

A political earthquake strikes Ukraine

February 24, 2014

UKRAINE'S PRESIDENT Viktor Yanukovich appears to have been driven from power after the mass protest movement that has occupied Kiev's Maidan (Independence Square) since November survived a deadly crackdown last week. In a matter of days, the country's corrupt and autocratic regime was overwhelmed.

The parliamentary opposition to Yanukovich—dominated by center-right and even far-right parties, backed by the European Union (EU) and U.S. government—is moving quickly to establish its authority, ahead of new elections planned for May. Their goal is to head off any further action from below that might undermine their claim to speak for the uprising—and that might target the country's elite beyond Yanukovich and his ruling party.

Contrary to this aim, however, the Maidan occupation grew larger over the weekend as masses of people celebrated reports that Yanukovich had fled the capital late Friday night. In scenes reminiscent of insurrections past, demonstrators poured into Yanukovich's abandoned private estate in Kiev, complete with a luxurious residence, zoo and carefully manicured golf course.

The masses of people who participated in the Maidan movement did not endure months of encampments during a frigid winter and repeated assaults by the regime's riot police in order for a new political leadership to take charge and preside over the same neoliberal policies that have impoverished ordinary people. Whatever happens now, the memory of how mass resistance forced out a tyranny will stay burned in the minds of Ukrainians.

Nevertheless, at this point, the conservative, pro-Western parties that have claimed leadership of the movement are pressing their advantage.

As a consequence of the upheaval last week, Yulia Tymoshenko, the imprisoned leader of the opposition Fatherland Party, was freed from jail. The Western media showcased a sympathetic image of Tymoshenko, frail from years behind bars and speaking to 50,000 people in Maidan. But more honest reports noted she got a "cool reception" from the occupiers. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, a volunteer security officer admonished her, saying: "Yulia Vladimirovna, remember who made this revolution."

Tymoshenko herself is no stranger to political power or corruption—she is a former prime minister, and she became one of the richest people in Ukraine by brokering insider deals in the energy industry. Other leading figures of the former opposition parties have similar backgrounds.

Equally menacing is the high profile of the far right—in the form of both Svoboda, a political party with representatives in parliament that has ties to the British National Party and France's National Front; and the extra-parliamentary Right Sector, a tightly organized street force that reportedly took the lead in the confrontations with riot police when the crackdown came last week.

The far right doesn't care about democratic rights or challenging the power of the wealthy oligarchs—any more than Yanukovich did, or the more conventional conservative parties that have taken control in parliament.

THE MAIDAN occupation was sparked off in November by the announcement that the Yanukovich

government was rejecting a proposed “association agreement” with the EU, apparently in order to join the Eurasian Customs Union, led by Vladimir Putin’s Russia.

The center-right parties that dominated the speakers’ platform in Maidan continued to portray themselves as pro-Europe, and the widespread desire for a break with Russia has been a factor throughout. But other issues quickly gained in prominence—the impoverished conditions for the majority of the population, in contrast to the incredible wealth of the oligarchs; the corruption of the Yanukovich regime; and pro-democracy demands against the state’s harsh repression.

Yanukovich attempted to balance between promises of change and threats of imprisonment and worse for demonstrators—all while struggling to maintain the support of the wealthy elite. But each time Yanukovich ordered repression, the riot police were repelled, though at the cost of scores of people killed.

The conflict reached a new pitch on Tuesday, February 18, following the announcement of the resumption of Russian aid to Ukraine. The government unleashed the most violent crackdown yet on protesters. After 36 hours of intense battles that left more than two dozen people dead and hundreds injured, a truce was announced on Wednesday night.

But events had spiraled beyond the control of the regime. The seizure of government offices in western Ukraine began to spread, while members of parliament from Yanukovich’s ruling Party of Regions started defecting, along with the mayor of Kiev.

The truce was shattered the next morning, and acting Interior Minister Vitaliy Zakharchenko announced he had authorized police to be equipped with Kalashnikovs and sniper rifles. Security forces and the now armed self-defense units of the Maidan fought pitched battles, using live ammunition—news footage showed downtown Kiev transformed into a war zone.

This was the setting for Yanukovich, having announced another “agreement” with opposition parties, to flee Kiev for the east of the country, where he has his political base of support, close to the border with Russia. Other political officials followed his lead and fled, or defected to the Maidan opposition. Security forces abandoned the fight in Kiev, and the numbers in the square swelled, demanding that the police chiefs responsible for the deaths of protesters be held accountable.

Because of the defections, the trio of conservative and far right opposition parties achieved a majority in parliament and voted unanimously to return to the 2004 constitution, which grants parliament greater powers. Over the weekend, votes were taken to impeach Yanukovich and to hand over his powers to the speaker of parliament, Aleksandr Turchinov, who is now acting president.

What will happen is far from clear, but there is a real possibility that Ukraine could break apart. The last week’s upheavals has accelerated the process of western cities and regions, beginning last week with the city of Lviv, shaking off the control of the central government in Kiev. Meanwhile, in the Eastern city of Kharkiv, a congress of the country’s Southern and Eastern regions passed a resolution last Saturday rejecting the authority of the now-opposition-controlled parliament in Kiev.

THE POLITICAL forces poised to take control of Ukraine after Yanukovich’s fall aren’t looking out for workers, in any way, shape or form. As a statement from the anarchist Autonomous Workers Union of Ukraine bluntly put it:

Besides the fascists, old and experienced Oppositionists will also attempt to seize power. Many of them already have some experience with working in government, and they are no strangers to

corruption, favoritism and the use of budget funds for personal purposes.

As Russian socialist Ilya Budraitskis explained in an interview with the German magazine *Marx21*, the wealthy elite “has influence not only on the economy and society, but also has direct control over one or more political parties. An oligarch can therefore translate their finance capital into direct political power.”

Yulia Tymoshenko is a creature of this system. She played a leading role in Ukraine’s 2004 “Orange Revolution,” when mass protest against a stolen election succeeded in overturning the result. Tymoshenko became prime minister under President Viktor Yushchenko, who was widely seen as a pro-Western reformer. But Yushchenko failed to reverse Ukraine’s economic inequality or democratize the political system. Disillusionment with him paved the way for Yanyukovich and his party to make a comeback six years later.

Before 2004, Tymoshenko first rose to prominence as the head of an energy company following the breakup of the old USSR in 1991 and the declaration of an independent Ukraine—she proved a savvy operator in the new era of privatization and free-market “reform.” She and the other leaders of the parties now in control in Kiev are no more concerned today about the economic and social needs of ordinary Ukrainians—their negotiations with the EU so far have been focused on opening up Ukraine’s market to EU businesses.

A government led by Tymoshenko’s Fatherland Party will lead to a deepening of neoliberal measures, only this time with international connections to the EU and International Monetary Fund, rather than Putin’s Russia. Indeed, some on the left are already calling this prospect a “Second Orange Revolution”—in recognition that it is bound to disappoint the hopes of the wider layers of people that brought them to power.

ANOTHER THREAT to working people in Ukraine comes in the form of the far right.

The influence and perceived respectability of the right in the Maidan movement needs to be understood in its political and historical context. Liberalism, as one might understand it from the U.S. context, does not exist as an independent force in Ukraine. Instead, the political landscape is composed of various shades of conservative populist parties.

At the website LeftEast, Ovidiu Tichindeleanu explained that “popular movements have exploded all throughout Eastern Europe [in the last three years], and all expressed an anti-systemic discontent.” But because these movements “failed to produce a common constitutional moment,” Tichindeleanu argues, many of them, “whether from Ukraine or Romania, have come to be dominated or marred by nationalists and the far right.”

The size and influence of fascist forces in the Maidan movement is frightening. For example, members of the Antifascist Union Ukraine estimated in an interview that extreme right-wing nationalists made up about 30 percent of protesters.

Among the fighting forces that defended Maidan against the crackdown—and that now guard parliament, instead of the state police—the Right Sector, with its highly coordinated organization and disciplined command structure, is in strict control, even preventing left-wing attempts to organize defense groups.

Right Sector was increasingly at the forefront of the clashes with government forces, but its aims are not at all in conflict with those truly in power in Ukraine. In the midst of the most intense battles

last week, for example, Right Sector issued an appeal to the oligarchs around Yanukovich, asking them to support the protests and the formation of a government led by technocrats. Fascists have always relied on the backing of big capital to come to power—their appeal should be seen as a bid to build relations with the ruling class.

The menace of the far right in Ukraine cannot be understated. But it would be wrong to dismiss the protest movement wholesale because its presence.

The fascists won't be stopped by shoring up the repressive state apparatus around the oligarchs. On the contrary, the capitalist state typically uses such opportunities to limit the democratic rights of ordinary people, and especially to ramp up the repression of the left, thereby creating even more favorable conditions for the far right to grow.

Confronting the threat of fascism will require a grassroots effort involving independent workers' organizations, trade unions and a strengthened left establishing an atmosphere of solidarity within the Maidan, in which the toxic message of hate will wither and die.

PRIOR TO the crackdown on February 18, the socialist left, though small and not well organized, was gaining a hearing in the Maidan, according to reports. According to Zakhar Popovych, a member of Left Opposition, thousands of copies of the "Ten Theses of the Left Opposition in Ukraine" had been distributed and discussed among demonstrators.

Unfortunately, whatever progress the left had been making was largely disrupted by the crackdowns. The left in Ukraine remains very small, as one sober report from before the crackdown put it, with "no organization that can carry out planned strategic activities, nor media resources able to communicate to our position to the public, nor sufficient research capacity able to competently analyze our activities."

At the same time, however, the development of the Maidan movement was leading to a shift in the class composition of the demonstrations. Writing before the crackdown, a member of the Autonomous Workers Union reported that:

the protesters [initially] were mainly students and urban "middle classes": petite bourgeoisie, bohemian circles, office workers. Right now, the class composition of the protests has definitely shifted to the more universal one. I'm not sure about the exact proportions, but it's doubtless that the protest has become more "proletarian"—although the share of workers is still low, and when they are present, they are there as "Ukrainians" or "citizens," not as "workers."

At the front of the Maidan, leaders of center-right parties dominated the speakers' platform, and the far right controlled its self-defense units. But a large majority of the rank-and-file participants in the Maidan have legitimate grievances—against the impact of neoliberal capitalism, against state repression and their lack of a political voice, against endemic corruption that ultimately serves to amass more wealth for the oligarchs—which put them at odds with both the mainstream right and the far right.

Building on the basis of these grievances, around the principle of solidarity, offers the hope for confronting both the agenda of a new government led by the mainstream conservative parties and the threat of a further growth in influence for the fascists—and for creating the conditions for the emergence of a future revolutionary movement.

This article originally appeared in Socialist Worker.