

Donbass organizers: ‘Your resistance and solidarity give us strength’

written by Greg Butterfield
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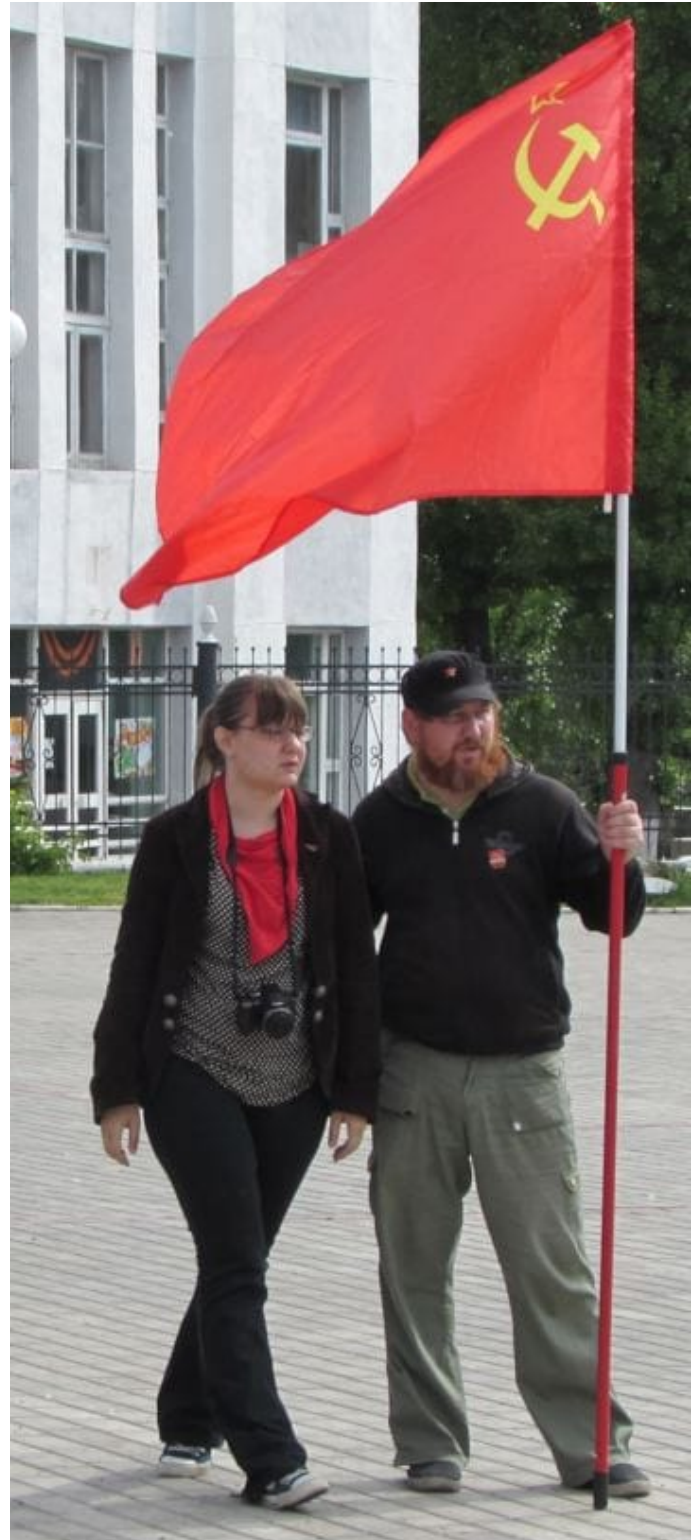
On May 2, Donetsk anti-fascists held a memorial for the victims of the 2014 Odessa massacre.

Photo: Red Carnation

[Part 1: “Voice of Donbass residents must be heard”](#)

Struggle-La Lucha spoke to Donetsk-based communist organizers Svetlana Licht and Denis Levin in conjunction with the fifth anniversary of the U.S.-backed coup in Ukraine and the beginning of the war against the Donbass republics. This is the second part of the interview.

Struggle-La Lucha: What impact does the Ukrainian-Western economic blockade have on workers in Donbass?



Svetlana Licht and Denis Levin at the International Anti-Fascist Conference in Krasnodon, Lugansk People's Republic, May 2016. SLL photo: Greg Butterfield

Denis Levin: We don't view the economic blockade as a separate, exclusively economic measure. For the residents of Donbass, the economic blockade is also the war. It is inextricably linked with direct military hostilities.

Any attempt to restore what has been destroyed faces the problem of restoring the economy and providing it with at least minimal material resources, which would be directed, in part, toward restoring trade with Ukraine. Cutting off trade is another measure of the criminal Ukrainian authorities to deprive the people of Donbass of even minimal means of subsistence.

The market for goods produced in the republics is significantly limited by the blockade, which means that it is impossible to produce a large income, which could be used both to eliminate the effects of the shelling and to launch new industries. In addition, many parts of the restored infrastructure are attacked over and over again.

I work in the public sector. As a welder, the enterprise I work for is trying to create comfortable working conditions for me, trying to provide adequate materials, timely tool repair, and so on. But it's obvious that due to the economic situation in Donbass, this is quite a difficult task. Plus, there are simply not enough workers. This situation has forced many specialists to leave for Russia to find work.

The economic blockade also results in rising prices for many goods. But over the years, a fairly reliable system of price containment and preservation of social guarantees has been developed. We still have free health care, unlike Ukraine. Even many people from Russia come to be treated by our doctors, because many doctors, good specialists, have not abandoned Donbass. We have the cheapest fare on public

municipal transport in the post-Soviet space, and benefits for old people, students and schoolchildren are preserved. And the cost of utilities doesn't destroy the family budget. But war and blockade are still a pervasive destructive factor.

SLL: In the past year, there were big changes in the leadership of the Donbass republics. The Minsk peace negotiations have been stalled for a long time. How do you view the political situation inside the republics today?

Denis: While the war goes on and the blockade continues, nothing fundamentally changes. In many ways, Ukraine uses the tense situation at the front for its internal political goals. Ukrainian politicians continue to use patriotic hysteria and fake news around the war to divert attention from neoliberal reforms, to create a patriotic image or to accuse their rivals of collaborating with the enemies of the Ukrainian nation. It may be possible to talk about some changes after the elections, but it seems to me that whoever they choose won't change anything fundamentally for us. After all, none of the candidates said anything radically new with regard to the issue of peace, the status of Donbass and its residents, or on the issue of the Minsk talks.

It's equally difficult to speak about the politics of the republics, and in particular, the position of the left movement. It is problematic to engage in politics in the conditions of war and terrorist attacks against the life and health of the people of the republic. And it's difficult to speak about the Communist Party of the Donetsk People's Republic (KPDPR), because they are also in a difficult position.

Several times we've tried to make some unifying steps with their organization, offered to hold a Donbass left forum on the issues of modern anti-fascism, to organize some kind of common association that would meet jointly and deal on a regular basis with some issues of both an ideological and practical nature. But the KPDPR works on a different principle. It is more difficult for them to make such decisions.

Therefore, we cooperate more with several Komsomol [Communist Youth League] cells, which are able to quickly make decisions and are always ready to join any united endeavor.

Svetlana Licht: I agree in many respects with Denis, but he forgot to say that many Donetsk workers are quite responsive to the left agenda. They share our views on social justice, not just out of nostalgia for the Soviet past, but also as it concerns their lives now, their working conditions, which call into question the conditions of war and blockade, and make them think about capitalism and exploitation.

What's happening here today makes asking difficult questions unavoidable, and more and more people are dissatisfied with how the right-wingers answer these questions. After all, the right always finds one primitive answer to the most difficult questions. Why was there a crisis in Ukraine, which led to a coup that led to the war? It's impossible to explain this only by some nonexistent national conspiracy.

On social media, I see interest in left-wing information sources, and at May Day demonstrations in Donetsk, more and more workers are genuinely interested in our answers to all sorts of questions. Of course, in many ways they have conservative misconceptions in different areas of life, but then we must also be able to persuade them.

SLL: How would you compare what happened in Ukraine with the current U.S.-attempted counterrevolution in Venezuela?

Denis: I think the difference between Ukraine five years ago and Venezuela today is that Venezuela, like many other Latin American countries, has already had the experience of economic subordination to Washington and puppet governments with all their attendant consequences: complete impoverishment, destruction of the social sphere, and paramilitary gangs guarding the local bourgeoisie and capitalism. Hugo Chávez tried to eliminate many of the consequences of the postcolonial position of

his people, and the enemies of the popular forces that he mobilized are now trying to destroy these social transformations.

In Ukraine, until 2014, many neoliberal processes were much slower compared with other post-Soviet countries, and the far-right turn significantly accelerated these processes. I don't like the comparison which many critics of the current Ukrainian regime like to use, but it's hard not to notice that Ukraine today is very similar to the Latin American dictatorships of the mid-20th century, and less and less resembles the post-Soviet bourgeois democracy that it was until 2014.

Sveta: I can only add that the experience of the Latin American countries, of the left movement, the working class and students against the ultraright and neoliberalism, is very rich. This is especially noticeable in relation to the combativeness of the women's movement and other Venezuelans who defend the Bolivarian Republic, while in Ukraine the progressive movements are demoralized and intimidated. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, they were not in the best condition, could not properly renew themselves and unite. But in the conditions in which they have to survive today, organizing a more mass left movement seems impossible.

We are simultaneously looking with fear and hope at what is happening in Venezuela. If the Bolivarian people succeed in resisting the coup, then they will be able to break the political strategy of coups.

SLL: The rise of neo-Nazi groups in Europe and the U.S. has surged in the years since the Maidan coup. How do you view the relationship between what happened in Ukraine and the spread of neofascist movements in the West?

Denis: I think what took place in Ukraine was a classical scheme which the bourgeoisie often used in the 20th century. It's customary for them to use the ultraright to protect their capital and profits during a crisis, when the poor and robbed masses are more likely to succumb to right-wing propaganda. But don't

forget that after every rise comes a fall. So the right wing is awaiting a decline in popularity of its rhetoric, which is already happening in some countries.

Sveta: I think that the rise of the ultraright in Ukraine is a consequence of both internal and global processes. After all, today, toleration of the far-right agenda is noticeable in many countries of the world, and the number of supporters of right-wing ideas has been growing for several years already. We see this in the victory of such politicians as Trump and Bolsonaro. I think that we will again and again encounter the horrendous consequences of turning Ukraine into an international training ground for the far right.

But on the other hand, we shouldn't forget that there is opposition to everything they do. The number of our supporters — Marxists, socialists, anti-fascists and advocates of other progressive ideas — does not decline. Yes, it's difficult for us, and in some countries there is a question of the survival of left-wing ideas. But if neo-Nazism and the general right-wing turn have a beginning, then there will be an end.

SLL: How can working people and the left in the U.S. aid the struggle of people in Ukraine and Donbass?

Sveta: I think that leftist projects like [Red Star Over Donbass](#) do a great job for international solidarity by spreading the truth about what is happening in the Donbass. So you can help us by not giving up on your endeavors and we will continue our cooperation.

Denis: Continue the struggle in your country, because when we see your resistance and solidarity, it gives us strength and we do not give up.

