

Interview with leader of the Social Movement in Ukraine

Friday 22 April 2022, by [DUDIN Vitaliy](#), [OPPEN Florence](#) (Date first published: 20 April 2022).

In this interview, Workers' Voice member Florence Oppen speaks with Vitalii Dudin, leader of the organization Social Movement, who describes the work being done by working-class activists to fight against the Russian invasion and for a socialist future in Ukraine.

Florence: We wanted to take this opportunity to learn more about organizing, class struggle, and socialism in Ukraine. Can you explain how your organization, Social Movement, was formed and what your points of unity are?

Vitalii: Dear comrades, first of all we highly appreciate your support in spreading the truth about the attack on Ukraine. We should support the Ukrainian people's self-defense and resistance in order to save Ukrainian democracy, which is a key factor for the development of a workers' movement. If the Russian invaders win, we will have no freedom for the working class in Ukraine. It will also be a big defeat for the European and international working class. We highly appreciate all humanitarian aid. Every convoy makes our life better. It gives us hope that we will stand, fight and save our lives, and that we can help those in need, people who lost their families, jobs, homes, etc.

To answer your question, I am the head of the NGO Social Movement, which is a unique organization in Ukraine because it unites leftist youth and working-class activists. We have anarchists, socialists, communists, as well as people working in the mines, the hospitals, the railway, etc. In Ukraine we don't have leftist or socialist parties in parliament or active in the class struggle. We also don't have mass organizations of the left. In 2015, when we founded our organization, Social Movement, we started to build up a political force that can become the core for the creation of a left party to fight for the power of working people. We are not fans of conservative left movements such as Stalinism. We have never been affiliated with the so-called Communist Parties. We defend workers' democracy, and we believe socialism is the future, not the past.

Florence: What kind of struggles were you involved in before the war?

Vitalii: I want to say that, honestly, I don't remember what was before the war, because the war started eight years ago, when pro-Russian loyalists occupied the Donbas region (Luhansk and Donetsk). Our poor country has been dealing with the military aggression of imperialist Russia since 2014, even though at that time the aggression was hidden because the Russian troops were acting under the cover of the movement for the so-called "People's Republics" [of Donetsk and Luhansk]. They are not republics: they are military, conservative dictatorships with no freedom whatsoever for the working class.

From 2015 on, since our organization was born, there has been war in a part of the territory of Ukraine. And we have used all opportunities to promote our socialist agenda, but it has been very difficult, because we had to build a left movement from scratch, from below, in the aftermath of Maidan. During Maidan, a lot of leftist organizations either dissolved, or were discredited because

they had connections with Russia. We refused to associate with Russia; we instead took the side of democratic rights, socialism, and a free and independent Ukraine. It was a hard time for organizing a new left alternative, because of the pressure from the far-right groups and the neoliberal forces. They tried to impose an atmosphere of anti-communist hysteria, and started a witch-hunt process, managing to approve a law on decommunization, which created a legal precedent for the persecution of left activists.

Despite all the dangers, we've become almost the only political group that is opposing neoliberal reforms and advocating social changes for the benefit of working people.

Since February 24th, we've faced a completely different set of problems. We are living in a time of extreme challenges because we don't know if our homes and families will be safe in the near future. Russian imperialism has a lot of military power, and they are firing missiles at peaceful cities from across our country, from the east to the west. It was a shock for Ukrainian society, but we are used to living and struggling under difficult conditions. We were somewhat prepared. Of course, it is hard to prepare for such a disaster as war, but we are using all possible opportunities to promote workers' rights, socialism, and a democratic agenda.

Florence: Here in the United States we are building an internationalist, antiwar solidarity movement based on demands for the immediate retreat of all Russian troops from Ukraine, support of the Ukrainian resistance and its right to armed self-defense, and at the same time, opposition to NATO expansion and U.S. imperialism. There is, however, a significant sector of the "anti-imperialist" left that either refuses to condemn the Russian invasion and support the resistance, or even worse, justifies the invasion, arguing that it is a legitimate response to NATO expansion. Can anyone be an "anti-imperialist" activist or militant today and remain neutral in this war?

Vitalii: I think it is a stupid position not to support Ukraine because of these reasons. It would be akin to defending other crimes or rapes. Russian imperialism needs no excuse to occupy Ukrainian cities. The cause here is not NATO, but the crisis of Russian capitalism, which today cannot create the basis for a stable and prosperous Russia, and cannot provide dignified conditions for Russian workers—and that is the reason why Putin's junta started an invasion. Putin's junta and the oligarchs need this war to stay in power and preserve their privileges.

I want to say that we are against NATO, this bloc of rich countries driven by an anti-communist agenda. Today, it is hard to justify NATO's existence.

Ukraine had close ties with NATO about 15 years ago, when the government was very pro-Western, but Ukraine didn't join the military alliance. Since that time, the prospect of membership in NATO has become rather unlikely. So Ukraine joining NATO is not the real cause of the Russian invasion, as it was not on the agenda in reality. Of course, when the Russian army began its provocations in 2014 and occupied a part of our country, a part of the population believed that NATO would be a shield to protect the country because Ukraine is very poor. But all these illusions were lost after the start of this full-scale invasion. Ukrainian people's beliefs in a "good" NATO coming to the rescue were shot down on Feb. 24. People now understand that NATO is a bloc of capitalist countries that are pursuing their own aims and interests and will not help the Ukrainian people. We can even see that now our president Zelensky is supporting the position of a "neutral Ukraine." The question of NATO is complicated here, and it can only be understood when you consider both international dynamics and the internal situation. Seriously speaking, inside Ukraine, almost no one believed that Ukraine would become a member of NATO. Today a lot of people support the idea of a "neutral status." Besides, I want to stress that a country's choice of international [affiliation] cannot justify military aggression.

Florence: You said that this war has to do with the specific interests Putin represents. U.S. media portrays Putin as “irrational” and “crazy.” We are not convinced by these superficial “explanations” and we think Putin is very consciously carrying out a political and economic project in Eastern Europe and Ukraine, and that he represents particular class interests. Can you share with us your analysis of the root causes of the Russian invasion and the relation of domination and exploitation that Russia has with Ukraine?

Vitalii: We can start from a historical perspective. Right now, I am reading a book on the Ukrainian state in the 20th century that was written in 1996 and follows the liberal-nationalist discourse, and even they understand that in the time of the Soviet Union, the USSR had to recognize the independent status of Ukraine and its sovereignty. Its official agenda was the recognition of the Ukrainian people, who had the right to self-determination and were distinct from the Russians, while claiming that Ukraine and Russia were “brotherly nations.” But after the collapse of the USSR, we saw that Russia started to expand its imperialist ambitions, building its identity on the ground of conservative ideas and xenophobia. The Russian ruling class sees Ukraine as a country they can invade because they used to control it in the past, in the time of the Russian Empire. If we listen to Putin’s stupid pseudo-historical lectures, we will hear that he criticizes Lenin because of his views on the right of self-determination of nations such as Ukraine. The Soviet project, which we don’t defend today, had some safeguards against the domination of the Russians, as an ethnic group, over smaller nations, such as Ukraine.

If we talk about history since 1991, we can say that Russians did everything they could to control the key sectors of our economy—the energy sector, banking, oil, gas, mining, industrial enterprises. Those relations were the relations of an imperial metropole with its periphery. After Maidan in 2014, relations between Russian and Ukraine were broken and the influence of Russian oligarchs over Ukrainian entities waned. It was a form of what we could call a process of “decolonization,” caused by the Maidan revolution, when people said that they didn’t want Russia to control our lives. We want instead to use all the resources of our country to build its prosperity and its social rights. We can theorize whether Ukraine could join the EU and which benefits it would get, etc. but the key thing is that Russia saw the Maidan uprising as a betrayal and responded with military invasion of the eastern part of Ukraine. For a long time, the war in the Donbas region was Russia’s instrument to exercise its power over Ukraine.

Ukraine and Russia have had a very complicated relationship, both countries have been highly interconnected. We have some common history, but at the same time Ukraine is an independent country, with its culture, language, and its national differences.

Florence: Here in the U.S., we support the right of the Ukrainian resistance to acquire and use all the weapons it needs, including those it can get from NATO countries. At the same time, as revolutionary socialists, we are opposed to US imperialism, to the deployment of new U.S. troops in the region, and we call for NATO to be disbanded. In a recent interview you stated, “We view NATO as a club of the richest countries and their close allies. For Ukraine, it would be better to develop relations with all countries and ensure real independence,” and you restated this here. Can you expand on this view and the role of NATO? How can we ensure the “real independence” of Ukraine? Can you also explain why the demand to condemn Ukraine’s foreign debt is important?

Vitalii: I think we should defend the independence of Ukraine in different spheres. Of course, there is a lot of attention to the military defense of Ukraine today, which is very important, but we cannot be limited only to this aspect. There is another aspect that is raised by Social Movement, which is the demand for social justice for Ukraine. We want to liberate our country from the unjust and unfair debt that was accrued after Ukraine took loans from the IMF and other international institutions. We

think Ukraine should resist both Russian tanks and Western banks.

Ukraine will have no chance to maintain an independent policy if our people are under the threat of Russian tanks, bombs, and missiles. It is absolutely clear. But we cannot achieve our goals in the social sphere if our hands are tied by the absurd demands of neoliberal institutions, because we know that the IMF is asking Ukraine to close public hospitals, schools, kindergartens, etc. The IMF does not serve the interests of Ukrainian working people. The last front of the struggle for independence is defeating the parasitic Ukrainian oligarchs. All the key sectors of the Ukrainian economy are in the hands of the rich oligarchs—the energy sector, ore mining, metallurgy, agriculture. These are the sectors which provide big profits, but the profits are shifted to “tax havens.” We want Ukraine to be liberated from the offshore evasion of taxes. We want the rest of the world to help us abolish tax heavens. We understand it is difficult, but we have not heard any serious arguments why this should not be done (except some demagoguery about “need to protect investors”).

Today’s neoliberal system is in crisis. We see that the logic of its agenda, the robbing of peoples, is justified by private property. The modern global system is totally unfair and we want to challenge its legitimacy from the Ukrainian perspective. This war is a tragedy for people, but today we can explain to people why Ukraine needs another social course. There is no other alternative to the expropriation of the money and property of all oligarchs, both Ukrainian and Russian. So it becomes clear that we must fight against all tax heavens, because Russian oligarchs accumulate billions there. Those who want to promote effective sanctions must begin by targeting tax heavens globally.

Florence : Do you expect this war, as horrible as it is, to provide a space for the radicalization of new layers of people to start questioning the root cause of war, capitalism, and imperialism? What kind of political discussions are happening within the resistance regarding the best political strategy to win the war, aside from the demand to increase material aid?

Vitalii: It is a good question because our political life in Ukraine is dramatically changing. We have no mass mobilizations in the streets because all demonstrations could be instantly declared illegal under martial law. But at the same time, many people are reading and thinking about the situation, and today our words become more relevant. Today we can shape the consciousness of the Ukrainian working class, after years of social disintegration. This war has forced us to unite. A lot of the Ukrainian workers, when they get arms in their hands, they are receiving the feeling of historical responsibility. They do recognize themselves as not only exploited workers, but as the subjects of history. So when they return to the workplace, they will be more radical in negotiations with their employers. If Ukraine wins, we will have an opportunity to influence the Ukrainian working class and its agenda. But it’s very important to be together with the working class; we need to show that we are not only talking but that we are also doing. This is why we are asking all our contacts to organize convoys in Ukraine: we are collecting money to buy equipment such as bullet-proof vests, helmets, medikits, etc. And many of our activists are acting as soldiers, be it in the Ukrainian army or the Territorial Defense. Everyone needs to be involved in one way or another in the defense of Ukraine.

Florence: In a former interview, you were explaining how unionists and social activists were getting involved in the resistance efforts in Ukraine, be it by joining the Territorial Defense or providing relief and material aid to soldiers, the wounded, the displaced or refugees. Within this broad resistance against the invasion, is there a space for sectors of the left and labor or social movements to assert some sort of political independence from the Zelensky government while participating militarily in the resistance?

Vitalii: There are some contradictions between the foreign agenda of the Ukrainian government and

its domestic policy. A lot of workers support the Ukrainian president, and they support the idea of the defense of Ukraine, and are against bad compromises with Russia, but at the same time, they see that every conflict--and this war is not an exception--should end with peace negotiations. Zelensky is not escalating the conflict; in this regard he is principled and consistent, and at the same time he makes room for peace talks. I think this policy is supported by the Ukrainian people.

But at the same time, we must understand that his socio-economic political agenda was formed under the pressure of his bourgeois environment. His political program was not written by the working class, the trade unions, etc. It was written by the people who served the oligarchs or the IMF. There are a lot of people with neoliberal views in his team, like Halyna Tretiakova, who is the head of the Committee of Social Policy in the Ukrainian parliament and is pushing forward neoliberal reforms. We have thus seen the introduction of the land market, the attempts at anti-labor employment reforms, and the privatization of health-care services.

But Zelensky understands that it would be very risky for him to promote only neoliberal ideas in our country, because it is a very poor country, and there are big class contradictions between the poor masses and the very small group of wealthy Ukrainian oligarchs. So at the same time [as neoliberal policies are adopted], the socially-oriented constitution of the country, which guarantees, at least on paper, free education and health care, has been kept. We also still have the Soviet labor code adopted in 1971, and have wide guarantees for unions, etc. But we know these social gains have been deeply harmed during the war. Now we have Law 2136, which gives our employers opportunities to ignore basic labor rights during martial law, but this law is not set in stone, and we hope that with the end of martial law we will be able to reverse this and win back the restoration of the majority of our social rights.

We know what the views of the government are, but we also know they are watching carefully what people are ready to support and fight for, such as the control of energy prices, or the need for basic income during war and unemployment, etc. In Ukraine we have a democratic regime. Of course, our democracy is seriously corrupted by the oligarchs, but we have some room to accomplish changes. If we win this war, and if the government does not change the agenda, we will have no chance to build a prosperous Ukraine, a socially oriented one, to rebuild our cities, etc. The left will have a lot of opportunities to fight and show the alternative to Zelensky.

Florence: Can you tell us if there is any resistance to these reforms happening during the war?

Vitalii: The opportunities of struggle for the working class have been restricted by the war. Strikes are now prohibited, and street demonstrations can be prohibited without a court ruling, so our tools are limited. At the same time, the voices of the people who are protecting their country carry a lot of weight for the government, and if people from the trade unions raise their voice against such reforms, our government may withdraw them. Working-class people have gained a lot of political legitimacy from the fact that they are defending the country.

Also, people can react in many ways: through social media, in the press (including internationally), etc., and those actions can pressure the government. But of course, I don't believe the political elite will stop pushing the neoliberal agenda without a strong labor opposition, and the opposition of a strong political party supported by the working class. We have no illusions. Today, we can use the media to stop the cruelest attacks against our social and democratic rights, but we cannot eliminate such tendencies altogether, because they are needed by this capitalist system. They are needed by the rich, the capitalist class, because they help them keep their profits. Ukrainian capitalism is in one of its deepest crises, and there are only two alternatives. Capitalists either share their property and profits with the people, or they can keep pushing these neoliberal reforms to keep their profits

coming. So even if the working class can negotiate some kind of “cease fire” with our own government, the problem remains. Only the permanent mobilization of the working class can make our country more just.

Florence: We are currently engaged in the solidarity campaign promoted by the International Labor Network of Solidarity and Struggles (led by CSP Conlutas in Brazil and Solidaires in France) to provide material aid to the independent labor movement in Ukraine. Are there any other working-class solidarity initiatives that you know of fighting for the future of Ukraine’s working class?

Vitalii: I would stress that here in Ukraine we feel your support and solidarity. As you know, aid for Ukraine has different aspects. One of them is arms: we demand the heavy weapons that can help us defend peaceful citizens. I appreciate your honest position that you are critical of Western imperialism and that at the same time you are giving vital, full-scale support to the Ukrainian people, and that you understand that the Russian aggression must be defeated.

There are also other aspects of aid, like the solidarity initiatives, such as the union convoys you mentioned, and there is also a coalition for the cancellation of Ukraine’s international debt. We also have good relations with our friends in the UK with the “Ukraine Solidarity Campaign,” and similar initiatives in Latin America, the USA, and even in Hong Kong. This is a very progressive process. Keep being informed and ask us, as Social Movement, about our current positions, ask Ukrainian workers about their needs, and support Ukrainian resistance.

Florence Oppen
Vitalii Dudin

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P.S.

The interviewer represents the Workers Voice political organisation in the USA. Workers’ Voice participates in solidarity campaigns, on the political left as well as initiatives of labor unions such as CSP-Conlutas in Brazil and Solidaires in France

Workers’ Voice

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