

Working undercover on Ukraine's deadly building sites

Tuesday 2 July 2019, by [ARUNYAN Oleksiy](#) (Date first published: 18 June 2019).

Every year, dozens of workers die on Ukraine's construction sites due to poor safety procedures. To find out more, I got a job at one of them.

A snowy evening in January. A tower crane on Kyiv's left bank lifts a steel frame and places it atop an unfinished apartment block. Twenty two stories up, Viktor, a steel fixer who'd come to the city for work, brings the load in. According to witnesses, this is what happened next: Viktor scrambled up the side of the three-metre high frame and unfastened the hooks connecting it to the crane. When Viktor was sliding back down, he slipped and fell into the void below. He died of injuries sustained in the fall.

The accident took place on 14 January 2019, at the new Seven housing complex in the Ukrainian capital. Three days later, another construction worker lost his life in a deadly accident at this site: a work team was finishing up and heading home when a screw flew off a drill machine, killing a 33-year-old construction worker.

Sadly, these incidents aren't unprecedented for Ukraine. According to [official statistics](#), there's roughly 60 fatalities and 200 dangerous accidents a year on the country's construction sites.

To understand why Ukrainian construction workers are dying, I decided to take a look at the situation from the inside - and get a job as a day labourer at the Seven housing complex.

"We're not qualified to do anything, but we do everything"

The Seven construction site is nestled among the Osokorki housing district on Kyiv's left bank. Two 24-storey apartment blocks at the Seven development are now finished. The remaining four are still being built.

The site is surrounded by highways and a forest of high-rise buildings. A thin line of construction workers, their work clothes in their backpacks, leads to the entrance.

"Good morning," I ask the security guard. "I'm looking for extra work, do you need any people for odd jobs?"

He shakes his head.

"I've been told to get rid of anyone who comes asking," the guard says, and points towards the exit.

I don't give up.

"Maybe you could ask the foreman anyway?"

"You've got to understand, it's not just one company working here, there's loads," the security guard

explains kindly. "But wait here, perhaps Yukhymovych needs some people."

A few minutes later, a grey-haired man in oil-stained overalls - Yuhymovych - calls me over. Red-faced and worn, he takes me over to management's hut. I ask once again about work.

"We only need your passport number and that's it, you'll get paid. More than half of the people here work like this. Everything will be fine, don't worry"

The head of construction - a big bearded man who is well turned out - says he's happy to take me on (450-500 hryvnya, or £12-£15 for a ten-hour shift), but that I'll only be paid six weeks later. I hesitate for the sake of my cover, but then hand over my passport to get the papers drawn up. Behind another desk, a foreman draws up a civil contract. I try to clarify why they aren't drawing up an employment contract.

"We don't need your military service card, nothing," the foreman tries to get me on side. "We only need your passport number and that's it, you'll get paid. More than half of the people here work like this. Everything will be fine, don't worry."

I'm handed a safety helmet, and then the foreman introduces me to my new workmates, two construction workers who've just come into the hut. The foreman is in no rush to finish the contract, and he promises to return my passport at lunch. I exit the hut and head over to my team's work station.

"There's five of us handymen on the site, we're all live in the same neighbourhood back home. We're not qualified to do anything, but we do everything," this is how one of my workmates describes the work we're about to do.

This is Serhiy, 47. He's known by the nickname "Teacher" on site. Before coming here, Serhiy taught history in a village school. But he had to change his job because of low wages.

My second workmate, Ihor, looks around 20. He's studying in Sumy, in northeast Ukraine, and has been working at the Seven site for two years.

I decide not to inform my colleagues about my real reason for being here.

Standing in the stuffy and ramshackle hut, I get changed into my work clothes - Teacher gives me a dirty hi-vis jacket, Yuhymovych hands over some new gloves, and we're off. The rules state that they should have read me safety instructions before starting, but it seems that nobody gave it a second thought.

"In case anything happens, no one knows you"

Our first task is to make safety barriers out of wooden boards for the second floor of the apartment block - these are to prevent people from going over the side of the unfinished building.

Even on the second floor, it's quite scary putting these fences together near the edge of the building. I try to stay far away from the drop while working, but Teacher and Ihor aren't afraid of heights, it seems. They're working only a few centimetres away from the edge. Two storeys below there's a pile of broken bricks and metal rods.

We gradually begin to run out of boards, and Ihor goes to get more. He leaves his helmet behind.

"Hey, have you won the lottery? Have you got a spare 100 hryvnya?" Teacher shouts after him and

throws his helmet down. Workers here can be fined for removing their helmets while on site. According to Serhiy, if the site manager catches you without a helmet, he'll remove 100 hryvnya from your wages.

That said, it's hard to call my new colleagues workers. Teacher constantly calls the team off for a smoke break. As handymen, we're paid by the hour, not the volume of work - if the foreman isn't around, no one makes any particular effort. During our breaks, Ihor gets out his smartphone and plays brain training games with Teacher.

Indeed, the quality of work leaves much to be desired. At several stations, the fences we set up barely hold together, and are unlikely to prevent anyone from going over the side.

"Is it true that someone recently fell to their death here?" I ask about Viktor, the steel fixer who died in January, during another smoke break.

"You mean the guy from Zhytomyr region? He fell into that pit over there," says Teacher, pointing at the drop a few metres away from us.

"And what, did they at least give the family some money?"

"The company gave them 100,000 hryvnya [£2,795], but it won't return their son," sighs Teacher. "You see how we work here. You're on a civil contract too. If something happens, nobody knows you. They'll chuck your body outside the gates and say that's how they found you."

At lunch, I go over to the management container to speak to the foreman. He gives me back my passport, but refuses to hand over a copy of the work contract. He promises to make me a photocopy later.

As a rule, the guys on my team work for a month without days off or holiday and then go home for a few days to relax, see their families and bring back money

Meanwhile, my team has set about making lunch. Our menu consists of pasta, a slightly burnt fried egg and mayonnaise sandwiches. Another three workers join in. They all look around the same age as Ihor, about 20 or so. They all put in for lunch and make it on an electric stove in the team's hut.

The handymen also live together, in a single room in a workers' dormitory. The employer allocates accommodation, and workers pay 20 hryvnya a day for a bed. As a rule, the guys on my team work for a month without days off or holiday and then go home for a few days to relax, see their families and bring back money.

Almost all workers at the Seven development are from Sumy and Zhytomyr regions. Back home, wages are three or four times less than Kyiv, and this forces people to travel to the capital for work. Here, these workers will agree to employment conditions that locals wouldn't touch. I didn't meet a single Kyiv resident on the day I worked, not counting the managers.

"Didn't they give you a copy of your contract either?" I ask my colleagues over lunch. They all shake their heads.

"Why do you need it?" Teacher asks.

"But you could work a bunch of shifts and then they'll say they don't know you, and won't pay you," I feign concern.

“That never happens,” Serhiy tries to calm me down. “Yes, at other sites, they’ll mess you about. Here they pay you on time, no delays, between the first and the tenth of the month. And if they trust you, they’ll give you an advance.”

After lunch we unload some styrofoam from a truck and then go back to putting together safety fences. The closer it comes to clocking off, the slower we work. As it gets to evening, we spend most of our time hanging around and hiding from the foremen in the building. I continue asking about working conditions, and how often accidents happen.

“Our guys have never had anything happen, they’re doing fine,” Teacher responds. “Maybe they bashed their fingers a few times with a hammer, that’s it. My eye once swelled up after some sand got into it, I had to go to hospital to get it cleaned. But the most dangerous job is this, putting up these barriers on the edge of the building.”

Teacher gets a text message from other workers saying that management has now left the site. This means that we can stop work without waiting for the official clocking off.

We change our clothes in the hut and I say goodbye to my colleagues. Teacher and Ihor aren’t in any rush to leave. They are waiting for the rest of the handymen, who are going to wash in the Dnipro river about 300 metres away. There’s no showers in the dormitory, and after work it’s impossible to get to the bathroom.

“No one cares”

“It’s got a bit better at the Seven housing complex now,” says Alexander Zakrevsky, a committee member of the Crane Workers Trade Union. “Before the accidents happened, there were no inspections, no helmets, no hi-vis, no lighting, no safety barriers. No one cared about safety.”

We’re sat at a small cafe on the road into Kyiv’s Troeshchyna housing district. A dozen or so metres away from us, a new market is being built, and this is where Alexander is currently working as a crane operator. Zakrevsky used to work at the Seven complex, but, according to him, he was “asked to leave because he was too demanding.”

Zakrevsky is sure that the deaths earlier this year at the Seven complex could have been avoided if basic safety procedures had been observed. According to the crane operator, there was no good lighting on top of the apartment block where the steelworker fell in January. But the most important thing is that there were no cables for safety harnesses. If Viktor, the steelworker, had been hooked up to a safety line, then he would not have fallen.

“I constantly made comments to the site manager and foreman, I was also responsible for safety equipment,” Zakrevsky tells me. “But they would say the same thing over and over again to me: leave us alone, what’s your f***ing problem. It gets dark in the winter, and I just couldn’t see what was happening down below. I told the foreman: at least give the builders some hi-vis vests and helmets so I can see them. And he says once again: leave me alone and don’t try so ***ing hard.”

A labour inspection was supposed to visit the Seven construction site the day after the steelworker’s fall in January. According to Zakrevsky, management prepared the site before the inspectors arrived – new safety barriers and other equipment were set up. The crane operator says that the site foreman and security guard asked him to leave the site while the inspectors were there, otherwise he could have said “something out of place”.

At the time, companies involved in the Seven housing development did not make public statements about the deaths of contractors at the construction site. I contacted them for their position and

comment on statements by Alexander Zakrevsky on violations of safety procedures. The Monolit Budservis company, which is a general subcontractor on the Seven development, refused to comment, citing that the investigation into the workers' deaths had not yet been completed. The developer, Stolitsa Group, which is responsible for property sales, did not respond to my request for comment.

Zakrevsky claims that the negligent attitudes towards safety procedures he described are typical not only for the Seven housing development, but the majority of Kyiv construction sites.

Official statistics show that between January and May 2019, 25 workers died in Ukraine's construction industry - this is twice more than the same period in 2018

A few weeks after the two construction workers died in January, Zakrevsky received a call from a friend, asking him to come in for a crane operator at another apartment complex under construction in the city, the gal property development. The day before, a steel fixer had [fallen](#) 16 stories. The site managers were preparing for the labour inspection, and they needed a new crane operator - the previous operator had not been officially employed.

When Zakrevsky climbed up the crane at the Baggoutovskiyi site, he saw the same safety violations on top of the unfinished apartment block that he'd reported at the Seven development. There was no lighting, safety barriers, safety lines for harnesses. According to the crane operator, this is why the steelworker died.

Official statistics show that between January and May 2019, 25 workers died in Ukraine's construction industry - this is twice more than the same period in 2018.

Ukrainian construction workers are ranked second in terms of accident rates in the country - only [transport workers](#) are ranked ahead of them in terms of workplace risks. In 2018, out of 409 workplace deaths, 57 were construction workers. A quarter of these deaths were related to falls, the most widespread cause of death on construction sites.

To see how people work on top of apartment buildings in the city, I decide to observe them from a crane - and negotiate with a friendly crane operator to take me up as a trainee.

The view from up high

"Are you studying at the training college?" a builder asks me in the hut where the shift gathers before work.

"Pretty much," I answer, not knowing where people study to become crane operators

He notices my unease.

"Is it your first time on a crane?"

"Yes."

"The main thing is: don't look down when you're going up, look at the ladder in front of you."

The crane I'm about to climb up is 100 metres high, and is set up at an apartment development in an outer Kyiv suburb. Apart from the 25th floor, most of the block is finished and has had its facade fitted.

To get to the operator's cabin, you need to climb up a series of ten-metre ladders without any safety cage, though there's a small landing at every interval. I climb up with crane operator Maksym (name changed), who's been in the job since 2003. He climbs up with ease while I dawdle on every step. At the first landing I'm gripped by vertigo, my head starts spinning and I think about heading back.

"Let's go! There's a lot to see up there, especially in the neighbour's windows," Maksym tries to cheer me up. "Many people don't put their blinds down."

The conversation distracts me from the fall below and I continue climbing - half an hour later and we're in the operator's cabin. From above, the city looks like a scale model.

Maksym takes off his shoes (it's a 12-hour shift), sits down and starts work. Pulling on the levers, he lifts up a metal container filled with steel fittings. But my guide is nervous, this load isn't fixed properly. Safety procedures state that steel rods can't be transported in self-made containers. Steel rods should be of the same length and tightly bound by wire, otherwise they can come loose and injure or even kill someone.

Maksym tells me about another safety violation on the site - the fact that a welder is hooking up the load below, and a steelworker is bringing it in on top of the building. According to safety procedures, only a rigger should do this - someone who is specially trained to load and unload cranes. If the load suddenly spills and hurts or kills someone below, then Maksym will be held responsible. This is why he does not have the right to transport loads which haven't been hooked up by someone qualified - but still, he is forced to ignore this procedure.

"Without a crane operator, you can't build anything," Maksym tells me, angrily. "But they put us in a bad position: you've got someone who can rig, they say, so shut up and work. But if I stopped lifting now, they'd ring the mechanic and he'd find someone else for the job. And I'd have to look for substitute work. And the mechanic will say: all the sites are the same, you won't find anything better than this, this is how everyone works."

The container filled with steel slowly descends onto the top of the unfinished block, where builders are fitting the frame of the last floor. I can see all the safety violations that Oleksandr Zakrevskyi has told me about: there's no safety barriers installed, many of the guys are working without helmets.

Workers are at risk not only of falling off the top of the building, but down inside it - via the internal shafts and spaces that come out at the top. According to Maksym, these holes should be covered in a safety net, but nobody's installed one. I ask the crane operator why these safety procedures aren't being followed.

Why are basic safety procedures still being ignored en masse on Ukraine's construction sites?

"Hell knows. Either no one has time or they think this is OK," Maksym says after pausing for thought. "They have a foreman. He should say to them: lads, until you put the safety barriers up, there'll be no concrete. For them, concrete is something sacred. Their wages depend on their workrate, after all. But as it turns out, the foreman doesn't care."

Having found out everything I wanted, I leave Maksym at work and head back down to earth. It turns out going down is just as terrifying as going up - the ladders seem to go on forever.

Inspections that favour employers

A labour safety unit should ensure that procedures are followed at building sites - and that the

violations I saw from above don't happen. Ukrainian law states that it is the employer's responsibility to set this unit up. The employer should also issue its workers with safety equipment, a medical examination and safety instruction.

The Ukrainian State Labour Service (Derzhpratsi) monitors the observance of these rules. It's the only state institution in the country that has the authority to inspect safety procedures at construction sites and factories.

According to the service, in 2018, labour inspectors carried out 1,134 planned workplace inspections and 848 unplanned inspections. On the basis of these inspections, 1,140 employees at building firms were charged with violations. The total sum of these fines comes to 500,000 hryvnya (£14,890).

But why are basic safety procedures still being ignored en masse on Ukraine's construction sites? Roman Cherneha, head of the State Labour Service, states that it's not the fault of his agency. He says that labour inspectors don't have the authority to really ensure the letter of the law is followed on construction sites.

According to the law, the State Labour Service draws up a yearly plan of inspections and publishes it online. This means that employers know in advance when to expect an inspection, and sort out any violations ahead of their visit.

"There's a whole range of workplaces that we simply cannot cover," Cherneha complains. "They see that they're not on the list and start cutting corners to increase the profit margin at that enterprise. Accordingly, they don't buy new equipment or carry out safety trainings. It doesn't cost a lot to train an employee, but it does cost money."

Labour service inspectors don't have the right to carry out unplanned workplace visits. The law states that unplanned visits are only carried out if an employee makes a complaint or following an accident. Even if an inspector is walking along the street and notices some glaring safety violations at a construction site, they can't do anything about it.

Cherneha also believes that accident rates in construction are linked to the small level of fines that employers have to pay for violations - between 340 and 680 hryvnya (£10-£20). For a more effective campaign against workplace accidents, Cherneha believes, the fines need to be raised, and the way in which unplanned inspections are carried out - simplified. He says that his agency has already drawn up draft legislation that reflects International Labour Organisation conventions. But Cherneha is concerned that it will be difficult to convince the Ukrainian parliament to vote for these changes.

"Unplanned visits make many businesspeople unhappy," Cherneha says, "and then they start contacting MPs and telling them that this is some kind of pressure on business."

Cherneha's concerns about the chances of passing new legislation aren't unfounded. Labour inspection legislation is currently going in favour of business. On 14 May, a Kyiv court [ruled](#) in a case brought by Ukraine's Entrepreneurs Union revoking a Cabinet of Ministers decree on fighting informal employment. This decree simplified the process of carrying out unplanned inspections in cases where the State Labour Service suspected an employer of using informal labour, but now it's become more difficult.

Who is responsible?

When someone dies at a construction site or another industrial workplace in Ukraine, the employer is obliged to inform the State Labour Service, which then forms a commission to investigate what

happened. This commission includes representatives of the Social Insurance Fund, employer and trade union (if the victim was a member).

The commission has to establish who is responsible for the accident in question. If the death is connected to the individual's work, the victim's relatives are allocated compensation via the Social Insurance Fund. The employer doesn't cover this compensation, even if the company is declared responsible - though it can face criminal liability.

According to figures issued by the Construction Workers Union of Ukraine, only six out of ten families of workers who die at work receive compensation payments. Often, relatives of victims are left without compensation because the individual was not officially employed, says Galina Bondarchuk, a union labour inspector. Bondarchuk is a member of the labour investigation commission for the Kyiv region.

"I had a case in Boryspil, a big firm is building a series of apartment blocks there," Bondarchuk tells me. "A guy fell from the twelfth floor. The case got to the investigation stage, and we wanted to confiscate the company's safety monitoring journals, but they simply didn't keep any. For them, the guy didn't exist on paper at all, he wasn't counted, and he wasn't paid. In this kind of situation, it's simply impossible to prove that he worked for the company or that he fell from the twelfth floor."

When a person who dies at work is not officially employed, Bondarchuk says, there are situations when the body is removed from the workplace and left outside the site. Bondarchuk says there also cases where management lies to the police, claiming the dead person did not work for them and managed to get onto the site by accident.

If the victim did in fact work for the employer then, Bondarchuk tells me she has come across cases when other employees put a helmet and hi-vis jacket on the body. The investigation commission can visit the accident site several days later, and that period is enough for safety barriers and other equipment to be set up. This means that it can look as if the victim died due to their own negligence.

In cases where the sides do not agree about who is responsible for a workplace death, Bondarchuk says that the investigation commission regularly takes the side of the employer. She claims that Ukraine's Social Insurance Fund tries to save money on compensation payments and always supports conclusions that do not link a workplace death to the employer. Sometimes, Bondarchuk claims, employees of the State Labour Service help employers avoid responsibility for workplace deaths. Public officials have, in the past, tried to convince her to sign falsified reports that victims did not work at this or that construction site.

"I tell them: guys, we need to work together, in tandem!" says Bondarchuk. "I understand that you've been paid somewhere, most likely. But it's in both our interest to protect working people!"

More than four months on since the two deaths at the Seven property development in January, the investigation commission has still not come to any decision about what happened and who is responsible. The State Labour Service does not explain why the investigation is taking so long. When they complete their report, its results should be handed over to the police, which has opened two criminal investigations. When I contacted the Kyiv Prosecutor's Office, I was told that no one has been declared a suspect in either of these cases.

So far, no one has answered for the deaths of these two workers - and it's possible that no one will. Meanwhile, everyday hundreds of people - who have left families behind in Ukraine's regions - go to work at the Seven housing development and dozens of other construction sites in Kyiv. Whether these workers come home alive (and well) is often out of their hands.

After publication, Stolitsa Group, which is selling apartments at the Seven housing complex, responded to openDemocracy's information request. Stolitsa Group stated that it does not bear responsibility for safety at this site, and that it is involved in property sales, rather than investment in the Seven complex. According to the company, Monopolit Budservis, the general contractor, is fully responsible for construction, and only the investor, Knyazhyi zaton, has the right to inspect safety procedures. According to Stolitsa Group, the investor is currently conducting its own inspection of the construction workers' deaths.

We initially stated that Stolitsa Group was the investor in the Seven housing complex, and apologise for this inaccuracy.

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