

# Gregor Kerr: Irish Left with Ukraine at ICTU

Friday 14 July 2023, by [KERR Gregor](#) (Date first published: 5 July 2023).

**Due to time constraints I didn't get an opportunity to deliver my prepared speech at the [Irish Left With Ukraine](#) Fringe Meeting at the ICTU Conference yesterday evening. If you get a chance to listen to the 3 fabulous Ukrainian speakers, you will realise that my speech wasn't missed!**

If I had had time, this is what I would have said -

To its credit, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and many individual unions have been unequivocal in their support for Ukraine since the brutal Russian invasion in February 2022. As is noted in the Executive Council report to BDC, in March 2022 ICTU organised a well-attended demonstration outside the Russian embassy to mark the one-month anniversary of the invasion. ICTU and many unions have run fundraising efforts and moneys raised have gone to the Irish Red Cross and to the International Trade Union Confederation fund to support Ukrainian unions. At meetings of the ITUC General Council, ICTU supported suspension of the Russian Trade Union Federation from the ITUC, and at the ITUC Congress in Melbourne in November 2022, ICTU President Kevin Callinan attended a special session which pledged support to Ukrainian and Belarus unions. Also in November, David Joyce ICTU Global Solidarity Officer and Séamus Dooley of the NUJ spoke at a public meeting in Dublin organised by Irish Left With Ukraine.

Many individual unions have also made contact and pledged solidarity with their sister Ukrainian unions. At Easter, 2 representatives of the Trade Union of Education and Science Workers of Ukraine received a standing ovation following a very powerful speech to the annual Congress of my own union - the Irish National Teachers Organisation.

Some would say - and indeed I would agree - that more should be done. But nonetheless the importance of those pledges and concrete actions of solidarity cannot be over-stated. And, indeed, the importance of providing a space and a platform for the amplification of the voices of Ukrainian trade unionists and workers is possibly the singular most important thing any of us can do in terms of supporting Ukrainian resistance to the invasion of their country by Putin's imperialist forces.

What my view is, what your view is, what any of our views might be are somewhat irrelevant. Of course we can have our views - based usually on whatever political philosophy or current we ascribe to. But the challenge for us all is can we step outside of our pre-prepared political frameworks and put ourselves in the shoes of workers and trade unionists who in the last months of 2021 and the early months of 2022 were grappling with exactly the same sort of struggles we face on a day to day basis - struggles with individual employers about wage rates and terms and conditions, struggles with the broader neo-liberal government agenda on issues of access to public health, housing, education etc etc.?

But, suddenly, their lives were turned upside down by a brutal invasion of their country. They found themselves facing the sort of horrors we really can't envisage and they found themselves grappling with how to respond. How do any of us know how we would respond in such a situation? Our

political theory might suddenly not fit the reality of the brutality of what is happening.

So the challenge for each of us as Irish trade unionists and as Irish left political activists is to be able to step outside our theory and to listen to the voices of Ukrainian trade unionists, feminists, LGBTQ+ activists, socialists, anarchists.. to listen to their reality, to respond to their requests, to empathise with the horrific situation in which they find themselves...

When we take that as our starting point, when we ask "What's your experience? What do you want us to do? How can we show our solidarity with you?", we very quickly arrive at the importance of arguing for Ukraine's rights, for their self-determination, for the right of Ukrainian people to resist the invasion by whatever means they feel necessary, for their right to get the weapons they need to mount that resistance from whatever source they can (whether we like that source or not - and I think that's obviously a sticking point for many on the Irish left which I would like to come back to in a minute). And we arrive at the importance of making those arguments because that is what Ukrainian trade unionists, socialists and left activists are arguing. Our job is not to say what we think Ukrainians should say or do. Our job is to listen, to provide a platform, to amplify their voices.

We are all in agreement that we are for peace. The vast majority of people on the broad left in Ireland - indeed the vast majority of the population as a whole - agree that the invasion was wrong, that Putin's forces should not have invaded and that Russian forces should withdraw. However, where differences emerge is in how or from what source Ukrainian people might arm themselves to resist the invasion. And, unfortunately, the fact that the only likely source of weapons is from the West, from NATO members, proves a problem for some on the left so some people find themselves supporting Ukraine's right to resist but opposing their right - or at least not able to bring themselves to proactively support their right - to acquire weapons from whatever source necessary to do so.

It's a strange position really and if it seems strange to us how utterly bizarre it must seem to Ukrainian trade unionists and workers..... We support your right to defend yourself but not your right to acquire the necessary weapons to do so.

It's a position that is being highlighted even more in recent times as the debate about defence of Ireland's neutrality heats up. To my mind, people arrive at this political position because of a lack of subtlety or nuance in terms of developing political thinking, perhaps because of the syndrome I mentioned earlier of trying to fit the facts into a pre-determined political theory rather than looking at and responding to the actual situation.

Ireland's military neutrality should absolutely be defended - although all of us know of course that the neutrality of the State has been compromised and honoured more in the breach than in the respect by successive governments.

But we should also be saying that there is and has to be a huge difference between saying We should remain militarily neutral and should not join any military bloc, should have nothing to do with NATO and being able to say at the same time that in any instance of conflict we are on the side of the oppressed against the oppressor. As trade unionists and as left activists we must defend Solidarity as well as Neutrality - We stand with the Palestinians in their struggle against the oppression of apartheid Israel, We stand with the people of Ukraine in their struggle against the oppression of the invading Russian forces.

Too many on the left tend to equate 'both sides' in the war against Ukraine. Too many left voices constantly refer to a 'proxy war' and blame NATO's expansionism and 'Western imperialism' for the war. This position denies Putin's agency, it leads to claims that Russia had 'no choice' but to invade. It leads to people opposing Ukraine's right to arm themselves from whatever source they can to

resist the invasion. It leads to calls for ceasefire and peace negotiations now without prefacing those calls with a demand for immediate Russian withdrawal.

Leftists wouldn't have dreamt of calling for a 'ceasefire and peace negotiations' when the US invaded Vietnam. Nor were there calls for 'ceasefire and negotiations' when the US invaded Iraq. Rightly hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in Ireland and millions did so across Europe to demand US withdrawal.

Where, we might ask, are the hundreds of thousands demanding Russian withdrawal? Where is the anti-war movement (using that term in the broadest sense) in standing in solidarity with the Ukrainian people to demand Russian withdrawal and to defend Ukrainian workers' right to resist the occupation. It does not compromise our neutrality, nor does it diminish our opposition to NATO to make that demand.

By not making that demand we ignore the voices of Ukrainian workers, trade unionists and left activists, we deny them agency.

So I would like to take this opportunity to ask us all here to re-double our efforts to amplify the voices of Ukrainian resistance and solidarity. And in that context I would like to recommend this book to you – a book that in the words of Vitalii Dudin, president of Sotsialnyi Rukh/Ukrainian Social Movement on the blurb ' builds a bridge of solidarity between the people of Ukraine and the working class around the world.' 'The contributions, he writes, 'make it easier to imagine a better future without imperialism and injustice.'

For Ukrainians, it's an immediate and deadly struggle. For the rest of us, the importance of a Ukrainian victory should be starkly obvious. We know that in Russia human rights, trade union rights, social rights are being repressed and oppressed by the Putin regime. We know that if Russia is allowed to impose its will on Ukraine that there too democracy and trade union and social rights will be suppressed.

In an essay in this book entitled 'I'm a Ukrainian Socialist: Here's why I resist the Russian Invasion', Tara Bilous says 'the decision to oppose the Russian occupation was not made by Joe Biden, nor by Zelenskiy, but by the Ukrainian people who rose en masse in the first days of the invasion and lined up for weapons.'

And in the midst of the horrors of war, Ukrainian socialists and trade unionists are already grappling with the questions of how society can be reconstructed in a post-war situation. 'Ukraine faces a colossal task in dealing with huge destruction and re-launching industry but neoliberal policies are not suitable for this ...' writes Vitalii Dudin in another essay in this book, ' ... this requires policies of re-distribution through taxation and the confiscation of surplus wealth from Ukraine's richest people. This would be a concrete expression of Ukraine's long-promised policy of de-oligarchization.... In the short term, Russia's war has weakened Ukrainian workers' power. But in the long run Ukraine's labour movement may intensify and improve employment conditions. Despite all the pessimism, Ukrainian society does have a belief in a more just model of reconstruction,' he writes.

The task for us, as I've said already, is to stand beside the Ukrainian trade union and socialist movement, to raise and amplify their voices, to provide them with a platform and to support them in their heroic struggles.

To finish – one final quote from an essay entitled The Right to Resist; A feminist Manifesto in this book Ukraine Voices of Resistance and Solidarity "We stand for the right to resist. If Ukrainian

society lays down its arms, there will be no Ukrainian society. If Russia lays down its arms, the war will end”.

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**Gregor Kerr**

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**P.S.**

Gregor Kerr

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