

With socialists and feminists in Ukraine

Wednesday 9 August 2023, by [ISMAIL Sacha](#) (Date first published: 21 July 2023).

The [first of the two full days](#) the recent Ukraine Solidarity Campaign (USC) mini-delegation had in the country was spent mainly meeting trade unionists. We delivered a vehicle and equipment to the KVPU union federation to take east; met with Lviv teachers' reps; and visited a mine and [hospital](#) in nearby Novovolynsk.

The second day was spent mainly with left-wing political activists.

Feminist Workshop

USC held a conference on post-war reconstruction on 17 June, and some UK-based Ukrainian feminists attended. One of them put us in touch with her organisation, the Lviv-based [Feminist Workshop](#), and we went to meet them.

Before the war Feminist Workshop, founded in 2014, was a campaigning organisation. Now it also participates in providing social support, primarily shelters for people displaced by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Nastia and Ivanka, who both work for the organisation, met us - me and Chris Ford from USC, Vladyslav Starodubtsev from Ukrainian socialist group [Social Movement](#) - for a discussion before showing us one of the shelters.

Like many of the young activists we met that day, both women are themselves originally from eastern Ukraine. Ivanka said many in her family are pro-Putin; she is virulently hostile to Russia and she found it intolerable there. However she went back recently - to near the frontline - to run a camp with activities for children affected by the war.

When the full-scale invasion began last February, activists in Feminist Workshop quickly found themselves doing things they previously had no experience of doing, particularly to establish and run the shelters. They have got some funding, but it is little and precarious; one of the shelters they run is about to close and they've had to do a lot of work just on finding people somewhere else to go.

They are still campaigning, particularly to demand sex and relationships education in schools. This is very limited in Ukraine, and when some schools have introduced it on their own account they have faced pressure from right-wingers and religious conservatives. We suggested putting them in touch with the teacher trade unionists we met the day before.

They also mentioned a number of protests, for instance about a rape, that have taken place, for whatever reason being tolerated by the authorities despite martial law.

Ivanka is also part of an "anticapitalist feminist" organisation, Bilkis - which also originated in the north-eastern city of Kharkiv, before relocating to Lviv with the invasion. They were running a "free market" that day - we hoped to go and have a look, but ran out of time. After she left Nastia described how Feminist Workshop have sought, gently and carefully, to introduce feminist ideas to

those using their services who were not previously engaged with them.

In the context of debates in the UK, it seems worth mentioning that Feminist Workshop are a pro-trans rights and trans-inclusive organisation. They said that there were disagreements about this among Ukrainian feminists, but they worked to maintain a strong stance.

The shelter we visited was small, resource-poor but impressive and well-maintained. So was their small office in the same building, full of all kinds of resources and campaigning materials.

Social Movement

Though not members, the Feminist Workshop comrades expressed a very positive view of [Sotsialnyi Rukh](#) (Social Movement, SR), the other organisation whose members we spent a lot of time with that day.

Earlier in the day, while I stayed in bed, Chris met an activist, Olya, from the organisation [SD Platform](#) (Social Democratic Platform). Two SR people I asked about SD Platform praised its youthfulness, energy and connections among teachers. They criticised it for its lack of clearly left-wing politics and engagement with social struggles.

After we left Feminist Workshop's shelter, we met six SR comrades – Vladyslav, Denys (our translator during the workplace visits the day before), Zhenya, Maksym, Pavlo and Katya.

I didn't realise till after she'd left that Katya was Katya Gritseva, the [renowned socialist artist and illustrator](#)!

Katya, Maksym and Pavlo told us about their activity as students, including in reviving the left-wing student union Direct Action. The latter sounded to me more like a broad left-wing activist group, but I may have misunderstood. I told them about the rise and fall of the student movement in the UK over the last 15 years. They also asked some questions about the broader political situation on the British left, including about what can be expected in the Labour Party under Starmer's regime.

Zhenya works as an editor for left-wing journal [Spilne \(Commons\)](#), loosely connected to SR. We went back to her flat and stayed there past curfew for some very interesting discussions, joined by two others, Sasha and Maryna. (Curfew, 10pm, is no longer very vigorously enforced in Lviv; but I was still extremely pleased that by chance Zhenya lives on the same street as our hotel!)

Chris told the young Ukrainians about his visits to Ukraine, Poland and elsewhere in eastern Europe in the 1980s. We debated, from a fairly wide range of positions, socialists' attitude to nationalist movements, including in Scotland and Wales. We discussed what eastern Ukraine, where most of the Ukrainian comrades with us come from, is like; deindustrialisation there; and lessons from deindustrialisation in the UK. (For some of this time Denys was in the other room, speaking at a pro-Ukraine online fringe meeting for the Irish TUC Congress.)

We had a very long discussion about [the range of mixed Ukrainian-Russian](#) that dominates in many of Ukraine's small towns and villages. (Trotsky grew up speaking a version.) Is it a language, a dialect, or even a single thing? How does it interact with social class in Ukraine? What will and should happen to it as more and more Ukrainians refuse to speak Russian in protest at the invasion?

Zhenya and Maryna, Surzhyk speakers, had recently been led the production of a magazine discussing the issues, with articles in Surzhyk and Ukrainian.

Following the [destruction of the Kakhovka dam](#), comrades were very worried about a possible

Russian attack on the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant. However, it turned out the imminent threat was more immediate. The next night, back in London, we got frightened messages from our friends in Lviv. Russia was bombing the city - destroying a block, injuring nine, killing four.

Politics

Our time in Ukraine reinforced the need for active solidarity with the Ukrainians against Russian imperialism, but also very much with its labour movement and particularly the organised left.

Often on the UK left, certainly at the moment, we feel we operate in a difficult and confusing political environment. But in Ukraine the broad left-wing politics that dominates the labour movement here, deeply inadequate and ineffective as it is, simply does not exist.

Numerous observations brought this home. The first KVPU staffer we met, young and energetic, seemed surprised by the suggestion that Western corporations might have damaging plans for Ukraine. The Lviv office of the other union federation, FPU, had leased parts of its space to far-right group Right Sector, allowing them to dominate the entrance of the building - not because the FPU leaders sympathise with Right Sector but, I think, because of the lack of clear political lines in Ukrainian society. Members of SD Platform work as staff for MPs in Zelensky's party, despite the extreme neoliberal policies it is imposing.

These kind of contradictions exist here too, very much so: but in Ukraine they take much sharper form. That is why, as Denys explained to us, widespread aspirations there for a more equal and socially just society find such limited political expression. We must help Ukrainian socialists change the dynamic.

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