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‘Anti-war movement must be built on foundation of solidarity’

written by Melinda Butterfield
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Melinda Butterfield at Times Square protest against U.S.-NATO proxy war, New York City, Jan. 14.

Talk given by Melinda Butterfield at “People Speak Out to Stop Racism, Poverty and World War III” at St. Mary’s Episcopal Church in Harlem, New York, Jan. 13.

Good evening friends, siblings and comrades.

Tonight I’d like you to join me for a little thought experiment. First, I want you to imagine there’s been a far-right takeover of the U.S. government supported by violent white supremacists. Sadly, that’s pretty easy to imagine these days.

Next, imagine that people all over the country rose up to protest against this coup – Black and white, Latinx, Asian and Indigenous, LGBTQ+, immigrants, prisoners. But just as this anti-fascist movement seems to be gaining strength, a terrible massacre of activists takes place in Philadelphia. The resistance is brutally repressed in most of the U.S. Some people are killed, many are imprisoned, thousands have to flee abroad or risk death.

However, in two states, the anti-fascist movement successfully seizes control and holds it. Let’s say, for the sake of argument, that these states are New York and Connecticut. The new U.S. government sends in troops and tanks, but the community organizes itself and manages to push them back.

A long-term standoff ensues. Many threatened activists from all over the U.S. wind up coming to New York City and Hartford to help strengthen the resistance.

Now imagine this state of affairs continues for nine years. Trade and supplies from the rest of the continental U.S. and Canada are cut off. Hartford, due to its location, is relatively sheltered from attack. But New York City is shelled with artillery from across the Hudson on a daily basis, targeting apartment buildings, schools, hospitals, and houses of worship.

Death squads and armed drones are regularly sent in to infiltrate and carry out attacks on residents. Overseas allies of the regime in Washington send it more and

more weapons. Over time, the number of federal troops surrounding this anti-fascist enclave grows.

The regime in Washington hates Mexico and is constantly trying to provoke a military conflict with our neighbors to the south (also not a far-fetched scenario). Mexico is the only country that offers support to the anti-fascists in New York and Connecticut. The Mexican government even tries to broker a peace agreement. But despite its promises, Washington keeps bombing New York City, week after week, year after year. According to them, we're nothing but pawns of the evil Mexican government.

This imaginary scenario is one that I hope will never come to pass. But I asked you to consider it because I want everyone, just for a few minutes, to put yourselves in the shoes of people living in the Donbass, the former eastern regions of Ukraine called Donetsk and Lugansk.

What I just described is reality for people living there since a U.S.-backed coup overthrew Ukraine's elected government nine years ago, in 2014.

Life in Donetsk

Let me tell you about a dear friend of mine in Donetsk named Sveta. She's one of the most courageous people I've ever known. Sveta is a socialist, a feminist, and a labor activist who grew up in Donbass, but later moved west to Kiev, the Ukrainian capital.

In 2014, after the coup, she had to flee Kiev under threat of arrest or death. Her husband Denis is a Jewish union organizer from Western Ukraine, and if anything, he was in even greater danger. Sveta and Denis settled back in Donetsk and have lived there through years and years of Ukraine's bombing war.

Today, Denis is enlisted in the Donetsk People's Militia to protect the people of

Donbass. While some people have fled the bombing by going eastward into Russia, Sveta has stayed in the city to care for her elderly father.

Almost every day, she posts updates on the situation there. Over the past year, they've grown increasingly heartbreaking. Even her incredible inner strength has been ground down to the bone by the unrelenting Ukrainian attacks on civilians, on her neighbors, on the streets she has to travel for food, medicine, and water. Yes, water, because people have to severely ration water since Ukraine cut off the city's main source.

Every time it seems like there might be an end to this nightmare, a new, more powerful weapons system supplied by the United States and NATO gets into the hands of the neo-Nazi Azov Brigade and other Ukrainian forces north and west of the city. Just yesterday, a grocery warehouse in Donetsk was attacked with NATO-issued weapons, killing a worker and wounding four more.

One of the Ukrainian regime's worst crimes started this past summer. Their army began scattering small landmines called "petals" all over the city. They're about the size of the palm of your hand. They're colored and shaped to look like leaves. If you step on one, you may die, but you're pretty much guaranteed to be left maimed and disabled. The majority of those who have fallen victim have been seniors or emergency workers, and some children too. As of Dec. 21, there were 87 victims of the petals.

Solidarity is essential

The countdown to World War III started long before Russia intervened to protect Donbass last February. People in Donetsk and Lugansk, like the people of Yemen and Palestine, and North Africa, are guinea pigs for testing U.S. weapons. In the event of a nuclear exchange, they will be the first to die. The avowed policy of the Ukrainian government since 2014 has been to "take back" the region and "cleanse"

it of the majority Russian-speaking population. The guiding hand behind all of this has been the U.S. government – under both Democrats and Republicans.

Building a true anti-war movement here starts with poor and working people recognizing that it is not in our interests – that the \$113 billion spent on the U.S. proxy war in Ukraine last year alone is money stolen from our pockets, money that's desperately needed to address the crises of inflation, homelessness, poverty, lack of health care and climate catastrophe.

We have our own battles to fight right here, against poverty, against racist police killings, which were the highest ever recorded last year, against the terrible attacks on voting rights, women's reproductive freedom, and the right of transgender people like me just to exist.

But to be effective, the anti-war movement must be built on a foundation of solidarity with the people directly affected. And those residents of Donbass and exiled Ukrainians have been completely written out of the U.S. narrative about the war and sadly, also by many existing anti-war groups.

Solidarity isn't a one-way street. Earlier generations learned so much from the struggles of people in Vietnam, Central America, and Iraq. Today, when organized fascist groups are growing more threatening in this country, we need to learn from the people of Donbass and their nearly-decade-long resistance to fascism.

Because, to paraphrase the powerful words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the bombs dropped abroad also explode here at home – they destroy the dream and possibility of a decent life.

Thank you.

