

Ukraine: Decent Work during and after the War

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On October 7th, the world celebrates World Day for Decent Work. On this day, the workers bring to mind their right to decent work, and unions of the world hold massive protests drawing their governments' attention to low wages, unsafe working conditions, and other problems millions of people still face.

The right to work is established by the Constitution of Ukraine. Our state is responsible for guaranteeing safe and healthy working conditions and a salary “not lower than that determined by law” for every worker (Article 43 of the Labor Code). As defined by the International Labor Organization, work is decent in case it guarantees the following: equitable income, a safe workplace, good prospects for personal development and social integration; the freedom to speak out about workspace problems, the ability to organize and participate in decisions that affect the lives of workers; equal opportunities and treatment for all women and men.

Does the state cope with the responsibilities assumed? How many Ukrainians can call their work worthy after reading such a definition?

As a researcher and author, I have been dealing a lot with working conditions and wages in various industries in recent years. The working conditions of those who teach children, take care of the elderly, cure, mine coal, drive trolleybuses or shoot new Ukrainian films very often deviate not only from the letter of the law but also from some of my basic ideas about justice.

A few months after the full-scale war broke out in Ukraine, state authorities and civil society representatives initiated discussions on reconstruction and the future image of Ukraine. In my opinion, all these discussions and long-term plans lack attention not only to employment issues per se but also specifically to the conditions in which those who support the Ukrainian economy work and live — to the workers themselves.

Unemployment and Fear

During the war, there is a risk of reducing the issue of decent work conditions and wages to a much simpler one - having at least some work and minimal financial stability. According to [the International Labor Organization](#), about 4.8 million Ukrainians lost their jobs in May alone. In August, the level of unemployment in Ukraine [reached 35%](#). At the same time, formal work preservation does not yet mean the same level of pre-war salary. So, the purchasing power of Ukrainians' salaries is rapidly falling.

Statistical estimates indicate that the situation is a crisis, but how are Ukrainians living through it? Since the first weeks of the full-scale war, the Cedos analytical centre has been conducting research to discover the influence of the war on the most crucial aspects of the lives of Ukrainians - relationships with relatives, housing, everyday life, emotional state, and economic well-being. Since May already, we have noticed that our respondents were most concerned about financial well-being

and employment issues. People who [took our survey](#) told us they had lost their jobs because of the war. They were not sure if they would be able to find a new one and talked about the fear of unemployment in the future.

I feel anxious because of the UAH 3,000 teacher's salary rate per month.

- Man, 27 years old, Chernyakhiv, Zhytomyr region

Uncertainty in the future. I am grateful to the company I work for still giving me a job. But I am not sure there will be one in the nearest future.

- Woman, 41 years old, Kyiv

I don't understand how the country will recover or what will happen to businesses and jobs. Since the beginning of the war, my husband has not earned anything.

- Woman, 35 years old, Dnipro

For many respondents, the loss of a job and means of livelihood caused natural despair. Internally displaced people and families with low income before the war shared such experiences much more often.

So, in August, conducting another wave of surveys, we asked people directly about the impact of the war on their jobs. Our survey is not representative. However, it allows us to identify some worthy public attention trends and create a more detailed picture of the social reality Ukrainians live in - beyond dry statistics of unemployed people and destroyed enterprises.

Access to work during the war

Our survey confirms that for a significant part of Ukrainians the war did not bring any substantial changes either in the place of work or in the level of wages. Among such respondents, there are quite a lot of residents of big cities, primarily Kyiv, workers of the so-called intellectual labor, as well as people who, before the start of the full-scale war, already worked remotely and/or whose employers are abroad.

However, the war still affected the work of the vast majority of respondents.

Some respondents faced an increase in workload, while their salary (or income from self-employment or business) decreased. Quite often people are transferred to a lower rate with a lower salary while retaining all their duties. Sometimes they even have to perform the redistributed duties of dismissed colleagues for a lower or the same money.

Another common situation is a decrease in workload and, accordingly, a decrease in wages. During the war, production and sales volumes diminish. Due to shelling and infrastructure damage, numerous enterprises could not carry out activities at the pre-war level. What concerns self-employed people and freelancers, there could be mentioned a decrease in the number of orders and consequently the level of fees.

We've got a feeling of having no right to vacation and rest. We started working harder, also because we got rid of contracts with Russian and Belarusian companies. We sent a lot of money to support the Armed Forces of Ukraine, and military friends, to help with evacuation to safe regions. So, in order not to go bankrupt, we had to get back on our feet one more time.

- Woman, 23 years old, Kyiv

We started working remotely; half of the workers were laid off [...], and sales volumes decreased, but I've got a lot of work due to the lack of workers.

- Woman, 27 years old, Kyiv

In the worst conditions are the people who lost their jobs or primary employment during the war and for whom part-time jobs do not allow to provide for themselves and their families. Overall, even in the small sample of our survey, the share of people who lost their job or self-employment income this year is very noticeable. We can say the same about the people who formally did not lose their jobs and were not considered unemployed but no longer had the means to live further. The same concerns the respondents who were sent on vacation at their own expense, workers who appeared to be amidst active hostilities or on the occupied territories, so they cannot do their work or even get to their workplace.

I live in a war zone and cannot get to work. To get to it, one needs to go through two more combat zones.

- Man, 47 years old, a village in the Mykolaiv region

I've got two children and lost my job. The four of us survive on my pension of 2,500 UAH.

- Man, 57 years old, Oleshky, Kherson region

Reduced incomes and hardships push people to seek additional employment and, in the case of the self-employed, to take on more orders than they could handle earlier. Some respondents said they were ready to take on almost any part-time job to provide themselves and their families with the minimum means for their living. Because finding work during the war, especially for internally displaced persons, who simultaneously have to solve the housing issue, is an extremely difficult task.

When respondents value their workplace above all else, the risk of abuse by the employer remains very high. Taking into account the respondents' answers, we can notice the evidence of possible shadow work. In those cases, employees were offered to work as self-employed, under a civil law agreement, or without registration, etc.

For three months, I was on layoff at my main job. During this time, for two months, I volunteered. I learned the profession of a loader at a large warehouse. After returning to my main job, I became a loader and a researcher at a time [...]

- Male, 35 years old, Kharkiv

[...] My husband and I were never lazy, we had good jobs. And now we agree to any paid job. We need to feed our kids.

- Woman, 33 years old, Zaporizhzhia

The employer made the job “shadow” and reduced the payment.

- Men, 55 years old, Nizhyn, Chernihiv region

I’ve got a different profession in another city, low-skilled. Less money while prices for everything are higher.

- Woman, 60 years old, Mariupol

Women face specific problems too: social infrastructures like kindergartens and schools are unavailable due to the destruction or damage of the buildings, organizing safe living conditions or a safe way to facilities during the war is impossible. All these increase the amount of care and time spent on children education for parents, mainly for mothers. Those women who were forced to leave Ukraine and have not yet been able to register their child in the desired institution abroad also face difficulties. According to our respondents, this becomes a significant obstacle for fulfilling the existing duties at work as well as for returning to the labor market and finding a new job.

Now I work as I used to, but for fewer hours. It is bad as I earn less. But it is also a good thing, as I can only work at night or dawn. Work does not go well with children: the eldest is on summer vacation, and there is no kindergarten for the youngest. It is closed and will not open due to the lack of a proper bomb shelter.

- Woman, 41 years old, Kyiv

I lost my job. Now I don’t work, as I don’t have anyone to stay with my children. For the same reason, I can’t work online.

- Woman, 40 years old, village, Chernihiv region

My job now is to be a mother of two little children. The war changed everything. [...] I am alone in a foreign country, and without any help, I can only rely on myself.

- Woman, 34 years old, Chernihiv

Anti-support of authorities

In such difficult conditions, it would seem that citizens could expect increased support from the state to be able to provide themselves with a minimally decent standard of living. However, since the beginning of the war, [several governmental solutions](#) in labor and social guarantees could hardly be called supportive both for those who managed to keep their jobs and those who lost them. Some decisions were directly aimed at restricting labor rights.

Back in March, [Law No. 2136](#) was voted for. At the time of martial law, it allowed employers to fire employees or suspend labor contracts without the trade union's consent, to suspend collective agreement norms, and to change essential working conditions without two months' notice, introducing it as a fait accompli. Later in July, [Law No. 2434](#) was passed. At the time of martial law, it allowed the employer to unilaterally dismiss an employee without any justification. Most importantly, it made it possible to use the so-called contractual regime of labor relations at small and medium-sized enterprises. The latter states that the conditions and remuneration for the worker can be determined in the employment contract individually – as a result of negotiations and beyond the guarantees of the Labor Code. At the same time, finally, [Law No. 2421](#) was passed. It introduces employment contracts with “non-fixed working hours” under which the employer is not obliged to provide the employee with a job, and the employee loses the guarantee of a stable income.

Considering some support for those who have lost their jobs, we should mention the [resolution on a new approach to unemployment benefits](#) approved by the government in the summer. It states that the officially registered unemployed who have not got a job within 30 days could be engaged in community service and paid at least minimum wage. Those who refuse to do that will be deprived of unemployed status and state financial support. The state unilaterally removes its obligation to fulfill its side of the social contract and provide unemployment benefits to citizens who paid social contributions.

All this seems to signal that the state does not take the side of the workers in trouble. On the contrary, it makes them even more vulnerable to possible abuses by employers. In the case of unemployment, it partly denies the support that people could count on before the war.

The future after the war

In August, we also asked respondents what is personally important to them in employment in the Ukrainian future. The desire for a decent salary and safe working conditions, making Ukrainians work in Ukraine and provide themselves with a decent life, was by no means a rare people's answer.

As we can see from the surveys, decent work has a prominent place in people's lives and their vision of a better, fairer society. Since March, in each wave of our surveys, respondents often name work among the key things that support them and help them cope with the complicated emotional experiences of war. People consider work as their way to contribute to the victory and economy of Ukraine and benefit society in general. The chance to do this in decent conditions and for decent payment is an inalienable right of citizens, which the state is obliged to ensure.

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