**War in Ukraine**

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Popular support for US involvement in Ukraine is based on a persuasive moral crusade most forcefully advanced by Joe Biden and other leading Democrats. Biden’s speech in Poland was one of those defining moments framing future wars as a repeat of past ones. On behalf of the ‘Free World’, Biden placed Ukraine “on the front lines” in “the perennial struggle for democracy and freedom.”

Biden did not invent the fiction of the ‘Free World’ or the ‘perennial struggle’ of good v evil. He simply recycled lines from the first cold war. Long before him, John F Kennedy’s “long twilight struggle” committed Americans to an anti-communist crusade that morphed into the unending struggle against any and all rivals after the fall of the Soviet Union.

The problem: moral crusades tend to rule out compromise and negotiations. Behind them lies the mirage of ‘total victory’. In Ukraine, this is a dangerous illusion for anyone that supports any side in the conflict. Even war at the scale of WWII – that ended in as total a victory as could be imagined – did not finish off fascism, militarism, or empire. Those evils run deep because they sustain capitalism.

War leaders are not about solving fundamental issues so they give us the twin deceptions of moral crusade and total victory. Joe Manchin, who always serves the Democrats by saying the quiet part out loud, entertained the Davos crowd by rejecting negotiations and holding out for a win.

The call to war enjoys strong bipartisan support. Liberal politicians and their supporters have pushed pro-war attitudes deep into progressive territory by appealing to ideals of self-determination, and ‘agency’. This also recalls the ‘cold war liberalism’ of the past when some radicals and many labor officials fell into line against the communist menace and supported the Vietnam War.

All the talk of agency and self-determination used to support a war thousands of miles away rings hollow since US workers – right here, right now – are denied effective agency and self-determination. We do not even have health care or secure reproductive rights – the simplest forms of bodily self-determination. The current organizing upsurge will surely help but true agency still requires mass independent political action as argued by the President of the Vermont AFL-CIO.

Contrary to the stories of triumph we’ve all heard since the Soviet Union collapsed, the Cold War was a disaster for the US working class; the new wars will be worse, much worse.

The war’s mass appeal is not based on informed, analytical, historical, or left-wing arguments but on simple binaries of good and evil promoted by both parties and blasted across all corporate media channels. The moral crusade works to silence any consideration of the material interest of the US working class in this conflict, and for good reason – we have none.

The US working class has a direct and vital material interest in peace. That means the dismantling of the US empire, cutting military budgets, defunding the police army, and in the case of Ukraine: immediate ceasefire and negotiations.

It’s hard to find a single example outside of revolutions and the national liberation struggles of the 20th Century when wars were fought in the interest of the working class. Ukraine is no exception.

When ruling classes fight each other it’s the working class that does the dying and pays the bills. Wars can only be made when nationalism, fascism or liberalism overcome class consciousness and solidarity. If this argument sounds familiar it’s because it has been a staple of working-class politics since at least WWI.

War and sanctions have provided the chaos, cover, and consent for yet another wave of austerity pushing workers down and corporate profits ever upward: Inflation – an across-the-board cut in pay and social security; rising food prices and possible shortages; surging costs of housing; increasing fuel costs for transportation and heating; record hikes in Medicare costs; Fed policy ‘to get wages down”

That’s just everything workers need to live.

The war multiplies the power of the very forces that exploit us: big corporations and billionaires. Worst of all, war in all its forms accelerates climate change. Escalation in Ukraine is death to the Green New Deal and a war on Mother Earth. No greater reason to oppose war has ever existed.

Despite these truly existential threats, the ruling class and ruling parties are experts in getting people to vote and act against their own interests. While workers do have jobs in arms factories the weapons industry fails as a jobs program because it produces fewer jobs than any other form of investment. It’s a net loss. Even for those that benefit from war work these imperial privileges are like white privileges: a form of divide and conquer that trades short-term advantage for long-term survival.

One of the great tragedies of Ukraine was the initial phase of the war that started in the Donbas in 2014. Instead of living up to the Minsk II accords, the Ukrainian state was able to convince one part of the Ukrainian working class to wage war against another part based on nationalism and ethnic differences – with an assist from fascist ideas and neo-nazi fighters. But for the sake of this essay, I am going to suspend discussion of that class treachery and the contentious question of what the Russian invasion means for workers in Donbas and Ukraine, in order to make clear my argument about the US working class.

We have mutual class interests with Ukrainian workers; we both face the assaults of the neoliberal order. Finance capital commands that order by controlling global institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

In 1992, just after independence, Ukraine joined the IMF and was soon trapped between access to loans and the austerity measures the IMF typically demands. Between 2010 and 2014 the IMF ramped up its assault on the Ukrainian working class by demanding budget cuts, higher home heating prices, the scrapping of pension reform, and the defeat of the proposed minimum wage law. In a move that would trigger his downfall, former Ukraine President Viktor Yanukovych went so far as to seek money from Russia instead.

The US-supported 2014 coup that ousted Yanukovych was cemented by a multi-billion dollar IMF loan. Monsanto and big agribusiness have grabbed land and profits also with the blessings of the World Bank and IMF. By 2014 corporate control of Ukraine was well underway. Being held hostage to the IMF is not self-determination. US workers have suffered from 50-years of austerity under the heel of the same financial forces. We have a shared class interest and a shared position of servitude under the big money dictatorship.

We also have mutual interest with Ukrainian workers because the Zelensky regime is seeking new pro-corporate labor laws to bring Ukrainian working conditions more into line with the needs of the global market and further away from its socialist past. The new law proposes exempting workers at small and medium corporations from all legal protections. Approximately two dozen large corporations have already suspended their contracts. In the US, workers struggle under the terms of the 1947 Taft Hartley ‘Slave Labor’ Act which Democrats have refused to repeal these past 70 years. We have common interests in advancing workers’ rights – war or no war.

We have common ground in that we are controlled by pro-war governments. After its independence in 1991, Ukraine choose neutrality but after 2014 opened the door to Nato expansion with its predictable outcome. The 2015 Minsk II accords were a viable yet never enforced peace plan. As late as 2019 Zelensky himself was elected on a peace platform. Nevertheless, opposition parties were banned outright, and a ‘uniform information policy’ was imposed.

As in the US, the desire for peace among everyday people is subject to intense propaganda and subverted by a political system that allows no alternatives. The US has a far more effective system of suppressing opposition parties. The entrenched parties snag rivals in a web of restrictive state laws and false narratives. Again, we have common ground.

The war has deepened division within an already divided working class in both countries. Perhaps the greatest act of solidarity is to fight our own battles on our own ground. It sure as hell isn’t in handing billions in weapons to a government that does not represent workers any better than our own.

The Global South is leading the way; they are trending toward non-alignment and neutrality. Why should Africa, Asia, and South America support war and sanctions that will not only hurt them but are sponsored by the very countries that colonized them?

Excerpted: ‘Moral Crusade or Class Interest? Does the US Working Class Have a Material Interest in Ukraine?’

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