

Labour Start Global Conference in Tbilisi

Wednesday 3 May 2023, by [BECH Alfons](#) (Date first published: 1 May 2023).

The Labour Start conference ended the day before 1 May. The number of participants exceeded 200. They came from some 30 countries. Here is a partial list: Albania, Armenia, Belarus, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Israel, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Lithuania, Myanmar, North Macedonia, Netherlands, Norway, Palestine, Poland, Russia, Spain, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom and Uzbekistan.

A conference that had the logistical and political support of the Georgian trade union, the GTUC. We will talk later about this union, one of the examples of the transformation of trade unions in countries belonging to the former USSR, as they see it themselves and according to the International Trade Union Confederation of which it is a member.

In this chronicle I will focus on those aspects that have to do with the mission that led me to participate in the conference: solidarity with trade unions in Ukraine. But first I would like to briefly review some aspects that struck me. First of all, the meaning of such a conference.

The value of worker solidarity today

As Eric Lee and other Labour Start coordinators have said, the conference is a place for trade unionists to meet and show solidarity. It doesn't matter whether you come on behalf of an organisation or as an individual, everyone has a chance to participate, to speak, to apply for a workshop. In this sense it is a very democratic and open meeting, which offers an opportunity in our days to exchange information and experiences. This is, in my opinion, the most important aspect. And it is what makes this conference so successful and fills a gap which, for some reason, the trade unions and international trade union centres themselves have to fill. Especially in the face of a war like the one in Ukraine.

The other aspect that has to do with the previous one is that it is, in essence, militant work. Based on a small network of coordinators dealing with areas or issues, and with a wider network of correspondents, Labour Start offers any trade unionist a global view of trade union or political struggles that have to do with working class life. It is a window into the world of work, albeit focused on the material and concrete aspect of the struggle for wages, rights, working conditions and freedom. The other more general political aspects and position-taking do not enter into this website and work.

Eric Lee placed the value of workers' solidarity in an "[era of crises, wars and disasters](#)". At the end of the conference he expressed the wish to be able to hold the next one in a Kiev without war and with fully re-established trade unions. May it be possible.

How the war in Ukraine affects neighbouring countries

The Conference thus had no official position on Ukraine. But all the speeches by Georgian trade unionists and all the others expressed their solidarity with the Ukrainian trade unions, their desire

for victory over the invaders. The interventions in plenary sessions by Olesia Briazgunova, international officer of the trade union KVPU, Ivanna Khrapko, head of the FPU youth coordinator, as well as the young lawyer Inna Kudinska, member of the NGO Labor Initiaves, were among the most listened to and applauded. In the halls of the National University of Georgia, where the conference was held, there was the same atmosphere as in the streets, bars, restaurants and private homes of Tbilisi, where posters, graffiti and banners in solidarity with Ukraine are displayed.

The interventions made by Belarusian trade unionists, including Maksim Pazniakou, were also listened to attentively. In a very short space of time, from 2020 to today, the situation in Belarus has changed completely. From a regime cornered by popular mobilisation, the regime has moved on to brutal repression and the dismantling of the political and trade union opposition. Maksim acknowledged that independent trade unionism was not prepared for this. They were confident that the regime would give in to the pressure of mobilisation. The workers had won some victories before 2020 and were the driving force behind the mobilisation of citizens at the time of the election fraud. But Putin's support for his protégé Lukashenko turned the tide. When on 24 February 2022 the invasion took place, the independent trade unionism of the BKDP understood and fully supported their Ukrainian brothers. Now it is paying with the imprisonment and exile of its leaders for its firm and supportive position.

Having a plan for social reconstruction

The workshop presented by the European Network of Solidarity with Ukraine (ENSU) was very interesting in the sense that it opened a reflection and some ideas to have a plan for social and trade union reconstruction of Ukraine. Although the workshop was not large in number, people who were interested participated and asked questions, starting with Ukrainian comrades Olesia from KVPU, Ivanna from FPU and Inna from Labor Initiatives.

Certainly the task we present is not an easy one: to propose to the Ukrainian trade unions to agree on a plan for the social reconstruction of the country; to have alternatives and a voice in the reconstruction that the Ukrainian capitalists and international capital are aiming for; and to strengthen the trade unions in this process with material and political support.

The humanitarian tasks that the trade unions and ngos, feminists, etc. have to face because of the war are now in the foreground. But even so, there is a growing awareness that a plan is needed and that the Ukrainian trade unions should start to think about and elaborate it. If Western and world trade unions do so, we must support them. And in this battle to strengthen class unionism, other unions in the region must also join in.

Is it too early to think about reconstruction?

But is it necessary to do this now? Our proposal as the European Network for Solidarity with Ukraine (ENSU) is that yes, it is necessary to start working out such a plan as soon as possible. So, from now on, while there is still the war. This means that we are looking at the prospect of Ukraine winning the war, rejecting the invasion and achieving stability throughout its territory with guarantees that another invasion and aggression by Russia will not be attempted again. It is important to start now because the solidarity ties should be used to find economic means for the functioning of trade unions, inclusion as an agent with a voice and decision-making power in economic plans, trade union and political training for the transitional stage. Experience and a common analysis of transition periods are key: this is when the future of a country is at stake. Georgian and Belarusian trade unionists have used this conference to exchange views on their own mistakes with Ukrainians. That should continue. That is solidarity.

The capitalists are already going to have their own conference on Ukrainian reconstruction in London next June. They will get a lot of money from the European Community. Then the trade unions in Ukraine and all over Europe have the right to ask: how much money will there be for social reconstruction? If the productive fabric is not rebuilt with labour rights, with guaranteed stability, if ILO labour laws and standards are not complied with and, on the contrary, are restricted and backward steps are taken, will it be accepted that social dumping will be installed in Europe? A “social dialogue” tying the hands of the trade unions is the greatest betrayal of the Ukrainian working people who are defending their country today on the front line and in the production of necessary goods and services.

After this first debate we must wait for the FPU and KVPU unions to reflect on these issues. If they see it as useful and positive we will try to help.

Alfons Bech Trade Union Coordinator of the European Solidarity Network with Ukraine

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

Translated from DeepL