

# Ukraine: Under the cover of Putin's war, Zelensky tears up workers' rights

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**Almost a month after Ukraine's parliament adopted two anti-worker bills, President Volodymyr Zelensky finally ratified Draft Law 5371 on August 17, thereby removing union rights for most of the country's workers.**

Explaining the situation to *Green Left*, Ukrainian labour lawyer Vitaliy Dudin said: "If Russian aggression poses an immediate threat to workers, then labour reform, which is being implemented under the cover of war, threatens to disenfranchise them in the context of the growing crisis."

That Zelensky took so long to sign the law — he had been much quicker to ratify an earlier bill entrenching zero hour contracts — indicates he was feeling the pressure of [the strong campaign](#) waged by Ukrainian and international trade unions against it.

While this was not enough to get him to veto the law, the campaign did help secure a last minute amendment to ensure the new law can only remain in force for the duration of the war.

Under Draft Law 5371 (now Law 2423), workers in enterprises with less than 250 employees — about 70% of the workforce — could lose safeguards when it comes to work hours and protection from dismissal, as employers have been empowered to override collective contracts or statutory provisions by introducing extremely flexible individual contracts. Trade union influence over decisions concerning overtime work and employment termination have also been diminished.

This attack on workers' rights comes on [the back of Law 2136](#), signed on March 23, which made it much easier for employers to dismiss workers or change their work duties, including extending their work week to 60 hours, without any consultation.

Dudin, who is also chairperson of the socialist organisation Sotsyalnyi Rukh (Social Movement), explained that "in addition to its immediate dire consequences, the war in Ukraine has caused great damage to labour rights" because "in parallel with the destruction of industry and infrastructure by Russian bombs", a new system of employment relations is emerging.

Dudin noted the reforms passed to date, together with the ones in line for debate in parliament, are aimed at deregulating the labour market, creating a precarious workforce, and undermining trade union influence.

So far, these laws have amended the Labour Code. But the goal is clearly to replace the code altogether, with a new draft code already in circulation.

Unlike Russia, where labour laws were neoliberalised in the early 2000s, Ukraine's existing Labour Code dates back to 1971, during the Soviet period. While for the past decades, the level of violations of the code has tended to be high — such as non-payment of wages in arrears, involuntary part-time

work, illegal dismissals — Dudin said “workers could use the code to protect their rights in courts, with local courts siding with the claimants in 80% of cases.”

Previous moves to erode the Labour Code, such as the attempt to pass a bill similar in scope to the new law in 2020-21, were defeated by trade union resistance. Now, the government is hoping to use the war as an excuse to ram new laws through — and the existence of martial law to stifle any protests.

The war has caused great economic hardship and “it is clear that the owners will try to compensate for the losses at the expense of the employees”, Dudin said. “To ‘disarm’ the working class, oligarchs and other capitalists need to dismantle labour protection legislation.”

Replacing the existing Labour Code is central to that aim.

In response to the latest attacks, the Federation of Trade Unions of Ukraine (FPU) [criticised Zelensky](#) for signing the “scandalous law” that “introduces extreme forms of liberalisation of labour relations” and deprives workers of “one of their fundamental rights — the right to labour protection and collective bargaining”.

The FPU thanked the trade unions and members of the international community who had “actively opposed the promotion of anti-labour Draft Law No.5371 in wartime conditions” adding: “We will also vigorously oppose dozens of other anti-labour and anti-union pieces of legislation that government lobbyists are trying to push through parliament.”

Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Ukraine (KVPU) leader Mykhailo Volynets [noted](#) Zelensky had “ignored the appeal of domestic and international trade union and human rights organisations to impose a veto on” the law, adding his organisation “will not put up with a blatant violation of the rights of workers, their constitutional guarantees and international norms and standards.”

The [European Network of Solidarity with Ukraine](#) (ENSU), which together with [LabourStart](#), the [International Labour Network of Solidarity and Struggle](#) and [SumOfUs](#) helped launch international petition campaigns calling on Zelensky to veto the law, said in a statement: “These attacks on workers are unconscionable in the context of war, given their strong commitment and that of their unions to defending the country against Russian aggression. That commitment is a key element in the current resistance...”

“The looming implementation of the Ukrainian government’s recent raft of anti-labour laws will likely meet with an angry response from the country’s workers,

“ENSU, and the growing number of labour organisations linked to the network, will be giving full solidarity and support to their Ukrainian sisters and brothers and their organisations in the battles to come.”

Dudin believes nothing but “labour, strengthened by international solidarity” can help “stop the implementation of these anti-social policies”.

“The main question for workers today is how to protect the remaining rights that allow them and their families to survive. However, in order to have a decent future, they must ask: are they ready to continue suffering for the prosperity of oligarchs?”

“We hope that workers currently withstanding Russian aggression on the frontline will be ready for new challenges and will return to their workplaces to demand justice.”

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