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UK: Nadhim Zahawi is playing into Putin's hands, not striking nurses

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Even Ukrainian workers are fighting for their own rights - that's the point of union solidarity.

Britain's current wave of strikes, according to [Nadhim Zahawi](#), chairman of the Tory party, is "exactly what Putin wants to see". He accused nurses of playing into the Russian dictator's hands by taking industrial action on 15 December.

Accusing strikers of being unpatriotic is a tactic going back to the Napoleonic era. Zahawi, however, has given it a new and unfortunate twist. Because the right to strike - and form free trade unions - is exactly what Ukrainian workers are defending as they resist the Russian invasion of their country.

When I visited Kyiv on the eve of the war I heard coal miners from the Donbas, in the east, explain how, in the areas Russia had already seized, their union was banned, their activists kidnapped and tortured, and their right to strike abolished. I met the leaders of nursing, mining and rail unions who complained bitterly about the [Zelensky](#) government's privatisation programme - but they were still telling their members to join the territorial army and fight.

And even in the depths of the war Ukrainian workers are fighting for their rights. Last month miners carried on working even while trapped underground by power cuts caused by bombing. That didn't stop other miners staging protests against alleged management corruption, or resisting Zelensky's anti-union laws.

Ukraine's trade union movement understands what the Tory government does not: that the best way to resist totalitarian dictatorship is by exercising the very rights - to strike, to freedom of speech and assembly - that the dictator is trying to suppress.

In fact it's Zahawi who is playing into [Putin](#)'s hands. It's true that the Russian state uses "hybrid warfare", a mixture of disinformation, espionage, hacking, corruption and organised crime, to undermine its enemies' will to fight. Everything that destabilises a "state victim", says the Russian textbook, is welcome, including strikes. But who's causing the nurses' strikes? The British government, through its refusal to negotiate.

It's also true that a small number of pro-Putin far-left groups here want to turn this winter's strikes into a movement to undermine support for Ukraine. The *Morning Star* newspaper has [stated this goal explicitly](#). That's why union leaders, and the vast majority of union activists, have gone out of their way to avoid linking the two issues. They know the danger of being played by Putin and his UK proxies, and they're determined to avoid it.

And that's why Zahawi's comments are so toxic. They betray a mindset deeply embedded in the Tory party that sees trade unions as (to use Thatcher's phrase) "the enemy within".

Zahawi complains the strikes are causing “division”. Britain is divided because the average worker is facing a 7 per cent fall in real wages over the next five years, while bankers are looking forward to the first Christmas of uncapped bonuses since Lehman Brothers went bust. It’s not Putin who is creating these divisions: it’s the British private school elite, and the free-market doctrines they’ve used to rip off the rest of us.

The Labour and trade union movements have, in fact, been magnificent in their support for Ukraine: from the vanloads of equipment driven to front-line towns by British union activists, to the Welsh Labour government’s offer of sanctuary to refugees, to the standing ovation the Labour conference gave to a Ukrainian MP in September.

Our solidarity with Ukraine is deep-rooted. In 1984, during the British miners’ strike, miners from the Donbas sent food and money. There’s been an active relationship ever since: the British ex-miner I went to Kyiv with in February had actually been there five times over the past 30 years.

Internationalism is at the heart of the trade union ethos. Every one of the unions currently striking is part of an international federation that has expressed solidarity with Ukraine. For example, the European Federation of Nurses, which the Royal College of Nursing is part of, roundly condemned the invasion when it happened.

So the strike wave will continue despite the Tory slanders. Zahawi meanwhile heads a party that has unrepentantly accepted millions from Russians with links to Putin.

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