

# Interview with Ukrainian Union Organizer Artem Tidva

Friday 13 May 2022, by [REIMANN John](#), [TIDVA Artem](#) (Date first published: 11 May 2022).

**Ukrainian union organizer Artem Tidva talks about: The unions from the old Soviet Union days; Employers' tactics to weaken unions since independence; Relations between Ukrainian and Russian unions before the invasion and since then; How the invasion has affected union organizing. He also makes an appeal for support to Ukraine Social Movement**

**John Reimann** | Oaklandsocialist was recently privileged to interview Artem Tidva, a union organizer for the left group Social Movement. Where are you right now, Artem?

**Artem** | Now I'm between central and western Ukraine.

**Artem** | And how are things where you are?

**Artem** | People playing with dogs, it's Sunday now, so people have a holiday. (but) at night we had two air alert alarms, airstrike alarms.

**John Reimann** | I was in the Lviv, when you're walking around, it seemed like just any normal kind of older European city. But then every once in a while, you'd be reminded this is a country at war. You'd see sandbags along basement windows, then you'd get the air raid sirens. And so there's no escaping it.

*(Artem is a union organizer for social movement in Ukraine. I asked him about the situation for the unions, starting with the situation for the old unions that descended from the state run unions under the Soviet Union.)*

**Artem** | As any country, we have some percent of yellow trade unions, because some employers also using this, like union busting tactics to create the controlled ones organizations, or may be even for optimizing of some processes in business, and so on. Yeah, we face this. After the Soviet Union, we got the biggest one, the Federation of trade unions, its biggest Confederation. But after Soviet Union collapsed, trade unions were reorganized in independent Ukraine. And they have their own story of elections of the heads. Some different powers, tried to collaborate with them to make labor unions beyond the control of the power [of the members]. Some tried to make some actions in political movement. Even maybe for last five years. They tried to organize their own kind of Social Democratic Party, [in the] 90s, maybe even late 80s by trade unionists, who had some knowledge about trade unionism. But their local trade union in the mines, for example, iron ore mines, or coal mines, were not (representing) their interests and [in the] 90s, [there was] legislation allow(ing) to create alternative unions as you want, because in Soviet Union, we have the right to do this, but no one did it because of the terrorism of regime. And in the 90s, some articles of law about labor, workers rights and so on, were kept and some, some of them are still in power. And people have created their own alternative to the main trade union and even in trade union organizing books.

**Artem** | We can read the example of Arcelor Mittal Kryvyi Rih. It's one of the biggest iron ore company in Kryvyi Rih city. It's built on the iron ore, on some sources of iron ore and mines are were built there before Soviet Union. I think Ukrainian capitalism were built in this in this kind of infrastructure which leads to railway building. Also this ArcelorMittal company in Kryvyi Rih own some iron ore mines.

*(Artem describes the situation inside this company, Arcelor Mittal Kryvyi Rih.)*

**Artem** | In this company, they have 11 trade unions. But I heard some rumors that some of trade unions on the in the company were created with the help of management. So management created this, to weaken already existing unions in the company, but it didn't help the company. For last two years, the 11 trade unions made an alliance against (the) employer. One of the Union of the same this company is originally from this post Soviet Federation of trade unions, which is biggest one, and as you say, it's kind of pro state might be pro Kyiv regime regime and so on. But it's difficult to say that the organization of millions of people are homogeneous. It's different between cities and cities between companies and companies, between departments in each in the same company, members of the same trade unions could have their different [ideas] about different things. And it's difficult to say that some trade unions is totally under state control or totally under management control. And there are some fluctuations, there are some human relations which make differences. It's not Belarus, even not Russia, where it's possible to totally control trade union by Putin the people from KGB to rule, the trade union, as we got from last one and a half years in Belarus. Now it's it's really problematic to to have an in dialogue with their trade unions,

*(Artem talks about the effect of the war on Union solidarity between Russian and Ukrainian workers,)*

**Artem** | Before the war started we had a lot cooperation, we, in the union in Ukrainian unions, we had the same international trade unions, internationals like PSI, Public Service International, like US International, the union of the food workers and so on. We all were in the same trainings for union reps in the same media field. And we try to knew what's happening where we knew some information about people who were arrested in Russia for some positions about people in Kazakhstan when these protests were about trade unionists in Belarus, who were taken into the prison from Vika DP, it's kind of independent one Trade Union Confederation, where people make some publications against the war in Ukraine. And they were put in jail. For example, in Kyiv our leftist group, Social Movement. Suzanna Rue it were involved in construction. They tried to organize construction workers in trade in trade unions, also leftists from social movement. were active in this gig economy delivery services. One of our activists activists was the leader of trade union of delivery service. And also our movement is connected with some feminist studies.

**Artem** | We trying to make feminism more closely linked to women who are workers, because feminism, which is trying to be academic, in some kind of isolation is not really you know, feminism of practice. It's (just) theoretical, which is not interesting for us. We're trying to make Marxism an instrument of class struggle. We are trying to make feminism an instrument of women liberation. We try to make trade unions an instrument of human struggle for dignity.

We had a small call before the war maybe off of here before maybe more with friends from Russian socialistic action, I think, or Russian socialist movement, I cannot remember exactly what is the correct name. Okay, so, and they did the same, they have the contacts with construction workers in their cities, they have gone contact with delivery services gig platform, they have contact with feminists, so maybe it's a way like in post Soviet countries leftist could build a movement. We didn't make some common plans. It's just was a way how we and they (organized). Since the war, it's difficult to talk with any Russian leftists or Russian trade unionists, who are supporting the war. It's

impossible, it's totally impossible.

**John Reimann** | Are you saying that the Russian trade unionist with whom you had been in contact are now supporting the war?

**Artem** | My friends are nice guys and girls, but some our friends from from construction, construction field from construction in from public service, trade unions and so on, they have at least not any position against more.

**John Reimann** | Are you saying they are neutral?

**Artem** | Maybe it will be good [better] if they will try to be at least neutral. Maybe (then) I will have no reason to talk about them. But some of them are trying to be neutral, but (at the same time) organizing some events, like against NATO invasion in Ukraine. So it's really weird to hear. For us something like this from people who didn't say anything about intervention of their country in our country.

**John Reimann** | What I'm gathering from what you're saying is that the war that the invasion of Ukraine has been really quite divisive. As far as dividing up the working class in Russia and in Ukraine,

**Artem** | If we talking about solidarity, I think yes, like solidarity between Russian and Ukrainian working class. Now, it's difficult to imagine big political subject in Ukraine, big political like unit in Ukraine. Oh, sorry, nothing Ukraine in Russia, which could be opposed to the killing of 1000s of people. In Ukraine, all trade unions are against it.

**John Reimann** | I would imagine that in the present situation, the war has really setback union organizing in Ukraine. Can you comment on that?

**Artem** | Even for me, it was difficult maybe for the first one and a half months after war started. It was difficult to read something not about war, not about Ukraine. And if we are for example, now, with trade unions if we are planning some trainings, we have to include this in (the)agenda in some kind of way because it's difficult for people to find time and talking about something which is not about their current needs. But on the other hand, I see great opportunities for trade unions and for all institutions to define their ability or their capability to react on (people's) current needs. I had experience of working with trade unions, which has no strategy of trade union organizing in future. But it was kind of big. trade unions, with no [view?], to change something in their tactics. And during trainings this trade unions recognize then they have to start talking with concrete groups of the workers, if they want to be (stronger). And in Ukraine, we still have a big trade unions. Some of them were not really active, but it's impossible to say that they're totally inactive. Sure, they are active in some sectors. They still have some collective agreements, which still (campaigning) for workers some social package and some social insurance.

**Artem** | But we can do more for them to be more proactive, more critical of some state initiatives. But they are like they are. Some of them are not leftist, like we are. So yeah, we are facing with big structures, which have to be more active. I think, in Ukraine, we had a temporarily law legislation during martial law temporarily. Labor Law deregulation during martial martial law. And this is kind of [gave] opportunities for management, to delay salaries, to fire some activist,

*(It turns out that the AFL CIO has a presence in Ukraine, and is doing training in union organizing. I pointed out the irony of the fact that they have been have a total failure as far as organizing in the United States. But now they're going to teach union organizing in Ukraine.)*

**Artem** | Yeah, sure. They don't really like us like leftists like Social Movement, because we are doing this work that they are trying to do, but for free. And maybe in some kind of way more effectively. But as for me, in Ukraine, they create a space for communication of workers of different trade union, which also could be used by us too.

***Artem gives a final appeal to the international working class:***

An international labor movement has to show their solidarity. And now you can show that from the first of May The Swedish Transport Workers started to blocking cooperation with Russian ships. And we heard about the same about UK where Transport Workers (refuse to) work with Russian ships. And this way of solidarity could help for Russian trade unionists (and) for Russian workers, who understood that if everyone in the world are judging their aggression maybe they did something wrong? Maybe they have to try to understand why everyone is going (against) this war. Every city where Russian military is intervening, a lot of people (are) dying. There are a lot of people (being) kidnapped, a lot of people injured. And we have to arm our workers we have to help our workers to get back into their houses into a peaceful life with their hands with their legs. So we have to help them

**John Reimann** | Artem makes an appeal for financial support from workers in the West. I was in Ukraine in Lviv. I visited the Social Movement. I brought them first aid kits with me. Here is a picture of those first aid kits being packaged up at the post office and said to help save the lives of workers and soldiers at the military front. There's also as you see a link to where you can donate to social movement in Ukraine. I urge people who are watching this video to donate to Ukraine Social Movement through this web site:

<https://rev.org.ua/ukraine-call-for-financial-aid/>

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**John Reimann**  
**Artem Tidva**

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