

# Another Ukraine is possible

Tuesday 27 June 2023, by [DAVIS Mike](#) (Date first published: 23 June 2023).

## Ukrainian activists call for a just reconstruction that puts people before private profit, reports Mike Davis

Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> June saw almost 100 activists gather in London to discuss rebuilding Ukraine after the devastation of the war resulting from the full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022. Titled 'From Resistance to Reconstruction', the event foreshadowed the business-dominated [Ukraine Recovery Conference](#) staged by the British Government a few days later, on 20-21 June. The underlying theme of identifying alternatives to a neoliberal economic agenda, with its intended bonanza for big corporations and a green light for privatisation and deregulation, was covered by over a dozen speakers, including UK and Ukrainian trade unionists, Labour MPs, representatives of Ukraine's two left social movements, SD Platform and Sotsialnyi Rukh, and feminist and environmental campaigners.

A big danger highlighted in each of the four sessions was that civil society organisations, women, green activists and particularly trade unions and local councils will be left out of recovery plans while profiteering big business will have free reign.

Former North West England Labour MEP **Julie Ward** opened the conference on behalf of organisers Ukraine Solidarity Campaign, saying: "Since the all-out invasion, we've sought to give voice to the labour movement in Ukraine inside our own movement in this country. We've organised meetings and protests, always seeking to ensure that it is Ukrainians on our platform. That it is their voice being heard – the voice of resistance alongside the voices of solidarity."

Speaking from Wales, **Mick Antoniw**, a Labour Senedd member, denounced Putin's war crimes and the genocide being perpetrated on a daily basis. He reported the Duma had given immunity to Russian soldiers. He made calls for a special tribunal and for \$300 billion of Russian assets currently frozen to be used for reparation payments and reconstruction. He asked rhetorically whether, if international law means anything, it should mean Ukraine receives these funds.

**Luke Cooper**, director of PeaceRep's Ukraine programme at the London School of Economics, criticised UK Government policy of putting the private sector first. He highlighted the fact that large numbers of big corporations are lining up to seek lucrative profits from procurement and infrastructure rebuilding.

He spoke about the demand and supply crisis in Ukraine, with one in four people unemployed. There has been an 11% decline in wages, thus reducing demand, while the destruction of factories reduces supply. One in four construction workers are in the military. This all indicates market failure, meaning the state must intervene. The US is offering grants and aid, not loans, whereas the EU is offering cheap loans with conditions relating to health and safety and environmental standards. While positive in one way, it is unlikely private companies will comply, underlining the need for state direction.

The Ukraine government should demand grants to buy Ukrainian products, raise taxes – especially

on the rich – and use the war as the moment to deepen moves to root out the corruption that has plagued the country.

**Vitaliy Dudin** of Sotsialnyi Rukh highlighted that the average European wage is €2,000. This should be for all Ukrainians, he urged. He spoke of the need for democratic workplaces with managers being elected – half from the state and half from trade unions. The Zelenskyy government law of March 2022 had allowed employers to cancel collective bargaining agreements. This must be reversed, while payments and contracts for the unemployed should include skills training. He also urged the need for inspections, with sanctions if employers break agreements. The strength of Ukrainian trade unions is a huge asset, underlining why they must be central to any recovery plan. **Maria Exall**, president of the TUC, spoke in a similar vein, highlighting the value of trade union work while encouraging more UK unions to take up solidarity activity.

**Andy Kilmister** from Oxford contrasted a profit-led growth model with a wage-led growth model, stressing the latter provides greater stability and more opportunities for green development and secure jobs. He warned that big funds from the private sector came with bad conditions. He emphasised a further danger – that US funds could dry up after 2025, depending on the results of presidential elections.

A powerful feminist perspective was introduced by **Oksana Potapova**, a researcher at LSE: “A feminist view is critical for a sustainable and resilient recovery. Any recovery must be inclusive, drawing on the knowledge of working women derived from everyday issues.” She reported that over 60,000 women were now in the military, stressing it was important to avoid the chauvinist trope of ‘resilient women supporting warrior men’. It is vital to avoid dependency and promote agency. That means a socially just and inclusive recovery with women at its heart.

**Yuliya Yurchenko**, senior lecturer in political economy at Greenwich University and a member of the Ukraine Solidarity Campaign, predicted the Ukraine Recovery Conference would talk about civil society involvement, but it would mean NGOs at best, not trade unions. She also spoke about the importance of cancelling Ukraine’s debt. Further, workers involved in unproductive labour, namely in nurseries, health and social care, need to be represented in any recovery programme. What is needed is a radical Marshall Plan, with the people, through their organisations, leading the reconstruction. The Ukrainian government estimated \$750bn was needed for rebuilding, and that was before the Kakhovka dam disaster.

**Nick Dearden**, director of Global Justice Now, further illustrated the dangers: corporations involved in mining and private equity – for example, the US giant Blackrock – are coordinating investment opportunities. These are disaster capitalists seeking maximum profits. The IMF has not stopped the debt payments while the UK is busy using the aid budget to promote public-private partnerships. He made a comparison with the end of the Second World War, when returning soldiers and their families demanded radical change, leading to the NHS and welfare state. It would be unforgivable if these opportunities were missed.

**Simon Pirani**, a researcher at Durham University, concentrated on six points connected to energy supply (leaving the dam explosion Kakhovka for others to discuss). These were: a just transition from fossil fuels; electricity and heat from renewables, including housing insulation; small-scale wind and solar projects in municipalities; championing the provision of electricity and heat as services regulated by the state, thereby extending public ownership; opposing new nuclear power development, and fighting extractivist strands and policies within the EU and UK.

**John McDonnell**, Labour’s shadow chancellor between 2016 and 2019, spoke of his solidarity work over almost ten years and reiterated the importance of reconstruction partners also coming from

non-profit sectors and social partnerships. **Alex Sobel**, Labour shadow minister for nature, spoke of his own family having fled from Lviv in 1941 after having lived in the area for 500 years. "Ukraine hosts half of Europe's biodiversity," he reminded participants, but there is a serious danger in Russia launching chemical weapons that would seriously damage this environment. He further emphasised that the central question was: 'who pays?' His answer was unequivocal - "the Kremlin must pay" - and that means, as others had said, seizing frozen Russian assets. He further warned, "We must avoid the Iraq situation, where big US corporations like Blackrock came in using cheap migrant labour."

**Oksana Holota**, a representative of the Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Ukraine (KVPU), told participants: "Russia is killing, destroying and annihilating Ukraine. Even before the full-scale Russian invasion, the level of social and material security was low. Since the start of the war, income levels have decreased significantly. Social security has been removed, wages cut, hours increased and inflation is up. According to the World Bank, the number of people below the poverty line is projected to hit 50%."

Her account of the Russian genocide was stark, with over 100,000 dead, children forced out of the country, and chemical products in the water killing life in rivers and the Black Sea. "Russia is a terrorist state," she declared, and can only be stopped by force of arms. The task after the war is to build a social Ukraine, but the task now is the provision of arms and humanitarian aid.

**Viktoriya Ball** announced herself a child of Chernobyl. Her harrowing catalogue of burnt forests, polluted rivers, desolated farms and damaged nuclear power stations all pointed to the need for an equitable recovery that puts the needs of the environment alongside jobs, living standards and security.

**Bohdan Ferens** of Social Democratic Platform highlighted two major problems for the Ukrainian left: namely, the absence of a direct voice in the Verkhovna Rada (the Ukrainian parliament), because there is no western-style social democratic party; and secondly, the nature of the potential international allies being mostly in thrall to neoliberal free market policies. He emphasised a just reconstruction should have three criteria: "transparency, local actors and a social dimension". Further, he argued social democracy was critical for the transformation. A new party was needed to secure this change.

One of the closing speakers at the conference put the task for the British solidarity movement into perspective. **John Moloney**, assistant general secretary of Aslef, the rail union, reminded participants his union was one of the first to condemn the Russian invasion and call for solidarity with Ukraine. Many other unions have taken a similar stance. But some had proven difficult, arguing Ukraine was a fascist state, that this was a proxy war or an inter-imperialist war. His message was that British trade unionists must listen to the voices of their Ukrainian counterparts. This would cut through to members and silence the apologists for Putin.

**Sacha Ismail**, in closing, reported on the achievements of the Ukraine Solidarity Campaign in raising money for relief and medical vehicles, in assisting solidarity and military aid advocacy in UK trade unions, and in providing platforms for Ukrainian trade unionists and activists. A lobby of the Russian embassy is planned for Friday 24<sup>th</sup> June under the slogans, 'Stop Ecocide', 'Victory to Ukraine' and 'Make Russia Pay'.

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**Mike Davis**

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