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Class forces in the Ukrainian civil war



AntiMaidan protest in Kharkov led by Borotba on March 22, 2014.
Photo: Borotba

By Greg Butterfield

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Simferopol, Crimea — *Workers World* has conducted an extensive interview with Victor Shapinov, a coordinator and leading theoretician of the Marxist organization Union Borotba (Struggle) of Ukraine. Shapinov currently lives in exile with other Borotba activists in Crimea, under threat of arrest from the U.S.-backed coup regime in Kiev. Links to previous installments in the series can be found at the end of this article. The final installment will appear next week.

Workers World: A major demand of the Maidan movement was adoption of an association agreement with the European Union. What forces in Ukraine were pushing for integration with the EU? What impact will compulsory austerity measures enforced by the EU and International Monetary Fund have on the struggle there?

[Maidan is the pro-imperialist movement which took its name from the central square of Kiev, the Ukrainian capital, where it held protests in late 2013 and early 2014. The backbones of this movement, which received extensive funding and political support from the U.S. government, were neo-Nazi gangs and political parties. Maidan culminated in the overthrow of the elected government of President Victor Yanukovich in February. It brought to power an alliance of wealthy oligarchs, neoliberal politicians and fascists that have carried out a brutal war against the working-class, primarily Russian-speaking population of the Donbass region and anti-fascists throughout Ukraine. — WW]

Victor Shapinov: Some people thought that so-called European integration would bring Western living standards to Ukraine. But to see reality, we need to look at the situation in Greece. The EU doesn't bring high living standards, but a regime of austerity to cut social spending by the state.

Borotba was one of the first political forces that stood against Euro-integration. We published a major analysis of the consequences of integration with the EU economic system and the association treaty. For countries like Ukraine, it means surrendering control of their markets to EU imperialism.

Take agriculture, for example. Ukraine has big, effective agricultural production. But agricultural goods from Europe are cheaper, because they get very big state subsidies from the EU — between 40 and 50 percent in some cases. The Ukrainian state simply cannot give such money to farmers, and they will go bankrupt.

It's the same for industry. Ukraine will be flooded with cheap imports from the EU. At the same time, it will lose the market of Russia and other countries of the Customs Union.

Countries like Greece, Spain and Portugal, which are today living under austerity regimes, are the periphery of the central European Union countries. Ukraine will be the periphery of the periphery, like the developing countries of the Third World.

It is bad for Ukraine's economy, but good for some branches of industry and the big oligarchs. Because of the capitalist crisis, they want the support of the West and guarantees for the safety of their capital. They were very active in the promotion of Euro-



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integration.

When the Maidan movement started, all the TV channels were in favor of it. They said that [then President Victor] Yanukovich is very bad and Maidan is very good. Almost all TV channels in Ukraine are privately owned by oligarchic groups. All of them promoted Maidan and made big propaganda in favor of it.

After the Maidan coup won, they agitated for the free trade agreement, and it was signed by Ukraine and the Europeans. But the treaty will start only in 2016. Even for Europe it is not so easy.

But if we talk about the neoliberal reforms in exchange for IMF loans, those are already beginning to take hold. The main figure in this process is Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, who is very pro-Western. He proudly declared the largest program of privatization of state-owned property in the history of Ukraine.

We see that it is a new kind of politics for Ukraine: market fundamentalism on one hand, nationalism and fascism on the other. Now they walk side by side.

At the beginning, many people said Maidan was a people's movement against corruption and so on. But what was the political leadership of this movement? It was this bloc of neoliberals and fascists.

From the first day of the Maidan movement, Borotba's prognosis was that its victory would bring this bloc to power. They are like two hands of monopoly capital, trying to save its political and economic control. This was the political and social basis of the Maidan movement.

Yanukovich was not very effective for the monopoly capitalists. Before, they had to make some deals with him, but after Maidan, they hold direct political power, like oligarchs [Igor] Kolomoisky, who became governor of the Dnepetrovsk region, or [Serhiy] Taruta, who became governor of Donetsk. Taruta, however, was expelled by the People's Republic.

Some leftists called Maidan a people's movement. But people are divided into classes. It's not only a language question, that one part of the population speaks Russian and the other Ukrainian, but a class question. The middle class and so-called "creative class" — freelancers from big cities and so on — were the core of the Maidan movement. Even in the cities of the southeast, you can see a pro-Maidan position represented by these social strata.

In Russia, there was a so-called peace march in Moscow [on Sept. 21], not really for peace but to support the Kiev government. It was very much inspired by pro-Western propaganda and led by Russian liberals. Their social basis is also the "creative class."

These strata are linked with Western capitalism. Some of them work in branches of the economy dominated by Western businesses. Some orient toward the West because of their way of life and consumption. They adopt this ideology and think that anyone who is against them or who is not so pro-Western is backward and primitive.

WW: What are the class forces at work in the resistance to the coup — the AntiMaidan movement and the Donbass People's Republics?

VS: We see that people who are linked with so-called real production, the factories, mines and so on, are more involved in the AntiMaidan movement or share its sentiments.

We could not say it is a pure class division, that it is just the bourgeoisie on this side, and the proletariat on the other side, of course. It is more complicated.

The political agenda of Maidan does not speak with a clear class orientation. Rather, it talks about how the ruling class must make a so-called civilizational choice. They say Ukraine must make a civilizational choice for Europe, for the West, and against Russia and the East. Even left forces are guilty of this, or adopting this kind of political language.

When Borotba was at the head of the AntiMaidan movement in Kharkov, we always said that it was first of all an anti-oligarchy movement, even before anti-fascism, because it was the oligarchy that fed the fascists, raised them, supported them. And now we see that they even arm them and form battalions of them to send to Donbass. We always tried to advance the class point of view.

Sometimes, even without the influence of Borotba or other leftists, there is spontaneous development of class thinking.

Take Aleksey Mozgovoy, commander of the Ghost Battalion of the people's army in Donbass. He is very leftist, anti-oligarchy and anti-bureaucratic. His ideal is self-government by the people, as we say, like the soviets [workers' councils] in the early period of Soviet history.

It's not because he read some books, but because he was inspired by this movement and made his own analysis. Now there is a good basis to work with him.

There is also a strong influence from the Russian Federation and its forces. In some senses it's good, because without Russia's support, the resistance in Donbass would have been violently destroyed.

At the beginning, the movement had no leaders, no structures, nothing. It's a miracle that they survived and built an army that can win against the enemy. Without some support from Russia it could not be. That is just reality.

But Russia is not a socialist or even a democratic country. It tries to use this movement for its own goals. Also, Russia tries to impose ideological views on the movement that are harmless to capitalism, for example, Russian Orthodox religion and Russian nationalist ideas.

WW: How would you describe the Russian nationalism in Donbass?

VS: In the West, if you support the People's Republics, you will always encounter the argument that they are just Russian nationalists, that the conflict in Ukraine is a war between two kinds of nationalism.

But if you speak with these people from Donetsk who say they are Russian nationalists, it is quite different.

If someone in Moscow says he is a Russian nationalist, there's a 90-percent chance he is a fascist. If someone in Donetsk says that he is a Russian nationalist, 90 percent of the time, he is just for more rights for the Russian-speaking population, the right to education in the Russian-language, and so on. Or he is against [Ukrainian nationalist and Nazi collaborator Stepan] Bandera being here. In economic views, he is a socialist.

[Resistance leader and Donetsk "People's Gov."] Pavel Gubarev, for example, says he is a Russian nationalist, but at the same time he says he is an orthodox socialist. A lot of people have such mixed-up views.

The ideological struggle is only at its first step. Who will win and what clear ideologies will emerge is the problem of work, of struggle.

It's a pity that Borotba always had a weak organization in Donetsk and Lugansk. That's where the strongest movement was, so we have not had such a strong influence. But there are leftist trends in the political leadership, for example, the head of the Supreme Soviet of Donetsk, Boris Litvinov. He said, "We are building a republic with elements of socialism." He is a former member of the Communist Party of Ukraine. [On October 8, Litvinov became the chairperson of the newly-formed Communist Party of the Donetsk People's Republic. — WW]

We know that a lot of fighters and commanders in the people's army are leftists and communists, not only Mozgovoy, but also others who were members of the Communist Party or who call themselves communists. There is a battalion whose sign is the red star. A lot of squads fight under the red flag.

That's the difference, when it comes down to it. If I have an argument with some leftist who says, "You have to support Maidan or not give support to either side," I respond, "You cannot come with a red banner to a Maidan demonstration, but there are always red banners among the AntiMaidan." And it's not just because of nostalgia for the Soviet past. It's about the political views of the people. The Maidan always wants to destroy the monuments to Lenin, and AntiMaidan protects them.

Even some people who call themselves "monarchists" come out to protect the Lenin monuments. As we say, it is a very complicated contradiction.

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