

Ukrainian coal miners defy national protest ban to go on strike

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Industrial action at Mine No. 9 in Novovolynsk follows takeover at the top and allegations of corruption

Miners and management at a state-owned coal operation in western Ukraine have called a strike over what they say is an attempt to seize control of the mine.

The strike action at Mine No. 9 in the town of Novovolynsk continues the [first major workers' protest](#) in Ukraine since Russia's 24 February invasion and the Ukrainian government's announcement of martial law, which forbids all protests.

Last month, the miners [prevented](#) a new director from taking up his post, citing his alleged link to an embezzlement scandal at another coal mine in the region.

They also claimed that his appointment had been made on the say-so of local *smotriashchiy* – a term for the Ukrainian coal sector's network of corrupt unofficial overseers. That director denied any wrongdoing and stated he was not under investigation.

Now, they say, efforts to take control of the mine have reached a new level and the miners have gone on strike to protect their jobs and working conditions.

They describe a stark sequence of events. On 9 September, a new manager arrived at Mine No. 9 with a lawyer and a dozen private security guards.

While acting director Volodymyr Yurkiv was holding a meeting, the new proposed manager, Serhiy Trotsko, tried to remove Yurkiv and the others from the office.

Trotsko said he had been newly appointed by Ukraine's Ministry of Energy, but did not show a copy of the appointment order, according to Yurkiv. (The ministry confirmed to openDemocracy on 14 September that it had appointed Trotsko.)

This led to a confrontation between the miners and Trotsko and his security team, according to videos of the events seen by openDemocracy.

Yurkiv, who was demoted to chief engineer by the ministry following a previous protest in August, says Trotsko's appointment had not followed due procedure. Similarly, he said Trotsko had arrived without proof of the ministry's order.

Speaking to openDemocracy, Trotsko said he had brought legal counsel to Mine No. 9 because he "doesn't know the intricacies of law", and that he had hired the lawyer and private security team himself.

Mine No. 9's management team and Mykhailo Volynets of the miners union have expressed frustration that they were unable to contact the ministry about the crisis. Volynets even made an official complaint to Ukrainian law enforcement over Trotsko's attempt to take over.

He sees it as connected to the Ukrainian government's [announcement of a 2.5 billion hryvnia \(£58m\) fund](#) for buying coal for the winter season, which is likely to put significant stress on the country's heating systems.

Fragile future

Early in Volodymyr Zelenskyi's administration, the Ukrainian president made a promise to stamp out corruption in the coal sector. Workers at Mine No. 9 link the recent appointments to the possible return of corrupt practices.

Zelenskyi's promise gave workers at Mine No. 9 hope for the future, Yurkiv says, adding that the miners want to return to work "on the condition that [Trotsko] leaves".

He told openDemocracy: "I'm not trying to hold on to my job – this would be a wrong impression. I want [Mine No. 9] to stay afloat and, most importantly, to work."

Just five days of downtime at Mine No. 9 have cost it 1.5 million hryvnias (around £35,000), he says.

This is not the first time Trotsko has tried to take up a coal industry management post under resistance. Three years ago, he [tried](#) to take up a post as director of Lvivuhillia, the state coal company in Lviv region, [with the help of a lawyer](#) who travelled to the site. He failed after coal workers prevented him from entering the building.

Trotsko has [told](#) local media outlet Bug that he worked his way up from electrician to director of the Nadiya mine in Lviv region, and that he had brought private security to Mine No. 9 in Novovolynsk "so that no physical force" was used against him.

Speaking to openDemocracy, he said he had brought a copy of his appointment order, signed by the minister of energy, on the day he started – which Yurkiv says he was not shown.

He claims that the protests at Mine No. 9 were instigated by a "certain group of miners" for whom a change in management would mean an end to their jobs.

"Most of the workers at the mine understand everything, but are under the influence of their leaders," Trotsko said.

According to the Ministry of Energy, Mine No. 9 has nearly exhausted its forecasted reserves of coal. The mine is set to close in 2023 – and employees are concerned that management changes could lead to it closing sooner.

Trotsko says he was appointed to increase the mine's profitability, and to give the ministry a reason to cancel the closure of the mine.

Andriy Syniuk, the director of the ministry's coal industry department, told openDemocracy that he and his department "have nothing to do" with the situation at Mine No. 9.

Syniuk previously accompanied a proposed new manager, Viktor Herashchenko, to Novovolynsk on 2 August – but workers blocked their path to the mine.

When asked if the spate of new managers at Mine No. 9 was based on a decision by the ministry's top bosses, Syniuk declined to comment.

This time, no representative from the Ministry of Energy arrived alongside Trotsko to present him to employees.

In fact, Mine No. 9 management had not been informed by the ministry that a new director had been appointed, even during the routine morning meeting with ministry officials on 9 September, according to Pavlo Holota, Mine No. 9's assistant anti-corruption director.

The miners collectively issued a motion of no confidence against Trotsko at a general meeting on 9 September with the new manager present. In response, Trotsko summoned the police to file a report on obstruction of his work.

The head office of the national police in Volyn region told openDemocracy that the force had opened an investigation into alleged obstruction of legitimate business activity at Mine No. 9.

The mobilisation at Mine No. 9 is not the only protest in the western Ukrainian coal fields during Russia's invasion of the country.

At the beginning of September, workers at the Nadiya mine in the Lviv region came out to protest after Trotsko, who had worked at that mine for 17 years, came along to introduce a new managerial appointment. In response, a group of six miners refused to come up to the surface for three days.

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