

From Lisbon to Kryvyi Rih: a conversation about labor struggles with Yurii Samoilov

Monday 5 June 2023, by [PETROV Valerii](#), [SAMOILOV Yuri](#), [SELISHCHEVA Daria](#) (Date first published: 30 May 2023).

Yurii Samoilov is the leader of an independent miners' union in Kryvyi Rih and an activist of the left-wing organization [Social Movement](#). For years, he has been organizing and supporting workers, especially in the [mining and metallurgical sector](#). As a trade union representative, he joined the fight in courts, at demonstrations and strikes, and conducted educational projects for workers. Yurii actively participated in [protests](#) for better working conditions in mines, joined the [campaign](#) for higher wages, in particular at the Kryvyi Rih enterprises of the transnational metallurgical giant ArcelorMittal.

In the spring of 2023, Yurii Samoilov visited a number of European countries and met local trade unionists and labor activists. We talked to him about common problems of labor, young people in militant trade unions in Europe, and the place of leftist forces in Ukraine after the war.

You have recently returned from a trip to several European countries. Please tell us who organized it and what was its purpose.

This trip was organized by European trade unions and I met their representatives. The purpose of the visit was to encounter in person the activists we had been in contact with online for about a year. We decided that this way I would be able to communicate with a larger number of trade unions representing different groups of workers in different countries. These unions are small, but they can be called militant unions.

The enterprises in Lisbon face the same problems as those in Kryvyi Rih.

Tell us about these unions.

The trip to Poland was organized by Inicjatywa Pracownicza (IP). It is a young and small independent trade union whose representatives work in various industries. They have a very interesting [experience](#) of building unions in new tech companies such as [Amazon](#) and [Uber](#), where it is quite difficult to organize workers due to specific working conditions. But IP succeeds thanks to its experience in creating militant unions and supporting their activities.

In France, I met with the independent trade union Solidaires (SUD). This is one of eight organizations that are part of the French trade union coordination platform, which also focuses on militant strategies to fight for workers' rights. This union is represented in various industries, including ArcelorMittal's plants in France. I also met with the CGT (General Confederation of Labor) union, which also has a huge experience of successful struggle. Interestingly, protests in France are strongly influenced by tradition. If a protest is organized by some other organization, it is likely to be small. If the rally is organized by the CGT, people come out, despite the fact that the union is no longer as big as it used to be. This shows the need for positive tradition in trade unions.

In Spain, I talked to the Italian trade union COBAS and the Spanish trade union CGT. They are also experienced in military trade unionism and have their own methods of struggle, as well as strong views.

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In Portugal, I met with the primary organization of the steelworkers' union, which operates at the Volkswagen car plant. Talking to them, I was once again convinced that the working class is addressing the same issues around the world.

In Italy, I was invited by the Associazione Diritti Lavoratori Cobas (ADL COBAS), a trade union that started operating among migrants. Many Ukrainians working in Italy are part of it. They have been creating «trade union social centers» in various Italian cities for years.

They also organized a meeting for me at two ArcelorMittal plants, one of them Polish and the other German.

Such an intense program! Tell us, what issues were the activists you talked to primarily interested in?

They had questions about Ukraine. They wanted to hear the opinion of a person with life and struggle experience in Ukraine, not of the media. They asked how Ukrainians feel about the war with Russia and how they see their future. You could see that there is interest, and I did not feel hostility in any country.

This is encouraging. A question about some prejudices. From the Ukrainian perspective, it seems that many leftists in Europe are pro-Russian. Did you see anything like that among the trade unionists you talked to?

In Western countries, pro-Russian stance is usually taken by right-wing groups. I have noticed the following dynamic there: the more right-wing a person from Western Europe is, the more likely he or she is to support Russia. And this applies not only to Western Europe. Even in Poland I saw a rally organized by the ultra-right and attended by about a dozen people. They made speeches about how the Poles are tired of Ukrainians. There are large diasporas of Russians in different European countries, and they differ enormously in their views and attitudes towards the war.

Yes, there is a clear class approach, an understanding that the war has been waged by Russian imperialism, and 99.9% of those at the front are ordinary Ukrainian people fighting against it.

Speaking about the left. There is a misconception that pro-Russian sentiments in Western European society are only found in the left-wing environment. On the contrary, the left-wingers of Western Europe have always opposed the imperialism of their countries. Almost all the countries I have visited used to be empires: France, Spain, even Portugal and Italy. It is obvious that the leftists there have always fought against the imperialist views of their rulers. That's why their position is clear to me: they see that Ukraine is trying not to be a colony of Russia. But there are groups of people who call themselves leftists, although they are not really leftists as they probably have not even read Karl Marx. However, such people exist everywhere, even in Ukraine.

So the trade unions you talked to have no illusions about Russia's invasion of Ukraine and support us?

Yes, there is a clear class approach, an understanding that the war has been waged by Russian imperialism, and 99.9% of those at the front are ordinary Ukrainian people fighting against it.

Have you seen any differences in the attitudes of leftists from different countries? How do the beliefs of trade unionists differ?

No, there are no fundamental differences. Everyone does the same thing. If a person is a locksmith or a plumber, then no matter what country they live in, the problems will be similar. A trade unionist deals with workers. The most remote country I have visited is Portugal. The enterprises in Lisbon face the same problems as those in Kryvyi Rih considering both salaries and working conditions. The only difference is in the amount of salaries. For example, I have visited three Arcelor plants. One plant is located in Kryvyi Rih (the Sixth Blast Furnace is now active). The workers, few of whom are left now, are paid 12-15 thousand hryvnias, depending on the euro exchange rate. There are no bonuses. The second is a plant in Katowice, Poland. The blast furnace there was built using the same technology and the metal smelting technology is the same: two Polish workers sit, while the metal flows. I asked them, "What is your salary?". They said that in terms of euros it is 4,000. In hryvnia terms, it's 160,000 (!). The same Arcelor plant, built using the same technology in a German city that used to be called Stalingrad and is now Eisenhüttenstadt. I also met two German workers who were sitting and watching the metal flow. I asked them, "What is your salary?". They answered, "10,000 Euros". Do the math yourself. The blast furnace and the technology are the same in all three cases.

What are the most pressing issues the leftists you talk to face, besides raising wages?

In European countries, not only in France, where there has been a recent wave of protests, people are concerned about raising the retirement age. In Germany, for example, it is 67 years on average. Moreover, even if a person works in a hazardous industry, it does not affect the retirement age significantly. In Ukraine, the difference between two salaries is bigger. We are still "keeping the brand" compared to the westerners.

We need to fight for salary increases to achieve the same level regardless of whether we are part of the European Union.

Some people think that changes to Ukrainian legislation are somehow different from changes to European legislation. In fact, they fit into the overall picture of unification of the social sphere in Europe. This applies to all aspects of labor, with the exception of wages, which elites in different countries are trying to keep down. There is a misconception that if we get closer to Europe, we will immediately have the same wages as in France or Germany. But this is impossible. We need to fight for salary increases to achieve the same level regardless of whether we are part of the European Union.

Have they shared other concerns, besides the retirement age?

They had questions about the fact that employers in all European countries have frozen wages, allegedly because of the war in Ukraine. It turns out that they are creating narratives that will encourage the population of these countries not to help Ukraine and to side with our enemy.

In fact, it turns out they are using the situation for their own enrichment.

Yes, for the sake of profit. They do not see the people. There is another issue that is critical for the left in Europe. They cannot adapt to the new realities, they live by old narratives. That's why populist organizations occupy this niche. Let's call them the new fascists. The left-wing organizations I have met do little with young people. They do not have a defined youth policy, and

such an organization is an organization without a future.

You mean they don't involve young people in trade union activities?

They believe that young people should get engaged and educated themselves, like a child growing up in a family. Because, in their opinion, any organization is a big family (laughs). They are losing young supporters. The old supporters, the ideologically motivated and established ones do exist, but they are dying out. And they just don't work with the new electorate, so those people support some bullshit. It's the same in Ukraine: people vote for a picture.

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What is the average age of trade union activists?

The ones I met were mostly elderly. Even older than me. I have seen middle-aged people and young people, but not many of them. The Polish trade union Inicjatywa Pracownicza is made up of young people. It's a new union, they are dynamic and interesting. They declare that IP is an anarcho-syndicalist organization. This is just right for the young people. They are revolutionary in a good way.

And they deal with more up-to-date forms of labor like precarious work for Amazon?

Yes. They do it, and they are good at it because young people work there.

The trade union in Italy that works among migrants is made up of middle-aged, working-age immigrants.

In Germany, they are mostly pensioners. The situation there is generally sad: the right-wing populist party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) has taken the electorate away from the left. Strangely enough, ordinary people consider the party to be left-wing as they don't really distinguish AfD from die Linke. It's just that the AfD works with young people, and die Linke doesn't work with young people at all. I told them that they should pay special attention to this. Do you know what the advantage of the Social Movement is? It's that I am the only elderly member, and all the others are three times younger (laughs).

Mass May Day marches used to take place in Kyiv, Kryvyi Rih, Lviv, Kharkiv and other Ukrainian cities. When do you think we can expect their revival?

As far as I know, this year Kyiv and Kryvyi Rih held semi-closed May Day events. I think that the very tradition of celebrating the day of death of the fighters for an eight-hour workday is not quite right. It should not be called a holiday, because many workers were executed. At the same time, the vast majority of Ukrainians do not know what kind of day May Day is. But I do realize that it's not people's fault, but the fault of the media who are spreading completely different narratives. That's why we need to rethink May Day and how we celebrate it.

So it shouldn't be a barbecue day?

Exactly. Neoliberal narratives often turn our own arguments against us. They reproach us: you say that we should do less and get more, you want to slow down the development of the world, you are going against the future. Our own arguments are embedded in their narrative. And when we tell them that no, that's not what we want, it turns out that they are right, and we are justifying ourselves. And we have to say: a person was not born to work at all and I don't give a damn about

your work! Bees work to produce honey, and we should enjoy life, not work for some idiot, collecting honey for him. In short, I think it is important to fight these narratives. Have you heard Ukrainian media reporting about May Day? I haven't.

What are the most pressing issues of the class struggle Ukrainian workers are facing today? And what do you think has changed in the agenda with the full-scale war?

The issues of the working class in Ukraine have become more acute because the working class is now on the front lines. More blood has been shed. Talking to those who are fighting at the frontline, I see that people's thinking is black and white. Relationships in military units are also capitalized in the context of the overall capitalization of society in Ukraine. And no matter what they say, the Armed Forces are divided into strata. And this touches a nerve. In my small trade union, 200 people are fighting, and another 300 are relatives of trade union members. So it turns out that all the conversations in workers' families are about the war, the front, those who serve there, and how this will affect everyone's life.

In Kryvyi Rih, there have already been several protests about relations in military units, and it is clear that they are similar to the protests about relations in mines. Something similar happened in Kryvyi Rih on the eve of May Day. About a thousand women gathered to find out what was happening to their husbands. We are talking about the same steel miners who are now at war. They talked about corruption, incompetence of some officers, and theft. There were questions about the unfair treatment of the private soldiers (workers who became soldiers) by officers (top managers). Thus, the problems of Ukrainian civilian society have been transferred to the army.

But since it is impossible to retrieve the body, the family's payments were stopped. No body, no money. This is capitalism.

We have been at war for over a year now. At the beginning of the full-scale invasion we were in a state of shock, but now we are able to analyze what is happening in the army, and we have to do it. Let me give you an example. As an activist, I received a call about the following problem: the family was told that their husband was killed, his body was lying in the gray zone. But since it is impossible to retrieve the body, the family's payments were stopped. No body, no money. This is capitalism. Another case, I just heard about it yesterday: the commander and the entire unit were killed. There is no one to confirm the fact of death. Can you imagine the situation in which families find themselves? The social struggle, no matter how hard they try to hide it, has moved to the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Same things are happening there, only now they are mixed with blood.

In your opinion, is the ban on leftist symbols and rhetoric a big problem for the leftist movement in Ukraine? Do you see this as an obstacle to the further development of the labor and leftist movement?

Saakashvili once fought against trade unions in Georgia [1]. As a result, only the strongest survived. Now the work of trade unions has been restored there, and Georgia has become one of the dynamic centers of the [trade union movement](#). So I think the ban on symbols will play against the right.

I talked to the right-wing - in fact, they can be called fascists - and they told me: "Symoneko, Moroz and the like are not communists. The real communists are you and the Social Movement." So they know everything, and no matter how we mimic, we will still be communists for them.

The ban on symbols only shows that the authorities are afraid of us. In fact, it doesn't change anything. One symbol or another - what's the difference? There's a story about some customs worker who asked if the stars on Converse shoes and Karlsberg beer were communist (laughs). The people

who ban leftist symbols believe that Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Marx are Russian fascists. So why talk about them at all?

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P.S.

Commons

<https://commons.com.ua/en/intervyu-z-yuriyem-samojlovim-pro-robitnichu-borotbu/>

Footnotes

[1] During the Saakashvili government, an unprecedented course of deregulation took place in the country. Controlling bodies such as labor, sanitary and food inspections were abolished. Thus, Georgia became the only country without a functioning labor inspectorate among the 183 members of the International Labor Organization. As a result, the state was unable to monitor the health and safety of workers at enterprises. Trade union leaders were persecuted in the country. Georgia became the sixth country in the [ranking of countries with the most unfriendly labor laws](#). Editorial note.