

After the war, Ukrainian workers will never agree again to be exploited

Friday 17 March 2023, by [KULBACZEWSKA-FIGAT Małgorzata](#) (Date first published: 24 February 2023).

On 21 February, Yuriy Samoylov, chairman of the Independent Miners' Trade Union in the city of Kryvyi Rih, visited Warsaw. The meeting hosted by Inicjatywa Pracownicza (Workers' Initiative) trade union and by International Labour Network of Solidarity and Struggles, attended by labour activists and people of Ukrainian diaspora, was the first from the series of meetings. Yuriy Samoylov is going to speak in Madrid, Lyon, Lisbon, Milan, Padua and Katowice, too - [see the dates](#).

For those who would not be able to attend the meetings, we prepared a selection of Yuriy's thoughts and comments pronounced in Warsaw. The experienced union leader spoke on a variety of up-to-date topics: from the humanitarian situation in Kryvyi Rih to the impact of new labour laws in Ukraine, introduced during the war, on the working class.

First impressions after crossing the Ukrainian-Polish border

When I entered Poland from Ukraine, the first thing that struck me was the lack of sirens, alarms. At first, our children, for example my granddaughter, were afraid of the sirens, they hid in the basement. Now, during the alarm, the children rejoice: it means there will be no lessons!

The second thing I noticed is that the lights are on everywhere. Nobody saves electricity, there are no limits or technical issues. In Kryvyi Rih, the electricity is constantly off. Driving from my town to Poland, I saw that other towns were also dark.

"Even being here, I keep looking at my watch: how much time is left until curfew? Will I make it home in time? I cannot realise that there are no curfews here, in Poland. Here and in Ukraine - these are two different worlds."

How Ukrainian unions operate during the war

From the trade union I represent, about 300 people have been mobilised into the army. About 200 people whose wives or husbands are members of our organisation are also fighting. During this past year, several union members have been killed.

Ukrainian law stipulates that a man or woman who performs military service is still an employee of his/her plant and therefore still belongs to a trade union. In some plants, we have managed to ensure that such a mobilised employee continues to receive the salary. It goes to that person's family.

"The trade union has had to take on tasks that it did not deal with before. Union members call us from the front and tell us what they need. They name specific things. We know that if we don't get them, such a soldier might even die."

Another situation: a union member found out that her husband had been killed. Thanks to the drone images, she knew where his body laid. She asked the union to get permission to take the body out of the combat zone, through such channels as possible. Terrible mission... but we needed to do it.

Another problem the unions have faced is workplaces that stop working – for various reasons. Or situations where Russian missiles fall on cities and workplaces. People are literally killed while working. This was also the case with us in Kryvyi Rih – two members of our union were killed in such circumstances.

On the war and occupation

There was a moment when the front entered directly into the borders of Kryvyi Rih. Our city is very stretched out, over 125 kilometres. There was a moment in 2022 spring when Russian troops entered the southern districts. They were there for no more than two weeks, then the front moved back. But even during those two weeks, these soldiers killed many civilians, looted many houses.

From the beginning of the war I went regularly to the front line. After about two weeks, I started witnessing how groups of refugees, thousands of people, including the elderly, were getting out of occupied territories. They were walking tens of kilometres on foot; they were not allowed to move in cars. I looked at it as if I watched a WW2 film. But this time, it was not a movie, but real life.

On the first day of war, my son and my grandson enlisted in the army. My grandson took part in the liberation of Kherson. There were 26 colleagues in the platoon. Today four are alive. It is difficult for me to even talk about it. Thank you for coming. Thank you that you are not indifferent to all this.

I know what the mood is among my union members who are fighting. They say that yes, we are getting weapons, but we are still getting too few. These weapons are in short supply. Everyone has heard about Bakhmut, about Soledar. Why did we have to [withdraw from Soledar](#)? Because our soldiers no longer had anything to shoot with.

They give us a tank. But along with the tank we should also get support units. Eight support vehicles should accompany a tank. And we didn't get that. Our union members serve in self-propelled artillery units. Ammunition is delivered to them in ordinary civilian Zhiguli vehicles.

How the fighting workers become conscious of their force

The trade union during the war fights first and foremost to secure survival of its members. As for workers' rights, I will tell you this. Our union has 2,400 members. We are not a big organisation, but we are a fighting organisation. Before the war we went on strike practically every year. Now, as I said, there are about 300 trade unionists in the army. More or less two battalions of people who kill, know how to kill. When the war is over and these people go back to work, every employer will have to remember that they can kill.

“I have been saying all along: if your employer pays you a low wage, he is depriving your children of a future. You too, but more importantly your children. So you have two options – eat your children, which means giving them no future at all, or eat your employer, which seems more acceptable to us. This is the principle of our small, but valiant union.”

Miners' strikes

I am a miner. I worked in the mines for 35 years. My grandfather told me how his generation organized strikes. He explained how to strike properly. And I organised my first strike in 1985. I

looked at the Polish Solidarity movement and thought we'd do the same at home. It worked. If you see me now sitting in front of you, that means we won. Back then, the mine was under the control of the state security organs. This has not changed. The authorities' supervision of the workers still exists today.

"How to strike? Simple methods are best. When you organise a strike, the whole crew should be united. One person should be chosen to speak, but before he/she speaks, everyone should agree beforehand and establish a common position. And once it is agreed, it should not be deviated from."

When Ukrainian miners go on strike, it always takes place underground. We proceed this way because it is difficult to send policemen underground to disperse the protest, in case anyone tried. All the strikers sit inside the mine in underground rooms, about the size of this one, and when the talks with the employer's representative start, they take place practically in front of everyone.

During a strike, the most important thing is the support of the protesters' families. If women and children support the strikers, the strike wins. A criminal case has been opened against me three times, because children were taking part in protest actions that I organised. I said then and I still say it: children have to learn from early years how to fight for their rights. One of our methods was this: when workers go on strike inside the mine, their female partners with their children go under the director's office. Hundreds of women who know that their children may be left without a piece of bread.

When the strike took place at Sukha Balka mine a couple of years ago, the miners stayed underground while more than 1,000 people protested on the surface. The miners' families came to the director, but he did not understand who he was dealing with. As a result, the women beat up this director and tore his clothes on him. He called the police for help, but the policemen did not respond. Before every strike, I spoke to the policemen, asked them not to interfere. And not once in Kryvyi Rih did the police try to disperse the protests by force.

So, the relatives of the strikers entered the director's office. After two hours the company's management announced: you will get 30 per cent raises. But the miners had already realised that they could fight for more and demanded 100 per cent raises. If I had agreed to the 30 then, people would have thought: we lost the strike. That's why in such situations we had to go to the mines, talk to the miners and all the documents were signed on the spot.

That was our tradition for more than 30 years, until the war: every year there was a strike, at one company or another.

Our union at one point had 8,000 members, but the employers actively obstructed us, destroyed the organisation. On the other hand, we too have ways of organising protests when, in theory, our union is not even present in a particular company. And when the strike at Sukha Balka, which I mentioned, was going on, I held talks not only with the management of the plant, but also with the common criminals from the Solntsevo group. This battered director was pouring tea for us. I myself was shocked at how interconnected the Ukrainian, Russian, or any post-Soviet business and criminal world was.

Anti-worker legislation in Ukraine

Since the end of the nineties, the authorities have not succeeded in introducing a labour code unfavourable to workers, although they have tried many times.

So they came up with a new method – they introduce changes under the guise of martial law. This is

happening now. From 1 October 2022, salary indexation has been banned. As of 1 January 2023, the state funds that paid disability and sickness support were abolished. The government assures that these changes will not bring any changes for the people, but the budget law has 4 billion hryvnias less than it was before for the same tasks. We can already hear that whoever is a citizen of Ukraine and is 35 years old will not get a pension.

“Our society is increasingly clearly, sharply divided into a privileged caste and a working caste. This has an eminently demotivating effect on the Ukrainian people as a whole. But on the other hand, let me remind you: a great many workers have already fought and will continue to fight at the front. They will all ask after the war: why I do not have a good life?”

Kryvyi Rih in the war conditions

Before the war, there were 150,000 people working in our big factories – mines, strip mines, metal works. They worked in difficult, exhausting jobs, so wages were relatively good too. During each strike we made a simple mathematical demand – that our wages are not worth less than \$1,000. And thanks to the strikes, our salaries grew. Everyone was earning circa \$1,000 or more.

Now, however, factories are working at 50, 30 per cent of their capacity, and wages are below \$200-300. As power cuts are repeated, there are often accidents in the factories. Besides, new laws introduced already during the war gave the possibility to dismiss a worker just like that, even without reason. Before the war, this was impossible.

In those plants where our union is present and strong, the company management tries to agree with us on their actions. However, there are places, like Arcelor Mittal’s plant, with which we have a problem. Their local administration is not even based in Kryvyi Rih, let alone the central management. They stopped all production at the beginning of the war. Before the war there were about 40,000 workers there. Now there are 3-4 thousand left, and the rest have been sent to lay-offs. They receive no more than 150 euros.

Artem-1 mine belongs to Arcelor-Mittal. Miners working there, among others, do one of the most difficult jobs – tunneling. They wanted to form a trade union. But to set one up, you have to inform the plant manager. And he doesn’t have an office. There is only a mobile number. For three months I looked for the director. I finally caught her in a shop. It was a 21-year-old girl who said: “After all, you know that I don’t decide on anything”.

The workers wanted to form a union because they realised that sickness contributions were not being paid for them. I asked them if they were registered with the relevant authority, if they were being credited for their exhausting work underground. They believed that they were. But I turned to the social security office and it turned out that no one had heard of them. They were not reported. They had no real contracts. The employer simply wrote down their names and gave this list to the security guards at the mine gate to let them into work. Nobody paid any social contributions for them.

I am convinced that up to 30% of the people in the city now work under such rules.

On the Maydan and Ukraine’s failed revolutions

There is a proverb in Ukraine: Two Ukrainians, three hetmans [Hetman – a Cossack military leader]. A president whom we have just elected and whom we sincerely adored can be hated three weeks later. I have participated in all the Maydan revolutions. It has always been the same: first, the euphoria of the revolution, then the neoliberals come to power and take everything for themselves.

“I remember the end of February 2014, the third Maydan. There was a tent of our trade union in the protesters’ camp. Nearby the bodies of the shot protesters were lying. And literally next to us and next to those bodies, Yulia Tymoshenko, Petro Poroshenko and others were discussing how would they divide power and money. 100, maybe 50 metres away people were being killed. But no one was shooting at the politicians.”

After each Maydan, we thought things would get better. Each time it got worse and worse.

On the trade unions in Donetsk and Luhansk

In 2014, our trade union had nearly 52,000 members in Donetsk and Lugansk. When these areas fell out of Ukraine’s control, the Russians killed about eight of our activists. Dozens of activists had to leave. Only a small number of people agreed to cooperate with the Russians, mainly for economic reasons. One and a half million people have left Donetsk and Luhansk in the last eight years. Several universities and other institutions, formerly based in Lugansk and Donetsk, still operate in Kryvyi Rih. Many people with higher education and people who ran their own businesses left Donetsk. People who have left the area say that they have been deprived of all possible human rights.

There is the town of Krasnyi Luch where mines owned by Rinat Akhmetov operate. Our union had several thousand members there. The union leaders tried to do after 2014 what they had done before – to defend workers’ rights, to demand higher wages. One was killed, another, a Russian from Bryansk, was arrested three times – he was taken straight from his home and locked up in an underground cell. And he was leading an organisation of one and a half thousand miners, he wanted to fight for workers’ rights. From him I know that only criminal laws apply in this area, no others.

Either we win Ukraine or we die.

Małgorzata Kulbaczewska-Figat Cross-Border Talks co-founder and co-coordinator. Poland-based journalist reporting on political life and social changes in Central and Eastern Europe, with a particular focus on labour movements. Examining peripheral capitalism and people’s self-organisation. Digging out forgotten history of Polish (and East-European) workers’ struggles. Her texts were published by Dziennik Trybuna in Poland, Left.it in Italy, Avgi in Greece and other progressive outlets.

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