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'When fascists raise their heads, don't hesitate': Lessons from Ukraine for U.S. workers

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Fascists massacred activists and burned the House of Trade Union in Odessa, Ukraine, on May 2, 2014.

In the autumn of 2014, I flew from New York to Simferopol, Crimea, to meet with activists who had been driven from their homes in Ukraine by far-right, racist, anti-communist mobs and politicians, much like those homegrown neo-Nazis who attacked the Capitol building in Washington, D.C., on Jan. 6, on behalf of Donald Trump.

The exiles I met and spoke with — socialists and communists, labor organizers and community leaders, even elected officials — had fled the country under threat of arrest or death. They had seen their offices raided, their neighbors beaten down and their comrades murdered because of the language they spoke, their political beliefs,

their religious views or what part of the country they grew up in.

I went to meet them and report their stories. My motivation wasn't only solidarity and human empathy for their plight. It was also because I knew what most people in this country were unaware of — that the U.S. government, including both of the dominant political parties, had a big part in helping the fascists overthrow the Ukrainian government, take over the streets and start a war in the eastern part of the country.

Prominent Republicans like Sen. John McCain and Democrats like Secretary of State John Kerry flew to Kiev, the Ukrainian capital, on behalf of Congress and the Obama administration. They pledged Washington's support and monetary aid to the alliance of pro-Western politicians and fascist gangs that took power. Sometimes, they were photographed shaking hands with known neo-Nazis.

Then-Vice President Joe Biden served as the U.S. government point person on Ukraine. He delivered orders from Wall Street and the Pentagon to the compliant politicians in Kiev on matters like raising utility rates on workers, privatizing the economy and selling it off to Western businesses, and having NATO train Ukrainian troops for a potential war against neighboring Russia.

I felt a responsibility to report these facts to workers and the people's movement here.

'Raise the alarm, organize, defend yourselves'

I'll never forget the plea I heard from one exiled Ukrainian activist. He had a warning for us.

In its desperation to dominate the globe economically and militarily, the U.S. is spreading fascism around the world, he said. And this will come back to haunt the workers in the U.S.

When the fascists raise their heads here, he said, don't hesitate. Raise the alarm, organize, defend yourselves before it's too late.

"We wish we had known," he said. "We wish we had done more. Now we know what happens if you don't."

He knew what he was talking about. Some of his friends and comrades had been killed in the massacre at the House of Trade Unions on May 2, 2014, in the city of Odessa.

On that day, a fascist mob violently drove progressive activists from a public square into the trade union building. Then they set the building on fire. When people tried to flee the blaze, the mob shot and beat them. At least 48 people died.

I couldn't help thinking of those events, and that activist's warning, on Jan. 6, when I saw a lynch's noose prominently displayed outside the Capitol and white supremacists with sidearms and zip ties leaping through the chambers where Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib had recently stood.

The far-right coup in Ukraine had also started with protests and the invasion of government buildings targeting "moderate" politicians from November 2013 to February 2014.

Then came raids on the offices of workers' organizations. Right-wing militias patrolled the streets of the capital and other cities, looking for people speaking the "wrong" language or expressing the "wrong" views, much like the Proud Boys who attacked Black churches and burned Black Lives Matter banners in D.C. in December.

And then, just a few months later, came the massacre of progressive activists in Odessa and the start of a bloody war in the Donbass region that has cost more than 13,000 lives and continues to this day.

Fascism is not to be debated, but smashed

Today, six and a half years after that trip to Crimea, I remain in touch with many of the activists I met there. Almost all remain exiled from their homes. They have had to build new lives, away from friends and family, often under harsh conditions.

A few have returned to Ukraine but face the constant threat of repression. Some have spent time in jail. All continue their political work as best they can.

“Fascism is not to be debated,” goes an old slogan. “It is to be smashed.”

The terrorists of Azov, C14 and Right Sector in Ukraine, like the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers and other MAGA goons in the U.S., will not hesitate to murder, lynch and repress oppressed people and workers when they get the chance.

The centrist and liberal capitalist politicians — who rely on fascism to advance the interests of U.S. bosses abroad — won’t mount an effective fight against them at home, even if their own necks are threatened.

It’s up to us — the workers and oppressed communities — to get organized and prepare to defend ourselves and our organizations, to defend the people’s basic democratic rights and win the masses of people to struggle for the only system that can destroy fascism at the root: socialism.



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