

# What socialists are doing in Ukraine

Tuesday 24 May 2022, by [CASHMAN Ruth](#), [PILASH Denis](#) (Date first published: 17 May 2022).

**Denys Pilash is tired. He travelled 600 miles from Ukraine's capital to Lviv to host the European Network for Solidarity with Ukraine [delegation](#), then after sleeping on a floor he translated between English and Ukrainian for a conference that overran several hours. With no break he moved from interview to interview with visitors keen to hear his take on the invasion, the situation for the Ukrainian left, and the future of Ukraine. Still, he sits with us for an hour explaining the work of Sotsialnyi Rukh (SR) and what they are doing to do to build a democratic socialist left in Ukraine:**

I was in a small but militant syndicalist student union instrumental in preventing different cabinets from further commercialisation of education and imposing higher fees. Some of us joined other forces in a new organisation, Left Opposition. This was the basis for the Assembly for Social Revolution that ultimately became the Social Movement. We participated in lots of mobilisations, lots of struggles. We have been struggling against the new neoliberal labour code proposals that have been pursued for 15 years, and still the capitalist class didn't achieve its goals.

We also we tried to direct the people's anger that was behind the Euromaidan protests and other mobilisations as well - to really point out that all these grievances, starting from police brutality, lack of political representation and the general sense of economic insecurity and no prospects for tomorrow, can be traced back to the system of oligarchic capitalism, and that that's why we need to speak about an economic and political alternative to it.

Sotsialnyi Rukh is a completely anti-capitalist organisation. We advocate a break with the neoliberal and oligarchic capitalism that dominates Ukraine. When we say democratic socialism, we mean a society organised on collective ownership of the means of production and with democratic self-governance, akin to some ideas of socialism from below. If you have so-called socialism without democracy, you have all these deformations we saw in the Soviet past, in the worst case Stalinist dictatorship. When you have a so-called democracy that isn't extended to economic democracy in the workplace, it means just reproducing the dominance of the capitalist class in the society. Our outlook also includes struggles for women's rights, and rights for all the people that are excluded or oppressed by the existing system of domination.

We also link the struggle against the capitalist system and for workers' emancipation with ecological and environmental issues. We need to understand all the damage that was done to the environment by both the capitalist and the Soviet bureaucratic model. We now see how it's all interconnected, when you have fossil-fuel empires like Russia and Saudi Arabia or Western companies promoting an aggressive agenda, and they are fueled by the same things that are destroying the planet and life. We can go extinct by war or by climate disaster, and both menaces are very much interconnected.

We had a number of activists who used to be in Trotskyist anti-Stalinist Marxist organisations. But we also were joined by people who had less political experience, newly politicised trade unionists, and also people who came from an anarchist milieu, who were members of the radical students union or came from a more social democratic approaches. From the beginning, we wanted to have

different ideological political platforms inside to give voice to these different political philosophies. Generally we had some disagreements but nothing that couldn't be bridged. For major strategic questions, when we need to adjust our political positions, we try to have long discussions.

**Denys recalls his own political journey with humility and humour. He laughs whilst recounting:**

I started off with a group called the Organisation of Marxists, and it was a doomed-from-the-beginning attempt to bring together people who considered themselves revolutionary Marxists. Stalinist or anti-Stalinist. But you cannot reconcile these political cultures. Our ways parted dramatically.

**After a list of impressive militant campaigns, he quips:**

I participated in some kind of, you know, union activities, social movements, left-wing cinema screenings, some reading groups, what usual left-wing sectarians do.

**Building a new left organisation in the shadow of Stalinism has not been easy for SR.**

If you see the political terrain of the countries that used to be the so-called socialist bloc, only a few of them have a feasible new left party, like Razem in Poland or Levica in Slovenia. There is little room for a democratic left. The S-word is discredited here. It won't stay that way forever. But to approach a real-life person in Ukraine, you obviously need to not start with terms but to explain their meaning.

Among the factors in this discrediting were the impact of the 1990s wild capitalism and the grim heritage of Stalinism, all its atrocities and crimes. Also the policies of parties with communist or socialist in their name. Eager to cooperate with pro-Russian bourgeois governments, the Communist Party of Ukraine was a socially conservative party, not so much pro-worker as pro-death penalty, orthodox Church and "traditional values" like homophobia. Politics that would seem really nasty even for some tankie in the West. But in the post-Soviet space that's the Communist Party. And then you have different types of so-called socialist parties, essentially vehicles for corrupt political adventurers. The original Socialist Party of Ukraine was once viewed as a beacon of hope for democratic left and a combative opposition to President Kuchma, who was the architect of this oligarchic capitalist system in Ukraine. Then it also started to sell out.

These circumstances spurred a widespread allergy to anything connected to the Soviet Union. But people have an equal, if not bigger, hatred towards the oligarchs. Few in Ukraine are content with the existing system, and they are particularly disappointed with the way a handful of people are effectively still in control not just of the economy, but also of the political system. And even the current president was promising a war on oligarchs. But the problem is that every oligarchic party and even every oligarch will say that they are against oligarchs.

You need to explain that the problem is not exclusive to our country, though here in Ukraine and Eastern Europe in general we have as oligarchs some particularly vile people, criminals in the nineties enriched in this process of primitive accumulation of capital. The root of the problem is the system that exploits you. The system that leaves you without normal means to exist. And at the same time, it gives profits to the people who are the most incompetent and greedy.

If you participate in struggles at your workplace and you can be in solidarity with other people who face sacking, low salaries, discrimination, you can lend your support and you can speak about what common problems and challenges we have.

The moment the Communist Party was deregistered due to the “de-communisation” law they were effectively dead, virtual nonexistence. They lost their base, they lost most of their membership. They only existed on paper.

**Though the Communist party was not a real left party, the “de-communisation” legislation is a threat to the real left. Denys explains:**

Of course the “de-communisation” legislation made any kind of leftist politics much more difficult here. I wrote a couple of articles against the law. It narrows the space for any kind of progressive politics. It denies a huge part of Ukrainian history itself because the Ukrainian national liberation movement was leftist from the beginning and the people who are venerated as the biggest Ukrainian writers, among them Ivan Franco and Lesya Ukrainka, were socialists. The demand for Ukrainian independence was first raised by Marxists.

The law provided a justification, so the far right could beat you up the street and say, oh, it was some commie. It's okay. It legitimised this.

**The far right in Ukraine has received a lot of attention from the Western Left. Over the sound of air raid sirens, Denys explains the terrain of racist and nationalist politics:**

The far right here is minuscule in size, but it was and it is a force on the streets. There was only one point when a far right force, Svoboda, made it into Parliament as a party list. The majority of the elections, they achieved around 2%, this is an indication of their real support.

We have different far-right tendencies. Svoboda is an old right-wing populist party. It started as a Social Nationalist Party of Ukraine, but then it was rebranded to a more moderate image with help of some foreign advisors. At that point, they were friends with Le Pen's party and now they are mortal enemies, because most of the European far right are pro-Putin and Putin is pro-far right. Now it's an ethno-nationalist party that is confined only to Western Ukraine.

And then you have the Azov movement, the National Corps party around the military unit. Azov is no longer a separate battalion, for seven years they have been a regiment under the Ministry of Interior of Ukraine. But they lost the support of their patron, the powerful interior minister who we finally got rid of.

Trends in recent years were rather pessimistic for the far right because they were losing ground and political legitimacy. But now the invasion reinforces some of their legitimacy as defenders of Ukraine. However, unlike eight years ago with the outbreak of war in the Donbas, you now have a complete resistance of the entire society. So, the percentage of the far right in this resistance is really, really very low.

In the resistance you have people from all ethnic backgrounds, from all regions of Ukraine, speaking different languages, men and women with different political views, but mostly people who deem themselves as apolitical. They are all in the resistance in the war and repelling the aggression. The far right cannot claim that it's their struggle. It's a struggle of the entire multi-ethnic nation of Ukraine.

We have two competing views somehow coexisting during the war, but they are mutually exclusive.

The first one is a hyper-nationalist vision of a more ethnically homogeneous Ukraine. They say we need to rally around the flag and become the opposite of anything perceived as Russian. And it's true that many people who used to be bilingual or Russian speaking, felt so upset by the Russian invasions that they decided they will no longer speak Russian, only Ukrainian.

On the other side, you have Russian speaking-people, Ukrainian speaking people, people from even the most deprived, discriminated minorities and communities like the Roma people, who have joined the military effort, in territorial defence, in humanitarian volunteer networks and so on. And it highlights how diverse we are and how actually we need to promote this multitude of communities and of different regions inside Ukraine.

We had this process of decentralisation, but in many cases it was really an austerity policy, dropping the budgets from the state level to the local. We need a devolution that will give more direct democracy for the local communities, and they can influence their issues in their cities, towns, villages, but also maybe some kind of regional identity, what kind of cultural policies they would like.

Again we have a turn to renaming the streets, getting rid of Russian names and so on. But can we have a calm and honest discussion to really include the interest of all the communities that are represented and to not exclude any part of society? For instance people in Transcarpathia, in Lviv, in Donbas, and in Bessarabia around Odesa are very different, but at the same time very similar. It is about embracing that.

**Sotsialnyi Rukh are developing a programme which resists bosses attempts to shift full burden of the war onto the working class and looks to build Ukraine on a new basis:**

If we look at the transitional program and transitional demands designated by Trotsky. This idea that contrary to simple reformist and Stalinist parties that have maximum programs, that somehow in the future you will achieve some kind of just society, communism etc. but now you have only some very minimalistic struggles, with no bridge between them. Instead, we need real struggles for feasible things that are understandable and sustainable but reveal a broader revolutionary perspective. You need to show them why we need to go beyond the logic of the existing capitalist system.

For instance, when we demand full-fledged sanctions against Russian elites, we can point out that there are lots of loopholes, lots of exemptions provided by the system of tax havens. And it's used not just by the Russian oligarchs, but also Ukrainian oligarchs and billionaires throughout the world. Those ruling classes in general ditching their own population to protect their wealth. We need to dismantle the offshore capitalism system, but the same people hiding their wealth, run the system and write the laws.

If you speak about the cancellation of Ukrainian debt, this problem is global as well. Countries and their peoples are trapped in this vicious circle of debt, getting more loans to pay off your previous loans. That goes along with IMF-driven austerity. It's something that Ukraine shares with people in the European peripheries and in the Global South. Working classes even in the most prosperous countries suffer from austerity policies. The grievances of our nurses, our construction and railroad workers, to name a number of unions we closely cooperate with, are very common for their colleagues across Europe as well. Maybe as a magnitude it is a bit different between the one of the poorest countries and the most prosperous, but the disparities, inequalities and injustices, they are pretty visible everywhere.

In all these cases, as in our outcry against imperialist aggression and fossil fuels, we raise demands for Ukraine and see how they transcend to something that is necessary in the entire world. We really need to break the system, but starting from something relatively small, we can show the big picture to the people both here and abroad.

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**Denys Pilash** of Ukrainian socialist organisation Sotsialniy Rukh (Social Movement) spoke to **Ruth Cashman**.

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