



Struggle-La-Lucha.org

‘Voice of Donbass residents must be heard’

written by Greg Butterfield
May 3, 2019



Sveta Licht and Denis Levin. Photo by Katya A.

Activists anywhere in the world would quickly recognize Svetlana Licht and Denis Levin, if not by their names, then by their character. They are the kind of extraordinary worker-organizers who exist wherever a fierce struggle rages: courageous, determined, and able to adapt and continue their revolutionary work no

matter how challenging the circumstances.

In early 2014, Licht and Levin were members of the Marxist organization Borotba (Struggle) in Kiev, the capital of Ukraine. Forced to leave the city after the U.S.-backed Maidan coup unleashed fascist terror on the streets, they travelled to Kharkov, Ukraine's second-largest city, and helped to organize the anti-fascist protest movement there.

Weeks after the massacre of nearly 50 anti-fascists in Odessa on May 2, 2014, armed



neo-Nazis attempted to kidnap Levin after a rally. Quick action by Licht and the intervention of protesters and passersby managed to drive them off.

The duo then went to Licht's native city of Donetsk, capital of the recently declared Donetsk People's Republic. They lived through some of the worst days of the Ukrainian military siege of the Donbass region in the summer of 2014 before going to Simferopol, Crimea, where several Borotba members and other Ukrainian political exiles sought refuge.

Licht and Levin returned to Donetsk in 2015, where they have been organizing ever since. Struggle-La Lucha spoke to the communist organizers in conjunction with the fifth anniversary of the coup and the beginning of the war.

Struggle - La Lucha: It's been five years since you were forced to leave Kiev after the Maidan coup. As activists in political exile, what is your situation today?

Denis Levin: We were forced to live in Crimea for a year and a half just because we

didn't have work in Donetsk. In many ways, the majority of people who fled Donbass in 2014 left not only because of the war, but also for economic reasons caused by the war. We returned to Donetsk at the end of 2015. For more than a year, I've been working as a welder for the Donetsk heating network, in one of the most bombed districts of Donetsk — the Kievsky district.

Being a refugee isn't easy, mainly because of the frequent problems with documents. If you flee from political persecution, from neo-Nazi threats to your life and health, you have no way to put your documents in order. But the hardest part isn't even that. The most difficult thing for a political refugee, or even for a person who is apolitical but who fled from the war, is separation from loved ones. I haven't seen my mother, brothers and sister for five years, because I can't go to Ukraine, like many other political emigrants.

Many Borotba members can only afford to communicate with their relatives who remain in Ukraine through the internet. It's very difficult, especially if your relatives have any problems with their health or welfare. In addition, because of problems with documents, not everyone has the opportunity to go to Russia to arrange their lives there, or to try to find a better paying job.

Svetlana Licht: When we returned to Donetsk in 2015, it wasn't easy for us. The war and blockade by Ukraine hit the economy of the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics hard; it was difficult to find work, especially work that could ensure a decent life. For some time I worked as a translator, translating articles from English, but the fees for such work are not very high.

I'm still glad that we returned to my hometown. I'm glad we no longer have to think about where to earn money to give to the landlord as soon as possible so that we will not be evicted from rental housing.

I think there is no point in despair, because my situation with Denis is better than

that of many Donetsk residents. After all, thousands of people lost their homes, health, relatives and friends. Thousands of people are forced to live in terrible conditions because of the war, because the hostilities do not stop, even when we don't hear the explosions. In these circumstances it's very difficult to restore the housing stock, to rebuild destroyed schools and hospitals. That's why you should not give up — it will only please our enemies!

I think that the lives of political refugees from Ukraine are no different from the lives of people who, for example, are fleeing conscription into the army, or from the lives of migrant workers who have never been interested in politics. Everyone has to survive in very cramped conditions, often without official documents, separated from family and friends.

SLL: What are your political activities now?

Denis: I can't say that our activities are particularly political, but rather enlightening. We continue to study philosophy and history in our philosophical circle. We began to make friends and communicate more with members of the Komsomol [Communist Youth League] of the DPR, to help them in their organizational work.

We began to produce political statements more often, because it's important to us that the position of the left of Donbass on anti-fascism, the attitude to the war, the status of women, the political blockade and everything that happens in the world, be heard. There are no comrades left in Ukraine who fully share our views on what is happening. There are different groups of people with left-wing views who agree with us in some ways, but not in others. Of course, it is dangerous for them to speak frankly about what we can say openly. It's necessary to be in solidarity with such people.

There are also a large number of left-liberals and even those who consider

themselves Marxists, socialists and feminists who are categorically against our views and even support the war against the residents of Donbass. They are most often heard. We want to counter this. We demand they listen to the voice of the people in Donetsk.



Recent meeting of the Aurora Women's Club and friends in Donetsk. Photo: Aurora

Sveta: It's also important for me that our [Aurora Women's Club](#) takes an active part in all this work. The post-Soviet left movement is in a crisis because women are often not involved in organizing and developing programmatic documents.

Perhaps someone will think that I am wrong, but it seems to me that in the conditions we live in, organizing a Marxist circle, organizing a women's movement — this is already an important political step. The organization of systematic activity itself is an important experience for those who have never participated in anything like this. And we have a majority of people like this, both in the Marxist circle and in

Aurora.

Now we are transforming everything in order to spread our ideas and involve as many people as possible in our activities. We try to speak in plain language and make our events, statements and discussions publicly accessible and understandable. Because many modern leftists speak bird language [in specialized terms not understood by most people], do not know how to answer difficult questions easily and quickly, while the right-wingers are faster to attract supporters with their primitive rhetoric.

SLL: How would you compare the situation of women and girls in Donetsk to what existed before the coup in 2014?

Sveta: If we consider the situation of women historically, then, like any other industrial region in the Soviet Union, the Donbass was a place of comprehensive emancipation of women. Industrialization and the restoration of industry after World War II required a huge number of skilled workers, and in this sense Soviet society did not look backward.

The problem is that many of the phenomena of domestic sexism were not overcome (for both objective and subjective reasons), and this eventually led to a serious conservative rollback after the fall of the Soviet Union in all former republics. This is particularly striking in Central Asia, where insufficient industrial development (and, accordingly, emancipation) led not only to extreme forms of nationalism and fundamentalism, but also patriarchy. But one cannot deny that in Russia or Ukraine, even in relatively developed economically and industrially regions, there has been conservative backsliding, including in our country.

Obviously, the social and economic situation of Donetsk has been aggravated by the war and its consequences. But it seems to me that we should not despair, and we have hope. Many girls are now going to learn the industrial professions that we

really need.

There are those who see their future only as housewives, because it offers hope for a more peaceful and stable life. There are those who don't even see any alternative to traditional roles of women and never thought about it. But the development of information technology isn't standing still. Girls themselves learn about many aspects and history of the women's movement through the internet, but the difficulty is that this happens on an individual basis. This is another reason why we created Aurora.

We have another problem. First World and Third Wave feminism — mainstream bourgeois feminism — is very distant and therefore incomprehensible to Donbass workers, so we've returned to the origins of our Marxist feminism, which can explain in understandable language the reasons for oppression and exploitation, especially oppression and exploitation of women. A critical study of modern trends makes it possible to enrich old-school Marxism.

I think Aurora has a great future and we have many challenges, so now we need to concentrate on using all our strength to effectively organize and implement our plans. We have no budget or sponsors, as many Ukrainian women's organizations do. But unlike in Ukraine, no one interferes with us, except for the war and economic blockade, which means that with a realistic approach, we'll be able to create a completely new, viable movement.

End of part 1

