

Ukraine: Lviv miners: “We are not slaves”

How the Chervonohrad miners are fighting for their wages

Friday 9 August 2024, by [KARETNIKOVA Tetiana Hnativa](#), [LE TRÉHONDAT Patrick](#), [SHUMAKOV Maksym](#), [VASYLETS Ihor](#) (Date first published: 29 July 2024).



Interview with the activist Tetiana Hnativa Karetnikova for Trudova Halychyna by Ihor Vasylets and Maksym Shumakov - Translation Patrick Le Tréhondat

On 24 June, the miners’ wives and children went to the premises of the Chervonohrad town administration. The women demanded payment of six months’ back wages from the miners of the Lviv State Coal Enterprise.

Workers in Chervonohrad, whose resources are almost entirely based on mining, have been suffering from wage arrears for several years. This time, management attributes the arrears to the damage caused to the energy infrastructure by the Russian missile attack: due to the destruction of power stations, energy companies cannot use the coal they receive. However, the miners and their families are not satisfied with this response and are demanding fair pay for their work. The action in front of the city administration was intended to draw the attention of officials and the public to their problem.

Activists from the Social Movement and the independent student union Direct Action visited Chervonohrad and spoke with Tatiana Gnativa Karetnikova, an activist and the wife of one of the miners.

T.H.: How did you get involved in civic activism and become the face of the campaign for the payment of miners’ wages?

T.H.K.: I’m a doctor by training and an ambulance driver. I have fifteen years’ experience. My father was a miner, so I grew up seeing what it was like. No money, no salary - it didn’t happen yesterday or the day before. As it happens, my husband also went to work in the mine and these wage arrears started.

Our first action took place in 2019. We hadn’t received our wages for about six months, so we went to Sokal, to the Lvivvugilya state enterprise. There were men and women, women with children. In one case, the wife of a miner gave birth prematurely because she was worried about wages, delays and debts. The child ended up in intensive care. Afterwards, everyone was very excited and scared, because women with children arrived.

So we decided [to protest] too. We understand the guys: they can’t stop production. They’ve shipped

the coal for which they haven't received the money for six months. It was already in Trypilska TPP's warehouses. In fact, the guys did their job - they shipped the coal and nothing else bothered them. Give us back our wages!

TG: How many people have seen their pay delayed? Is everyone affected?

T.H.K.: All the mine workers! The surface workers [mine employees working on the surface - accountants, superintendents, etc. - have only been paid twice since February - 16% in April and a few percent in February. Underground workers [miners who work underground] are luckier with the help of the state; they receive around 37% to 40% of their salary once a month. But nine to eight thousand hryvnia [180 to 202 euros] a month for a family of four is nothing at all.

Almost everyone in Chervonohrad works in the mines, or at least one member of every family is a miner. And the town earns a lot from it! If the salary is normal, then the personal income tax is high. The approximate debt per person is 100,000 to 120,000 hryvnias. That's for six months. That's a lot of money [which the town is also losing].

T.H.: Does management indicate the reason for the debt?

T.H.K.: The debt arose because the energy companies did not pay for the coal they received. In other words, the mines delivered coal to them, but the buyers didn't pay. The companies said: "What about us? A rocket hit and the coal is under the rubble". But on the other hand, why should the people who have already done their job care?

The Ministry apologises - "we are working". But we don't know in what direction they are working. There were rumours that they wanted to freeze the debt for five years. However, we all heard on TV that the ministry had allocated a large sum of money to DTEK [energy company] to restore the energy sector. They could have used some of that money to pay off the debt!

If the miners had not sent the coal, they would have been fined for not doing their job. And those who didn't pay the miners for the coal they received don't pay a fine, they don't pay anything at all.

T.H.: In a report on Suspilne TV, it is mentioned that the coal warehouses are overloaded.

T.H.K.: There's nowhere to sell it. The CEO is looking to sign new contracts. Some of it, perhaps, to supply abroad. Some of it could be sold on the stock market. I mean, he's not sitting on his hands, he's not waiting. But our ministry is a bit... slow.

T.H.: How many miners work in the mines in total?

T.H.K.: Six thousand. And each miner has four or five other family members behind him. They have to pay interest and utility bills. And even then, it's not enough for everything. Time goes by and we go back into debt. There were times when we didn't pay the utilities because we didn't have the money. The [utility companies] charge us a penalty. There have been times when they wanted to cut off the electricity because of the debt.

T.H.: So you haven't 'frozen' your utility bills because of the debt situation?

T.H.K.: No. Lighting, gas - they're not interested in anything: "Why are these our problems? It's your problem not to be paid! And the miners can't say: "It's not our problem that a bomb fell there - give us back our money! All this has been going on since February until today.

T.H.: How do you manage to survive on the money you receive?

T.H.K.: Men go to work, and after work they go to another job to earn money, at least a little to live on.

T.H.: What type of work is involved?

T.H.K.: Taxis, repairs. They're always looking for something, somewhere. They work as night watchmen. One woman told me: "I see my husband for half an hour a day": in other words, he comes home from work, eats and goes back to work.

T.H.: Where do the people who aren't working in the mines work?

T.H.K.: We have educators, teachers and doctors here. There are shops. But the town's budget is based on the mines.

On Monday, there was a meeting of the GIZ, a German organisation that deals with the transformation of coal-mining regions. With the mines due to close in 2030, the Germans have decided to give miners the opportunity to retrain, retrain or set up their own businesses.

On Monday, a German lady came with her management and some people from Lviv. They were a bit uncomfortable because they wanted to present a good image, and then some "strange" people with children came and ruined everything for them. I say: if you want to transform the coal-mining regions, make sure that the people have paid off their debts so that your image is really good.

T.H.: There were no minors at your rally, only women with children. Why is that?

T.H.K.: Firstly, people are at work. Secondly, they are worried about being deprived of their protection. The mines are protected because they are major energy companies. They can't stop because coal is important for the heating season.

In general, 60% of our men are at war. In fact, all their support came from their colleagues, and now these colleagues have nothing to support them. Whether it's ammunition, night vision equipment or quadcopters, there's no support because there's nothing left to support them. In the same way, the town volunteers [defenders] depended on the miners' wages, and they could give money to buy something for the front line. And now everything has come to a standstill.

T.H.: Tell us about the city's trade unions and whether they help you.

T.H.K.: The NPGU [Independent Union of Ukrainian Miners] accused us of the fact that our action would be organised by a new, unknown political party. And that we want to reduce the unions to zero. In fact, you are deceiving yourself! If the unions were doing something, we wouldn't be going out. But when we took action, workers from an independent union came to see us. There were representatives from almost all the mines. There was a director of the Miners' Office. We asked them: "Help us, give us a bus, we'll go to the Ministry. We'll ask when the debt will be repaid". But they told us there was no point and that it would cost too much to hire a bus.

T.H.: So your initiative group is not contacting the unions?

T.H.K.: We make contact, but they don't hear us. They say: "Why did you leave? You're not a union. Why are you doing more than you are? And so on. For the moment, we're getting more help from local elected representatives than from the unions.

TG: What do you intend to do in the event of non-payment of debts?

T.H.K.: I wrote in Shakhtar Plus that if the unions help, they are good. If they don't, what good are they? We pay dues [to the union] which amount to UAH 400 per month per employee. That's a lot of money. We need a transparent union, where we can, for example, get money for treatment or something else if we need it. Otherwise, once a year, they give us two kilos of sweets for St Nicholas and once a year, a thousand hryvnias in aid. I tell the unions: "You see how many debts there are. Give aid to everyone in the mine. At least once a shift, give them some help." "We have no money", they say. The situation is difficult today, but what happened before? How many years in a row have dues been paid? Where is this money? I don't want to disqualify or discredit anyone, but the unions are discrediting themselves!

T.H.: How do you see your initiative developing? Is there an action plan for the future?

T.H.K.: We are currently waiting and seeing. At the meeting on Tuesday [2 July - editor's note], they said that there were two options for repaying the debt: either to take out loans from Ukrainian banks, or to do it at the expense of foreign donors. They will decide at the meeting which of these options is best.

T.H.: Has anyone been invited to this initiative?

T.H.K.: No. There will be trade unions there. They don't think our initiative is serious. To be honest, they're scared. For some reason, they are very afraid of women with children, because this has already been tested in 2019 and it has been tested again today.

T.H.: What do you think of life in the city in general? We've been talking to the locals for a while and we've noticed that people are quite pessimistic. They say that the coal industry will soon disappear, and the town with it.

T.H.K.: Why? Our town is beautiful. New houses are being built. The main thing is to create new jobs after the mines close. For example, GIZ has opened courses where you can study in different [areas] - information technology and 3D printing. It has now opened grants, so you can apply for them. The amount of the grant is, I believe, two hundred thousand euros to open your own business. A lot of people are applying. For example, I want to open a first aid medical centre here.

TG: But everyone agrees that the coal industry will come to an end sooner or later?

T.H.K.: Yes, they [the GIZ - editor's note] have said themselves that all coalmining companies should be closed by 2030. In our country, when mines were closed, they were mothballed. Now we're talking about building new companies in their place. There are many options - machine building, concrete production. We have a large steel construction plant and a reinforced concrete plant, which are no longer in operation. There's a lot of space and the premises are several storeys underground, so it's possible to set up production. There are also various voluntary initiatives. For example, there is the Krystynopil Volunteer Force, a formation of territorial defence volunteers. These are soldiers who are there to defend the region in the event of an attack from Belarus, for example. I took the oath when I was nine months pregnant. There's no reason to be afraid. What counts is how we set ourselves up. It's the same here in the city: if you put your mind to it, it will happen. If you prepare for depression, it will happen.

I'm also a volunteer with the Red Cross. We also have a foundation called the Foundation for Strategic Development. Personally, I go there to collect first aid kits and check medicines. However, I haven't been there for a long time because I had to go to work. My child was a year and a half old and I had to go to work: I had to feed my family. We also help doctors to fight. I work in the education sector and doctors in this sector only receive the minimum wage. So we fought and the

city increased our pay by 50%, and now the NHS is going to give us a 20% increase for mental health. In other words, we get a bit more than the minimum wage. But we still managed to get it!

T.H.: Finally, we'd like to ask you how people can support you and your initiative?

T.H.K.: Well, we've written an appeal to the Minister about the debt. We collected signatures on Tuesday. We sent them off. The CEO has agreed to take care of it and give it to us personally to speed things up. We'll now see how things go. If nothing happens, I'll make an appointment with the minister. I will then speak to him personally. My rights have been violated. That is, the human right to remuneration. Excuse me, we are not slaves. Slaves at least received food, but here they don't even do that.



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