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## Akhmetov and other oligarchs seek role as Ukraine's policemen

By Chris Marsden

17 May 2014

The *New York Times* has led efforts to portray the setting up of patrols employing “steelworkers” and “miners” in the eastern Ukrainian city of Mariupol as proof of a rising wave of opposition to all those presently engaged in conflict with the Kiev regime and its thugs.

In its front-page lead article Friday, the *Times* described the move as “a body blow,” asserting that “the pro-Russian protesters have melted away, as has any sign of the Donetsk People’s Republic or its representatives.”

The *Times* claimed that by late Thursday, “miners and steelworkers had deployed in at least five cities, including the regional capital, Donetsk.” But the *Wall Street Journal* reported patrols being mounted in only “four smaller towns” where the steel and mining oligarch Rinat Akhmetov’s company owns facilities, and cited a spokesman stating that “it wasn’t clear yet whether similar patrols could be introduced in Donetsk....”

Once again, the *New York Times* —the so-called “newspaper of record”—has distinguished itself only as a useful conduit for the crudest propaganda in the service of US imperialism.

In reality, the launching of the patrols has nothing to do with a movement in the working class. Along with their promotion by the *Times* and other sources, the patrols are part of a concerted effort by the United States and Germany to stifle resistance to Kiev's coup regime and ensure that presidential elections planned for May 25 go ahead. To this end, the Western powers are seeking to use the wealth and influence of Ukraine's oligarchs to bring things under control.

The various reports citing a number of patrols, made up of six workers and two police officers, as having taken control of Mariupol all acknowledge that those involved are employees of Akhmetov, Ukraine's richest man, with a fortune estimated at \$11.8 billion.

It is Akhmetov who is behind the patrols, and there is no doubt that he acted in consultation with the Western powers. In preparation for the "round table" talks now underway in Kiev on Ukraine's future, hosted by the OSCE (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe), German foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier met Tuesday with Akhmetov following separate talks with acting prime minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk and acting president Oleksandr Turchynov.

To fulfil his chosen role, Akhmetov has taken great pains not to appear to be simply backing Kiev, calling, in particular, for the Ukrainian army to leave the area and rely on his "volunteers" to restore order. In a statement issued Wednesday, he declared himself in favour of greater regional autonomy, while opposing separatism and calls to join the Russian Federation.

Akhmetov's firms Metinvest and DTEK together employ 280,000 people in eastern Ukraine. Yuri Zinchenko, the chief executive of Ilych Steel, an Akhmetov operation in Mariupol, is reported as leading the patrols in the city. Zinchenko said, "There's no family in Mariupol that's not connected to the steel industry."

His words reinforce a videotaped statement by Akhmetov warning against the formation of a Donetsk People's Republic, as proposed in a separatist referendum passed by a wide margin last Sunday. Akhmetov declared: "The structure of our economy is coal, industry, metallurgy, energy, machine works, chemicals and agriculture and all the enterprises tied to these sectors...[it] will come under huge sanctions, we will not sell our products, cannot produce. This means the stopping of factories, this means unemployment, this means poverty."

There is ground to suspect that Russian president Vladimir Putin supports Akhmetov's attempt to stabilise the region. For the past week, Moscow has made clear that it wants a compromise with the US and Europe involving the type of regional autonomy offered in the Kiev talks, and is not interested in further annexations of Ukrainian territory. Moscow fears a radicalisation of large sections of Ukrainian workers seeking to oppose the Kiev regime, which was installed last February in a US- and German-backed putsch spearheaded by fascist forces in the Right Sector militia and Svoboda Party.

Putin urged pro-Russian groups in Donetsk and Lugansk to delay their independence referendums, held May 11, and called the May 25 presidential elections a “step in the right direction.” On May 12, *Russia Today* ran a piece praising Akhmetov’s Metinvest for issuing “a call for employees in the Donetsk region to become ‘volunteer warriors’ and protect local citizens against Kiev anti-terrorist operations”—an entirely opposed version of events to those circulating in the Western media.

Russia’s *RT* also cited opposition from Kiev to Akhmetov. It reported Sergey Pashinsky, acting head of the president’s administration, as saying: “In fact, Akhmetov’s statement is a demand to Ukraine to stop the anti-terroristic operation and call off our forces. This call will not just fail to fix the situation in the Donetsk region, but also spread this infection across Ukraine.”

Akhmetov’s May 11 statement appealed for the central government “to stop the use of heavy weapons and large-scale combat activities in Donbas cities. We believe the Ukraine military must withdraw from Donbas cities.... The government can and must hear the voice of Donbas residents. Further military operations will destroy our trust in the regime.”

If there is disagreement between Kiev on one side and Washington and Berlin on the other over Akhmetov’s latest initiative, it is in no small measure due to the belief among the Western powers that the interim government has become dangerously reliant militarily on far-right forces. More than merely politically embarrassing, their use has deepened popular opposition to the coup regime.

The *Guardian* on Thursday reported on the formation of volunteer units made up largely of Svoboda and Right Sector activists. It noted that their deployment in the east “has resulted in bloodshed on a number of occasions so far,” and added, “These incidents, already awful enough, are often amplified and distorted by Russian media, leading to even more anger among the crowds in what is becoming a downward spiral of hatred and violence.”

Right Sector leader Dmitry Yarosh last month moved his headquarters from Kiev to Dnepropetrovsk, near the east. He said of his 800 armed operatives in the area, “We coordinate all of our actions with the leadership of the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Security Service of Ukraine.”

Yesterday, US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Victoria Nuland issued a face-saving denial in response to the citation by Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov of “reports about the secret visit of the Right Sector coordinator (Andriy) Artyomenko to Washington” to meet with her.

If Akhmetov is playing the role of “soft cop” in the east, for his own reasons, other oligarchs are pursuing a more nakedly aggressive campaign on behalf of Kiev.

Ihor Kolomoisky, who was appointed governor of Dnepropetrovsk, is the head of the Donbas battalion, a militia group he funds that claims to have retaken control of Velyka Novosilka, about 30 miles southwest of Donetsk, and to be preparing to move on the regional capital. Kolomoisky has offered a \$10,000 bounty for every pro-Russian militia leader captured.