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# Ukrainian workers fight on the front - and suffer from lack of political power

Wednesday 2 November 2022, by [ŁOBODZIŃSKI Wojciech Albert](#) (Date first published: 28 October 2022).

**“We don’t want to be Europe’s cheap labour force! An independent working world in Ukraine and Poland - the foundation of a socially just European Union” - with these words as the motto, trade unionists and activists from The International Labour Network of Solidarity and Struggle met on 27 September in Warsaw at the invitation of the Polish labour union “Workers’ Initiative”. They debated the future of Poland and Ukraine within the European labour market. The following day, they travelled to Ukraine as part of the Workers’ Aid Convoy, heading to Kryvyi Rih to support Ukrainian workers.**

**We asked the participants of the convoy about their motivations and far-reaching goals of the initiative. - The world is changing, whether we want it to or not, in order for it to change for the better we need to take action - they said.**

**For the first time, thanks to you, you can hear about humanitarian aid from trade unions coming to Ukraine. This is an unusual idea. Where did this initiative come from?**

**Baptiste LARVOI-SIMON of the Union syndicale Solidaires, France:** What is happening in Ukraine is a struggle for freedom and change towards new models of societies. The kind of world we will live in depends on the end of this struggle, including the ways and means used to end it. Energy, ecology, feminism, anti-imperialism and anti-authoritarianism, capitalism are the themes at the heart of this war. Ukraine’s independent trade unions with our support, or rather despite it, are fighting for their common future.

Moreover, our commitment to the freedoms, the rights of workers in Western Europe can only be meaningful if we consider them globally. This is why all our organisations consider it their duty to make the most productive use of our links, because cooperation is our main means in the political struggle for a better organised world. Our international convoy for Ukrainian trade unions is a thorough realisation of this thought.

**Sergio Zulian of ADL COBAS, Italy:** We took part in this convoy and discussion mainly because we want to give real help and build a network with real people, living in Ukraine and organising against the Russian invasion, but also to improve workers’ rights. We feel very tired of the fact that in the mainstream media only the big powers, governments, presidents are shown. They are not the ones who are dying, fighting and working to rebuild the country during the war.

**This was the second Workers’ Aid Convoy to Ukraine.**

**Paweł Nowożycki of the OZZ Inicjatywa Pracownicza:** Yes. With the first convoy (April/May), we wanted to show our practical solidarity with people like us, the working class, who are struggling to maintain resistance against the Russian imperialist invasion despite limited resources. This time we

also sought to do an international campaign against the changes to labour laws in Ukraine, hence the Convoy's motto – 'Against attacks on workers' rights under the guise of war'.

We felt this was particularly important because capitalists take every opportunity to undermine workers' rights. What has been happening since March in Ukraine is specific, it is a war situation after all, but attacks on workers' rights in some forms also take place in our countries.

### **What is the political, far-reaching goal here?**

**Antoni Wiesztort, international driver at Amazon, OZZ Inicjatywa Pracownicza national committee:** Neoliberal politicians in Poland and the EU nominally want Ukraine in Europe and not in the embrace of Russia.

"But Ukraine stripped of Western-level social rights, with a labour code abolished just like in Pinochet's Chile, will be nothing but eternally cheap labour for Europe. Neoliberal policies compromise all the effort that millions of people are currently putting into defending their country."

This vision of Ukraine, the cradle of social dumping in Europe, strikes a blow to the whole world of work across the continent. In Poland, we know without the experience of war that until now every shock caused by a crisis has been used by selfish elites to turn the screw on working people and weaken our position. Already before the war, Ukraine and Poland, Eastern Europe, played an important role in amplifying inequalities in the EU and the accumulation of wealth in the West. Our unions are linked together through specific industries and workplaces, so we are trying to coordinate a response to the attacks from big business.

**Fabio Bosco of CSP-Conlutas, Brazil:** I would simply add that the capitalist class is acting internationally to put the burden of the economic crisis on the backs of the working class. We need to unite the working class around the world to fend off austerity policies and war....

**Vladyslav Starodubtsev of the Ukrainian democratic socialist organisation Sotsialnyi Rukh:** In this context it is essential to empower trade unions, building international solidarity becomes a necessity for anyone who wants a more just, democratic and peaceful world.

### **What kind of support do you want to give to your colleagues in Ukraine?**

**Verveine Angeli of the Union syndicale Solidaires in France:** We want to give both material support and express our solidarity with Ukrainian workers. That is why we went directly to Kryvyi Rih as a 10-member delegation and attended a meeting with the Confederation of Free Trade Unions there. This was the first international meeting of independent trade unions in Kryvyi Rih and we heard directly from the participants that it was very important that someone came to visit and listen to their problems in these difficult times.

It is also about understanding in our communities what is happening in Ukraine to better understand the global movements of our world. Our support for Ukrainian workers is both political and material. Unfortunately, the biggest labour organisations and left parties in the world are not on the side of the Ukrainians. We want to show the Ukrainian workers that they have allies among the international working class.

**Ignacy Józwiak of OZZ Inicjatywa Pracownicza (Workers' Initiative)** The support should be both symbolic (showing our global solidarity and emphasising that we are here as an organisation to listen to them and make their voice more visible) and material (which is why we organised our second convoy with a humanitarian consignment). Our Ukrainian brothers and sisters know their

needs, material, symbolical or political. We should listen to them and do everything we can to provide them with what they need.

**Using Poland as an example, let us outline how the culture of work is changing in the context of the war in Ukraine and the crisis affecting Europe.**

**Antoni Wiesztort, international driver at Amazon, National Commission of OZZ Inicjatywa Pracownicza:** From the beginning, the war in Poland felt the biggest rise of the price of renting flats. It was already very expensive and in February landlords added a “war bonus”, because the free market operates unscrupulously.

“War is a paradise for speculators, and in Poland the authorities have liquidated the common resources, which would have been an alternative to speculation. In practice this means that in every “physical” industry we have to take more overtime.”

After the outbreak of war, the Polish government also attempted to further restrict the right to strike in Poland, and this current law already de facto prohibits strikes in major multinational corporations and condemns Poles to the role of breakers in the EU. For example, if the 50 per cent turnout requirement for a strike referendum were applied to parliamentary elections, most elections in the 21<sup>st</sup> century would have to be declared illegal. But for the elites this is clearly not enough so the war is a great opportunity to knock the last teeth out of the labour movement in Poland.

**As for your profession, there have supposedly been some changes in working hours, haven't there?**

**Antoni Wiesztort, international driver near Amazon, OZZ Inicjatywa Pracownicza national committee:** Yes. In Poland, under the pretext of war, the heads of the transport industry forced the government to push through the European Commission to extend our driving time to 11 hours a day, 60 a week. Work was extended for everyone in the whole country, although the war disrupted the Polish supply chain by maybe 5-10 per cent because, after all, we mainly drive in the EU and not to Ukraine, Russia and further east.

Formally in the EU, drivers' working time can only be deregulated temporarily. Poland has already done this twice this year, in March and August. The result was more exhausted drivers and more spectacular accidents. Many drivers from Polish bases, as many as 20-30 per cent, are Ukrainian.

**And in Ukraine, what are the changes like?**

**Baptiste LARVOI-SIMON of the Union syndicale Solidaires in France:** The work culture is changing because the professions are mutating: from miner or nurse to front line fighters.... From being an accountant in a trade union to a union leader. From a trade unionist working to get the money needed for her family, to a parent using the union to find suitable sleeping bags for her son and his fellow soldiers, and for her daughter the means to get medically necessary electric shocks. From the full-time worker to the worker with a contract for 1 hour per month and 5€/month, changed without any consent of the worker, based on the motivation of union discrimination, without any legal remedy because of the labour law reform of the liberal Zelensky government.

**The anti-worker solutions, this is first of all the Bill 5371, which introduces: unilateral dismissal of an employee without cause on the initiative of the employer, departure from the Labour Code and the establishment of unfair terms of an employment contract. The power of bilateral contracts with the possibility to propose almost any working conditions, including overtime or work on public holidays. Moreover, the employment contract can**

**establish additional grounds for termination of employment, as well as establish previously unforeseen legal penalties against the employee, such as fines. Fortunately, these solutions are linked to martial law and will only work during martial law for the moment.**

**Baptiste LARVOL-SIMON of the Union syndicale Solidaires, France:** Yes, but it is not only this law.

“A number of laws adopted by the Ukrainian parliament in recent months allow employers to arbitrarily lengthen or shorten working hours, reduce wages to the minimum wage, dismiss workers without consulting unions and introduce new types of ‘junk’ contracts. This makes life even more difficult for the working class. We met a person earning the equivalent of €5 in the last three months. How is he supposed to survive or feed his family?”

Moreover, during the war, it was almost impossible for the trade unions to protest and strike. Nevertheless, the independent Trade Unions continue to fight and maintain their organisations in the cities to be helpful to the population and continue to fight for their rights!

**Fabio Bosco of CSP-Conlutas Brazil:** In this context, it seems clear that the Ukrainian oligarchs want to use the war to advance their agenda against workers’ rights. The Ukrainian parliament has passed new laws against workers’ rights to the detriment of warfare, in which the working class is massively involved. It is necessary to reverse these new labour rights in order to strengthen the resistance against Putin. Let us also remember that work culture and organisation is changing not only in Ukraine. We have a crisis in Europe and the world. Crises of various kinds are always a harvesting period for capital. We should be very wary of attempts to push anti-worker and anti-social reforms (austerity policies) in our countries under the guise of anti-crisis measures.

**And what is the situation on the war production front, what is the mood, are there any new phenomena taking place?**

**Vladyslav Starodubtsev of Sotsialnyi Rukh:** People are more united than ever, they are engaging in solidarity actions and cooperation is really flourishing.

“A lot has changed in the way people feel their power, because the war has forced everyone to work together, without owners, who have fled the country. People are facing new challenges and absolutely new forms of work: humanitarian and logistical work, volunteering to help refugees and organising refugee centres. But also resisting the occupation.”

Finally, fighting on the frontlines or working under conditions of missile strikes or bombardments, blackouts....

**Can we outline the main developments in day-to-day work?**

**Vladyslav Starodubtsev of Sotsialnyi Rukh:** The Ukrainian government is using the war as an opportunity to promote and push its agenda. While all the attention is focused on the front, the prestige of the government is as high as ever (and for good reason), and the majority of activists and trade unionists are fighting on the front, they are promoting extreme neoliberal measures regarding unionisation, labour law, bargaining power, etc. They practically do everything to make unions powerless and workers as insecure and weak as possible.

**And from your meetings with activists on the ground, what did they point out most often?**

**Verveine Angeli of the Union syndicale Solidaires in France:** Our comrades in Kryvyi Rih talked about changes in collective agreements, the lack of consultation on redundancies, contracts coming to an end, working conditions, the possibility for employers to break collective agreements, the retirement age.... There are also specific conditions depending on the war: pay conditions, conditions where workers become soldiers... The Ukrainian workers' organisations we met with in Kryvyi Rih are fighting against labour law reform.

**The working class needs to be included in the war effort, but taking away their livelihoods, I mean jobs, wages and workers' rights, is not the way to stop Putin.**

Life just goes harder and harder for the working class, starting with the most vulnerable: children who are still at home for school, mothers who are deprived of their children's pensions because their father and ex-partner have gone off to fight.

Also important here is the global context, remember that we are not just talking about Ukrainian or Russian oligarchs, but also other global players, such as ArcelorMittal, which is the main foreign investor in Kryvyi Rih.

**Ignacy Jóźwiak of OZZ Inicjatywa Pracownicza:** I might add to what Verveine said that it was striking to learn all these details, the nuances of gender dynamics. One recently introduced law deprives mobilised workers of their wages from the workplace. Apparently, this completely changes the situation for mothers, especially single mothers whose ex-husbands are now serving in the military. Previously, they received money for their children (maintenance) directly from their employer. Under wartime conditions, especially at the front, it is impossible to fill in the relevant documents about income or lack thereof. These mothers are often left with nothing.

**What should be the role of the trade union movement in all this?**

**Vladyslav Starodubtsev of Sotsialnyi Rukh:** Trade unions are the largest part of civil society. At the same time, they are the most underrepresented part of it.

*"Workers fight at the front, produce weapons, work in logistics, and evacuate people. But they have no real power or political agency. This creates a situation of undemocratic rule by an absolute minority over an absolute majority."*

Unfortunately, despite the fact that labour is the core of Ukrainian resistance to Russian imperialism, the authorities continue to push through legislative initiatives to limit its participation in the decision-making process, thus provoking further social conflicts, weakening defence capabilities and violating the democratic rights of the majority in order to protect the ruling minority. Empowering the trade unions is the only way to ensure real democracy and strengthen the defence of our country.

Because the people, who are now giving everything they have to defend their land, their friends and relatives, their nation, have no power and no voice in the struggle against imperialism, in which they are a major player.

**Ignacy Jóźwiak of the OZZ Inicjatywa Pracownicza:** Let us remember that independent and militant unions have their organisation, their communication channels and their well-maintained personal networks. This is crucial in exceptional times such as war. Ukrainian trade unions now have their hands full: in addition to their regular activities, they have to fight against anti-social reforms and austerity policies and provide assistance to their members who serve in the army or territorial defence (and we are talking about tens of thousands of people). Unions also do a lot for civilians in

frontline areas and for IDPs (internally displaced persons, refugees within Ukraine).

I believe it is our job, as trade unions from Poland, France, Italy, Spain, Brazil and other countries, to support them in any way we can, without questioning it. These brave men and women know what they are doing!

**Are any parties in the EU Parliament working on solutions to the problems you have identified, and do Ukrainian workers have friends there?**

**Vladyslav Starodubtsev of Sotsialnyi Rukh:** Most of the left-wing European parties are giving us their help in terms of the fight against the new labour law, against the Ukrainian debt. We felt strong solidarity from parties like Enhedlisted, who helped financially with our trade union work and campaigns. Not necessarily the parties of the EU parliament, but the Social Democratic Party of Switzerland, the Polish party Razem (Together), gave us great help. For the time being, we are trying to get in touch with other parliamentarians of the Left, because some of them are reluctant to see international solidarity. They are domestically oriented and are only now trying to find leftist ways to help Ukraine.

**What is the role of the Ukrainian trade union movement in defending Ukraine and fighting against the weakening of the Ukrainian Labour Code?**

**Vladyslav Starodubtsev of Sotsialnyi Rukh:** Ukrainian trade unions are a very controversial structure with different traditions and specificities. The Federation of Trade Unions of Ukraine was formed from the Soviet trade unions, they were strong supporters of the Party of Regions and now seem to be more 'loyal' trade unions. They have a strong tradition of being not an instrument for defending workers' interests, but a bureaucratic-managerial tool, and this is still a huge problem. We, as Sotsialnyi Rukh, are trying to change this and have been moderately successful in creating new trade union traditions, and with the Servant of The People government, the FPU are mostly forced to be in a position of 'moderate opposition' all the time. Separately, I want to say that the FPU youth are really great in their activities and the main FPU can learn a lot from them.

The KVPU, on the other hand, is more in opposition but has its own political ambitions and shady deals with some oligarchs. Their work is crucial in providing opposition to anti-labour reforms on the streets, and thanks to MP Mykhaylo Volynets we also have a trade union voice in parliament, with him pushing his party Batkivshchyna to almost always vote against anti-labour laws.

The most active resistance to anti-labour laws tends to come from socialist and independent trade union activists, who are not very connected to the Confederation or Federation leadership, have no or only formal membership and are almost always in the vanguard of any protest. Sometimes by their example they motivate the Federation and Confederation to act.

But the Federation and Confederation are now changing for the better and I admire their work – with humanitarian aid, defence against nasty laws, etc. They are still bureaucratic structures, with a lot of corruption, secret deals, maybe not at the high management level, but still, and so on. But there is progress, which makes me optimistic.

**Is the Polish trade union movement able to respond collectively to further attempts to weaken the right to strike and push through its own solutions?**

**Antoni Wiesztort, international driver at Amazon, OZZ Inicjatywa Pracownicza national committee:** In Poland, Inicjatywa Pracownicza is trying to work with other organisations to this end because every union should have an interest in improving anti-union laws in our favour. At the

company level, we are building a coalition with committees from Solidarność e.g. at Genpact, with Workers' Unity and other structures. The bureaucracies of the big national headquarters believe in their own channels of influence and so far do not see the benefit of coordination, it remains for us to wish them well.

**Ignacy Józwiak of OZZ Inicjatywa Pracownicza:** I would add that I believe that this can happen. What we need in Poland is cooperation at grassroots levels, between rank and file workers, between sections from the same workplaces or branches of the labour market. What we need now is a kind of unity in diversity and that is what we are striving for as the Workers' Initiative.

**Can the international trade union movement, at its current stage of development, coordinate the struggle to abolish social inequalities between Eastern and Western Europe?**

**Verveine Angeli of the Union syndicale Solidaires, France:** We can act on a global level to demand minimum wages and a minimum wage, but it is not that simple. We can also, as we do at specific levels, as in the case of Amazon workers, act to unite them to fight together against poor working conditions, employment and wages.

**Vladyslav Starodubtsev of Sotsialnyi Rukh:** For me, however, this is not enough. The international trade union movement is now split by different parties and currents, sometimes finding itself on the conservative side (as we can see examples of some demonstrations for 'peace' against the 'gas price increase' and so on). I think the trade union movement is now in a revival phase – it is very weak and passive, but it is actively changing, especially under the influence of leftist politicians who are helping to 'politicise' and unite the now very institutionalised trade unions.

"Most of the world's biggest trade unions need a more decentralised and democratic approach, as well as international and political cooperation between different movements and parties, in order not to isolate themselves from politics. I see that new trade unions are now being formed."

There is unionisation of Amazon workers, new unions dealing with precarious jobs, such as at Starbucks in the US. What I think is needed is to work in two directions: to help the new independent unions and to reform and work with the old ones. I hope that in the future the trade union movement will be a force that will shape the vision of our world and political sphere.

**What is the future of the European trade union movement in the new cold war we are now in (China, Russia - EU, USA)?**

**Vladyslav Starodubtsev of Sotsialnyi Rukh:** At the moment we see two trends. More independent trade union action is arising from international solidarity and cooperation, humanitarian and political work. And pacifism is linked to the cost-of-living crisis, partly motivated by the Russian invasion in Ukraine, which is moving many trade unions in the opposite direction of solidarity, towards some form of European nationalism (in the right-wing sense of the word). We need to unite the progressive parts of the trade unions and oppose the latter, blinded by their primitive pacifism. In this area, I really admire the work of the Ukraine Solidarity Campaign in the UK, which has pushed many British trade unions from pacifist or pro-Russian to pro-Ukrainian positions. Such work is very much needed, as is working with the trade union movement on all fronts of action, because they are the biggest part of civil society.

"And if our work as leftists, socialists, independent trade unionists, organisers succeeds, we will probably see the trade union movement stronger and more internationalist than

ever before in history.”

**Verveine Angeli of the Union syndicale Solidaires in France:** I agree with Vladyslav, and I would also add that I think it is really important in such a situation to be independent from governments and to build strong ties between workers and unions across borders, even if we know that this is difficult in the current war, for example between Ukrainian and Russian unions (but with unions in Belarus it was possible).

It is important to prevent wars and attacks on workers depending on economic competition. Capitalists from America, Europe, China and Russia and Japan are fighting over markets and profits. The labor movement must oppose Russian aggression and a new Cold War and fight for jobs, wages and social benefits. If the labor movement takes this stand, it will become stronger and well positioned to take power.

**Sotsialnyi Rukh (Social Movement) - is a Ukrainian left-wing social organisation founded in 2015 that works on the principles of democratic socialism, the fight against capitalism and xenophobia. It operates in Ukraine's largest cities (Kyiv, Kryvyi Rih, Lviv, Odessa, Dnipro, Kharkiv). The group, which aspires to be a grassroots political party, came to prominence during the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, when it called on the international left to support Ukrainian resistance to Russian imperialism and campaigned against the Ukrainian government's wartime curtailment of certain labour rights.**

Workers' Initiative (IP) - is a Polish anarcho-syndicalist trade union. IP was founded in the second half of 2001 as an informal group of anarchists whose aim was to fight together for workers' rights. As a formal nationwide anarcho-syndicalist trade union, IP became active in September 2004.

Solidaires or Solidaires Unitaires Démocratiques (SUD) - is a French trade union group. They tend to favour progressive or even radical views and work with the alter-globalisation or anti-globalisation movement. Group 10 and the SUD unions are part of the European Social Forum and the World Social Forum. Most of the SUD unions practice syndicalism of struggle (syndicalisme de lutte), as do the CGT, FO and CNT factions. This puts them in opposition to reformist or bargaining unions: CFDT, Confédération Française des Travailleurs Chrétiens (CFTC), CFE-CGC and Union nationale des syndicats autonomes (UNSA).

Central Sindical e Popular Conlutas (CSP-Conlutas) - is a Brazilian trade union organisation that proposes to create an alternative to the large Brazilian unions: the Central Única dos Trabalhadores, União Nacional dos Estudantes and Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem-Terra. The CSP Conlutas emerged from several sectors of the trade union movement in the struggle against the neoliberal reforms applied by the Lula government. On 21 September 2010, the newspaper Estado de São Paulo reported that the headquarters was made up of 140 unions and 2 million workers.

COBAS (Confederazione Italiana di Base UNicobas) - is an independent, syndicalist, free socialist union and part of the Italian trade union movement. CIB Unicobas was formed in 1991 out of the Cobas movement and is present in the education sector as well as in the civil service and health sector.



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