

Ukraine: Democratic socialists challenge Zelensky's attack on workers, political parties

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Using the pretext of Russia's invasion, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has banned several political parties and undermined labour and trade union rights.

Ukrainian socialist group Sotsyalnyi Rukh (Social Movement) criticised the actions as undemocratic and warned they risk undermining popular resistance to the invasion.

Zelensky "temporarily suspended the activities" of 11 parties with alleged links to Russia on March 19. While most of the parties are very small, the list includes the second-largest party in parliament, the Opposition Platform for Life, along with several organisations that have the words "Left" or "Socialist" in their name.

Days earlier, parliament passed a bill to deregulate labour rights, the Law of Ukraine "*On the Organisation of Labour Relations in Martial Law*" (7160), which was signed into law by Zelensky on March 23.

New labour law

Socialists and trade unions say the law — which significantly curtails employees' rights and increases the power of bosses — is unconstitutional and could remain in place even after the war ends.

Social Movement leader Vitaliy Dudin explained in a [March 16 public letter to Zelensky](#) that the new labour law, which comes "at a time when Ukrainian trade unions and the wider working people are mobilised in popular resistance and organisation of mutual aid" represents "a slap in the face to their courage and sacrifice".

"Such measures will transfer the burden of war from the richest to the working majority," Dudin wrote. "They must be rejected."

George Sandul, a lawyer with the workers' rights NGO Labor Initiatives, told Serhiy Guz from [openDemocracy](#) that the changes have "shocked trade unions and experts in the field".

"Naturally, the way people work has undergone tremendous changes during the war prompted by Russia's invasion," said Sandul. "But those employees who did not lose their jobs are working day and night for the army and the Ukrainian people to obtain victory."

"It is logical that any legislative regulation should serve one main goal: strengthening the defence capability of Ukraine. This bill ... clearly does not serve this purpose, instead it puts a spoke in the

wheel.”

In a similar vein, Dudin wrote: “Restrictions imposed to protect the public interest must be proportionate to the achievement of the objective pursued. The [law] is designed to strengthen defence capabilities, but establishes the possibility of exploitation of workers at enterprises of any industry throughout Ukraine. In other words, the emergency rules provided by it can be used not to carry out work in the interests of defence, but to increase the profits of the owners.”

The law allows: employers to cancel collective labour agreements and increase the working week from 40 to 60 hours; the dismissal of workers on sick leave or vacation, as well as the sacking of trade union members without the consent of the trade union committee; women to be assigned to physically strenuous and underground labour, currently prohibited by Ukraine’s labour laws; and the suspension of an employment contract “in connection with the military aggression against Ukraine”, with responsibility for the payment of workers’ wages put on “the State committing military aggression” (Russia), not the employer.

Guz notes the law follows in the footsteps of “equally radical proposals to change labour law in favour of employers, and to significantly restrict the rights of trade unions” that were proposed by the parliamentary committee for social policies and the Ministry of Economy months prior to Russia’s invasion.

Dudin believes these restrictions on labour rights are not necessary and that there are “more equitable ways” to ensure the defence of Ukraine: “It is necessary to confiscate the property of Ukrainian oligarchs on the grounds of public necessity. The capital of Ukrainian oligarchs must work for the economy.

“The main goal of the policy at this stage is to unite society in counteracting Russian aggression and to preserve the rights of the affected people as much as possible. Ukraine’s economy will definitely be revived [through] state support, proper organisation of work and decent wages.”

Ban on parties

In a [statement released on March 21](#), Social Movement stated its opposition to the ban on certain parties: “We have already seen how the government tried to abuse the situation of war to attack the labour rights of Ukrainian workers, now its actions are aimed at limiting political and civil freedoms. We cannot support this.”

Dudin told [Novara Media](#) that Zelensky’s decree suspending the activities of these parties is “concerning”. “We’re living through very difficult times, but restrictions on freedom of speech and association are only defensible when necessitated by compelling legal grounds,” he said.

“Even during a state of emergency, measures must be proportional to their aims. This presidential decree, however, does not fulfil its main stated aim — namely, ensuring Ukrainian security. For Ukraine to win this war, two things will be needed: popular unity and international support. This ill-conceived decree risks jeopardising both.”

Dudin added: “The rationale behind this decree is political, based on unspecified accusations of anti-Ukrainianism on the part of these parties. It’s an unreasonable restriction on one of our most fundamental rights. This isn’t Russia, this is Ukraine, and our constitution proclaims a pluralist, multi-party system. We can’t just give up this essential component of our democracy under the pretext that we are at war.

“As leftists, of course, we are particularly concerned about restrictions on the left and that the

decree will create the perception that everything connected with the left and with socialism is part of some Russian strategy against Ukraine.

“At the same time, while many foreign comrades are currently asking us whether left-wing thought is now banned in Ukraine and if this is the start of a broader repression of the left, I don’t think it’s that categorical. Rather than an attack on the left *per se*, the government seems to have been guided by fairly vague ideas of what is ‘pro-Russian’ and ‘pro-Ukrainian’.

“You might say: no real leftists were harmed in the making of this decree. None of the targeted parties fight for social justice or for democratic socialism...

“In short, in spite of the restrictions now placed on these parties, those fighting for social justice in Ukraine will continue to do so. In that sense, things haven’t changed that significantly.”

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