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Ukraine: The war through a trade union lens

PCS is affiliated to the Ukraine Solidarity Campaign and sent a delegation there in November.

Workers also received a recent visit from the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). Ukrainian journalist and trade union activist Serhii Guz tells us more about how the unions are resisting the threats of Russian aggression and the anti-labour reforms of their own government.

Visits from unions around the world, such as that organised by PCS in November and a delegation from the ITUC in May, not only show solidarity with Ukrainian unions but are also an opportunity to see first-hand the conditions under which people are working.

“Although Kyiv is better protected than other parts of Ukraine, it remains a city under attack. The day before our delegation arrived... the city was subject to air attacks four times,” TUC General Secretary Paul Nowak said in an interview during the ITUC visit. The delegates visited the Trypillya thermal power plant, which was destroyed by Russian missiles, and were struck by the determination of the station workers to restore it, despite the threat of new shelling.

Such determination comes at a price. Working conditions are becoming increasingly dangerous.

Massive Russian missile attacks on energy facilities, industrial plants and residential areas have made work extremely dangerous for everyone, but most of all for the rescuers, emergency medics and police officers. The Russian military is increasingly resorting to double strike tactics, deliberately targeting first responders, killing 90 rescuers and more than 120 medical workers so far, and injuring hundreds more.

It is no less dangerous for the builders who clear away rubble, or for workers in agriculture. They are constantly at risk of being blown up by explosive devices in frontline regions. Trade unions are forced to focus on these new safety realities –

equipping workplace bomb shelters and conducting mine safety training.

Catastrophic outflow

The war is also damaging trade unions in another way. More than 11 million Ukrainians have changed their place of work and life, half of whom have gone abroad. The largest trade union association, the Federation of Trade Unions of Ukraine (FPU), estimates that the movement has lost around one million members – a quarter of the pre-war number.

“We are losing contact with these people, they are no longer members,” says Mikhail Volynets, head of the Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Ukraine (KVPU). While they hope that over time people will return to their jobs and the union, he said, “the reality is that we are losing large trade union organisations that were in enterprises located in the occupied territories”.

To stop this catastrophic outflow of members, Ukrainian unions are trying to support displaced people with humanitarian aid. For example, the FPU, which inherited hotels and tourist complexes in the Soviet era, has provided thousands of places for refugees.

Pretext to attack unions

It might seem that in these conditions the Ukrainian government would have become an ally of the trade unions, but it's not the case.

The central government has withdrawn from social dialogue. The war became a pretext for attacking unions, significantly curtailing labour and trade union rights in the workplace. This was made easier because with the declaration of martial law, the rights to strikes, rallies and other freedoms were abolished or limited.

Moreover, the government is preparing to remove a significant part of the FPU's property. It's a long-standing dispute over the Soviet legacy but for the first time the government has resorted to judicial seizures of union-owned premises. Meanwhile union leaders are being put under pressure from criminal cases over the disposal of disputed property.

It's hardly surprising that during the ITUC visit, no senior Ukrainian government officials found the time or inclination to meet them.

“Martial law is in no way a justification for curtailing and limiting the rights of workers and trade unions... [which are] universal and must remain untouchable”, said ITUC General Secretary Luc Triangle.

Despite difficult relations with their own government, Ukrainian trade unions continue to call for international military and humanitarian assistance, to counter Russian aggression.

They also call for support for demands for a just post-war reconstruction that includes decent jobs and working conditions, the involvement of unions in decision-making at all levels, and the protection of key rights such as collective bargaining and freedom of association.