

Ukraine's iron will against Putin's barbarism

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Ukraine has always loomed large in my life. My grandfather fled near-certain death from the pogroms that massacred Jews in Ukraine early in the last century, and he was able to bring most of his and my grandmother's family from western Ukraine to America. Many Jews who survived those pogroms later perished in the massacre at Babi Yar by Nazi forces and their collaborators. In 2014, I went to Ukraine on a solidarity mission with other labor leaders shortly after dozens of demonstrators were fatally shot there during a pro-democracy uprising. The uprising ousted Ukraine's Russian-backed president and ushered in a new era of freedom and democracy that the Ukrainian people have long wanted.

Like so many, I have watched with horror at Vladimir Putin's barbarism and with awe at the Ukrainian people's determination and will. Putin's forces are now killing civilians—bombing kindergartens, hospitals, and people waiting in line for food or trying to flee to safety. But instead of these Russian assaults breaking their will, the Ukrainian people have confronted them with staunch resistance, even as the carnage and suffering are mounting. This is a battle for people's lives and homes, and for freedom, self-determination and democracy.

Oleksandr Sushko, the executive director of the International Renaissance Foundation in Ukraine, [urges](#), "The voices of Ukraine's civil society sector must be protected, as we know these defenders of democracy and freedom are high on Putin's kill list."

Teachers and trade unionists are among those "defenders of democracy." As Jeffrey C. Isaac, a professor of political science at Indiana University, Bloomington, writes in the Albert Shanker Institute [blog](#):

Education is a dangerous thing for authoritarian leaders and regimes, for it nurtures free-thinking individuals capable of asking questions and seeking their own answers. For this reason, teachers have long been on the front line of the struggle for democracy.

In the U.S., teachers are facing a well-orchestrated political campaign by the far-right to limit the teaching of certain subjects and perspectives in public schools, all in the name of a "patriotism" that is manifestly hostile to a multi-ethnic and multi-racial democracy and a well-educated citizenry. ...

... As Human Rights Watch reports, teachers [in Russia] will be required to read out loud a two-page text informing students that Russia is currently undertaking "special peacekeeping operation" in Ukraine... and that the Russian government is committed to "peace" and "freedom," and "is not going to impose anything on anyone by force."

Democracy, independence and freedom are not to be taken for granted.

Countering that kind of disinformation is part of the fight for self-determination and democracy.

Amid the chaos and carnage of war, Ukrainian teachers have continued teaching their students in any way they can—in basements and subways as they seek refuge from bombings, using messaging apps like Telegram, and in refugee resettlement areas.

According to the United Nations, nearly every second since the atrocities began, a Ukrainian child has become a [refugee](#). The teachers union in Poland has turned its conference center into a home for more than 100 Ukrainian orphans and unaccompanied children and converted its offices into temporary residences for women and children. Teachers in Poland, Germany, Romania and Slovakia are preparing to integrate refugee children into their school systems,

implementing a dual-language model used to educate students fleeing the war in Syria.

The AFT is raising funds to help resettle teachers and children displaced by the war in Ukraine. The generosity of our members, many of whom are not paid a living wage, has been tremendous. Every cent we raise will go directly to these refugee efforts. In addition, many AFT pension trustees are divesting pension funds from Russian investments.

Much of the world is in turmoil—from COVID-19, to climate catastrophes, to humanitarian crises in Afghanistan, Central America, Haiti, South Sudan, Yemen and elsewhere. As Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said in his address to the U.S. Congress last week, we need new alliances to stop conflicts and keep peace. World leaders must call for an end to hostilities in Ukraine and other conflict zones, and they must work both to stabilize countries so citizens are not forced to flee and to resettle refugees whose only recourse is to leave their homes.

I think many Americans believe that the survival of our democracy is a given. But today democracy is imperiled not only in places like Ukraine, but by forces here that are working to limit voting rights, spread disinformation, manipulate the outcome of elections and prevent the peaceful transfer of power after legitimate elections. Zelenskyy reminded us that "democracy, independence and freedom" are the foundation of the United States and are not to be taken for granted. Defending democracy is not something we can leave to others, as Ukraine's freedom fighters are showing us.



Photo: Michelle Ringuette

Weingarten in Kyiv's Maidan Square in March 2014, after pro-democracy demonstrators were killed there.

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