

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > Eastern Europe & Russian Federation > Ukraine > Labour (Ukraine) > **Ukraine's Trade Unions Face Russian Invasion and Homegrown Attacks on (...)**

Ukraine's Trade Unions Face Russian Invasion and Homegrown Attacks on Labor Rights

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In Ukraine, organized labor has rallied behind the resistance against Russia's invasion. But rather than reward its contribution, the government is using the war to push through anti-labor measures, posing a long-term threat to workers' right to organize.

When airport worker Andrey Chuba signed up for service in the Ukrainian military, it was partly to get away from another conflict. The year was 2020, when the war with Russian proxy forces was low-intensity and confined to the country's eastern Donbas region. But at Boryspil International Airport, outside of Kyiv, conflict was brewing between management and workers. Chuba, a security guard, had been part of a wildcat organizing effort against unpopular changes to shift schedules, and was facing reprisals from his employer. Left hanging by local union leaders, who Chuba says were in the bosses' pocket, he felt that a three-year army contract was a decent way out. Legislation guaranteed that, in addition to his military wage, he would continue receiving his civilian pay. But that was a lifetime ago.

When we met near Kyiv's Independence Square this past December, the city was covered in gray slush, and the threat of Russian aerial attacks had become a part of daily life. Many Kyivites have developed an ear to distinguish the booms of Ukrainian air defense from enemy hits. When kept awake at night by the howling of Vladimir Putin's Iranian-made drones, colloquially called "mopeds," they know their colleagues will be just as sleepy the next day.

The airport where Chuba used to work has been mothballed, pending a peace that feels more remote with each month that passes. While his military contract has been extended until further notice, legislative amendments passed since the full-scale invasion have stripped him of the civilian part of his wage. "I'm not the only one," he tells me. "Lots of people in service are in the same situation."

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Chuba is currently fighting the wage cut in court, arguing that legal amendments cannot be applied retroactively, like in his case. Although he admits the airport is currently strapped for cash, he doesn't see it is a valid argument to deny him his pay. It recently emerged, he points out, that its CEO earned the equivalent of about \$50,000 in the first half of 2023. Chuba's story is one of many, illustrating a concerning trend.

While Ukrainian soldiers are defending their country at the front, Ukrainian workers have seen an attack from the rear, targeting their livelihoods, rights, and representatives. Since spring 2022, Ukraine's parliament, which is dominated by president Volodymyr Zelenskyy's Servant of the People

party, has passed a series of amendments and reforms which have cut social benefits, deregulated labor relations, and restricted the power of trade unions.

[Among other things](#), firing employees has been made easier, zero-hour contracts have been legalized, and private companies with fewer than 250 employees have been permitted to sign individual contracts with workers, rather than adhere to collective agreements or the country's labor code. [MP Halyna Tretyakova](#), head of the parliament's social policy committee, has been spearheading Ukraine's neoliberal reform course. According to her, the country's labor law, originating in the 1970s, is an outmoded Soviet holdover.

Parliament has also decided to [merge](#) the country's social insurance fund (managed jointly by the state, employers, and unions) with the state pension fund. Critics say the merger reduces union oversight, jeopardizes benefits like parental and sickness pay, and primarily benefits the insurance industry. Indeed, Tretyakova, herself a [former insurance executive](#), has dismissed concerns over benefit reductions, [suggesting the private sector can fill any gaps](#).

Russia's invasion has undoubtedly plunged the Ukrainian economy into a deep crisis. Yet, reformers' claims that their agenda is necessitated by the stresses of war seem dubious, given that similar proposals had already been launched in 2019, before Putin's all-out war. At the time, unions put up [stiff resistance](#), and the bill was withdrawn. With martial law in effect, however, protests and strikes are now banned. This time, unions only succeeded in lobbying for some of the latest reforms to be limited to wartime. But with the war dragging on, even these temporary laws risk becoming the new normal. Moreover, it appears that the governing party wants to go further yet and break the labor movement permanently.

Diplomatic Endeavors

The world of Ukrainian trade unions is complex and contradictory, and the answer to how grave the situation is depends on which representatives you ask. When *Jacobin* visited the Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Ukraine (KVPU), one of the country's two main union centers, its vice chairperson, Petro Tulei, and international secretary, Olesia Bryazgunova, struck a diplomatic tone. To them, the essential thing is the long-term perspective. "What's important now, is to achieve peace and security, by defeating the Russian aggressor. After that, the democratic process will resume its normal course," says Tulei. He emphasizes that, through behind-the-scenes dialog, unions did have some positive influence on the recent legal changes.

The KVPU emerged out of the great Donbas miners' strikes during late-Soviet Perestroika, and is associated with the Ukrainian independence movement. Its chair, Mykhailo Volynets, is an MP for Yulia Tymoshenko's oppositional Fatherland party, and has been one of the most vocal parliamentary critics of the recent reforms. The walls at KVPU headquarters are adorned with pictures of him shaking hands with Western leaders like Joe Biden.

According to KVPU deputy head Tulei, the neoliberal technocrats who legitimize their agenda by citing Ukraine's ambitions of joining the European Union have a poor understanding of the European social model. He is proud that his organization actively participated in the 2014 revolution, which put Ukraine on its European path, and views EU integration as a promise of a more social Ukraine to come. "The European Commission has already reminded our lawmakers that Ukrainian labor law must be in line with EU standards," he says.

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Bryazgunova's assessment is similarly colored by geopolitical considerations: "I get pissed off when our domestic shortcomings, like these reforms, are used abroad as arguments against financial and military aid to Ukraine," the KVPU international secretary says bluntly. "This is a dangerous line of reasoning. Why should we have to die, just because we have some liberal madmen here?" Rather than criticize Ukraine, she asks fellow labor activists abroad to stand up for Ukrainian refugees and to lobby for socially just reconstruction programs for the war-ravaged country.

But not all Ukrainian labor activists are content to keep quiet until the war is over. "For bosses and top officials, the war has become a source of enrichment and a way to encroach on socioeconomic rights," complains Oleksandr Skyba, a train driver with the state railway company. At the Kyiv freight depot, where he is based, he heads the local chapter of the Independent Railroad Workers' Union, which is part of KVPU. According to him, Ukrainian companies do not suffer from their workers enjoying excessively good conditions. "On the contrary, a socially secure worker is a productive and patriotic worker," he says. The policies being implemented, Skyba believes, instead risk undermining the population's morale.

He rejects the reformers' rhetoric about needing to cleanse the country's social sector of its Soviet legacy. "Our legislation has been updated many times since then. And regardless — what about our tanks and artillery at the front, didn't we inherit them from the Soviet era? And the buildings where our parliament and president work? If we're just going to raze everything Soviet, let them sit in tents instead!"

According to him, the anti-worker sentiment now being promoted under the cover of war primarily benefits dishonest actors. He cites his own workplace as an example. Since the railways are considered critical infrastructure, a certain quota of its workers may be exempted from the military draft. But when management compiles the lists of who is to be deferred, sometimes they "forget" inconvenient employees — like Skyba himself. "I got a six-month exemption in August, but in September I was suddenly told I was no longer on the list. And there are similar stories from colleagues in Dnipro and Zaporizhzhia," he says.

Skyba is not the only labor leader with reason for personal concern. "I wouldn't be surprised if my office was bugged," says Natalia Zemlianska. She heads the Ukrainian Union of Manufacturers, Small Business Owners, and Migrant Workers, which unites around five thousand members. Sitting behind her desk on the sixth floor of the House of Unions, her window faces onto Kyiv's Independence Square, ground zero for Ukraine's 2014 revolution. The imposing brutalist edifice belongs to the country's largest labor union center, the Federation of Trade Unions of Ukraine (FPU), of which Zemlianska's organization is a member.

The FPU is heir to the Soviet-era trade union federation. As confrontational labor organizing did not fit into the ruling Communist Party's image of its workers' paradise, the FPU's predecessor was politically toothless. Its main task was providing sanatoriums and holiday resorts for members, rather than aiding them in workplace struggles, and critical labor activists say much of today's FPU is still stuck in those habits. To this day, the FPU owns significant real estate, and it has been criticized for prioritizing its own commercial interests over representing workers. Whatever its deficiencies, the FPU is also home to many dedicated organizers, defending the interests of its members. And since the authorities have taken aim at the labor movement in general, and the FPU in particular, they are feeling increasingly threatened.

"We are under enormous pressure right now," says Zemlianska. "FPU deputy head Volodymyr

Sayenko was arrested in December 2022, and even though the investigation against him has been concluded, he is still being held." Sayenko's bail has been set at a whopping 124 million hryvnia, roughly \$3 million. Several other FPU representatives, including Zemlianska, have had their homes raided by police. The investigation revolves around suspicions of embezzlement of FPU real estate.

Claims of Wrongdoing

Allegations of corruption and state attempts to seize FPU property have been a recurring theme stretching back through several previous governments. Given that the fight against corruption, an endemic issue in Ukraine, is broadly considered an apolitical, commonsense imperative, such allegations also serve to legitimize whatever political vendetta anyone might pursue. As part of the current investigation, stewardship of several FPU properties, including the House of Unions, was recently transferred to Ukraine's Asset Recovery and Management Agency, ARMA.

Zemlianska won't comment on the details of the case currently being made against Sayenko, but stresses that the authorities' behavior contradicts the principles of rule of law and fails to honor international conventions protecting labor leaders from harassment. To her, the authorities' anti-corruption rhetoric rings hollow.

One official who, in her view, personifies the authorities' hypocrisy on the matter is Olena Duma, head of ARMA. Transparency International Ukraine has [called](#) her appointment a "significant danger" to the functioning of the agency, citing her political ties and lack of relevant experience. Since last summer, Duma also [presides over an entity](#) called the Trade Union Confederation of Ukraine. It is no accident that its title is confusingly similar to that of Ukraine's two existing labor union centers, the KVPU and the FPU.

Zemlianska and several other labor leaders *Jacobin* has spoken to describe Duma's organization as a pseudo-union, set up to undermine the country's genuine labor movement. "ARMA already has the power to evict us from our offices at any time. This fiction of a union is but another instrument in this raiding. By transferring our real estate to it, the whole thing can be presented to the public as some kind of reshuffling within the union movement," Zemlianska explains.

Internal [documents recently obtained by OpenDemocracy suggest](#) Duma's astroturf union is part of a larger scheme, launched behind the scenes by MPs of the ruling party, including social policy chief Tretyakova, to set up an entire new union structure that would be friendly to the government and its reform program. To FPU representative Zemlianska, what's tragic about this approach to dealing with labor is that it is reminiscent of the political culture Ukraine is struggling to leave behind.

"On the one hand we are forced to fight Russia's aggression, to avoid living like in Russia, where unionists are put behind bars, but at the same time, we see the same tendencies here. Come on! Ten years ago, people gave their lives out there," she exclaims, gesticulating to the square outside her window. "But now it feels like everything has been forgotten, and we're starting over again! How is that possible?"

As Ukraine's governing party seems set on combating the country's labor movement, workers like airport guard Andrey Chuba are facing a murky future. Has he lost faith in his country? "We must believe in victory," he says defiantly. "There is no damn alternative."

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