

American pseudo-left speaking tour fails to shore up support for war against Russia

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A ten-day pseudo-left speaking tour within the US, which attempted to mobilize support for the US-NATO war against Russia, concluded last Wednesday with an event at the University of California, Berkeley.

Outside of a narrow middle-class and academic milieu that already back the war, the tour failed to shore up support for the war among wider layers of students and young people, despite being heavily promoted.

The speaking tour was conducted under the headline, “Resisting Russian Imperialism: Ukraine’s Struggle for Self-Determination.” The four featured speakers were Denys Bondar and Hanna Perekhoda, both members of the Ukrainian Sotsialnyi Rukh (Social Movement), a front group with ties to the Central Intelligence Agency, together with Ilya Budraitskis and Ilya Matveev, both leading figures of the Pabloite Russian Socialist Movement (RSM).

This speaking tour constituted the “left” flank of efforts to drum up support for the war by saturating the American public with war propaganda, particularly amidst the bloody failure of Ukraine’s months-long “counteroffensive,” which saw the slaughter of tens of thousands of conscripts with no substantial military gains. In this sense, the speaking tour was designed to complement the work of the more “mainstream” outlets for war propaganda, like the *New York Times*, by making appeals to students and young people specially couched in “left,” “socialist,” and even “Marxist” language.

The tour, which began at the Socialism 2023 conference and had two other stops in Chicago and New York City, concluded with the Berkeley event on September 13, where Matveev and Perekhoda appeared on a panel together. Despite being held at one of the most politicized campuses in the country, the gathering attracted only about 50 of what might be called “the usual suspects,” including at least one union official as well as members of several pseudo-left groups active in the area. Relatively few students attended, and in the audience, those appearing to be over the age of 65 predominated.

In terms of its content, the event was indistinguishable from a press conference at the Pentagon. There was hardly anything said that could be described as in any way left-wing, let alone socialist.

In so many words, the speakers demanded that the audience accept that American imperialism—after rampaging through Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Libya, Vietnam, and elsewhere—had been magically transformed into a benevolent force in the case of

Ukraine.

Moderator Blanca Missé, a California Faculty Association union official, set the tone for the event by announcing at the outset that it was designated as a “safe space” for the panelists.

Matveev spoke first, giving what purported to be a historical background to the war in Ukraine. This 20-minute timeline consisted of various examples of alleged “Russian imperialism” and “meddling” in Ukraine from 1994 to the present. In this “narrative,” as he called it, the actual record of US imperialism and its “meddling” in Ukraine, including in the 2014 coup, were simply erased. While he invoked “Russian imperialism” repeatedly, he made no substantial attempt to justify his use of this phrase.

Notably, the entire history of the Russian Revolution and the formation and subsequent liquidation of the Soviet Union—i.e., the essential history of working-class and left-wing struggle in both Russia and Ukraine—was missing from his “background” to the war. History began instead in 1994, with the Budapest Memorandum, in which Ukraine relinquished its nuclear weapons. The unstated implication of choosing this starting point was that this was a mistake, and the Ukraine regime presumably should be, in his view, once again armed with nuclear weapons.

The joint struggle of the Ukrainian and Russian masses against fascism during the Second World War was also erased from the narrative. While Matveev emphasized the role of the far-right in Russia, his “background” erased the role of the Ukrainian far-right entirely, both historically and in the present.

In the course of presenting his timeline, Matveev claimed that US President Barack Obama had failed to provide “lethal aid” to Ukraine out of fear of “provoking” Russia, while Donald Trump had provided a “minimal amount” but with onerous “conditions” attached. With these arguments, Matveev established himself as a critic of American imperialism from the right, i.e., on the grounds that for years it had failed to be “lethal” enough in waging war against Russia.

Perekhoda’s report consisted of taking Pentagon talking points and translating them into the pseudo-left language of “social justice” and postmodern identity politics—invoking feminism, LGBT rights, and even trade union “solidarity.”

Perekhoda referenced, for example, a petition last year in Ukraine in favor of recognizing same-sex marriage, which gathered 28,000 signatures but produced no results from the Zelensky regime. She pointed to this petition as evidence of the

progressive character of the Ukrainian “struggle,” as against the “obscurantist” and “homophobic” Russian imperialist elites.

According to Perekhoda, the allegedly democratic and progressive character of the “Ukrainian struggle” justified, in turn, accepting tens of billions of dollars of weapons, military training, and oversight from the Pentagon.

A major theme that emerged at the Berkeley event was an attack on that section of “the left” that has refused to sign up for the war. In this context, this means above all the principled socialist and internationalist position advanced on the *World Socialist Web Site* and by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the youth and student movement of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

Perekhoda, in particular, attacked those sections of “the left in the US” that are opposed, in principle, to the “military-industrial complex.” She also attacked proponents of “peace negotiations,” which she said would only benefit Russia.

At Berkeley, Perekhoda and Matveev both took for granted, without bothering to present any evidence or argument, that Ukraine is a “democracy.” In reality, Ukraine is governed by a corrupt and criminal oligarchy that is a mirror image of the Putin regime. In Ukraine at present, as in Russia, all opposition to the war is banned and hundreds of thousands of workers and youth have been forcibly conscripted into the military.

The term “self-determination,” which appears in the title of the event, turns reality on its head. The war has in fact transformed Ukraine into a vast prison for prospective NATO recruits, from which men of fighting age are legally prohibited from leaving. Far from “liberation,” the war has resulted in the total prostration and subjugation of Ukraine to imperialism.

It was particularly telling that, in line with the American government and media, the panelists devoted no significant attention to—and essentially covered up—the horrific death toll of the war. The vast scale of the suffering and the hundreds of thousands of dead on both sides are concealed because these facts naturally evoke anti-war sentiments among workers and young people, which would run counter to the central demand of the speaking tour: more weapons.

A mood of cynicism pervaded the meeting. In one exchange, Perekhoda remarked contemptuously that it does not matter what “leftists in the US” do, since it is not like they are going to change the policy of the US government anyway. This drew a murmur of laughter from the assembled audience. Similarly, Matveev commented at one point with a shrug, “There is no alternative.”

The speakers at Berkeley, remarkably, made no substantial attempt to address themselves at any point to the conditions facing students or the working class in general in the US. Instead, any dissent from the pro-war line was simply attacked and ridiculed as “egocentric” and “privileged,” as an illegitimate attempt to deny the “lived experience” of Ukrainians, and as spreading pro-Putin propaganda.

Behind their lies and enthusiasm for the war lie fundamental class interests. Perekhoda, Matveev, Budraitskis and Bondar speak for sections of the middle class in Ukraine and Russia that see the war as an opportunity to advance their careers, and to secure comfortable incomes and privileged positions for themselves by

aligning with US imperialism. They do not speak for the working class in the Ukraine or Russia or anywhere else.

This pro-war tour was promoted by a number of nominally “left” outlets, including the Democracy Now! program, and the Tempest Magazine, which is affiliated with the Democratic Socialists of America, itself a pseudo-left faction of the Democratic Party. Matveev and Budraitskis have also been published in *Jacobin*, the main outlet of the DSA.

The pseudo-left in the US, for its part, has a long tradition of lining up behind imperialist military violence, particularly in the wake of the liquidation of the USSR. This includes, in particular, their discovery of “humanitarian” reasons to support the NATO bombing of the former Yugoslavia.

Similarly, much of the pseudo-left and ex-left in the US supported the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan on the grounds of “women’s liberation,” discovered that the CIA-backed Islamist rebels in Syria were “freedom fighters,” and will doubtless line up for a future war against China on the grounds of the struggle to “liberate” Taiwan from “totalitarianism” and to “protect the Uyghurs.”

Against this background, the most remarkable aspect of this tour is that it failed to attract any significant popular support, especially on campuses. In contrast to the speakers’ bloodthirsty clamor for more weapons for Ukraine, in the broader population there are growing anti-war moods as well as skepticism about the official propaganda.

While Matveev and Perekhoda seek to cover up the criminal record of US imperialism, the past thirty years of unending war with their millions of dead have had a far-reaching effect on popular consciousness. In addition to endless wars abroad, students in the US are confronted with a society in which basic social infrastructure is collapsing in their own cities and hometowns, a climate catastrophe and ongoing pandemic are unfolding, and they are menaced by the violent resurgence of the far-right—manifesting in the epidemic of police brutality, the fascistic transformation of the Republican Party and Trump’s coup attempt on January 6, 2021.

To the extent that the purpose of the speaking tour was to undermine genuine socialist opposition to the war and bolster the official war propaganda, it can be characterized as a fiasco. Scarcely anybody was convinced who were not already convinced. Instead of shoring up support for the war, it exposed the growing gulf between the increasingly isolated pro-war middle-class pseudo-left and the broad mass of leftward-moving students, workers, and young people.



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