

Workers' Struggles in Ukraine and Belarus

Monday 15 August 2022, by [ARTIUKH Volodymyr](#), [GORBACH Denys](#) (Date first published: 4 November 2020).

Comparing working-class self-activity across the post-Soviet uprisings

The ongoing political crisis in Belarus has briefly placed the country on the radar of international observers, who have largely classified the opposition movement as yet another instance of [post-Soviet "colour revolutions"](#), or, as they are dubbed in the region, another "Maidan", referencing the 2013-14 movement in neighbouring Ukraine. Yet squeezing the movement in Belarus into a political sequence somewhere between Armenia and Kyrgyzstan fails to do full justice to these events. Although thinking in terms of "varieties of Maidans" may yield some productive findings on a higher level of abstraction, this article looks at a specific dimension present to varying extents in both the Ukrainian protests of 2013-14 and the ongoing Belarusian movement, but which encompasses much more than either of these movements: namely, working-class militancy.

The Ukrainian Maidan is hardly associated with the workers' movement in the popular imagination. Within the dominant public discourse in the country itself, idolizing the "Revolution of Dignity" as a popular uprising under the hegemony of nationalist and liberal intellectuals and enlightened individuals, any association with organized labour (suspicious by default in the context of "decommunization") seems almost sacrilegious. However, the early weeks of the mass protests in December 2013 were to a large extent tied to expectations of a general strike that would paralyze the economy and force concessions from the government. [Researchers noted](#) both an absolute and relative rise in the number of labour-related protests in the three years prior to Maidan. The leader of the Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Ukraine (KVPU), Mykhailo Volynets, traditionally allied to ex-prime minister Yuliya Tymoshenko, was charged with preparing the strike. Yet news reports on the topic gradually gave way to other matters deemed more important for the success of the movement, the movement's leadership shifted directions, and by late January 2014 when violent clashes between protesters and the police broke out, the notion of a general strike had lost its relevance. The second-largest labour organization, boasting almost 300,000 members including in the key industry of coal mining, was reduced to the role of a symbolic representative of labour as part of the multi-faceted "nation" constructed at Maidan Square and centred around issues with no direct bearing upon a working-class agenda as such.

The course of events in Belarus has been practically opposite in this respect. After three months of electoral campaigning in support of anti-incumbent candidates, labour unrest represented a culmination of the protest wave. Workers also enjoy a much more significant symbolic and political position in the Belarusian anti-Lukashenka coalition than they did in the Maidan movement of 2013-14. Even more significantly, this has occurred despite the fact that oppositional labour organizations in Belarus have been much weaker than their Ukrainian counterparts since 2001—the Belarusian Independent Trade Unions, the KVPU's sister union in Belarus, counts no more than 6,000 members.

Belarus: Strikes without Strikes

The electoral-turned-revolutionary protest mobilization that has been going on in Belarus since this

spring is in many ways exceptional for the region, not least because it has also been a workers' protest. It has witnessed the most numerous, geographically diverse, and most sustained labour unrest since the strikes of April 1991 which halted dozens of enterprises and brought tens of thousands of workers to the streets of Minsk and other cities of the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic against the economic policies of the Communist-led government. Subsequent labour protests had been much less numerous, either localized (Salihorsk miners' protests in 1992), short-lived (transportation workers' strike in Homel and Minsk in 1995; trade union-sponsored protests in 1998–2001), or both (wildcat strikes in 2011–13). It also represents the first large-scale labour protest to happen within the context of a broader political mobilization

Since the first mentions of workers' unrest on 10 August until the end of its active phase in late August, there have been reports of protest activity at more than 80 trade and service companies as well as educational, medical, and media institutions. Almost all of these are state-owned enterprises and/or publicly financed entities. The 30 largest state-owned enterprises affected by the protests [account for 27 percent of Belarusian GDP](#).

Although Belarusian activists tend to use the word "strikes" indiscriminately, the more accurate term for these incidents is in fact "labour unrest"—an expression of discontent by employees in the form of spontaneous or organized gatherings, walkouts, petitions, demonstrations, and/or work disruptions. Almost all of the labour protest events in August 2020 were limited to spontaneous, and later organized short-term gatherings in groups of 50–500 workers, usually within plant premises. These meetings would happen once or twice a day, involving factory management, trade union and local officials. Such meetings would often take place outside of working hours and would not lead to a complete shutdown of the plant or its departments. They often resulted in collecting signatures to issue a strike warning, collective petitions that were even signed by the so-called "yellow" trade unions, the founding of strike committees, and ultimately withdrawal from the "yellow" unions.

Proper strikes, i.e. a partial or full shutdown of plant divisions and significant work disruption, [happen rarely](#). The disruptions at one department of Belarusian Steel Works On 10 August, two departments of the Hrodna Azot chemical plant on 13 August, most of the mines operated by the Belaruskali potash company on 17–19 August, and the work stoppages at the Hrodna Construction Company are the most important confirmed incidents. The form of protest reminiscent of the Kryvyi Rih events analyzed in the second part of this article—workers' refusal to come out of the mine—was previously used only [on three occasions by three Salihorsk potash miners](#), and each time they were promptly evacuated by the emergency services and police. The work stoppages took place in the second week of post-electoral protests after the violent crackdown on 9–13 August. Following a wave of detentions among labour activists and threats to workers, the emerging labour organizations' strategy shifted to so-called "work-to-rule" tactics—slowing down of the labour process by strictly following the technical working rules—also known as "Italian strikes" in the post-Soviet space.

Managers and the authorities initially seemed disoriented and even forthcoming towards strikers. During the first week of the protests, after BelAZ workers forced their mayor to listen to their demands and workers from the Minsk Tractor Works marched to the city centre, [labour appeared to be the only force](#) capable of forcing the authorities to enter into a dialogue with the protesters and stop the violence. Informal arrangements at many industrial enterprises saw management allowing protesting workers to take a leave of absence in exchange for not showing up on the plant premises, while the state-run trade unions often signed petitions against electoral fraud and police violence. However, with the routinization of the general protest movement and the Belarusian president's newly gained confidence after receiving public Russian support, harassment, selective lay-offs, and detention [became the tactics of choice](#) against workers. In the last week of August, the Belaruskali strike committee called for a work-to-rule action for those who showed up in the factories. A similar strategy was reported at the Minsk Tractor Works. It is hard to assess how successful this strategy

has been given the arsenal of punitive tools at management's disposal, from withholding bonuses to threatening with financial and criminal liability, not to mention many workers' dependency on plant-mediated welfare provision (including subsidized housing and loans).

While it is up for debate whether the overall protest mobilization is in decline or just changing its shape, labour unrest gained a more individualized, sporadic, and invisible form. What resources enabled Belarusian workers to overcome the proverbial "patience" of post-Soviet workers? Are these resources gone for good, or have they transformed into a new quality of working-class organization in Belarus?

Class in Itself, Protest for Others?

Belarusian workers' acts of defiance have been effective, but more on the symbolical level than in material terms. Official statistics, which may not be reliable, report no significant drop in industrial output for the month of August. Output has been falling since last year, but this trend is caused by more systemic economic problems rather than strikes. There are reports of significantly falling output in some enterprises where disturbance took place like the Minsk Automobile Plant, but these numbers are difficult to assess. Nevertheless, their symbolic impact was important. On the one hand, there have been a number of signs that the authorities were afraid of the looming mass strikes: Lukashenka threatened to cut "superfluous" workforces and close down rebellious enterprises. His first post-election visit was to one of the industrial enterprises that produces military-grade vehicles, where workers famously booed him. On the other hand, the Belarusian working class became an inspiration for the broader protesting masses: workers were received as heroes on the streets, greeted with banners and chants, invited to talks on opposition media, offered solidarity at the factory gates and material compensation for unemployment. It should be noted that this marks a significant exception in the region, for in no other Eastern European country, including Ukraine, have workers gained such symbolic prestige among society at large.

At the same time, workers derive their confidence from the streets, not from their workplaces where they suffer from atomization and strict management control. Although labour unrests are part of the larger protest wave, Belarusian workers protest as citizens rather than as workers. This is, however, an ambivalent process: the very experience of uniting and standing up to the bosses is vital for workers to overcome atomization and gain organizational experience, but at the same time they have not yet learned to articulate political their demands within a broader social agenda. At this stage of development of working-class consciousness, the form of their activity is more important than the content. Stopping at this stage, on the other hand, may jeopardize possible beneficial long-term effects of this experience should its content evolve and lead to properly working-class forms of action.

The downside of the protests' general populist ideological frame is that social and work-related demands are only sporadically articulated. As was the case in the 1980s in Poland and the Soviet Union, political demands take precedence over bread-and-butter grievances. Yet unlike labour protests in the late Soviet Union, where social demands transformed into political ones, in Belarus today labour unrest began as immediately political, carried into the factories from the streets. [There are left-wing initiatives to bring social demands to the workers](#), but it is not yet clear how successful they are given the hesitant and ambiguous relations of the Belarus Left to the ongoing protest wave.

This, however, need not be ascribed to the malicious influence of the protests' liberal wing, as the abstractly "civic" and not concretely economic nature of this labour unrest is an objectively contradictory phenomenon. In a state capitalist country like Belarus, class conflict is blurred: the immediate exploiter coincides with the state bureaucracy, meaning that social demands are never disconnected from political demands. In popular consciousness, government bureaucrats appear not

as managers of state-owned capital, but as part of a “feudal” order—their social control function is abstracted and fetishized by the workers, while their exploitative function is overlooked. This raises the question of the direction of politicization. The small left-wing initiatives seeking to carry a social agenda into the protests do not seem to understand the objective inevitability of the illusion mentioned above as much as the liberals fail to understand that a formalist democratization agenda without social transformation will fail to effect real change. Essentially, left-wing activists expect workers to have pure class consciousness and fight against capitalists, whereas capitalists are not immediately visible even to these activists. In turn, the Left feels let down by the “deluded” and “bribed” workers.

Despite being the most significant labour unrest within the most significant protest mobilization in Belarus since the early 1990s, the work stoppages never transformed into a general strike and failed to deliver tangible results for the overall protest movement. The reasons for this are not only the hegemony of the liberal wing of the protest hidden beneath a democratic-populist sheen, but also weak labour organizations and the peculiar regime of labour control prevalent in the “Belarus model”.

Even Carrots Work like Sticks

The kind of strike over work-related grievances considered “legitimate” by Belarusian labour law is utopian: it involves a lengthy procedure, requiring support from two thirds of a representative workers’ assembly with a two-week warning, and can be prohibited for national security, public order, or other reasons. Thus, even a “normal” strike is impractical given management’s and the state’s control over workplaces. Moreover, strikes legally initiated by trade unions cannot pose “political demands”, as the Belarusian Law on Trade Unions states without further clarification. Indeed, the Belaruskali strike committee [was found guilty of organizing an illegal strike](#) by a Belarusian court. Thus, given the slow pace at which strike committees and other forms of labour organizations are being established on the one hand, and their extreme vulnerability to pressure from both management and state authorities on the other, we should not expect more significant work disruptions in state-owned enterprises in the near future. Indeed, after Tsikhanouskaia called for yet another general strike for 25 October, protests happened only in six large industrial enterprises, with some notable work disruption at the Hrodna Azot chemical plant and Minsk Electrotechnical Plant. The police and enterprise management have been better prepared than the core of 30-60 organized workers per company: the police demonstratively set up posts at the gates, workers were too intimidated to respond to the agitation of the initiating groups, and where they did respond, like at Hrodna Azot, they were detained in dozens on the shop floor. Detentions and dismissals of the activists followed the next day.

An even more formidable obstacle to sustainable labour organization in Belarus has been the bureaucratic despotism in the workplace on the one hand, and lack of independent organizational and intellectual resources to formulate an autonomous agenda for organized labour on the other. Since 2004 the state, facing opposition from trade unions and threats of strikes, has developed a unique system of labour control that pre-emptively breaks down workers’ solidarity, atomizes them, and makes them directly dependent on management. This represents an extension of the “neo-prebendal control” that the bureaucratic apparatus itself suffers from: any and all material privileges are conditional upon total subjugation to formal and informal authorities. This is ensured by a system of fixed-term contracts, which allows management to fire workers without any compensation but prevents them from leaving their workplaces at will. Unemployment, at the same time, is [punishable under the “law on social parasitism”](#), while unemployment benefits are miserable. Thus, employment is not only about exploitation but also about social control through a combination of precarity and immobility. Even traditional post-socialist informality within the workplace benefits management, rather than reinforcing workers’ autonomy as it did during Soviet

times. One can say that Belarusian factory regime combines the worst from the Soviet past and the Western capitalist present.

This is accompanied by a lack of autonomous organizational forms. The largest trade union body, the Belarusian Federation of Trade Unions which covers pretty much every employee in the country, has essentially become one of the branches of the state bureaucracy since being co-opted by the administration in 2002. The chairperson of the Federation was also responsible for Lukashenka's most recent re-election campaign. Nevertheless, Federation unions are somewhat more responsive to pressure from their rank-and-file members than the state bureaucracy proper, as the early days of the August protests showed, when some local union organizations signed petitions against electoral fraud and police violence. But given the Federation's crucial role in assessing and appeasing workers' moods—a sort of left hand of the state apparatus—it is kept under the direct control of the presidential administration. The trade unions that are not controlled by the state—the free and independent unions, as they call themselves—are not numerous and lack resources. The largest independent union, whose core is the Miners' Union with a stronghold in Salihorsk potash mines dating back to 1991, has around 6,000 members (probably less). It was the most active and most successful in organizing a proper strike on 17 August, with several potash mines shutting down for several days, but it also bore the brunt of state repression: many of its members have been detained and jailed, some left the country. Other independent unions are significantly smaller and lack a sizable presence in the workplace, resembling NGOs that offer legal counsel. Many strike committees appeared during the labour unrest, but they are secretive and vulnerable to state repression. Currently, the opposition Coordination Council, which includes a dozen representatives of labour organizations, is seeking [to incorporate workers more systematically and offer them organizational and material support](#) by launching an online resource that allows workers to join unions anonymously. Simultaneously, the [BySol initiative](#) offers financial support and education for repressed workers. However, given the weakness of this body and its market-oriented entrepreneurial approach to labour issues, this cooperation will probably not prove fruitful for the Belarusian labour movement in either the short- or long term.

Renewed labour protest activity in Belarus seems more likely to emerge over the long term, as opposed to something that could simply be scheduled by a now weakened opposition. The politicization that workers carried from the streets into their factories, their experience of standing up to their bosses, of solidarity and self-organization will not vanish without a trace. A large share of the workers at all major enterprises went through this moment of politicization, of realizing their collectivity and opposition to their bosses. Work safety-related and economic issues increasingly mix with the purely political agenda of the protests. This first protest drive may have been harshly repressed, but the contradictions of Belarusian state capitalism will not go away—indeed, they will only become more acute. Now not only the global recession, but also pressure from Russian capital will impact the Belarusian working class. On the one hand, it will increase the precariousness of workers' living conditions: wages will not rise, enterprises will slowly be sold off to Russian capitalists, “optimized”, or closed. On the other hand, bureaucratic control over workplaces will also increase, while the state-affiliated trade unions will prove incapable of channelling workers' discontent. This combination of workers' newly gained politicization and organization experience combined with a deteriorating economic situation may spark new waves of labour unrest, perhaps more autonomous from larger political protests.

Unfortunately, this possibility is rarely discussed among the Belarusian Left. No autonomous labour agenda has been formulated capable of addressing the aforementioned issues. The Belarusian Left lacks a coherent Marxist analysis of Belarusian state capitalism and its political superstructure that could account for class struggle in this context. Yet without such an analysis, the Left cannot formulate a political programme that would show the way forward for the class struggle under

bureaucratic state capitalism, and develop class-based demands and tactics for establishing workers' control over enterprises. Surprisingly, Belarusian left-wing intellectuals largely ignore this elephant in the room, either because they lack a clear understanding of the nature of Belarusian state, or due to mechanistic schematisations of the class structure borrowed from the Western capitalist states.

Ukraine: Embedded Strikes

If in Belarus the current political fervour seems to have anesthetized workers to material deprivation, in Ukraine bread-and-butter issues rose to the fore after “dignity” had been ostensibly achieved. Despite failing to become the focal point of Maidan in 2014, the Ukrainian labour movement managed to live on and even gradually rise in prominence. The last six years have seen a spectacular march on the capital by [healthcare workers from the North-East](#), strikes of [public transportation workers in Kyiv](#), massive campaigns of [coal miners in Western Ukraine](#), and even a mobilization of precarious [delivery service employees](#) in large cities. However, many of these mobilizations were reactive and ephemeral, not supported by nor generating any sustainable labour movements. Events which were able to produce long-lasting political effects have been unevenly distributed geographically: the changing structure of the national economy, namely the long-term eclipse of high-tech industries located in Dnipropetrovsk or Kyiv, and the war-induced irrelevance of the Donbas industries, has pushed Kryvyi Rih—a mining and metalworking city in the south-east of Ukraine, untouched by the war—into the spotlight. This city, which has become an important locus of national income generation in the new conjuncture relying to a greater extent on the export of iron ore, has also turned into a hotbed of working-class militancy. Already in 2014, Kryvyi Rih trade unions conducted industrial action independent of the general Maidan movement, even if discursively framed as a “patriotic” protest against the Russian company that owned the local mines. Under tis nationalist disguise were hidden purely economic demands to raise wages for the miners.

The economic crisis that ensued led to the drastic depreciation of the national currency in 2014-15, which helped form the main demand of all subsequent strikes and protests: a return to the average wage of 1,000 US dollars for the miners and metalworkers of the city. Framed conservatively as a restoration of social balance, the agenda in fact constitutes an offensive campaign—unusual for the protest repertoire of the Ukrainian working class, which typically focuses on defensive demands like preventing the closure of an enterprise or paying wage arrears. The symbolic figure of 1,000 represents the core element around which actual demands can be structured in a flexible manner: in different moments, they referred to US dollars (the traditional benchmark currency in Ukraine) or to euro (containing the additional symbolism of “moving towards Europe”, but also simply worth more than dollars)—1,000 figured as the expected wage level for skilled workers (as it was in 2013), as the average wage for the enterprise, as the wage hike to be granted to all workers, or as the minimum acceptable wage for the industry. This array of demands accompanies the annual strike waves that have broken over the city since 2017.

Lacking a strong internal structure, the movement is defined to a large extent by its external partners lending their resources to the workers. The most important of these partners is the Independent Miners Union of Ukraine (NPGU)—the core member federation of KVPU, headed by the same leader, Mykhailo Volynets, since its founding in 1990. The head of the local NPGU enjoys relative autonomy from the national leadership and considerable moral influence in the city's politicized working-class milieu. He is the key figure representing the restive workers during negotiations and in the media, along with a handful of NPGU cell presidents in the workplaces. The involvement of the national union apparatus usually takes place in the form of Volynets's media appearances and his communication with international actors (the ILO and various global union federations) as a method of exerting external pressure on the owner.

Volynets had been a member of parliament since the 1990s, lending him additional influence during

industrial conflicts. His traditional political patron Yuliya Tymoshenko, however, did not include him on her electoral list in 2014, and the loss of his mandate prompted him to seek other allies, most notably the neo-Nazi Azov movement. In 2016, Volynets invited [an Azov member](#) into the leadership of the union, explaining that it would help him in negotiations with the government. However, the harsh reaction of KVPU's international partners prompted the federation to abandon the alliance with the far right. It was also in the same period from 2014–19, when Volynets was not in parliament, that he established close ties with Rinat Akhmetov, the most powerful Ukrainian oligarch. Although neither publicly admit to the cooperation, the general pattern of KVPU's campaigns—never directed against coal mines and metalworking enterprises owned by Akhmetov—as well as [some leaked documents](#) are strong evidence of its existence.

The local chapter of NPGU has meanwhile established a partnership with a small leftist organisation in Kyiv called “Social Movement” (*SotsRukh*). The amount of resources available to socialist students and intelligentsia is quite small and their daily routine is rather detached from the workers living hundreds of kilometres away from them, but their deep commitment has nevertheless made them significant players in the city's working-class politics. Besides NPGU, there are no less than a dozen other unions, most of them with little ideological commitment of any sort. This cross-pollinating milieu is characterized by constantly shifting alliances and rivalries. It also has a modest far-right flank—the nationalist union is relatively isolated from the rest and politically weak compared to other forces, but ceaselessly tries to push its agenda and recruit members.

The 2020 Miners' Strike: Too Political or Not Political Enough?

On 3 September, a dozen workers from Oktiabrsk mine, belonging to the Kryvyi Rih Iron Ore Combine (KZRK), refused to leave the mine after their night shift. Around 20 miners from the following shift joined them before the administration stopped the mineshaft elevator.

This represents the routine protest repertoire for Kryvyi Rih miners, whereby strikes are usually a more or less spontaneous reaction to a localized perceived injustice (this time, it was workers in a specific department receiving unusually low pay). Strikers stay inside the mine, preventing it from operating, while their families and miners from other shifts gather in front of the entrance to wait for the arrival of the “bosses”. Ideally, the general director enters the mine, talks to the strikers, and makes some promises and immediate concessions. The NPGU leadership, usually caught unaware by the strike, inserts itself into the negotiation process and helps the strikers to avoid legal pitfalls (e.g. insisting on the terminology of an “underground protest” or “workplace discussion” instead of “strike”, which is a punishable offence). Oktiabrsk is the most underinvested of KZRK's four mines, with direct implications for the incomes of its employees, making it the most prone to such interruptions.

This time, however, the routine sequence of events was upended by some unusual circumstances. First of all, the strike was preceded by a massive reassessment of workplaces: the procedure that the employer has to hold every five years, relying on the expertise of an independent scientific body. This time, the local institute that usually does the job was ignored, and the task was conferred to an institute from another city, having little to do with mining. As a result of its work, ten professions, mostly occupied by women and underpaid, faced the prospect of losing their job's “hazardous” status, which would negate their early retirement. Early retirement is the single most important reason for people to work in Ukrainian mines—especially for women, whose wages are often little more than the official minimum. Cancelling early retirement would have been a heavy blow, but discussions in August did not suggest that the better-paid “core” male workforce was willing to support their female colleagues with a solidarity action. The strike, triggered by other events, created a space for such solidarity: maintaining the current retirement plan became one of the strikers' demands. Conversely, the gesture ensured a greater commitment to the cause among the

workforce, female and otherwise: on the fourth day of the strike, the three other mines joined the movement, completely stopping production. At the movement's peak, over 400 miners were remaining underground at the depth of around 1.3 kilometres.

Another unlikely element of solidarity was provided by the municipal elections scheduled for 25 October. The strike received immediate support from an organization of local entrepreneurs allied to Tymoshenko's party, Batkivshchyna. Thanks to the technical resources they provided, the strike has quickly become an ongoing street protest reverberating across the city. Despite the declared "non-political" character of the event (justifying the expulsion of the far-right speakers), it was effectively managed by people running for local councils under Batkivshchyna's banner, including some union leaders.

The strike also received unexpected support from city mayor Yuriy Vilkul. For the first time in his ten years in office, he came out to the protests, expressed his full support, offered help, and even condemned the oligarchs who operate industrial enterprises in the city. Closely connected to Rinat Akhmetov's company Metinvest throughout his political career, Vilkul lost support in the 2020 elections after Metinvest entered into an alliance with President Zelenskyi's party, which nominated a top manager from Metinvest as its mayoral candidate. The combination of Zelenskyi's popularity and Akhmetov's administrative and financial resources constitutes a real threat to the incumbent mayor, who thus decided to pose as the paternalistic supporter of the workers, ensuring that they received favourable media coverage and all the necessary logistical resources. The strike has become a major political resource for Vilkul, whose sudden change of rhetoric and material aid to strikers was appreciated in those quarters. The incumbent mayor made the best of the situation, presenting the loss of a major political partner as proof of his "pro-worker" stance and easily making it into the second round. On the other hand, Batkivshchyna, whose local chapter has been a loyal part of the pro-Vilkul coalition in the incumbent city council, failed to gain any support for itself; its efforts on the ground did not translate into electoral support, and the party has been voted out of the city council. Conversely, President Zelenskyi's silence around the strike happening in his native city, even after the miners came to Kyiv and spent several days picketing the parliament and the president's office, cost him political support in this milieu. His joint protégé with Metinvest, tainted with a "pro-bosses" image, did not gain enough votes to win in the first round, and his chances in the runoff are unclear.

Finally, at the highest levels of power, the strike played into the inter-oligarchic rivalry between the two owners of KZRK: Akhmetov's Metinvest and the Privat Group, led by Ihor Kolomoyskyi. In his public comments about the conflict, the leader of NPGU consistently demonized Privat while ignoring the role of Metinvest. Initially, he portrayed the enterprise as fully belonging to Privat; later, Volynets explained that Metinvest is indeed another owner, but that it sides with the workers and tries to make the other shareholder agree to concessions. In Ukraine, such rhetoric could be interpreted as an attempt by one owner to push out the other.

The 2020 strike was the first one to happen after the death of the general director, who had headed KZRK for two decades and enjoyed a degree of traditional paternalist legitimacy. His successor, on the other hand, attempted to renegotiate the informal norms by taking a hard line against the strikers. He outraged activist miners with his rough attitude and threats, which made the strike unusually long and painful. The self-marginalizing intransigence of management, together with the unusual political conjuncture, even pushed the local chapter of the loyalist union PMGU to cautiously support the strikers by the end of the movement.

The strike lasted 43 days. Its core demands concerning wage hikes were not achieved, not even remotely. Strikers ultimately agreed to the management's concessions they had initially rejected as insufficient: a 21 percent raise for the underground workers and 38 percent for the worse-paid

overground employees. Despite promising to cease all legal prosecution of the strikers, management has not called off its lawsuit. On the other hand, pension plans were retained for the ten professions that would have lost them had the strike not happened. The strike represented a moral victory for the miners, encouraging rather than dissuading them from subsequent conflict with the discredited management. However, optimism concerning their increased capacities for grassroots organisation would be premature. Instead, the strike demonstrated the union's persistent reliance on the state as the ultimate regulator and provider of goods. Instead of dissolving in the new capitalist conjuncture, traditional industrial paternalism has simply migrated upwards, with the government and other central actors playing the role of patron previously reserved for factory directors.

For many miners, the strike's political implications compromised it, tainting it with the corrupt undertones of "politics". It was indeed "politicized" in the sense of inscription into the context of party-political struggle and oligarchic competition, likely an inevitable dynamic for all similar events in contemporary Ukraine with its regime of "oligarchic democracy". However, it has also been "politicized" in another sense, that of extending the designated space for the political self-expression of the masses. Like the preceding strikes in Kryvyi Rih, the last round went much further than discussing wage levels and labour conditions. Ukrainian workers, who have seen multiple changes of property regimes at their places of work and residence, are probably better equipped to pose larger questions of property and value distribution than their colleagues in less-turbulent countries. Each strike and most labour-organised protest events we have witnessed tended to question the legitimacy of their employer's property rights. Contrary to stereotypes, the "golden age" evoked in this context is not so much the Soviet era—too controversial for some and anyway biographically irrelevant for most—but the early 2000s, when economic growth had already begun but industry remained in the hands of the state, with localized industrial paternalism mechanisms still intact. If anything, this is the most likely "real utopia" to animate the minds of the workers.

Allies and Patrons

The fragmented character of post-Soviet industrial paternalism is an important factor explaining the difficulties of building a grassroots labour movement beyond the borders of a single enterprise. Solidarity remains to a large extent an empty slogan when every enterprise has its own payment and distribution regimes, neutralizing workers' militancy to varying degrees. In May 2017, a [similar strike movement](#) not only spread to both of the two mining corporations active in the city, but also provoked separate protests at the metalworking giant ArcelorMittal Kryvyi Rih (AMKR). This coordination was short-lived and never repeated afterwards. In 2018, [labour unrest at AMKR](#) was not supported by the miners, and in 2019, Oktiabrskia was the only mine to strike.

This time, the striking miners have received support from railway workers, who organized a one-day [Italian strike](#). Coordination was made possible by the common organizational framework of KVPU. This type of connectedness via a [vertically structured patronage organization](#) makes the movement more, not less, susceptible to political capture by its partners. On the other hand, the NPGU cell at AMKR has not been able or willing to support their comrades through even symbolic industrial action.

Even inside the KZRK, workers were far from unanimous in supporting the strike. At the high point of the movement, it counted not more than 10 percent of the workforce. Passionate video appeals from activists shaming their colleagues did not help: the vast majority preferred to use the freed-up time for personal activities (fishing, home renovations, moonlighting) and maintained good relations with the bosses by regularly registering for shifts to signal their willingness to work and distance themselves from the striking troublemakers. The new labour movement of Ukraine looks much more impressive than it really is.

The leftist allies of the movement find it difficult to enter and gain influence in the movement, not least because of its modest scale. As a result, they might be well-known in the activist milieu, but that milieu has little influence over the workforce at large. In the moments of mobilization, the key issue is the amount and quality of resources that a potential ally is able to offer. This is not one of SotsRukh's strengths: in the case of competition, they will always be rejected in favour of a more powerful patron like the desperate city mayor or the nation-wide structure with oligarchic backing and parliamentary representation. On the other hand, the nationalists' claims to hegemony in the working-class activist milieu are even less founded. Counterintuitively for today's Ukraine, so far they have been on the losing side of the struggle for influence, relatively isolated and exercising little influence in the enterprises where they are present.

Pathologically suspicious of all "politics" potentially meddling in their struggle, Ukrainian workers nevertheless have no choice but to accept help from powerful political actors, provided the latter are even interested in lending them a hand. The traditional pattern of spontaneous protests, relying on the informal leverage that the most-privileged section of the workforce has over management, is considered optimal, but the conditions making it possible are disappearing. The tacit renegotiation of conventions sheds light on the political vacuum in the workplace. This vacuum could potentially be filled by genuine working-class organizations with a wider membership base and transparent connections to external politico-economic structures. Alternatively, employers can step in by eradicating all traces of working-class militancy with the help of neo-Fordist distribution schemes that already guarantee social peace at Metinvest's own quarries in Kryvyi Rih today.

In the meantime, the greatest achievement of the workers' movement in Ukraine so far has been its ability to produce a convincing public image, hiding its inherent weakness from the critical gaze. The leftist movement, suffering from its own weaknesses, has been instrumental in producing this publicity.

Conclusion

In both Ukraine and Belarus, despite the proverbial post-socialist workers' patience, the labour movement is capable of taking spectacular forms. These forms, however, are contingent on particular conjunctures outside of workers' control. In both cases, the strength of the workers' movement is built on ambivalent legacies: that of inter-oligarchic rivalry or of preserved industrial potential. Thus, workers' mobilizations do not appear very sustainable given the changes in the broader political or economic context.

In the context of macro-political struggle in state capitalist Belarus, the employer is also the oppressive government, which makes workers' protest especially virulent. Nevertheless, this duality also hinders the development of an autonomous workers' agenda, forcing them into a "natural" alliance with political forces that tend to rely on market-fundamentalist ideology hidden behind anti-authoritarian populist rhetoric. In the [pluralist-by-default](#) Ukraine, political struggle takes place at various levels, drawing workers into [patronage relations](#) that sometimes end up "hijacking" their struggles for the purpose of competition between patrons. On the ideological level, this divergence creates grotesque mirror images: centralized industrial paternalism in Belarus actually represents the political ideal for Ukrainian workers, as they are unaware of the precarity built into that system. Some newly politicized Belarusian workers in turn admire Ukraine, where they sometimes find temporary refuge, for its apparent economic and political freedom—unaware of the market-based, let alone brute-force coercion.

Despite the proliferation of independent organizations in Ukraine, which are very weak in Belarus, in both countries workers exhibit the same lack of trust towards the unions, "independent" or otherwise, preferring informal "spontaneous" manners of resolving conflicts. These informal

patterns tend to be highly individualistic, erasing the very possibility of sustainable collective organisation. To the extent that such structures do exist, they mostly unite the most high-skilled and well-paid workforces, while the others are left to their own devices.

Contrary to the stereotypes concerning de-industrialization, classical industrial labour can in fact be an important political player in politico-economic contexts as diverse as Ukraine and Belarus. But it is full of weaknesses that are all too readily ignored during bouts of enthusiasm. These weaknesses include pacifying corporate welfare schemes, generalized precarity outside of the enterprise, and a suspicious attitude vis-à-vis “politics” that divides workers. Among the resources shared by militant workers in both cases, internal social hierarchies play an important role: both in Ukraine and in Belarus, the outrage provoked by the ruling class openly questioning the primacy of the working class in the symbolic hierarchy seems to have played a very important mobilizing role. All of these factors need to be studied in greater detail in order to get a better grasp of the possibilities opening for progressive forces in the current political conjuncture on the European periphery.

Both countries face economic downturn in the coming months if not years, and it looks like Ukrainian and Belarusian workers will not be willing to bear the brunt of it. Whether Lukashenka stays in power—which appears likely for now—or leaves under the pressures of the protesters, the Belarusian government will have to deal with an industrial working class that has learned how to engage in collective action in spite of severe bureaucratic and police pressure. If either the old regime under Russian pressure or the new neoliberal hard-liners decide to tackle the crisis with a push for austerity, a new and possibly more massive wave of labour unrest can be expected.

In Ukraine, the struggle against austerity has been a more routine thing for industrial workers. However, they have to rely on resources external to the workers’ movement, namely on the material and administrative leverage of political patrons and the “soft” resources of moral economy: namely, popular support for the workers’ cause among the general public. Both types of resources are beyond their control. In the long run, they are set to diminish, given Ukraine’s dependence on global commodity markets (which are set to stagnate, depriving ruling-class factions of income they could share with their clients) and the gradual marginalization of the working class in the national moral landscape. However, in the near future these resources will be sufficient for new episodes of working-class struggles. These episodes are able to occasionally deliver certain results, mostly due to the political weaknesses of the Ukrainian state and ruling class. As long as the current precarious and unstable politico-economic situation does not consolidate into a more solid hegemonic conjuncture, these victories will remain isolated episodes that do not come together in forming a strong and sustainable labour movement.

Volodymyr Artiukh is a research fellow at New Europe College in Bucharest and currently working on a book manuscript about Belarusian labour and the political economy of authoritarian populism.

Denys Gorbach is a PhD candidate at Sciences Po in Paris. His research deals with the moral economy of the Ukrainian industrial working class, situating it between the national accumulation regime and the local political imagination.

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