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Mineworkers union leader: ‘Please stand with Ukraine and help us win this war’

Thursday 24 November 2022, by [DS Chloe](#), [LEVYTSKA Nataliya](#) (Date first published: 23 November 2022).

Nataliya Levytska is deputy chairperson of the Independent Mineworkers Union of Ukraine. She is in Australia as a Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Ukraine (KVPU) delegate to the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) World Congress, where she is seeking support for Ukrainian unionists resisting Russia’s war of aggression.



During her visit, Geelong Trades Hall Council president Tim Gooden presented Levytska with three emergency radios on behalf of the council as its contribution to the struggle of Ukrainian unions facing permanent bombardment of communications and electricity infrastructure by invading Russian forces.

Levytska also spoke to *Green Left*’s **Chloe DS** about the situation of Ukrainian trade unions.

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What can you tell us about the trade union movement in Ukraine?

I represent the KVPU, which is the second-largest union confederation in Ukraine. KVPU was established at the time of Ukraine’s independence, but its first affiliates were established during the miners’ strikes that occurred during the times of the USSR [in the late 1980s].

The Ukrainian trade union movement united about 6 million workers. But now, due to the war, this number has decreased because Russia has destroyed enterprises and infrastructure, resulting in the loss of workplaces.

Russia has also destroyed residential buildings and hospitals, and imposed a reign of terror in the occupied territories, forcing people to flee and become refugees.

Prior to the invasion, Ukrainian trade unions fought for wage increases and better working conditions, and demanded the implementation of international labour standards. We confronted several attempts to undermine workers' and union rights. Thanks to campaigns, protest actions and negotiations with the government, we stopped those attacks.

The KVPU and its affiliated organisations use different tools to defend workers' rights, including protests, work-to-rule actions, collective bargaining and submitting lawsuits. Even now, during the war, we have won cases in courts. For example, two weeks ago the Supreme Court of Ukraine ruled in favour of a Wizz Air union member in their illegal dismissal case.

However, due to the war, we are limited in our options. For example, we can campaign but we cannot hold protest actions.

How has Russia's invasion impacted on Ukraine's trade union movement?

The KVPU has been affected by Russia's war ever since 2014.

We have had cases where our union leaders have been kidnapped and tortured by Russian-backed separatists. Our unions were prohibited in the separatist areas.

We have also had the experience of working with internally displaced people (IDPs) and helping out members serving in the Ukrainian Army.

Despite this, since 2014, we have continued to help affiliated unions carry out their usual activities to protect workers' rights.

Now, Russia's full-scale invasion has ruined our cities and villages, killed people and brought terror to our country. Trade unions now face new challenges, including risks to members' life, displacement, loss of homes, loss of jobs and incomes, sexual violence and torture, and risks of human trafficking. Ukrainian children have been illegally taken to the Russian Federation and our members have requested help, because they don't know how to get them back.

The scale of our tasks is huge.

Since the first days of the invasion, the KVPU has been helping to evacuate people, delivering humanitarian aid, delivering medicine and equipment to hospitals, helping IDPs, and providing aid to members who are serving in the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

Now, one of the priorities of the KVPU is to prepare for the cold season because Russian forces are hitting energy targets and infrastructure to cause blackouts and cut off water, gas and heat supplies.

We are grateful to ITUC members and our partners, such as Solidarity Center and Friedrich Ebert Foundation, for their aid which has made it possible to deliver power banks, warm clothes, heaters and necessary goods to our members, medics and civilians in the regions.

The risk of large-scale blackouts in Ukraine during the winter season is high. Even now, in Kyiv, we live and work with electricity outages. Just imagine only being able to prepare food, take a shower, work and have internet access at certain times when there is an available electricity supply.

What can you tell us about the anti-union laws being pushed by the Zelensky government?

Ukrainian trade unions are opposed to laws and draft laws that undermine workers and trade union rights pushed by representatives of the main parliamentary party. We have campaigned against labour reforms being carried out without effective social dialogue.

We have insisted that any significant changes to legislation must be made in consultation with social partners, and at a time when workers can access information about this dialogue. Currently, workers don't have proper access to electricity to read or watch the news and follow these changes. Their voices must be heard.

Ukrainian trade unions have insisted on the importance of ensuring legislation is in compliance with international labour standards, including the Directives of the European Union.

What is the trade union movement's perspective on the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine?

The post-war reconstruction of Ukraine must be inclusive and must seek to build an economy based on decent and green jobs. Trade unions, as representatives of workers, should be involved in the process of developing a plan for the rebuilding of Ukraine.

People have paid a huge price for freedom and peace. We are under no illusions that the rebuilding process will be easy. All social parties should cooperate and work hard to ensure a better future for our children.

How much influence does the far-right have in Ukraine?

People in Ukraine are united behind the need to protect Ukraine. Ukrainians want to live in peace and protect our country. This stance is not influenced by any particular groups, because Ukraine is a very democratic country and Ukrainian people support our country.

It is not true to say that Ukraine is fascist, this is Russian propaganda. Ukraine is a country where peaceful people live, people who want to live in peace in our own country.

What can you tell us about the campaign initiated by Ukrainian and Polish unions to expel the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia (FNPR) from the ITUC?

The Russian Federation continues to destroy Ukraine and commit genocide against its population, using rocket strikes and bombs prohibited by international law.

It continues to implement a reign of terror in the occupied territories, creating concentration camps and deporting the population, including children, to Russia. It is destroying infrastructure and energy facilities with the aim of leaving millions of Ukrainian residents without water, electricity and heat during the cold season.

Russia is committing the crime of genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and the crime of aggression. In addition, the Russian regime is provoking an economic, food and energy crisis in the world with its war in Ukraine, and undermining achievements made in the global fight against climate change and for the promotion of democracy.

FNPR, as a trade union that supports the war and the criminal actions and policies of the Russian authorities both in terms of spreading information and through its actions in the occupied territories, cannot remain a member of the ITUC.

What can the trade union movement internationally do to support Ukraine?

We appreciate all kinds of support from our brothers and sisters, from donations and humanitarian aid, to spreading information about the war in Ukraine in their countries.

We will still need aid in winter: generators, power banks, medicine, food, warm clothes, sleeping bags, etc. Our refugees cannot go back home because their homes have been destroyed and their cities are under missile attacks or occupied by Russians.

Moreover, people, in particular women with children and people with disabilities, have to go abroad because blackouts pose risks to their lives.

We ask that trade unions explain to their members that the war in Ukraine has had a devastating impact on people worldwide. It has caused an energy, economic, ecological and migrant crisis, and worsened the situation of inflation. It has undermined achievements in fighting food insecurity and climate change, as well as with regards to gender gaps and energy poverty.

The people of Ukraine are fighting for their freedom, democracy and peace. Ukrainians have given their lives not only for their land but for a better future for the world.

Any final comments that you would like to end on?

Please stand with Ukraine and help us win this war. Please stand with all those who fight against authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, injustice and the violation of rights. We should fight for a better world and to ensure that there will never again be wars, genocides, and crimes against humanity.

Chloe DS
Nataliya Levytska

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P.S.

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