpenproletariat. It is not itself an 'element of finance capital'.

Equating the two creates the danger that, if finance capital finds it necessary to use a different strategy, less terrorist, more 'democratic', to achieve its goals, the drafters of the Manifesto would see that as a victory. By the same logic, if a 'democratic' outcome to the present crisis would be a victory, then a 'Popular Front' with capitalist forces, even forces of finance capital, would be an adequate basis for conducting the present struggle. As in Stalin's day, this incorrect analysis of fascism opens the way not to the struggle for socialism but to a supposed 'necessary' stage of bourgeois democracy, a limitation that will strangle the working class movement today, just as it did in the Thirties.

The National Question

There is no doubt that a government/regime of Yatsenyuk, Poroshenko, Yarosh, and leaders like Timoshenko, promised nothing but discrimination and oppression for the Russophone section of Ukraine's citizens. This is inherent in their statements that Ukrainian is the national language, their determination to linguistically Ukrainianise the population of the east or south, or to ethnically cleanse, that is, drive them out, altogether.

Anyone who covers up or excuses such a policy on the grounds of Ukraine's history of national oppression, whether they call themselves anarchists, communists or Trotskyists, is acting as a reactionary bourgeois nationalist, not a proletarian internationalist. No degree of national oppression justifies a reversal of oppression and discrimination, or visiting it on an entirely innocent people. As the history of Zionism shows, it is possible to use the most terrible genocide as a pretext for the project of cruelly oppressing and displacing another people. It is outrageous to blame today's Russophone Ukrainians for the crimes of the Tsars or Stalin and his successors.

The oppression of the Russophone people of the Ukraine, especially in the south and east (Novorossiya) consists of the denial of equality in the use of their language. It should be recognised, however, that this is not as severe as that endured by Ukrainian speakers in the past. This is the subjective reason for the attempts to bring about a renaissance of the Ukrainian language at the expense of Russian. As is shown by attempts to revive Irish Gaelic, it is no easy matter to displace a language that has become established. To do so by discriminatory legislation, by banning the mother tongue of a section of the population from schools, courts, the media, etc. can only have reactionary consequences.

There is no question that Ukrainians suffered severe oppression both during the forced collectivisation of the early Thirties and the bloody purges of 1937-8. There were also severe attacks on Ukrainian language and culture. Other nationalities within Soviet Ukraine/Crimea, particularly the Tartars and the Volga Germans, also suffered terrible oppression in the form of mass deportations in which huge numbers perished.

At other periods in the history of the USSR, in the 1920s and 1950s and in the early 60s, the Ukrainian language and culture were positively fostered. Indeed, without the conquest of illiteracy after the Russian Revolution, a mass Ukrainian national consciousness would hardly have developed.

Though the Soviet Constitutions of 1918 and 1936 both included the right to self-determination, including secession, there can be no doubt that, during the rule of Stalin and his successors, subject nationalities were obstructed from expressing their wishes as to independence or not. The tragedy was that independence, when it came, also meant capitalist restoration and a brutal slump on a scale similar to, or worse, than that during the Great Depression of 1929-33.

Related to this was the fact that, thanks to 60 years of Stalinism, there was no genuine Bolshevik party capable of opposing restoration and fighting for an independent socialist Ukraine, within a free federation of such states, including Russia.

A restoration of Russian domination is something that millions of Ukrainians in the centre and west of the country legitimately fear, just as, after the February coup, Russian speakers feared the reverse. This is unlikely to be Putin's objective today, given the balance of international forces, and it is plainly not the intention of many of the resistance forces or the drafters of the Manifesto. Nonetheless, it is true that some Russian nationalists, who have come to aid the struggle, do openly voice such views.

Although the Manifesto criticises the Russian oligarchs for not really wishing to aid Novorossiya, it does not denounce and renounce any occupation or seizure of Ukraine's territory by Russian forces. Russia is, as we argue elsewhere in this journal, an imperialist power itself. For this reason, Putin is resisting the western imperialist block's attempt to alter the neutral status of Ukraine between Nato and Russia, and between the EU and Putin's attempted Eurasian economic block.

On this issue, Putin is not the aggressor but the defender of the status quo. However, this does not make him, or Russia, any the less imperialist. Russia's bloody wars in Chechnya, Putin's support for the Assad dictatorship in Syria, indicate that he does not head a progressive block. Strategically, independence for Ukraine means independence from Russia quite as much as it means independence from Nato and the EU.

On this basis, and on the basis of opposition to neoliberalism and the defence of democracy, it is possible to win over the workers of the central and western Ukraine, to win over units of the army sent to oppress the population of south and eastern Ukraine/Novorossiya.

The impact that the neoliberal 'reforms' of the Kiev government will have on the majority of the population east and west will alienate workers and youth who presently support them or are neutral in the present struggle. If the resistance forces in the east make plain their dedication to a united, all-Ukrainian struggle in defence of the jobs and services of working people, which the Manifesto does indeed envisage, then there is the potential for a joint struggle against the oligarchs and nationalists.

Conclusion

So what do we think is the goal and the programme that can win the civil war against the right-wing nationalists, fascists and oligarchs? We outline this in our draft action programme below. Its axes are the following:

The struggle against the neoliberal-oligarch government, its armies and its fascist gangs is a also fight against capitalism, not only Ukrainian but North American, European and Russian and against either of the contending imperialist power blocks.

The only class that can lead this struggle is the Ukrainian working class aided by workers in Europe and internationally.

This revolution is not simply a 'people's revolution' or a 'democratic revolution'; it is not merely 'socially oriented' or 'socially just' it must be a social revolution that uproots capitalism itself.

This revolution must therefore culminate not just in 'people's power', whatever that is understood to be, but in workers' power, that is, the rule of councils of delegates who are democratically elected and recallable by workers in their workplaces and communities.

This revolution must not only transcend the limits of capitalist democracy, and a social welfare state, and become a socialist revolution; it must become the spark that ignites an international revolution, for, if the history of Stalinism shows anything, it shows that it is impossible to build socialism in one country.

REFERENCES

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2 <http://socialistresistance.org/6613/the-imperialist-carve-up-of-ukraine-...> [2]

3 Georgi Dimitrov, as General Secretary of the Communist International, moved the resolution 'The People's Front Against Fascism and War' at the 7th Congress in 1935.

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