

Ukrainian miners win their wartime strike, but victory looks short-lived

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Victory may be fleeting for the miners in Novovolynsk, as they fear a reinstated director could be removed again

On 6 October, Ukraine's energy ministry [dismissed](#) Trotsko following pressure from a delegation of strikers that visited the energy minister twice. But some workers at the mine and the union representative fear this is not the end of their struggle against what they allege is a continuous corrupt attempt to take control of the mine.

"This is not a victory. Victory is when we mine an extra 1,000 tonnes of coal. This [whole situation] was a misunderstanding," said Volodymyr Yurkiv, the mine's previous director, who during the strike period was demoted to chief engineer. In the month of strike action, the mine could have earned five million hryvnias (£110,000), Yurkiv added.

Workers at Mine No. 9 have been fighting to keep Yurkiv – who was reinstated as director by the ministry on 8 October after Trotsko was dismissed – in office, as they say they are completely satisfied with his management. But Mykhailo Volynets, a Ukrainian MP who is also chair of the Independent Trade Union of Ukrainian Miners, is among those who think Yurkiv could be dismissed once again. He told openDemocracy that the latest events "are not the end of this story".

"It will happen again," Volynets said, claiming the energy ministry will try to appoint a new director at mine No. 9 for a third time. Volynets believes there are still corrupt insiders at Ukraine's energy ministry, claiming the recent new managerial appointments have been made on behalf of the *smotriashchiy*.

"The *smotriashchiy*, together with certain ministerial employees, looked for other candidates who are ready to accept the position of director [at Mine No. 9], but they are afraid that the [workers] will not let them in," Volynets says.

"These corrupt renegades have not calmed down. They will not allow Yurkiv to remain in the position of director," Volynets said.

"I wish it wasn't happening, especially during war. Because it undermines people's trust in state institutions," he said.

Volynets sees the ongoing tension in Novovolynsk as connected to the Ukrainian government's [2.5 billion hryvnia \(£58m\) fund](#) for buying coal for this year's winter heating season, which is likely to put significant stress on the country's heating systems.

Ongoing uncertainty

Although workers at Mine No. 9 restarted mining coal as soon as the ministry issued an order to dismiss Trotsko, they are exhausted by the ongoing uncertainty, Yurkiv said.

Tensions have been heightened by the fact employees have not yet been paid their wages for August, according to Yurkiv. Although the ministry of finance sent the money for their salaries to the local public finance office, it was returned after Trotsko allegedly ordered salaries not to be paid without his signature.

Vasyl Hura, head of the mine workers' union branch at Novovolynsk, believes the miners at No. 9 will keep fighting if necessary.

This is the second time in recent months miners at Novovolynsk have defeated a new managerial appointment. In August, they blocked access to Mine No. 9, refusing to allow [Viktor Herashchenko](#), who had been newly appointed as director, onto the premises. He later resigned, having been unable to enter the mine.

The miners alleged Herashchenko was linked to an investigation into embezzlement relating to a state contract at another mine. At the time, Herashchenko, whose name is not mentioned in the investigation, [told openDemocracy](#) he had nothing to do with the embezzlement. He became chief engineer at the Buzhanka mine several weeks after the contract currently under investigation was signed, he said.

The ministry has refused to explain its decisions to mine employees or the media. Neither minister Halushchenko nor Andriy Syniuk, the director of the ministry's coal industry department, responded to openDemocracy's request for comment.

Pavlo Holota, Mine No. 9's assistant anti-corruption director, said most of his letters of concern to the ministry go unanswered, claiming the ministry's management have failed to inform the mine about their plans on several occasions.

Serhiy Trotsko denies having a hidden agenda and claims he was appointed by the ministry to increase the mine's profitability. It is not clear how the mine could increase its profit since it has been in liquidation for several years, having almost exhausted its coal reserves.

Speaking to openDemocracy, Trotsko said: "The minister has fired me and I agree with his decision." He added that he had hired the private security firm for his own safety and to guard mine property.

According to one local source, Trotsko has since taken up an unofficial position as an adviser to the new director of Nadiya, another local mine in the Lviv region, where he has been seen daily since being dismissed from Mine No. 9.

Alongside the attempts to change the director at Mine No. 9, directors at two other state-owned mines in western Ukraine have also recently been replaced.

In September, several workers at Nadiya conducted an underground strike against their new director, though they eventually ended the strike due to a lack of reaction from the authorities.

According to a source familiar with the situation, the new director at the Nadiya mine has rehired as a deputy chief engineer a former section chief who had [previously been found guilty](#) of stealing 87 tonnes of coal from the mine.

That source told openDemocracy that there are already signs that "unofficial practices" of illegal coal dealing are in place at the Nadiya mine.

In September, a local MP, Ihor Guz, [called](#) on prime minister Denys Shmyhal to “regulate the conflict” at Mine No. 9.

When openDemocracy asked Zelenskyi’s office to comment on the situation in west Ukraine’s coal industry, the office said the president is unable to comment on events outside of Russia’s war or international relations.

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