Ukraine: work and war

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Working conditions in Ukraine have changed profoundly since the Russian army's full-scale invasion began. No war can be won on the battlefield alone. The mobilisation of Ukrainian society – and particularly of women workers – is the reason that the Russian lightning strike failed. The Ukrainian labour movement does not intend merely to repel the invasion; it also seeks to ensure a more egalitarian, socially responsible and democratic future[1].

On 24 February 2022, Ukraine awakes to all-out war. It comes as a shock to many. Columns of Russian tanks are heading towards Kyiv. Paratroopers are attacking close to the capital. The Russian army is engaging in hostilities on a front line extending more than 1,000 kilometres, from close to Chernobyl on the Belarussian border to the Black Sea. Across the world, Putin's allies and adversaries alike opine that Russia's overwhelmingly superior military might will win the war in a matter of weeks. The United States offers to exfiltrate President Zelenskiy from Kyiv so that he can go into exile.

Everyone in Ukraine that morning had to take a stand on the war. The long-established fissures that cut across society were remoulded. The first major failure in the Russian offensive was the mass refusal to collaborate with the invaders, triggering enormously violent reprisals against the civilian population once it became clear that the lightning strike had been unsuccessful. Nowhere were the occupiers welcomed as liberators. Hardly anyone in a position of power was willing to collaborate. While tens of thousands of volunteers rushed to military recruitment offices, others resisted using the means they had to hand, with great ingenuity. In Kyiv, thousands of young people converted their toy drones into very simple weapons that helped to stall the tanks' advance.

Workers have played a key role in the resistance, particularly in sectors where trade unions have had a presence. Tram conductor of 19 years Yelena Sabirova kept driving her tram through Kyiv even after the city had been half-deserted. Miners around the southern city of Kryvyi Rih divided themselves between different roles: some went to the front, others continued to mine iron ore. To this day, the unbroken link between the mine and the front is maintained by daily convoys bringing food and equipment to the combatants. As for railway workers, the war completely transformed their jobs. In just a few weeks, they had to transport almost one third of the population: eight million refugees left Ukraine completely, and five million were internally displaced. They also had to provide transport to the front for volunteers and conscripts as well as deliver food and other essential items. The main railway stations were organised to provide shelter and food to the massive number of refugees. The unions gave their support to a publicity campaign led by feminist organisations around the presence of criminal gangs aiming to capitalise on despair among women and girl refugees in order to traffic them. This work was sometimes carried out under shelling. On 8 April 2022, two Russian missiles hit a station in Kramatorsk that was sheltering more than 1,000 refugees awaiting evacuation. Fifty-seven people died, including five children.

The slogan 'Glory to Ukraine, glory to our heroes' is a popular one, but the reality of this war is that acts of heroism are commonplace by one and all. The greatest victory achieved by this grassroots resistance

1. This article owes much to Artem Tidva, Daria Saburova and Denys Gorbach. Artem is an organiser in the Ukrainian public services union affiliated to the Federation of Trade Unions of Ukraine (FPU), as well as for the European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU). Daria and Denys are Ukrainian researchers living in France who are involved in the work of the European Network for Solidarity with Ukraine.

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of so many people, many of them women away from the front line, was the failure of the Russian bombing campaign of winter 2022-2023. By systematically destroying the vital infrastructure involved in generating power, drinking water and heating, the Russian army endangered people's survival. The intention was to cow the country into capitulating and to threaten other European countries with a massive influx of refugees.

The winter battle was won because of a close-knit network of supportive communities where women from working-class backgrounds often played a leading role. That's what Daria Saburova, a researcher working with the European Network for Solidarity with Ukraine, noticed when she was staying in Kryvyi Rih between January and April 2023. In contrast to large NGOs led by the middle classes (usually with links to the church or liberal or nationalist parliamentary parties), who often operate with little direct contact with the population, small local support organisations have been doing two jobs. Away from the front, they provide help to refugees and people living in recently liberated areas. At the front, they keep in continuous contact with the soldiers. At first, such contact was vital because of logistical shortcomings. Today, the volunteers are motivated by the strong link between the army and the people. Many women take food to the front, telling themselves that the help they bring to soldiers they don't know will also be brought to their sons or husbands in other places by other women. The war has become a collective experience that strengthens working people's autonomy in relation to the state.

A complicated picture in the eastern regions

The Russian army attacked regions of Ukraine where a significant share of the population is categorised as 'Russian-speaking'. The reality is in fact more complicated. The chief characteristic of these regions is described by linguists as 'diglossia'. People switch between Russian and Ukrainian with ease depending on whom they're talking to and the type of conversation. A single discussion will often involve more than one language. Some working people speak *Surzhyk*, a linguistic mixture of Russian and Ukrainian that is regarded as 'impure' by nationalists in both countries. Russian nationalists presumed the people there were part of the 'Russian world' and would welcome the invasion as a liberation. The places in question were often regions where the majority of people had been anti-Maidan, in part because they thought membership of the European Union would have a negative impact on employment.

The invasion of 24 February changed the situation completely. News of its extreme brutality spread rapidly through contact between individuals, friends or relatives in the occupied territories. Personal interactions were regarded as more reliable than official information, whether from Russian or Ukrainian sources. The people became aware that the Russian army was striking out at the civilian population, banning trade unions in all occupied towns, setting up 'filtration camps' where people were often tortured and sometimes executed. In some cases, a mere tattoo could be a liability if it displayed nationalist or political allegiances. There was also pillaging as a result of the failure of Russian logistics to feed their own army.

The experience of eight years of occupation in the Donbas also contributed to the shift in opinion. In 2014, some of the urban population in the region had supported separatists who promised a process involving little warfare and a rapid improvement in living standards. In contrast to what had happened in Crimea, however, the secession of the Donbas involved huge bloodshed and culminated in mafia-type gangs taking power. Industries belonging to Ukrainian oligarchs were confiscated and then redistributed between these gangs before being nationalised and broken up. Most factories ceased operations, and any equipment of value was transferred to Russia. For men of working age, the network of militias administering the region became the leading employer.

The result was an exodus of the working population to Ukraine, Russia or other parts of the world. Only pensioners benefitted, in so far as they continued to receive their Ukrainian pension and were able to draw a Russian pension provided that they agreed to have a Russian passport. In 2022, even the sectors of the population that had been most anti-Maidan shied away from following the Donbas example. In the occupied territories, the majority of people sitting in the administrations set up by the Russians were members of separatist militias or outsiders who were originally from Russia.

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The women holding the healthcare sector together

The healthcare sector is essential in war and in peace. The vast majority of health workers are women; the sector is poorly paid and has been weakened by privatisation policies. It has never been regarded as a priority by the various governments that have come into office since independence in 1991. Between 1991 and 2017, the number of nurses fell from 670,000 to 360,000, according to Nina Kozlovska, founder of the nurses' union movement 'Be like Nina'[2]. The total number of healthcare staff fell by close to another 140,000 between 2017 and 2022. The Ministry of Health is a bureaucratic body and has been slow to adjust to a profound change in circumstances and needs. Its very inefficiency is one of the reasons for the growing reliance on private delivery of services.

Since the start of the full-scale invasion, nurses have not waited for instructions from management. They divide tasks between nurses based in hospitals or health centres and those who are off to reinforce services at the front line. Their hospitals are targets for Russian shells. After 15 months of war, the World Health Organization had recorded 1,004 Russian attacks on healthcare establishments. Dr Jarno Habicht, WHO Representative in Ukraine, was open in his admiration: 'The fact that the health system in Ukraine continues to operate amid such circumstances is a testament to the heroic dedication of healthcare workers. Despite the challenges posed first by the Covid-19 pandemic and now well over a year of war, Ukraine's healthcare workers remain amazingly strong, brave and patient, day after day, saving lives and providing care to those in need[3].'

This courage and dedication cannot be separated from a heightened awareness of women workers' collective interests. That's why, in various hospitals in the country, trade union groupings have united under the banner 'Be like Nina', both to enable them to do a good job and to improve staff working conditions. The nurses who are members criticise the fact that, despite the rocketing growth in healthcare needs because of the war, some hospitals are using martial law to sack staff, cut salaries and impose a lot of unpaid overtime. Sometimes they force staff to move from full-time to part-time work even while increasing overtime.

Additionally, Ukrainian women workers are massively involved in voluntary activities that they organise independently and, at the same time, refuse to agree to their paid work being devalued. They deplore wage cuts when hospitals are making a profit. The current minimum monthly salary for nurses is around 320 euros. In many hospitals, it has been cut or is paid after a significant delay. Hospitals are able to do this because of a 2023 Ukrainian government resolution[4] that authorises employers in healthcare establishments to make such cuts where wage costs (including social security contributions) exceed 85% of the funds received by way of subsidies. In other words, employers can unilaterally decide to cut wages based on the vagaries of their own management.

This particular fight is far removed from the impression of a society united by war. Although there is broad consensus around the need to repel the invasion, there is open hostility to social projects that clash with the realities of daily life, both at work and away from it. A 2022 law on the punishment of collaborators, for example, drafted under the influence of nationalist forces, extends the concept of collaboration beyond activities performed directly in the service of the occupier. It thus constitutes a threat to working-class people who have no savings and are forced to continue to work despite the occupation. One of the victories won through pressure exerted by women workers is that the state has given up on bringing criminal proceedings against healthcare staff who continued to work in occupied (and subsequently liberated) territories.

2. 'The pain of Ukrainian nurses in wartime', a report by the trade union 'Be like Nina', *Support for Resistant Ukraine*, No. 20, June 2023. https://ukraine-solidarity.eu/feminist-news-and-analysis/feminist-news-and-analysis-english-texts/the-pain-of-ukrainian-nurses-in-wartime
3. WHO media release of 30 May 2023, https://www.who.int/europe/en/news/item/30-05-2023-who-records-1-000th-attack-on-health-care-in-ukraine-over-the-past-15-months-of-full-scale-war
4. Resolution No. 28 of the Council of Ministers of 13 January 2023.

↴ **'After the war'**
Illustration: © Katya Gritsev

Fighting on two fronts

Since the outbreak of all-out war, the Ukrainian trade union movement has been fighting on two fronts. It is heavily involved in the battle to oust the Russian occupiers. There are many trade unionists fighting in the army and territorial defence forces, allowing for a daily contact with the unions, who provide them with ongoing material and psychological support. Additionally, in companies there is a daily struggle to defend social and trade union rights against governmental measures that are exploiting martial law to undermine collective agreements, facilitate layoffs and diminish union rights[5]. Martial law prohibits strikes and demonstrations, but this has not prevented trade unions from standing their ground and, in some cases, taking strike action.

Examples can be found in many sectors – take the miners in Novovolynsk (western Ukraine) who went on strike in September 2022 to protest against the appointment of a new, corrupt and authoritarian manager, or the young Bolt Food delivery drivers in Dnipro and in Kiev who mobilised in October 2023 against a deterioration in their working conditions. These labour movements show how widespread resistance is, whether on the front line fighting the occupiers or away from it fighting for a more equal and democratic society. Forms of self-management have even emerged in some small businesses[6]. For all essential activities such as health, education or transport, labour collectives have had to be creative in coming up with emergency solutions that are more efficient than those proposed by management.

In this respect, Ukraine is very much like the rest of Europe. Not because of its geographical location but because grassroots resistance there shares the same objectives as European progressive forces. Far from being a charitable act, solidarity is about establishing a reciprocal relationship between the trade unions of Ukraine and the trade unions in Europe and across the world. Whatever form union support takes, whether it's an invitation for trade unionists in Ukraine to make visits abroad or the publication of information and analyses by unions or other progressive forces in Ukrainian society, the longer the conflict goes on, the more important it is to put this solidarity into action. ●

London-on-Dnieper

An unusual scene took place in London on Friday 29 September 2023. Outside the headquarters of utilities company Veolia, the Labour Member of Parliament John McDonnell shared a platform with Yuliya Yurchenko, an activist from the Ukrainian left-wing organisation Sotsyalnyi Rukh under the flags of the General and Municipal Boilermakers Union (GMB). The GMB is a leading British trade union and has over 560,000 members, mainly in industrial sectors.

The GMB had decided to hold a week-long strike for higher wages at refuse recycling plants in Nottinghamshire, beginning on Monday 25 September. The facilities process refuse collected from more than 250,000 homes under contract between Veolia and Nottinghamshire County Council. Mick Coppin, GMB Organiser, said, 'Veolia Nottinghamshire are raking in vast sums of money from local council tax payers. In return, they're expecting local workers to do dangerous, difficult, and smelly work for the minimum wage. [...] Our members can no longer afford to heat their homes and pay their bills; they're being driven to the breadline by a multi-million pound company.'

The Ukraine Solidarity Campaign, which has significant trade union backing, stated that Veolia, which is refusing to negotiate with the GMB, continues to hold discussions on business operations with the Russian regime.

Since the all-out invasion, Ukraine has called on businesses that are still doing business in Russia to take immediate measures to cut their ties and exit responsibly. Veolia has refused this act of solidarity. The group is one of the 23 French multinationals that have not made any changes to their activities in Russia since February 2022, as shown on the database on multinational businesses in Russia compiled by Yale University in the United States.*

The GMB has furnished humanitarian aid and assistance to members of Ukrainian trade unions fighting on the front line. GMB members working for Veolia in London have already held demonstrations of support for Ukraine. They had Ukrainian flags on their picket lines as a sign of solidarity with the Ukrainian people. The GMB moved a motion for a resolution at the recent TUC congress (Trades Union Congress – the confederation of British trade unions). The resolution, carried on 12 September 2023,** is evidence of a firm commitment by the British trade unions to multiple activities demonstrating 'grassroots to grassroots' solidarity in order to establish direct links between union members in both countries.

* https://som.yale.edu/story/2022/over-1000-companies-have-curtailed-operations-russia-some-remain

** The resolution can be consulted at: https://congress.tuc.org.uk/c21-solidarity-with-ukraine/#sthash.xripFRsw.dpbs

In companies there is a daily struggle to defend social and trade union rights against governmental measures that are exploiting martial law.

5. See Alexandre Kitral's excellent article: *Swimming Upstream: Stories of people who challenged employer tyranny in Ukraine*. https://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article66554
6. Ukraine: *'The practice of self-management is widespread'*, https://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article64403