

# **Ukrainian employers use the war as pretext to cancel workers' rights**

Monday 19 December 2022, by [JÓŻWIAK Ignacy](#), [SAMOYLOV Yuriy](#) (Date first published: 16 December 2022).

**Sometimes I get calls from various people and they say 'my relative has fallen at the front and his body is lying somewhere on a neutral strip not far from the city, help me pick him up'. You see, in Europe the trade unions might even be afraid to think about it, and here we need to deal with such things somehow. And we do - says Yuriy Samoylov, chairman of the Independent Miners' Trade Union in the city of Kryvyi Rih.**

**Yuriy, thank you very much for taking the time to talk to us under these difficult circumstances. To begin, tell us something about yourself and your role in the labour movement in Kryvyi Rih?**

My name is Yuri Samoilov and I am the chairman of the Independent Miners' Trade Union in the city of Kryvyi Rih. In addition, I represent the Confederation of Free Trade Unions, which also includes railwaymen, teachers, medics and workers in the service sphere. The Miners' Union at the moment also includes metalworkers, and some medical workers are also members.

**When was your organisation founded?**

In Kryvyi Rih, we founded it in 1992.

**What are the biggest employers or the biggest companies in Kryvyi Rih, apart from Arcelor Mittal, which we all know?**

There are mines, factories and metal processing plants that belong to Ukrainian oligarchs: Yaroslavsky, Kolomoisky, Akhmetov. When we go on strike, we have a conflict with these three oligarchs.

**And do you have your structures at Arcelor Mittal?**

At Arcelor Mittal we have a committee of about 400 people, including those who work for outsourcing companies. There are about a thousand people directly employed there, and in outsourcing it could be as many as 20,000. Most are in outsourcing, and the outsourcers are local companies. At the moment we have two committees there.

**How many members does your trade union in Kryvyi Rih have?**

About 2,400.

**You once mentioned that there are strikes in the city every year, when was the last time one took place?**

The last big strike was in 2020, with a group of workers 46 days underground. At the beginning,

there were about 500, while about 50 people stayed underground until the end of the protest. Apart from that, there were protests, the storming of the presidential palace... I mean we went to Kyiv for a meeting with the president. There were conflicts with the police.

We fought for a 30% increase in wages, and the preservation of social guarantees for miners and women miners. The employers came up with the idea that working underground is no longer harmful, that people do not work in harmful conditions, and this provoked a conflict. This conflict is still going on – for now, it is only ‘frozen’, but not resolved.

I think that in the next two years we will have to struggle over social guarantees again.

Now the employers are using the war situation to take away some of the rights and guarantees, both financial and social, from workers.

### **What is the situation in the industry of Kryvyi Rih now?**

Only some 30% of the whole industrial potential is working. A certain number of workers was put on lay-offs. In the places where we are present as a union, this is done in a fairly civilised way; where we are not, people are simply thrown out without pay.

A lot of men from the Kryvyi Rih now serve in the military. People are under constant stress, because they have ‘some’ job for ‘some’ money . I emphasise – “some”. It is equally possible to have no job and no money at all.

There are a lot of internally displaced people in the city, refugees from Zaporizhzhya or from the Donetsk region. Most of them are looking for job. This produces a certain tension too, as the employers, especially the small business, always can find/replace workers. Salaries are now undercut virtually everywhere.

### **How much salary do workers receive during the shutdowns?**

They receive about half of what they received while working. Or nothing at all.

### **Is it legal?!**

Yes, it is now legal. Some of the social guarantees have been taken away by the decisions voted by Verkhovna Rada [Ukrainian parliament – Editor’s note] and the authorities.

### **How have labour relations and wages changed during the war, among those workers who kept their jobs?**

The labour protection fund still exists. Perhaps there is someone who kept his or her salary. But for the majority of the workers, the salary was reduced. This is mainly related to the fact that various allowances and bonuses have been reduced or completely eliminated.

### **And how have working hours changed?**

It varies a lot. Some people work one or two days a week. There are also those who work twelve hours a day-six days a week. The labour legislation does not work in this area any more.

People work underground not for seven hours, as they should, but for ten hours. On the surface, people work twelve hours. The employers claim this is because of the curfew. They have not been

able to figure out the logistics of the curfew for half a year and somehow they are not going to do it. Instead, companies are adapting as best they can. Longer underground shifts are appearing. We have a curfew from 10 in the evening until 6 in the morning in the city.

### **Are there no special passes for the workers?**

No. It's hard to establish anything here, it's already a military issue.

### **So what are the main tasks for the trade unions in Kryvyi Rih now?**

Just like at the beginning of the war, our key task now is to help our members who are now serving in the army. Supply of the army at the basic level – clothes, clothing, warm things – needs to change for the better. The winter season has already started and it's tough.

Before the war, an employer did not have the right to dismiss an employee without the union's approval. Now they have been given this right and are very keen to exercise it. They say there is no work – and that's it. They don't have to give a reason for the dismissal. Elon Musk would be happy, these are his methods – liberalising labour relations.

But what else do unions do now?

Sometimes, for example, I get calls from various people and they say 'my relative has fallen at the front and his body is lying somewhere on a neutral strip not far from the city, help me pick him up'. You see, in Europe the trade unions might even be afraid to think about it, and here we need to deal with such things somehow. And we do.

There are a lot of different issues here related to the army, but why are we even talking about the army? Because several hundred members of our trade union have been called up to the army, being still employed in their jobs. Their employment contracts are not on hold. They have not been annulled yet, because anything can happen. They are members of our trade union and remain so.

It's all intertwined here: labour relations, the situation in the companies, the situation in the city, various personal relations. You could say that the trade union deals with everything.

Legislation in Ukraine is heavily liberalised. Soldiers are also workers, but a trade union in the army is not recognised. A soldier cannot be dismissed from the army, he can only be killed or wounded.

When we are involved in humanitarian aid, we have our trade union members in mind. You could say that we have shifted the activities of the trade union into the military area. I don't know how it is in other countries, but in Ukraine there is even a ban on trade unions in some force and security structures. Some time ago, we tried to establish such unions, but they were quickly destroyed.

### **Where do your union members serve, do they serve together or in different units?**

The majority serve here. Before the war and at the beginning of the war, territorial defence units were formed here. There was what I would call outsourcing. It may seem ridiculous, but I talked to our activist and he said there was a lot of legal nuances with this. On the one hand they are military, on the other hand they are not, and on the third hand it's not clear at all.

Anyway, our people are everywhere, from Kharkiv to the Kinburn Spit. I have contacts practically along the entire front line.

**And do they serve and operate together, or are they scattered in different units?**

There is a unit where there are very many of ours, but they are also elsewhere.

**What is the attitude of your union members to the war now? What are they hoping for, what are they expecting?**

People are waiting for Ukrainian victory. We are hoping for victory, but we also have a class approach.

**And what might change after victory, in Kryvyi Rih and in Ukraine?**

I, personally, hope for an increase in awareness among the people, in self-confidence. Over the past decades, people have lost faith in themselves and in those around them. In social institutions, in the trade union, in the army. The army now has a lot of support, even though everyone knows that it is not free of certain problems. With us, the army and the people are one and the same. This is the difference between our army and the Russian army. Here, everyone helps the military, even those who do not fight.

We are experiencing an internal, horizontal mobilisation, which can rectify the mistakes made by the authorities. Here I am thinking more of the economic area, not the military one.

**And what is the situation in Kryvyi Rih now, the city has been shelled again?**

The situation is very difficult. Half the town is without electricity, six hundred people, miners are underground. Half an hour ago I had the last information that they are gradually evacuating them there [As we speak, everyone has been evacuated. This kind of situation happens regularly – author's note]. Today I thought we could use Starlink, because very often there is no communication. Anyway, you saw some of our guys, I recently couldn't communicate with them, the internet was down, even the mobile network was down. We are increasingly having problems with electricity and connectivity and all the signs are that the winter period is going to be very tough.

**Has anything changed in the city after the liberation of Kherson and the surrounding villages? [The interview took place four days after the withdrawal of the Russian army from this city - note IJ].**

The mood changed. I've seen people from the Kherson Region who now live in Kryvyi Rih who gathered to go home, to the countryside, to small towns.

But what a mood there can be when you arrive home and there is no home. In some villages there are no houses at all, like during the Second World War. Not even that there are no roofs – there are no whole buildings.

Volodya, the miner from Kryvyi Rih you met, was in the south. He said the dead bodies' stench was terrible. That's why there is no euphoria, even if there is joy at the liberation of Kherson. I, too, have relatives there. It's hard there, there's no water or electricity, no gas – in a city where some 350,000 people live. Now it could be 150,000, because more than half have left.

They say more than 100,000 left for Russia, but as far as I know, most of them went straight to Poland via Latvia and Lithuania. They left en masse. Now everyone is afraid that we will be forced to have some negotiations. The situation in Ukraine may remain like this for a few more years.

## **I would like to ask about the situation and the role of women in the labour movement in Kryvyi Rih.**

In Kryvyi Rih, women miners have a leading role in our organisation. The 2020 strike was very much on the shoulders of women. They were very active. There are mines in our town where more women work than men. Women feel the protection that a trade union gives them.

They understand that if there was no union and a strike in 2020, they would have to work five years longer, they would have two weeks less holiday. Now miners have an average of 52 days' holiday, and there was a proposal to reduce it to 28 days. It is clear that there is something to fight for. In our union women make up about 30%, of the members, they are miners and metalworkers.

## **And how has the war affected them?**

There are women who went to the front, there are members of our trade union who are now fighting. Some women went to Poland and the Czech Republic at the beginning of the war. Most have returned. A mass of women are now here, working.

## **Is there anything else you would like to add, maybe there is something you would like to say that I have not asked?**

I am very grateful to your trade union, I am glad we met. We've had your delegation with us a few times now and they're making a film about us. That way more people will know about us. We have been fighting for several decades. Now they know more about us, and every communication gives more strength, both to us and to you. The more we talk, the stronger we will be, I am convinced of that.

## **What then do you expect from the international labour movement?**

I count on the international consolidation of the independent trade union movement, this is very important. The trade union movement in the world has been established for a long time, but from my point of view, it has all been bureaucratised. These structures do not deal with trade union activities, but more with some cultural and literary activities. There are trade union structures and there are trade union members separately. We are now, together with you, changing that.

I hope that our meetings and discussions will help to create all this from scratch. And that is what we are hoping for, as well as our future meetings.

**Thank you - a victory for all!**

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**Ignacy Józwiak**  
**Yuriy Samoylov**

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