

Ukrainian syndicalists: the biggest fascist threat is concentrated in Russia and in the occupied territories

Modkraft.dk

March 12, 2015

Interview with AWU activists, made by Danish left-wing portal Modkraft.dk in December 2014. We publish here the original text in English.

What kind of an organisation is Autonomous Workers Union and how are you organised?

AWU is a class union organized along the lines of federalism and direct democracy. Among our members are anarcho-syndicalists and libertarian Marxists, and our Statute, in addition, allows for the membership of non-finalists. Our organization was founded in the summer of 2011, now we have two local cells in Kiev and Kharkiv. The main vectors of our activity are political education, endorsement of libertarian anti-capitalist agenda and organization of street protests. Also, workplace conflicts are something we look for and we provide legal support for its participants.

Can you give a short explanation of why the Autonomous Workers Union are in a general opposition to Borotba?

Borotba are Stalinists who have been parasitizing on Ukrainian leftist movement for a long time — only to forge a semblance of an influential organization and embezzle some foreign money sent to them for party development. Before Maidan happened they had been busy hijacking various leftist demos and pickets and promoting their image through social conservative and pro-Russian propaganda, exploiting Soviet nostalgia and revolutionary aesthetics. After the coup they relocated to Southern and Eastern regions and took their chances in cooperation with Russian nationalists under the guise of “persecuted communists”, expressing their support for the obscurantist and reactionary Antimaidan movement. Soon, in their speeches members of Borotba were alternating outright approval of armed “antifascist” struggle in Donetsk and Luhansk “people’s republics” with emotional appeals for immediate peace — based on the audience they were addressing to. You may find out more about them in a series of articles that we published at Nihilist.li website.

What, if any, where your role in the Maidan uprising and how would you explain the cause of it?

AWU didn't take part in Maidan as an organization, as there were many reasons for it — the dominant position of the right conservative rhetoric, anti-communist stance of many Maidan's leaders, political hegemony of the bourgeois opposition just to name a few. Yet we supported the incentives of the protest that were the most important for us — against strengthening of police state, opposed to curtailing of political rights and individual freedoms. We had written a number of propagandist texts urging grassroots initiatives of Maidan to direct their protest energy along the class lines but we failed to succeed in it. However, some of our activists participated in the most progressive initiatives of Maidan, such as taking turns in guarding emergency hospitals in order to prevent the police from kidnapping injured protesters.

How and why has the fascists gained so much influence in the elections? And do you know anything about the aid and volunteers they are receiving from outsiders?

According to some very broad estimates, the far-right have received at most 13 of the 450 seats at the last parliament elections, therefore so far it's a bit too early to speak about their "massive influence". The principal parties of the far right — Svoboda and Right Sector — had not gained the requisite 5% threshold, and that pretty accurately reflects the level of their popularity. Actually, after the elections there were no protests staged by them — Ukrainian society took the failure of the far right for granted. To compare their result with Denmark's right populist Danish People's Party, that received more than 12.3% at the last Folketing elections and 26.6% at the recent European Parliament elections, we are fortunate not to have Bornholm "people's republic" proclaimed yet.

Ukrainian politics may indeed appear to be facing the right end of the political spectre more than that of a European average — but it happened only due to collapse of local parliamentary left rather than the power the rightists might wield. Right now the most pressing danger stems not from the far right, but from the right centrist politicians who may try to push some anti-democratic bills through, citing the war as an excuse.

The only area where the far rights have indeed found their success was publicity campaign of Azov volunteer battalion, which had initially been established on the basis of neo-nazi Social Nationalist Assembly. The battalion (which had already grown large enough to become a regiment) now also includes a fraction of participants of more moderate views, but neo-nazis are still ideologically dominant and are able to conduct their propaganda within the ranks.

There are at least two neo-nazi Swedes known to be serving in this regiment — Mikael Skillt who used to be a member of Swedish Resistance Movement, and a man who calls himself "Severin from Goteborg"; another man from Italy, Francesco Fontana of National Vanguard; and also some Russian neo-nazis who oppose Putin's policy. But these people had mostly become friends with Ukrainian neo-nazis at the times of Maidan, their involvement is of personal nature and there is no way we can talk of broader support among European far-rights of Ukrainian side in this conflict. Quite the opposite, the sympathies of European far right mainstream are with Russia — and there are also many European fascists who came to Donbas and fight for DPR's and LPR's side.

How have the fascists gained the amount of power they have now, and how are you fighting it?

As we have already said, fascists boast a quite modest representation in the current parliament. The greater danger stems from incorporation of the far right into police and army structures, such as the aforementioned Azov regiment and also such of the former supporters of Svoboda party. So far they are mostly preoccupied with the war in the East and are unable to settle their scores

with the left, but the power they would still wield after the fighting stops may allow them to persecute their political opponents.

On the other hand, the position of the far right in Ukraine is rather weak and often depends on current political situation; a single mistake can lead to their collapse. For instance, Svoboda lost much of their electorate as a consequence to their aggressive attempts in claiming the authority over many grassroots Maidan activists; additionally, there were several incidents, which happened after the Maidan was over, where the party members had shown inappropriate aggression. Today, participation of the far right in the fighting eastward makes patriotically bent citizens lenient to their nature; however, larger part of the society maintains a negative attitude towards the street violence they had shown. The acts of aggression, like the fight of the far right youth with the police on October 14, or the arson of Zhovten cinema during LGBT movie night, are widely condemned.

In this situation the most rational strategy we can show is public critique of the far right's actions and ideology. We don't have resources to stand up for physical struggle but we are capable of building a wide informal front with those liberals who see the danger of the far right. Surely, concerted actions will not require us to resign from our own political views: temporarily consolidating against the common enemy, we would not forfeit our right to publicly criticize our liberal associates.

To what degree does the fascists attack the left wing and is it worse in some places than others?

During Maidan there were attacks on some leftists which were trying to sway the protest agenda towards the class conflict. Leftist propaganda was often portrayed as "Soviet" or "pro-Russian". Generally, leftists who took part in Maidan failed to affect the general disposition.

After the regime overthrow far rights orchestrated several aggressive acts, including two attacks against individual left activists in Kiev and an attack on AWU squat in Kharkiv which provides shelter to many refugees from the war-torn regions. But attacks against leftists had been happening since long before Maidan (in 2005–2009 the majority of such attacks were conducted by representatives of far right subculture, and in 2011–2013, after a certain respite, by C14 group affiliated with Svoboda), therefore so far it's not feasible to speak about any growth in violence. For leftists in Ukraine public activity remains associated with a particular danger, but is still possible.

Is there a general connection between the antifascist movement in Ukraine and the Russian Left Wing?

Like elsewhere all over the world, Russian left has split over Ukrainian question. We maintain connections with those Russian leftists who were opposed to Putin's aggression — most of them are Russian anarchists. Specifically, we have good relationships with Autonomous Action.

What are your thoughts about the invasion of Krimea?

We consider the military invasion in Crimea a full-fledged annexion which has brought about plethora of negative consequences to the local population. Russian laws restricted political rights and freedoms, economic well-being, some parts of social welfare and benefits. Cultural and linguistic rights of minorities, e.g. Crimean Tatars, are endangered. There are also political repressions and show trials: leftist activist Alexander Kolchenko had been transferred from Crimea to Moscow and now finds himself under trial as an alleged Right Sector militant, along with several other people none of whom had ever had any relationship to that organization.

We don't care about allegiance of any territory to any particular state — but we are concerned with political, legal and economic welfare of workers inhabiting it, as well as availability of unhindered and safe transit. None of it is definite in the Crimean situation.

Where in Ukraine would you say the fascist have the most influence?

In Ukraine, the overtly fascist forces enjoy the most influence and power on the territories occupied by pro-Russian forces, where Russian imperialist revanchists are triumphant. In Crimea the power now belongs to far right Russkoe Edinstvo (Russian Unity) party which had received negligibly low percentage of votes at the last local elections under Ukrainian administration. Groups and persons close to the Russian far right played significant part in creating the so called “people's republics”. The first “people's governor” of Donetsk Pavel Gubarev used to be an activist of the neo-nazi RNE (Russian National Unity). The theorist of the Russian “New Right” Alexander Dugin as an active supporter of the idea of “Novorossia”, and activists of his Eurasian Youth Alliance (ESM) took part in the coup in Donetsk. You can read more here. This piece was written by a foreign author but it gives a perspective close to our own.

If we talk about “pro-Ukrainian” fascists, we can see an interesting dynamics for the last several years: the nationalists' rate of approval is growing weaker in the Western region which has traditionally been their power base since the end of 1980s, but it is growing stronger in Kiev — where educated “middle class”, petite bourgeoisie and intelligentsia (half of which is Russian-speaking) tend to concentrate. These social strata are the main source of power of Ukrainian nationalists (including the far right) in the big politics.

What is your current agenda after the Maidan uprising?

Our agenda remains unchanged: we are still committed to the struggle for preserving and widening of the political, social and labour rights, endorsing the left social and political agenda, building a wide class movement. But the the new realities demand a serious reevaluation of our tactics.

Why has the left declined in power and the fascists risen?

The left have never had much power or influence in Ukraine. The parties that had been represented in the parliament or in the government — namely Communist and Socialist — had never been left in reality, they were only achieving their own or their sponsors' business goals, utilizing populist rhetoric and Soviet nostalgia.

The last nominally leftist party — Communist Party of Ukraine — had had some seats in the parliament until October, but their prospects declined after the political mistake by its leadership in supporting the anti-democratic draft laws of Yanukovich on January 16. It is also worth mentioning that the idea of USSR restoration in CPU's rhetoric had undergone considerable mutations in the direction of conservative and clerical pan-Slavic nationalism. This change made CPU popular in the regions where cultural and economic ties with Russia are the strongest, and its attitude to residents of Western Ukraine was growing more and more hostile, up to overt xenophobia. But the ultimate gravedigger of CPU's parliamentary ambitions was Putin: annexation of Crimea and war in Donbas deprived Ukraine precisely of those regions where pro-Russian position of CPU had enjoyed the most support.

The far right are on the rise, on the other hand, temporarily — due to dire social situation, which is favourable for the growth of nationalist and xenophobic mood.

Do you receive outside aid and if so where from?

We don't receive any systematic aid but some activist groups from Europe and the US have sent us money raised from contributions and sales of magazines with our interviews. The money are now put to use for such purposes as producing visual agitation, maintaining the squat etc.

Which other organisations do you work with?

Today we cooperate with Swedish SAC and other syndicalist unions from Red and Black Coordination; also, with Russian anarchists from Autonomous Action. We have some good contacts with the British IWW, Polish ZSP, German FAU. Furthermore, we cooperate with local anarchist and unionist initiatives. We are ready to work with any grassroots movement the political agenda of which doesn't contradict to our political principles.

What is your policies and opinions on the ongoing conflict in the Donetsk region?

We consider the proclaimed "people's republics" to be far right military juntas overseen by Kremlin, receiving military and administrative cadres, as well as guns and soldiers from it. The rights and freedoms have come under brutal suppression on the territories under the control of those juntas, and the open proletarian politics are impossible. There is obviously not a trace of a "people's" or "socialist" uprising.

On the other hand we are convinced that the doubtful professional qualifications of Ukrainian military leadership led to a number mistakes and abuses: like throwing in the war draftees and reservists, using voluntary battalions without military expertise and technical equipment as cannon fodder, committing to overly ruinous fighting in urban areas. Some pro-Ukrainian volunteer battalions were accused of looting and of war crimes, while these things are usual for the separatist forces. So, the local population suffers from both sides, although, obviously, the scales cannot be compared.

What can we do to help your movement?

You may use your information resources to spread texts and declarations from our website, translate them into European languages, and provide solidarity support to our political campaigns in Ukraine.

Would it in anyway be useful for you if we came to Ukraine and wrote articles to the danish press about the subject of the Ukranian left, and exposition of the fascist crimes?

A trip to Ukraine, attending of public events and live communication with activists and common citizens will definitely be a useful practice and will surely help strengthen the connections between our movements.

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