Stop the War's Ukraine Betrayal: When 'Anti-Imperialism' Becomes Apologetics for Empire

The contradiction is not subtle. It screams from every Stop the War Coalition meeting, every leaflet, every carefully calibrated press release. When Israel bombards Gaza, the StWC mobilises hundreds of thousands, demands comprehensive sanctions, calls for arms embargoes, and platforms the Palestinian Ambassador as the authentic voice of his people's resistance. When Russia bombards Ukraine, the same Coalition organises static demonstrations of a few hundred, opposes sanctions as 'collective punishment,' demands an end to arms supplies, and platforms a marginal pacifist representing perhaps a dozen Ukrainians as the authentic voice of their people's desire for surrender.

This is not inconsistency. It is consistency of a particularly cynical kind.

The Political Roots of the Betrayal

Understanding the StWC's position requires understanding its organisational DNA. The Coalition is not a pacifist organisation in any meaningful sense. It emerged in 2001 as a political vehicle jointly controlled by the Socialist Workers Party and the Communist Party of Britain, with the strategic orientation shaped by figures like Lindsey German, Andrew Murray, and John Rees. Its founding premise was straightforward: the primary threat to world peace is American

imperialism and its British junior partner. All other questions are subordinate to this axiom.

The Coalition's intellectual bankruptcy finds its clearest contemporary expression in figures like Chris Bambery, who served as the SWP's national organiser for years before departing. Writing in Counterfire in August 2025, Bambery argued that 'US-Russia peace talks would be a good plan' and dismissed those who support Ukrainian victory as believing in a 'pipedream.' He accused critics of wanting 'war to the last Ukrainian': a Kremlin talking point deployed without irony. Most revealing was his insistence that 'the war in Ukraine did not begin with Putin's criminal invasion' but with 'highly contested elections' in 2013. The provocation narrative in its purest form.

And the practical conclusion of this 'realism'? That the Ukrainian people should accept dismemberment because Chris Bambery has decided resistance is futile. That Putin should be brought 'in from the cold' while Ukrainian cities burn. This is not anti-imperialism. It is capitulation dressed in radical vocabulary.

The problem, of course, is that this axiom produces grotesque results when applied mechanically to every conflict. If the main enemy is always at home, then every conflict involving Western powers must be opposed from the Western side regardless of who is dying, who is conquering, who is being colonised. The Syrian revolutionaries crushed between Assad's barrel bombs and Russian airstrikes? Dismissed as NATO proxies. The Ukrainians resisting annexation? Cannon fodder for Washington's geopolitical games.

No, worse than dismissed. Actively denied the means of self-defence.

What ‘Stop the War’ Actually Means

The StWC’s 2023 AGM resolution states it plainly: opposition to ‘the Russian invasion of February 2022’ coupled with opposition to ‘the reckless policy of expanding NATO and US hegemony which preceded and to an extent provoked it.’ Notice the grammatical structure. The invasion gets three words of condemnation. NATO provocation gets an entire explanatory clause. The framing distributes culpability, transforming a war of colonial aggression into a shared responsibility, a tragedy with fault on all sides.

And what follows from this framing? The Coalition opposes arms transfers to Ukraine, arguing that weapons merely ‘protract’ the conflict. It opposes sanctions on Russia, arguing they constitute ‘collective punishment’ of ordinary Russians and fuel the cost-of-living crisis at home. It demands an immediate ceasefire: a robber’s peace that freezes Russian troops in occupied territory, rewards annexation, and broadcasts to every aspiring imperial aggressor that conquest works if you can outlast Western attention spans.

By opposing both military aid and economic sanctions, the StWC opposes every coercive measure available to pressure Russia. All that remains is ‘diplomacy,’ by which they mean Ukrainian capitulation dressed in the language of peace. Gilbert Achcar’s analysis in International Viewpoint demonstrates precisely how this works: Trump and Putin’s bilateral framework carves Ukraine up for their own imperialist interests, demanding significant portions of Ukrainian territory and resources without offering genuine security guarantees. The principle of ‘Nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine’ means nothing to those who have already decided that Ukrainian resistance is a pipedream.

When Solidarity Becomes Selective

The contrast with Gaza could not be starker. Here the StWC deploys every tool it refuses Ukraine. Comprehensive sanctions? Essential. Arms embargo? Immediate. Economic isolation? The only non-violent mechanism to force compliance with international law. The ‘collective punishment’ argument deployed against Russian sanctions vanishes entirely. The concern about prolonging conflict through material support evaporates.

The StWC claims it cannot mobilise for Ukraine because the British public won’t march against Russian aggression. And yet: 400,000 people marched against Iraq in 2003. 800,000 have marched for Gaza since October 2023. The infrastructure is there: local groups, trade union affiliates, faith community liaisons. The capacity is proven. The Coalition’s choice is not incapacity but refusal. *And the Ukrainian trade unionists asking for solidarity? They receive invitations to send video messages that are never played.*

The defenders of this position have their arguments. They will tell you that sanctions on Russia serve inter-imperialist rivalry while BDS against Israel represents grassroots demand from the oppressed. They will tell you that arming Ukraine strengthens NATO while disarming Israel weakens settler colonialism. But notice what these arguments share: they reduce every question to the relationship between the conflict and American power. Ukrainian agency disappears. The forty million people fighting for national survival become merely instruments in a great power chess game.

Who Speaks for Ukraine?

Perhaps nothing reveals the bankruptcy of the StWC's position more clearly than its choice of Ukrainian voices. The Coalition claims to amplify the voices of victims. In practice, it exercises rigorous curation.

For Palestine, the StWC platforms Husam Zomlot, the Palestinian Ambassador to the UK, a figure representing the official national movement and articulating robust support for resistance. For Ukraine, the Coalition elevates Yurii Sheliazhenko, executive secretary of something called the Ukrainian Pacifist Movement. Sheliazhenko argues that Ukrainians should refuse to fight, that 'both sides' share blame for the violence. Investigative reports suggest his movement may consist of a handful of active members. He faces legal trouble in Ukraine for his stance, which the StWC frames as evidence of Zelensky's authoritarianism rather than as evidence that he represents approximately nobody.

This false pacifism is egocentric at its core, as the Fourth International's 2023 World Congress resolution noted: it prioritises opposing one's own national government over genuine solidarity with the Ukrainian people. Worse, it refuses to recognise the imperialist character of Putin's war, preferring instead to present it as a defensive response to NATO expansion. Sheliazhenko is its perfect avatar: a figure who tells Ukrainians to stop fighting while offering nothing that might actually stop Russian shells. No wonder Ukrainian and Russian socialists themselves reject this framing. They understand what the Western 'peace' left cannot bring itself to say: approving arms transfers to Ukraine is not warmongering. It is elementary solidarity.

Meanwhile, the Coalition has refused to platform representatives from the Federation of Trade Unions of Ukraine or the Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Ukraine. Both

support the war effort. Both have called for international arms supplies. Both represent the organised working class of Ukraine, the social force that any socialist movement should prioritise. But their message is inconvenient, so they remain unheard at StWC events.

Apply the same standard to Palestine. If the StWC treated Gaza as it treats Ukraine, it would search for Palestinian pacifists who condemn Hamas and call for immediate surrender to stop the bombing. It would platform them as the authentic voice of the Palestinian people. It would dismiss the mainstream national movement as proxies for regional powers. The absurdity is obvious.

The Labour Movement Fractures

The StWC's Ukraine position has produced a significant split in the British trade union movement. Unlike Iraq or Gaza, where unions were generally united, Ukraine has created genuine contestation.

The GMB, ASLEF, and NUM have passed motions supporting arms for Ukraine and affiliating with the Ukraine Solidarity Campaign. They view the war as a fight against fascism and support the right of self-defence. In 2024, the University and College Union congress voted to overturn a previous StWC-aligned position, backing Ukrainian resistance instead. This is significant. The StWC's influence on Ukraine is waning within organised labour even as its influence on Gaza remains hegemonic.

The debates at TUC congress have been fierce. Delegates accuse the leadership of applying double standards: supporting arms for Ukraine while demanding an embargo for Israel, or opposing arms for Ukraine while supporting sanctions on Israel. And the TUC leadership's response to these contradictions? Procedural manoeuvres to avoid votes. The contradiction cannot be

resolved because it is structural. It flows from a framework that categorises conflicts by their relationship to Washington rather than by the rights of the peoples involved.

What Genuine Internationalism Requires

The Fourth International has maintained a different position. We support Ukraine's right to self-determination and its material capacity to exercise that right, including through weapons supplies. Not because we endorse NATO's geopolitical strategies, but because we recognise that national liberation struggles do not wait for ideologically pure sponsors. The Ukrainian people have the right to defend themselves with whatever weapons are available.

This does not mean uncritical support for the Zelensky government. Ukrainian workers, trade unionists, feminists, and social movements are fighting on two fronts: against Russian invasion and against their own government's neoliberal policies. Our solidarity must support their independent organising, not subordinate them to either Russian imperialism or Western geopolitical interests.

We reject the campist logic that treats Russia as part of an 'anti-imperialist' bloc merely because it opposes the United States. Putin's vision of 'multipolarity' is not a progressive alternative but one where only a limited number of large states will have any voice in the international arena: competing capitalist authoritarianisms carving up spheres of influence. This reasoning led the StWC to silence over Assad's barrel bombs. It leads them now to effective solidarity with Putin's colonial war. The enemy of my enemy is not my friend when that enemy is crushing another people under tanks.

Ernest Mandel emphasised throughout his work that socialist

internationalism means supporting the material interests of workers and oppressed peoples everywhere, not aligning with lesser imperial powers against greater ones. The StWC has abandoned this tradition. It has become, in practice, an organisation that mobilises against Western-backed violence while demobilising against violence that Washington opposes.

The Gatekeepers

The Stop the War Coalition remains the gatekeeper of mass anti-war protest in Britain. It has the infrastructure, the union affiliations, the historical credibility from 2003. But its gatekeeping is highly selective. The gates open wide for those fighting US allies. They remain firmly shut for those fighting US rivals.

This is not anti-imperialism. It is campism dressed in anti-imperialist clothing. It measures every struggle not by the rights of the peoples involved but by its relationship to American hegemony. And in Ukraine, that measurement has led to a position functionally indistinguishable from calling for Ukrainian defeat.

Chris Bambery offers the quiet part out loud: bilateral US-Russia negotiations, Ukrainian 'realism' about territorial losses, an end to the 'pipedream' of victory, bringing Putin 'in from the cold.' He even celebrates Trump's nuclear diplomacy while Ukrainian cities burn. The StWC wraps the same message in more careful language, but the destination is identical. A robber's peace. Ukrainian dismemberment. And the message to every future aggressor that the Western left will provide ideological cover for conquest, so long as the conqueror is not aligned with Washington.

The Ukrainian working class deserves better from the British left. So do the Russian anti-war activists facing prison for opposing Putin's war. So do all of us who believe that

international solidarity means something more than tactical positioning against Washington.

The StWC had a choice. It chose wrong. The task now falls to others to build the genuine internationalist movement that both Ukraine and Palestine deserve.

Duncan Chapel, Red Mole Substack, 8 December 2025