FREE BOGDAN SYROTIUK! FIFTEEN YEARS IN PRISON FOR CALLING ON WORKERS TO UNITE AGAINST WAR



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On August 10, a court in Pervomaisk, Ukraine, sentenced Bogdan Syrotiuk, a 27-year-old socialist and opponent of war, to 15 years in prison for writing that Russian and Ukrainian workers have no reason to kill each other, and calling on them to unite against the war. The court called that high treason, seized his property, and ordered the destruction of socialist books and leaflets taken from him.

I demand the immediate and unconditional release of Bogdan, and so should every member of this union. I raised his case on May Day this year, alongside the victimized workers Başaran Aksu and Mehmet Türkmen in Turkey and the imprisoned Maruti Suzuki workers in India, and I raise it now with far greater urgency. For a young man already denied medical care for over a year, 15 years in a hellish Ukrainian prison is effectively a death sentence.

The petition demanding Bogdan's freedom has over 6,000 signatures, and I urge every UAW member to sign it at wsws.org/freebogdan.

Consider what Bogdan was convicted of. The Ukrainian security services arrested him in April 2024 claiming he was an agent of Moscow, with no evidence whatsoever. He was sentenced for six articles, including a May Day speech titled "For the Unity of the Working Class of Russia and Ukraine!" Two expert examinations, including one by the state's own forensic institute, found nothing in his writings supporting Russian aggression. But the court set both aside and listed among his offenses the "reinterpretation of national heroes," meaning his exposure of the Ukrainian state's rehabilitation of Stepan Bandera and the Waffen-SS Galicia Division, who joined Hitler in the mass murder of Jews and Poles.

We have been told for four and a half years that Ukraine is fighting a war for democracy, but it has become a police state that jails its left-wing opponents. Zelensky's term expired in May 2024 and he has ruled by decree ever since under permanent martial law, with 11 opposition parties suspended, the largest banned outright, and strikes prohibited. A government that outlaws strikes and jails a young worker for calling for workers' unity is not defending anybody's freedom, it is defending itself against its own working class. The same frame-ups, arrests and repression are being prepared for workers here who oppose austerity, war and dictatorship.

Most workers in the US have not heard of Bogdan's case because no major Western outlet has reported his arrest, his trial or his verdict. Bogdan's case destroys the narrative this war is sold on, which is why it has been buried.

The war in Ukraine is a central battleground in the opening stages of a third world war. In February the United States and Israel attacked Iran and killed the head of its government, and in July Ukraine struck an Iranian ship in the Caspian Sea, a body of water that does not touch Ukraine. These are interconnected parts of one expanding world war.

Anyone who still believes Donald Trump opposes war should weigh the record against the speeches. He has bombed Iran, seized the president of Venezuela, talked openly of taking Greenland and Canada, and demanded a $1.5 trillion military budget for next year, the largest single-year jump since World War II. The Pentagon, now renamed the Department of War, calls it the "Arsenal of Freedom."

Every dollar spent on war is a dollar taken away from the social programs which workers rely upon, including Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security. This July the House advanced the largest Pentagon bill in American history while cutting billions from those same programs. Those trillions were produced by the working class and should be spent on our needs. They take our money for these wars, and then they take our children to fight them, sent to seize oil, resources and markets for the same corporations that are cutting our jobs and wages at home.

This war does not run past our workplaces; it runs through them. At General Dynamics Electric Boat in Groton, Connecticut, roughly 2,500 members of UAW Local 571 design the Navy's nuclear submarine fleet for a company that says it will hire 8,000 more workers this year, on its way to 33,000. UAW members also build weapons at Lockheed Martin, at General Dynamics Land Systems and at plants across the country being retooled for war.

The same hands and skill that build a submarine can instead build hospitals, housing, rail lines and water systems. The means of destruction must be converted into means of production geared to human needs, with every job guaranteed and the workers who do the work deciding what gets made.

Despite Shawn Fain's repeated posturing as an opponent of war, his real record is that of a fervent supporter of American imperialism. He has promoted our plants for years as the "Arsenal of Democracy," he was among Biden's closest labor allies while that administration waged the Ukraine war, and in Groton last year he told the submarine designers they were "designing the backbone of our national defense." The Pentagon says Arsenal of Freedom and Fain says Arsenal of Democracy; it is the same arsenal for US imperialism.

Fain's record on the genocide in Gaza is no different. At the UAW's political conference in January 2024, Fain endorsed Genocide Joe Biden while the slaughter was underway, and the delegates who chanted "Ceasefire now!" were dragged from the hall by UAW security and the Secret Service while Fain looked on, an attack I denounced at the time. When 48,000 University of California academic workers struck against the police crackdown on anti-genocide protests, the apparatus capped the strike in advance and then ordered them back to work in obedience to a court injunction. Fain and the UAW bureaucracy have said nothing in defense of Bogdan Syrotiuk or against the war in Ukraine.

An injury to one is an injury to all. The workers dying in the trenches in Ukraine and Russia are our class brothers and sisters, as are the workers killed by American and Israeli bombs in Iran and the workers of Mexico, Turkey, China and every other country.

The Ukrainian government is counting on silence, and workers around the world are already denying it. Since the verdict, workers in more than 40 countries have written directly to the court, and every one of those letters makes this case harder to bury. What has begun as a protest must be built into an anti-war movement rooted in the working class.

I am asking every member of this union to act, and nothing matters more for Bogdan's defense than this: sign the petition for his release at wsws.org/freebogdan, and send a statement to the Pervomaisk City District Court at inbox@pm.mk.court.gov.ua, copied to freebogdan@wsws.org, demanding the verdict be overturned.

Bring a resolution demanding Bogdan's freedom to your local, put it before the membership and demand that it be voted on. We don't need permission from bureaucrats to vote on a resolution.

Build a rank-and-file committee at your workplace or campus and join the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). Ballots go out on August 21 and I am asking for your vote. But rank-and-file committees that workers control, linked across industries and borders, are the only force on earth that can stop this war and win Bogdan his freedom.

Bogdan Syrotiuk is in a Ukrainian prison cell for insisting that the workers of every country share one common interest. Every committee we build proves him right. Take up his defense as your own. Free Bogdan!

JOIN THE FIGHT FOR WORKERS' POWER!

Get involved with the rank-and-file campaign in the UAW elections.

willforuawpresident.org/get-involved