

UK MPs demand ‘just reconstruction’ in Ukraine amid fears for workers’ rights

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Money for Ukraine’s recovery must ‘not disappear into the hands of oligarchs’, Nadia Whittome told openDemocracy

UK MPs have called for a post-war reconstruction process that benefits “every Ukrainian” and includes a role for the country’s trade unions and civil society.

Since [Russia’s invasion](#), Ukraine’s government has [signalled](#) a permanent move away from consulting trade unions as part of its reconstruction and reform agenda, [sparking fears for workers’ rights](#).

International reconstruction discussions have, so far, largely been silent on the Ukrainian government’s approach of pushing through radical deregulation of workplace protections and socio-economic policy.

“The people of Ukraine should have a proper say in how [reconstruction] happens and what it would look like, including the democratic participation of trade unions and civil society,” Labour MP Nadia Whittome told openDemocracy.

She added: “The substantial sums that will be pumped into Ukraine must not be allowed to disappear into the hands of private company shareholders or rich oligarchs, but should instead be used to build shared wealth and prosperity that every Ukrainian can benefit from.”

Whittome’s approach was echoed by Tony Lloyd MP, the vice chair of the UK’s all-party parliamentary group on Ukraine. He said a “just reconstruction” would “ensure that the rights the Ukrainian people are fighting so hard to defend are maintained and strengthened”.

“As is the case all over the world, the active participation of trade unions and civil society in that process is vital – a just reconstruction is one which is led by the Ukrainian people, for the Ukrainian people,” Lloyd said.

“A just reconstruction is one which is led by the Ukrainian people, for the Ukrainian people” - Tony Lloyd, Labour MP

The British MPs’ comments came ahead of a [high-level reconstruction conference](#) in Germany, which will be opened by the country’s chancellor, Olaf Scholz, and EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen this week.

Workers’ rights are seemingly not on the agenda for the conference, which supports “a sustainable, resilient, inclusive, and green economic recovery which enhances strong democratic institutions, rule of law, and anti-corruption measures”.

A previous international conference on Ukraine's reconstruction was criticised by Ukrainian trade union officials for putting too much focus on investment plans.

That conference, held in Lugano, Switzerland, at the start of summer, ended in a declaration of support for Western-backed short- and long-term recovery plans for the country, signed by 40 states.

The trade union officials [complained](#) the document failed to mention "the policies that will affect real people, Ukrainians, workers – the people who are going to restore the country?"

At the time, they called for international reconstruction efforts to guarantee social dialogue principles – where employers and unions, with input from the state, negotiate over work-related issues – as part of the reform and rebuilding programme. This, they said, would turn the tide on the "closing space" in Ukraine for organised labour.

'Window of opportunity'

Analysts say Ukraine's ruling Servant of the People party and its government have used the Russian invasion as a "window of opportunity" to push through their long-held labour deregulation agenda. They point out that President Volodymyr Zelenskyi's administration made several attempts at radical labour reform prior to the war, but those efforts were blocked by trade union protests.

Indeed, a recent draft reconstruction plan released by the Ukrainian government [named](#) Ukrainian workers' "low loyalty to reforms" and the "active position of resistance taken by trade unions" as "key institutional restraints" to planned reforms.

In August, Zelenskyi signed a law that [removes all employees](#) of small- and medium-sized businesses from national labour law, encouraging them to strike individual, bespoke agreements with their employers instead.

Last year, a joint project by the International Labor Organization and European Union [criticised](#) this legislation for setting up a "parallel and less protective regime" for Ukrainian workers – and putting the idea that employers and employees can negotiate from equal positions of power into law.

The law also institutes the possibility of "at-will termination" of employment and "unilateral change by the employer of essential terms and conditions" of work, the project noted.

When asked about the negative effects of the law in August, Ruslan Stefanchuk, chairman of Ukraine's parliament, said that during wartime the Ukrainian "constitution allows for certain rights to be restricted – for the sake of the country's survival", citing the burden on business as a result of Russia's invasion.

"I am confident that after the war, we will return to the question of European-style workplace guarantees," Stefanchuk said.

Ukraine is now set to pass a new overall labour law which, according to its Ministry of Economy, will "simplify regulations, minimise state intervention in the regulation of employment and form a system of flexible protection".

Under the future labour code, employees would have the "freedom to choose how to organise their employment together with active state control over minimum standards and conditions," it said.

Red tape in Ukraine's HR laws, the Servant of the People party suggested, "creates bureaucratic barriers both for the self-realisation of employees and for raising the competitiveness of employers".

But analysts have told openDemocracy that the removal of workplace protections could hit Ukraine's internally displaced persons hardest. With the number of job vacancies far lower than the number of unemployed people, people displaced as a result of the Russian invasion will be more likely to agree to poorer conditions at work, they said.

Nearly half of Ukraine's businesses have stopped or nearly stopped their operations, according to a survey, published in June, by business consultancy Advanter Group. The draft reconstruction plan says the unemployment rate is estimated to have risen above 30%, with wages across different sectors of Ukraine's economy falling by 9% to 58%.

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