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The Ukraine: An Unfinished Revolution

The ARS Collective

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Effectively, all modern bourgeois regimes claim to be democratic. Yet for socialist revolutionaries it is an obvious fact that bourgeois democracy is no more than a political form of the rule of capital. However, it is help to study the specifics that distinguish it from other forms.

The specifics of this form can be found in two dimensions, the first dimension being that of intra-bourgeois relations and the second being the relationship of the bourgeois class with the exploited masses.

Bourgeois democracy is distinguished from bourgeois dictatorship by being an instrument of power for the whole class instead of just one clan. A stable bourgeois-democratic regime is capable of sustaining long-term policies, synthesising the interests of many bourgeois clans and taking them into account while moulding them into a strategy projected for years ahead.

However, an intra-bourgeois democracy is not the only feature of bourgeois-democratic regimes that have existed in the developed capitalist countries throughout the century between 1870 and 1970. Democracy, access to the machinery

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of the state, the freedom of speech and assembly for “insiders”, i.e. for those with wealth and power, existed in the older oligarchic republics and oligarchic constitutional “monarchies”. What sets these oligarchies apart from modern bourgeois democracy are the total exclusion of the majority of citizens from politics, property qualifications for participation in the electoral process and a general regime of class segregation.

The bourgeois democracies of 1870-1970 were societies of class compromise, in contrast to the Venetian republic of the late Middle Ages and the English “monarchy” of the 18th century. Faced with proletarian revolt against the regimes of oligarchy, the ruling class had prolonged its domination by at least one and a half centuries by making political and economic concessions to the deprived masses.

The ruling class introduced concessions such as universal suffrage and the legalisation of proletarian political parties and trade unions, after subduing the early revolutionary movement by naked terror and gradual indoctrination of the masses with the idea of capitalism as an inevitable and natural order of things. The conceded space was soon taken over by overtly bourgeois organisational with proletarian organisations playing by the class enemy’s rules. This new factor smothered the impending revolution with reform. Enormous strides in economic growth made in the periods 1870-1913 and 1945-1975 allowed the ruling class to maintain a social compromise through economic concessions, to sacrifice a part to preserve the whole. This century of class compromise saw the deprived and marginalised proletarians, who had nothing to lose but their chains and who were nothing, but in struggle to become everything, instead become an integrated part of the capitalist political system; the system where any shrewd bourgeois politician had to take notice of their interests and to accept this as an unpleasant inevitability.

But everything changed in the ‘70s, when capitalism entered a period of a drawn-out recession that lasts to this day. Fac-

ing declining rates of profit, the bourgeoisie came to regard the concessions to the workers as a liability to be clawed back. Only sporadic resistance to the bourgeois advance was put up by the pacified proletariat, which lost a large part of its traditions of struggle and solidarity, and saw its leadership, by then integrated into the ruling class, suggest that they “tighten their belts” in the name of the “national economy”.

As a result, only a hollow formality of the bourgeois democracy of 1870-1970 remains 30 years on, with actual class compromise largely eradicated from the system. If 50 years ago both right and left bourgeois parties debated over concrete things, over what policy would serve best for the preservation of capitalism, now both the right and the left show great solidarity in their class politics: and that is, simply put, to immediately take from the poor and give to the rich. And thus the proletariat once more falls down to the deprived and marginalised collection of individuals that it was prior to the era of compromise, losing its political corporation of unions and parties within the bourgeois society, being left with nothing more than its own power, its own class structure outside of the bourgeois political system, and the historical agency of being the nothing which in struggle becomes everything.

Such an outline of the history of bourgeois democracy was drawn up in order to allow a deeper perspective into the peculiarities of the political system of the CIS and the Ukraine in particular.

For the “Soviet” bourgeoisie, which had rapidly transformed into a regional salad of Russian, Ukrainian, etc., ruling classes during the perturbations of the Perestroika and the post-Perestroika crisis, “democratic” rhetoric with a sour face became a traditional hypocrisy. Nearly all of the post-soviet states (“nearly” indeed, due to the ghoulish complexity and backwardness of the new Central Asian Khanates) have claimed to be democracies. And yet they had no social

preconditions necessary for a stable and functional bourgeois-democratic form of government, making their claims hollow at best.

The working class of the USSR suffered atomisation and alienation from the Stalinist scientific application of terror at first, and the stale Brezhnevite stability later on. It was turned into a loose conglomeration of individuals and professional groups totally incapable of either revolutionary or even reformist class struggle. The cynical depoliticisation of the masses, following a double collapse of the “communist” and “democratic” ideologies in the last decade of the 20th century have predictably resulted in a bland political field, dominated by undifferentiated non-entities and fictional constructions, incapable of wielding political power and in fact not even designed for any real function. Meanwhile, the feverishly reorganising bourgeoisie had more important things to attend to than defending its common interests, namely brutally asserting individual and clan interests. This gave rise to the “gangster capitalism” culture of the 90s where guns and hired assassins stereotypically settled differences. The political manifestations of this bourgeois fever were pre-determined elections and a harmless theatrical opposition. This situation came to be the norm in Russia, not to mention the Central Asian Khanates.

Kuchma’s Ukraine was not an exception from the tendency described above, or at least not during the last years of his regime. The famed “Orange Revolution” shook the Putinisation of the Ukraine right down to its roots, overturning every previous political tendency. And yet it failed to create a long-term, stable, functioning bourgeois-democratic regime in the Ukraine, thereby leaving the Ukraine’s future a great uncertainty.

The differences of Russia’s political organisation from the Ukraine’s are geographical at root. The Ukraine is a large European country, while Russia is almost a continent. Such a

Ukrainians”; a free and equal coexistence of all languages and cultures which develop and enrich by free interaction;

6) An application of Mykola Khwyl’owyi’s (1893-1933) old theory of the Ukraine as a bridge between western and eastern proletarians, and the understanding that class war must prevail over imperialist national war, and the need for solidarity with proletarian struggle in any locality on the face of the Earth.

It is, of course, clear that the achievement of the above is exceptionally difficult, and that the parasitic exploiters will never give up power without a savage fight. But the Ukrainian proletariat will rot and degrade in the pit of the imperialist world system and perish in imperialist massacres along with all other proletarians of the world unless it breaks free from this pit, builds its own freedom with its mighty working hands and gain what was lost for the generation of Makhno (1888-1934) and Khwyl’owyi. Today, there aren’t many alternatives to this.

difference had tremendous impact on the bickering bourgeois clans of the two countries.

To prevent Russia’s dissolution into a soup of microstates under its geographical immensity’s fracturing pressure, its ruling classes have traditionally undertaken a policy of heavy and consistent centralisation. Today, all substantial capital flows pass through Moscow, and are under the firm grip of its mighty administrative centres. At the same time, Moscow intentionally overlooks the eccentricities of local chieftains from some provincial subdivisions like Bashkiria or Tatarstan, as their relative weakness allows them to pose no threat to Moscow’s real interests.

By the end of the eventful ‘90s, the Ukrainian bourgeoisie, having put behind them their struggle of each against all for dominance and the accompanying regular dispatch of competition, but having stopped short of regaining a common class-consciousness, finally reached a relatively stable clan-based level of class-consciousness. But Russia had yet another political crisis to go through before the millennium’s conclusion, a crisis which erupted in the dusk of the Yeltsin era¹. This crisis brought Russia into the new millennium under the leadership of a confident and victorious state-capitalist class, a class of bureaucrats and strongmen, a class that worked swiftly to put any unruly microclan in its place and established a renewed Bonapartist regime. This regime vehemently protects private capitalist profits from foreign competitors or proletarian threat, as well as excluding large swathes of private capitalists from significant political power. Since the Russian bourgeoisie was unable to forge a common strategy by democratic means, it had no choice but to accept a common class strategy written by the Kremlin’s Bonapartes,

¹ Russia defaulted in 1998, having squandered state assets, hitting a liquidity crisis and wiping out most of the peoples’ savings. Post-default politics of the Kremlin saw to the tightening and regressing of fiscal, budgetary, financial and monetary regulations.

accepting that certain members of their ranks would be in for a tough time in due course, and expecting a sorry end for some². Meanwhile, the Kremlin's Bonapartes were smart enough to accept the capitulation of some of the more subversive groups, and to preserve the latter's ranks and capitals on the condition that the latter will submit to the Kremlin's common strategy and stop playing power games.

So in the 21st century, the Ukraine is left with a far less centralised political and economic system than its big northern sister. And Kiev, with all due respect, is not quite Moscow; political scenarios where the Bashkir or Chukot cliques are taking Moscow stand in the realm of fantasy, while the Ukrainian Donetsk clique was at the gates of Kiev near the end of 2004 to the extent of temporarily unifying the rest of the Ukrainian bourgeoisie against it.

The old Kuchma regime was upheld by a coalition of three bourgeois clans: Dnepropetrovsk, to which Kuchma himself belonged, Donetsk, and Kiev. Yet the boom cycle of the early '00s heaved the Donetsk clan above all others, making the now famed Mr. Yanukovich from Donetsk Mr. Kuchma's successor.

But the Donetsk boys' greed was to be their downfall. They failed to grasp the wisdom of sharing, and their intra-clan greed took a far stronger hold on them than common bourgeois class interests ever could. So on the eve of the 2004 elections, rumours filled Kiev's establishments, most of them based on fact, that the Donetsk boys were planning to invade and appropriate everything they lay their eye upon taking example from their Moscow patrons. The western Ukrainian cliques, upon hearing these rumours, having been

² Non-convicted oligarchs are usually threatened with having to answer by laws that are usually ignored. The famous example is Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who in 2003 was charged with tax evasion, embezzlement, money laundering, etc – all common oligarchic practices. Boris Berezovsky faces similar charges while in exile in the UK. Such persecutions result in total asset expropriation and imprisonment.

hundreds of hectares of sunflowers and sweet corn. And I can see that no one is harvesting it – it seems they don't want to cash out on storage and then sell for the low wholesale prices. The sunflowers are dropping seeds and people grab sweet corn to feed their cattle. Prices on foreign appliances, food and gas are going up. Petrol has risen to 6 grivnas [per litre]. The villagers are slaughtering their cows, as they can't afford to keep them. The railroads are slashing jobs and road workers are sent on unpaid vacations. It's time to expect many road accidents and tragedies. Medicine prices are rocketing, the doctors are now charging openly without any remorse. I guess this is the crisis”.

For the working masses, the only alternative direction, the only way of ending poverty and oppression is to learn from the mistakes of the failed Orange Revolution by rejecting any trust of bourgeois clans, politicians and parties and to embrace an independent revolution, one of common assemblies of the workers.

What the power of the common assemblies of workers means:

1) A total destruction of all sources of bourgeois power - presidencies, parliaments, etc., a shift of power into the hands of common assemblies of workers, presiding over productive forces and territories by means of direct recallable delegates;

2) An expropriation of the exploiters' property, both private and “public”, and its management by the common assemblies of workers; a redirection of production from profit to the satisfaction of human needs;

3) A total destruction of all bureaucratic, administrative, military and punishment systems, universal arming of the working masses;

4) Real federalism, organisation of power down-upwards;

5) The common assemblies' power must be totally non-national in character, e.g. “Ukraine is for all those who live and work on its territory” instead of “Ukraine for the

The Ukrainian bourgeoisie, just like any of its colleagues, likes to solve its problems by pick-pocketing the working people. So, it has accepted IMF credit in return for a mild variation of a Structural Adjustment Programme, which entails wiping out the last vestiges of social expenditure. In a meeting with the industrialists, Timoshenko announced an end to “social parasitism”. For her the “parasites” are, of course, the working population and not the capitalists who thrive on poverty and need. The first assault on the working people came through Kiev’s public transit system, which experienced a four-fold hike in prices.

A letter from one Ukrainian worker provides a lucid insight into the masses’ experience of the depression:

“...For now, the crisis has spared my workplace, and my wages are still paid on time. But the listed construction company “Domobudivnyk”, where my son-in-law works, is shutting construction down, closing sites and has announced looming job cuts. Access to the labour exchange was promised, as well as possible re-hiring for some in the spring. My daughter is studying in the pedagogical university, in the second year, and receives 130 grivnas a month. My grandson of 1.5 years is often ill, and his treatment demands money. If my son-in-law loses his job, the crisis will grip our family hard. Firms and construction sites are closing all across the country; there are more and more jobless people, and finding a decent job is very difficult. I still am not seeing many protests around – the people sympathetically talk of a global crisis, and don’t really understand where it comes from. And to be honest, neither do I. It seems to me that the crisis in our country is artificially inflated to keep the weak dollar up. Maybe that’s why the dollar is growing and is already nearing 7 grivnas? And it’s impossible to buy any dollars at foreign exchange outlets, while the bankers are using the recent IMF credit to speculate en masse on the exchange and are making big money out of it. The village with my dacha is surrounded by

previously trodden upon by their superior counterparts from the East, now prepared for their finest hour. Playing on the Dnepropetrovsk and Kiev clans’ passive resentment of the Donetsk boys, on the latter’s arrogance, and on the formers’ anticipated neutrality or even support from them given any decisive action, the western cliques closed in on Kiev, making the Orange Revolution an imminent possibility.

From time immemorial have the ruling classes’ warring factions used their subjects in internal feuds. But only the degenerate consciousness produced by convulsing capitalism could dream up a plan to achieve success through primitive bribery and false promises. To inspire the deprived masses to stand on barricades and to spend days standing out in the freezing cold, a belief must be created, a belief in a monumental and righteous task, a belief in the crimes and decadence of the opposing forces, a belief in noble feelings and a belief in a resulting achievement – an achievement that would put an end to the cycle of destitution. And it must be said that the emergent clique of “Orangists” managed to execute the above quite professionally, even brilliantly. This is perhaps the only deed that will weigh against its sins before the historical tribunal.

The ordinary “orange revolutionaries” from the masses fought for an alien cause, yet were moved by a real and ripe protest against their unbearable existence, against the everyday satanic mill of capitalist exploitation. And they received invaluable positive and negative experience in the course of that fight. The positive experience bears the knowledge that when the deprived masses in their millions intervene in big politics, the rulers’ plans will break down. And the negative experience, which is even more valuable, bears the understanding that overthrowing the “bad” guys and helping the “good” guys take power will but extend the suffering for the masses, offering no hope, leaving only one option – taking power in our own hands, establishing the power of assemblies, founding a workers’ state.

And so, the Orange Revolution has stalled half way. It demolished the consolidating authoritarianism, but did not help a stable bourgeois republic emerge, let alone a workers' state, which was, back then, on the mind of a half a dozen activists at best. The devil is in the detail; stability of the bourgeois republic depends not only on bourgeois cliques' pluralism, but crucially on their ability to use the pluralism to forge common long-term policies which are acceptable to all those sharing the helm. It also depends on the ability to integrate the working class into real politics by making concessions. This is of course a stretch of imagination for the Ukrainian ruling class, just as it is for their Russian colleagues. Its industrial capital is worn out while the global market is overflowing and is gradually sinking into a depression; the only means to fulfilling its class interest is thus to proceed with hyper-exploitation of the working class. Which of course leaves social compromise in the realm of fiction.

The nationalised "Mittal Steel" works were immediately resold after Timoshenko's first term nationalisation, and only those who profited can now trace the profits, while Timoshenko's socially-oriented demagoguery has rapidly turned to nationalism. The Ukrainian bourgeoisie's progress towards unitary class-consciousness and long-term cooperation still leaves everything to be desired, and the vacuum left by the sobered Donetsk boys has not been filled with any pan-capitalist political entity, making the Ukraine's recent history of 2005-2008 the scene of a never-ending political boxing match. The appointment of the former enemy, Mr. Yanukovich, to the position of prime minister by the Orange president in 2005 alone dealt a lethal blow to the ordinary "orange revolutionaries" who once believed in a semi-mythical struggle between the forces of good and democracy and the totalitarian devils.

And that was not the end to bitter disappointments for the Ukrainians. From the poorest of the poor to small traders and

for, bearing self-made banners – "We have had enough! We are people, not cattle!"

Only political and social revolution can create a workers' republic, governed by workers' assemblies, without nationality or discrimination. Only such a revolution can bring equality for all languages and cultures, thus leaving Moscow's imperial adventures with no local footing. Only such an overhaul can give birth, once more, to the great Ukrainian culture, boost it to the heights of the great revolution of 1917-1921, that propelled the national culture into the '20s. Only a political and social revolution can overturn the power and property of the parasitic bourgeois clans; and only then can the working masses take power and property into their own hands and become masters of their own fate.

Contrary to the claims of petty bourgeois humanism, there is no "golden middle", and as the great French revolutionary Louis de St.-Just put it, "those who make half a revolution dig their own grave". And the Orange Revolution was halted well before the half-way mark. Whether presidential authoritarianism will bury the unstable republic to which the revolution gave birth, or whether it will be smashed by an imperialist war is certainly a question of great importance, but not of primary importance. Because either way, bourgeois democracy in the Ukraine is doomed.

What is more, the Ukrainian political crisis is amplified many times over by the global economic depression, which is taking rather sinister forms in the Ukraine. 20 of the 36 Ukrainian blast furnaces have stopped production, and considering that an extinguished blast furnace is a dead one, it is now a fact of history that over half of the Ukrainian metallurgical industry is dead and buried forever. Impose this on the importance of metal exports for the Ukrainian economy that is comparable to the importance of oil and gas for the Russian economy, and indeed a very tragic picture emerges.

showed the Duchy that a union with Rus', under Ivan's regime, meant death, in some cases literally.

But what if the Kremlin shows that there is no escape, and that eastern Ukraine will sooner or later be in its grasp, and that those who wisely submit will be spared while the subversive will meet their grim fate? After all, it wouldn't be the first time the Ukrainian ruling classes go into vassal servitude and sell-out to their neighbours. The dark history of the 17th century describes massacre and depopulation of the entire of eastern Ukraine by savage feuds between landlord clans and their different loyalties – which ranged from Moscow to Warsaw to Istanbul. The outcome of a similar debacle with modern military technology is the stuff of dystopian literature and gory computer games.

The modern Ukrainian state cannot sustain itself independently. It is a scourge for the working classes; millions of its citizens are unable to find work at home, where industry is turning into scrap metal and villages are depopulating. Its citizens are forced to work on sub-standard terms abroad. Once upon a time, freedom fighters for the Ukraine – from Shevchenko (1814-1861) to Poltawa (1921-1990) – fought for a Ukrainian state in itself, not for the freedom of the Ukrainian elites from the elites of Moscow and Warsaw. The slogan used to read: “for a free Ukraine without serfs and lords!” - without slaves and masters. And now, the Ukraine is a land of gargantuan parasitism of the masters and dreadful poverty of the slaves.

The modern Ukrainian state cannot even integrate all of its citizenry, instead propagating discrimination of its Russian-speaking people. Ukrainian ethnic nationalism can only fracture its nation, pushing the Russian-speaking population to embrace Russian imperial influence. And no ideological constructs of the elites will prevent this. Only a political and social revolution has that capacity, a conclusion of what hundreds of thousands were freezing on the Maidan Square

students to low ranking managers, all those put their hopes into the Orange future while freezing on the Maidan Square, have not seen their life change for the better, and the Orange future has not fulfilled a single promise. The pendulum swung and came back to rest. Inflation is devouring real wages, prison conditions have hardly improved and Kuchma's prisoners are still inside. While a blend of grassroots social movements in Ukraine's cities persisted for some time after Yushenko's ascension to power, and perpetuated the broader revolution, fighting to wipe out Kuchma's administrative legacy and pass city life into the masses' hands, these were predictably hijacked by local cliques that used them in their various feuds. Kuchma's state remained in place, and any sections renewed by the Orange tide turned out no better than the old ones.

But as mentioned before, the masses' experience has not been lost, and the stalled revolution makes the Ukraine an incomparably more dynamic region than the cold Russian monolith. Many of those who were once freezing on the Maidan have kindled their political experience and thoughts, and if many have totally lost hope, there are many who will sooner or later reach a conclusion: “capitalists, bosses – go to hell!” There are those who will desire to finish what they left on the Maidan, and this time without the old mistakes of putting false hope into the bourgeois cliques, who with their shameless and laughable bickering are discrediting themselves in front of the masses - and by this virtue are currently of great service to such a development.

A profound expression of the difference between bourgeois dictatorship and bourgeois democracy is found in a quotation by a character in Alexandra Marinina's detective story: “In some cities, only one mafia rules. In other cities, a few rule. And it's far easier to live in the latter.” Russia then is the former and Ukraine the latter, and the quotation holds true – life in the Ukraine is slightly easier indeed. Yet the problem lies in the weakness of this pluralistic mafia in the face of a

potentially monolithic mafia. This is notably illustrated by the history of Rech Pospolitaya, an aristocratic republic torn apart by absolutist monarchies, as well as by the example of the Weimar republic's fate, a pluralist state that was powerless against Hitler's monolithic NSDAP.

And the Ukrainian elites have yet to show any tendency or even ability to ascend from the divided clans to common class-consciousness, which makes the fate of bourgeois democracy in the Ukraine rather problematic. The question remains open – will an authoritarian tendency emerge and will Mr. Yushenko or some other figure take Kuchma's and Yanukovich's legacy to its conclusion? Or is something even more interesting and frightening in store for the Ukraine?

The most important phenomenon in modern global politics is the crisis-induced decline of the US's imperial hegemony and its international influence. Having grasped this factor early on, the Russian imperialist ruling class started using the new unfolding settings of the US's decline and Europe's ambivalence towards working with Russia (which had laid the foundations of cooperation in the preceding years by creating a common gas and oil market and consolidating common interest versus the US) to achieve a partial regain of what it had lost in the crisis of the early '90s. And the grand victories of the Russian army in South Ossetia and Abkhazia are the beginning, in the same manner as Hitler's annexing of Austria. So in the future we may expect similar debacles in Crimea and perhaps the whole of eastern Ukraine. In the current situation, the US won't bother upholding Ukraine's "empire", just as they betrayed their Georgian vassal last August. And yet the bulk of Ukraine's "imperial" foreign policy was based on defence against its northern sister by an alliance with the US and not its own power, let alone through that of its own or the Russian people.

The old-time nationalist chieftains like Bandera (1909-1959) and Stets'ko (1920-2003) had far more wisdom than the new

imperialist wannabes. They understood all the implications of neighbouring with Russia, and saw that as long as Russia exists as an empire, it will always claw at the Ukraine. They envisioned a grand solution, not devoid of its specific logic and a certain renegade bravery. The Ukraine was to become an independent centre of regional power in Eastern Europe and destroy the Russian empire, turning it into a Ukrainian colonial federated republic.

But the modern degenerate Ukrainian ruling class and its degenerate politicians are hardly capable of such imperial liberty. When just after the Orange Revolution in the Ukraine its echoes sounded throughout frozen Russia in early 2005, the famous pensioner uprising spread across its cities, and Russian pensioners pitched orange tents in the streets and wore orange bands, the Ukrainian republic could have challenged the Russian empire over regional hegemony. Of course Bandera and Stets'ko, not Yushenko and Timoshenko, would make such a move. But with the latter in charge, nothing could be done and was done. So, in the words of Mr. Kuchma, as analogous to Chernomyrdin's famous "we wanted something better, but got by as usual" - "we have what we have". And so they do. They have ceaseless inter-clan bickering, in which the losers will always appeal to foreign power sources for support – the most powerful of which is Russia. For now, the formerly strong pro-Russian sentiment of the eastern Ukrainian clans is diminished after the Putin regime's relationship with certain oligarchs showed that they may well be in for a tough time, with a sorry end for some, and saw that they can seriously lose out to the unfathomable greed of the Kremlin and Petersburg. A good historical parallel lies in the relationship between Ivan the Terrible's Rus' and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. In this case, the latter's orthodox feudal magnates were scared away from the previously attractive Rus' by the brutal Oprichnina (mass reprisals against Russian aristocrats 1565-1572). This