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Ukraine:

“A mass revolt for democracy”

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Zakhar Popovych, an economist and member of the leadership of “Left Opposition”, a Ukrainian political group, was interviewed by Manu Bichindaritz for “Hebdo L’Anticapitaliste”, the newspaper of France’s Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste.

Can you tell us about the situation on the ground in recent days, notably the political forces playing a role there?

The first attacks against the anti-riot police of the Berkut were organised mainly by the neo-Nazis of Pravyi Sektor, who are still more radical than the far right Svoboda movement. But it is also true that in the following days, many ordinary and very different people have entered the struggle. Thousands of them have brought tyres and oil to feed the huge fire. Among the activists, I have seen very different people mostly Russian speaking, many youth from the suburbs of Kiev. This was very different from the people at Maïdan square, who were mostly Ukrainian speaking people from villages in western Ukraine.

After the introduction of emergency laws most of the citizens of Kiev were very angry. And after the killing of the activists, still more so. Maïdan square, frequented on a “normal” evening by a few hundred people, was invaded by several thousand people who stayed all night. This mass mobilisation probably saved Maïdan from the “cleaning” which was clearly being prepared by the police.

Everybody was sure that the Berkut would attack. According to the new laws voted for the same day, the demonstrators were all considered as criminals. Among them far right groups were present, but also some left radical groups (mainly anarchists). Most demonstrators were critical of the opposition and the xenophobic far right. Many stones and molotov cocktails were thrown against the police, with several of them being injured. Unfortunately, many young people behaved as if it was a game, even after some of them had been killed. Nonetheless, it was a mass revolt of Ukrainians, of different nationalities and ethnic groups, for democracy in Ukraine. The far right were certainly present, but in the context of a much broader movement.

What was the government’s reaction?

Confronted with such an impressive mass mobilisation, the government decided not to use force against the demonstrators. Any attempt to evacuate the square would have ended up with many wounded and perhaps even deaths. However, this mass action, which had prevented the introduction of new anti-democratic emergency laws, also gave impetus to the most anti-democratic elements of the Maïdan movement. After the first battle against the police, far right neo-Nazi groups strengthened themselves and felt strong enough to proclaim themselves leaders of the movement.

Despite the armistice declared by the opposition leaders and the proposal by President Yanukovych that Jacenuk become Prime minister, the violence did not stop. The majority party in Parliament, as well as Yanukovych himself, tried to win time and had no intention of organizing new elections or introducing radical change. However, the opposition leaders are not ready to organize radical actions and had no idea what more they could do. The people at Maïdan were increasingly angry with both. Unfortunately the most likely scenario is the establishment of a right wing, authoritarian and nationalist regime. Even if the Svoboda party can pacify or indeed crush the most radical nationalist groups, the entry of this party into government will lead to the systematic oppression of the progressive radical left.

Despite the strengthening of the left and progressive forces in recent days, the Svoboda party remains the most

organised and powerful force at MaÃ~dan. It will seek to negotiate with the government so as to calm the situation. On Sunday February 16, it renounced occupying Kiev town hall, but some hours later the building was reoccupied by the “self defence” forces of MaÃ~dan, many of them neo-Nazi activists from Pravyi Sektor. Condemned officially by their leaders but nonetheless tolerated, these far right groups are becoming increasingly more violent and less manageable.

Your organization Left Opposition recently published a manifesto. [1] How do you defend your orientation inside this movement?

Despite a difficult situation the left is accepted at MaÃ~dan, much more than before, and we intervene systematically at the House of Ukraine, a student centre mainly organized by left and progressive activists. Left books and leaflets, including thousands of copies of our 10 point manifesto, are distributed here and we participate in the public debates.

Our proposals, including workers’ control and the deprivation of electoral rights for all millionaires, get a good reception. Unfortunately, this does not mean that many people have joined left organizations, still too weak to attract a significant number of new members. On the other hand, the attempt to organize the unity of the left and the anarchists in the “self defence” guard of MaÃ~dan has not succeeded, because of the violence of the attacks of the far right groups. At this time, the violence against the left is again developing, recalling the attacks suffered recently by the activists of the Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Ukraine, attacks which were coordinated, sometimes personally, by the Svoboda leaders.

What does the Left Opposition say on the question of the rival international agreements with Russia and the European Union?

Both paths are bad for the Ukraine. The main problem is inside the country. The grip of the oligarchy on politics has as a consequence a zero tax rate for the big companies. All taxes are paid by the workers and small companies. Thus the state’s coffers are empty, although there are sufficient resources in the country. The choice of integration into one bloc or another will not settle this problem.

What links do you have with the anti-capitalist and internationalist left in Russia or in Europe? How can we help you?

Can the European left press put pressure on their governments by insisting that it is possible to carry out investigations into the offshore companies which hold capital in the Ukraine? Is it possible to wage a campaign for sanctions not only against the representatives of the government but also against the oligarchs? Is it possible to show that the Ukrainians demand the seizure of the bank accounts of the oligarchs in Europe? Is it possible to show that this zero tax rate, as well as the total “oligarchisation” of politics, are not acceptable for Europe? If it was possible to do all this, it would be very good!

Finally, it is of course important to show zero tolerance for the far right, which is present in the Ukrainian opposition movement, and are in fact neo-Nazis. European activists and personalities are also welcome in Kiev to talk about these problems. It is still possible to speak here in conditions which are still relatively safe.

[1] Manifesto: 10 theses of the Leftist Opposition in Ukraine.