Report: International conference of European Solidarity with Ukraine

written by Tom Harris | May 20, 2022

On May 5 and 6, 2022, a two-day international conference of the European Solidarity Network with Ukraine with the support of the NGO "Social Movement" was held in Lviv, Ukraine. The international delegation included left-wing politicians, parliamentarians, trade unionists, journalists from Austria, Argentina, Belgium, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Spain, Germany, Poland, Finland, France, and Switzerland. Published here is a report by Tom Harris an activist of the Public and Commercial Services Union who attended.

On 3rd May, I travelled with other British trade unionists on a delegation to Ukraine. We did this to show solidarity with the Ukrainian people against Russia's vicious imperialist assault, and to try and learn from and make practical solidarity with the Ukrainian left and trade union movement. The delegation was organized by the European Network for Solidarity with Ukraine, and was made up of trade unionists, left-wing parliamentarians, journalists and social activists from Europe and South America. At the conference, we met with Ukrainian trade unionists, leftists, and activists from a broad range of feminist, ecologist, and human rights organizations.

Before reporting on the conference, I imagine readers will be interested in how Lviv feels and looks at this stage in the war. In Ukraine's far west, the city is less than 50 miles from the Polish border and many hundreds of miles from the battlefronts in the east and south. As a result, Lviv feels eerily peaceful and 'normal,' especially compared with the horrific images of destruction from elsewhere in the country. If you didn't know otherwise, you might suppose you were in any other elegant old Austro-Hungarian city with its pretty cathedrals, Renaissance architecture and streets lined with restaurants and cafes doing a decent trade.

A deeper look reveals the truth, though: the military roadblocks here and there, the enlistment points, the soldiers in uniform waiting for trains and buses, the sandbags built up around monuments and sheets of metal bolted over churches' stained glass to protect them from bomb damage.

And then there's the air raid sirens, which sound several times a day. We'd been told in advance what the protocol was (get two walls between yourself and the outdoors, head for a basement if possible) but we'd also been told that virtually everyone in Lviv ignores it. This isn't quite as reckless as it sounds: whenever a missile is detected heading for Ukraine, alarms sound in every city it could potentially hit. The vast majority of times the sirens go off, nothing is heading for Lviv. "Reassuring!," we thought, until we learnt that missiles had hit the electricity and rail infrastructure on the outskirts of town the day before we arrived. Two were injured and electricity was cut off to part of the city.

The disconnection between how we visitors felt we should react to an air raid warning and how the locals reacted was almost funny at times. On our first night at the hotel, we heard the sirens and dutifully made our way to the basement. No one else was there, and eventually some faintly amused security guards turned up to investigate. We reckon they thought we were up to mischief down there.

Many Ukrainians we interviewed told us that this surreal contrast between Lviv's relative normality and the horror elsewhere is a terrible thing to endure psychologically, especially if you have recently lived through a siege, or if, as was true of many we spoke to, your friends and relatives are still being shelled or living under occupation. Lviv's population has been swelled greatly by refugees looking for safety, many of them now living in awful, cramped conditions in cellars or small rooms.

The conference began by hearing from Ukrainian trade unionists. Oleksandr Skyba, a railworker from Kyiv's Darnitsya depot and activist in the Free Trade Union of Railway Workers and Transport Builders, described the incredibly dangerous conditions that he and his colleagues had been working under when Russian forces attempted to besiege the capital. The railways are essential for supplying the Ukrainian war effort and consequently were targeted by the Russians, with trains and tracks bombed and rail workers fired upon by Russian troops. Many rail workers have died. In a theme that would crop up again and again at the conference, Skyba described how the work of the union had become centered on keeping its members alive – moving humanitarian supplies, rescuing workers in peril, providing food and support for the many railway workers now fighting in the territorial defense units and the armed forces.

Oleksandr later told us how he and the union had been visiting members now enlisted in the armed forces to try and make sure they had basic training in first aid and military skills, including identifying mines. Many older Ukrainians have experience of the army, but the war has thrown many less experienced younger workers into army life for the first time, and their old trade union networks are proving crucial sources of support. This was echoed by Yurii Samoilov, a miners' leader who joined us via Zoom from the industrial city of Kryvi Rih, not far from the front line. He described his union's efforts to relay information and supplies to their members engaged in combat.

Other themes emerged from the speeches by trade unionists. Many pointed out how clear it was to workers that their independent organizations stood little chance of survival under Russian occupation. The comrade from Kryvi Rih alluded to the total crushing of trade unionism and all other forms of independent civil society in the Russian puppet-regimes in Donetsk and Luhansk. Serhii and Oksana, trade unionists in the health sector, reported that health workers in the occupied zones had been forced to leave their unions and ordered to join Russian ones instead. This piece of coercion was tied up with the occupiers' demand that the workers sign new, worse employment contracts. Some of these workers managed to contact their old union. They asked what they should do: risk their lives by refusing, or end up looking like collaborators when Ukrainian forces returned? The comrades from the health unions called on the international union movement to condemn Russian trade unions for their complicity in this.

Before the war, health workers were already suffering low pay and poor conditions. These workers – four in five of whom are women – are struggling on salaries below the Ukrainian average, and austerity policies had depleted the capacity of the health service to cope with Covid-19. Volodymyr Zelenskiy issued a presidential decree to increase health workers' wages but cuts to the sector's budget meant this never materialized. The outbreak of war, and the subsequent ban on health workers leaving the country, has left them caught in a perfect storm of poverty, danger, and the struggle to meet the dire need for medical treatment in a system buckling under pressure.

The conference also heard from various unions in the energy sector. Vasyl Semkanich from the

Independent Trade Union of Miners in the city of Chervonohrad told us how decades of Russian political intervention had made the Ukrainian economy dangerously reliant on imported fossil fuels from Russia. But he didn't want to absolve Ukraine's native ruling class. He also pinned blame on the Ukrainian oligarchs, who drag the country's energy sector further and further from public interest and scrutiny and use it to line their own pockets. He talked about his union's demands for the industry to be brought into democratic public ownership.

Pavlo Oleshchuk from the atomic workers union gave an alarming speech about the nuclear industry during the war. The Russian army has repeatedly fired explosives around nuclear power stations, and in the early days of the war the Zhaporizhzhia plant complex, Europe's biggest, actually caught fire. The plant is now under Russian occupation. Pavlo said that he had worked at the Zhaporizhzhia plant for 17 years and was familiar with the meticulous and careful safety measures that had been developed, many on the union's insistence, to keep the station and its workers safe. He shuddered to think how many of those measures were still in place. As he understands it, the Russians have imported their own managers to oversee the plant, but the original Ukrainian staff are still operating it and are resisting some of their orders. We were also shown slides of the damage the Russians inflicted on the briefly occupied Chernobyl site. Not only were workers' facilities completely trashed, but important safety infrastructure like laboratories, health and safety records and computer databases had been destroyed. Pavlo said he couldn't believe how recklessly the occupiers were behaving, as if "they don't understand where they are or how dangerous it is."

We also heard from feminist activists and campaigns for women's rights. The war has had a profound effect on women's lives. Sexual violence has been used as a weapon of war by the invading Russian forces, creating enormous suffering and trauma. The ability for women to access abortion is far from guaranteed. Though abortion is legal in Ukraine, those trying to get one can face social stigma and religious prejudice. Shamefully, many traumatized Ukrainian women who succeed in escaping to Poland discover that they are now in a country where abortion is effectively banned.

According to Yana Wolf, an activist from the feminist group Bilkis, the militarization of society has also emboldened some men to abuse women. 'When men join the army, they don't just get a uniform,' she explained. 'They get a sense of power, including over women.' She explained that women and children often face the fall out when traumatized men get back from the front. 'That trauma turns to rage when they return,' she explained, 'and violence provokes more violence.'

The Ukrainian women's movement has achieved much in recent decades, but the infrastructure it has built has been imperiled by war. Marta Chumalo of the group Women's Perspectives described how some women's refuges had to close in the face of the invasion. The conditions of many refugee women, including those who have fled to Lviv, are a perfect breeding ground for domestic violence. Marta's organization had been helping women, one of whom who'd been living 17-to-a-basement, with scant ability to feed and provide for themselves or their children and little recourse to escape violent partners.

But while women face grave challenges, they have also fought back, both against the invasion and against the oppression of men on their 'own' side. Many women have volunteered to fight the Russians, and the percentage of women in the armed forces has shot up to over 15%. A lot of women have demanded they be allowed to take the fight to the enemy, resisting the army's attempts to allocate them to roles far from combat. Meanwhile, the exodus of refugees to the safer towns of Ukraine's west has allowed previously disparate campaigners to forge new connections, with Lviv becoming an impromptu center for feminist and LGBT activism. In Kyiv, a feminist collective fighting for LGBT rights votes each month on which military unit they want to donate to.

Ethnic minorities, too, have been drawn into a common struggle against the occupiers. We heard

from human right's activist Yulian Kondur about the high numbers of Roma people volunteering in the armed forces. The participation of so many Roma soldiers in the war is a big source of pride for the community, he said. And yet the Roma are one of the most marginalized and oppressed groups in Ukrainian society, a systematic disadvantage that has by no means disappeared during war. The collective struggle of the war, Kondur said, has presented new opportunities to combat prejudice, but the difficulties are harsh. Roma continue to find it harder to migrate, including internally, and often struggle to access social provision designed to help the victims of war. Roma have also been the victims of vigilante justice amid the chaos of the conflict, and the speaker drew our attention to a particularly horrible incident in Lviv where Roma girls from Eastern Ukraine were tied up, painted, and humiliated for the alleged crime of petty theft.

To get a sense of where the socialist left finds itself in Ukraine, we spoke to activists from Sotsialniy Rukh (Social Movement). On the one hand, the war has presented enormous challenges. When the government introduced martial law, the right to strike or organize demonstrations was closed off. The Zelenskiy administration also cut taxes on corporations and diluted workers right's in what it described as an attempt to stabilize the economy. Social Movement are calling for the restitution of the rights that have been suspended, and positively demanding an expansion and deepening of labor and social legislation, levelled up to the standard of those enjoyed in the EU.

For some years, Ukrainian governments have implemented 'de-Communization' measures aimed at preventing political parties from positively invoking the Soviet past. Earlier in the war, Zelenskyy also banned a series of pro-Russian parties, some of them nominally leftist. We asked Social Movement for their view on this legislation. The problem, they said, is not so much that any of the banned parties were seriously struggling for socialism or workers' rights (on the whole they were thoroughly rotten bodies of Putin-sympathetic, USSR-nostalgic conservatives, broadening their appeal through Orthodox Christian chauvinism and a few gestures of opposition to benefit cuts). Nevertheless, Social Movement oppose the legislation that banned them. This is partially because of a general interest in democracy and freedom of association, but also because crude bans on leftist iconography and terminology can also be used to crack down on genuine socialists and fighters for workers' rights.

Social Movement activist Denys Pilash told us that, in general, it can be difficult to talk about socialism or anti-capitalism in a country which suffered so terribly under a regime that claimed to be a 'Socialist Soviet Republic'. And yet, most people in Ukraine are keenly aware of the big social inequalities, the hoarding of wealth by the rich, the robbing of society by the oligarchs. Disgust at the rich is so common that anti-oligarch rhetoric is employed even by the oligarch's parties themselves!

That sentiment hasn't disappeared in time of war, either. Social Movement have been able to make progress by pointing out the unfairness with which some aspects of the war are being managed and by telling workers how to invoke their rights. They highlight how the bosses' selfishness and disregard for workers' living conditions will weaken Ukraine's chances in the war. Pilash said that while Zelenskyy's popularity is very high because of his role as commander-in-chief, many ordinary Ukrainians view the meaner and more unjust policies of his government as somehow unconnected. In this way, popular opinion can be both very pro-Zelenskyy and simultaneously critical of the government.

In enormously difficult conditions, Social Movement and other genuine leftists are struggling to outline an egalitarian and democratic alternative that the Ukrainian public can grasp, clear and distinct from both the corrupt present and from the dictatorial Soviet past.

I spoke briefly at the conference, along with Ruth Cashman from UNISON. We outlined the aims we

felt needed to be taken up by the trade union movement and left internationally: for arms for Ukraine, for the abolition of the country's international debt, for the opening of borders to refugees, for our unions to make meaningful and practical links with the Ukrainian labor movement. Some aid convoys are coming from European unions, but more needs to be done. We also discussed the challenges that face us. These include the sluggishness and bureaucratism of a union movement that has been badly demoralized by decades of defeat. We also need to confront the legacy of the Stalinist politics, still present in our movement, that is only capable of seeing imperialism when it comes from NATO, and which turns a blind eye to the imperialism of Russia or China.

That will be a difficult task, but a necessary one. We talk a lot in the labor movement about international solidarity and mutual aid. If any of that is real and sincere, we need to act on it now. The Ukrainian left is in a life-or-death struggle. We owe them any help we can give.

STATEMENT of solidarity with Ukraine as adopted at the end of the Lviv conference.

On February 24, 2022, Russian imperialism launched an open aggression against Ukraine. For more than two months, the people of Ukraine have been fighting an unequal battle with the occupying forces, losing thousands of lives and enduring massive destruction. While a lot of politicians in the west as well as in Russia argued that Ukraine will fall in a few days, great mobilization of Ukrainian people in all spheres of life and heroic fight of the Ukrainian resistance show how misguided this take. Many European countries continue to finance the Russian war machine buying Russian oil and gas.

At the same time, the people of Ukraine are harmed by reforms adopted in the interests of the richest, before and even during the war. These political decisions result in shifting the burden of war to the majority of the population. Examples are the reduction of labor rights guarantees for employees and the reduction of taxes for business owners. These changes are accompanied by an increasing reduction in the social sphere, which creates unbearable conditions for the people of Ukraine affected by the war. In such circumstances Ukraine continues to meet its debt obligations to the IMF and other creditors. Instead of enriching creditors and world bankers, this money should go to the defense of the country and the fulfillment of the basic needs of the population. Through its policy, the IMF continues to promote anti-people reforms in Ukraine and is increasingly dragging Ukraine into bondage, undermining its independence, and making it difficult to rebuild the country.

The destruction of infrastructure, production, and residential neighborhoods raises the task of rebuilding Ukraine, under what conditions and at what cost rebuilding will take place after the war is an urgent question. Reconstruction based on the primacy of neoliberal politics will lead to even greater poverty and oligarchization. Comprehensive restoration of Ukraine and its role in providing basic goods for the world's most disadvantaged populations is impossible without changing the course of socio-economic policy at the national and world levels.

The response to Russian aggression must be the solidarity of the peoples of the world. Ukraine's victory in the war will weaken authoritarian regimes in Syria, Belarus, and other countries, and this will give the world a real opportunity to move towards democratic development with social and environmental justice.

Writing off Ukraine's foreign debt will be a step against the dominance of neoliberalism, built on inequality and exploitation. The precedent of such a policy will pave the way for other countries to have stable development policies that will not punish the poorest people in favor of the richest through unfair lending.

Our left, trade union, feminist, and human rights communities, fight to promote Ukraine's victory and its post-war prosperity, including:

- Withdrawal of Russian troops from the territory of Ukraine, in particular, from the occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk regions and the Autonomous Republic of Crimea.
- Military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine, as well as the imposition of tough sanctions against Russia.
- Introduction of a socially-oriented program for the reconstruction of Ukraine, aimed at helping the country's population, rather than enriching business elites.
- A Renouncing the purchase of Russian fossil fuels, entering a real energy transition in order to replace fossil fuels without replacing them with purchases from other sources.
- Abolition of Ukraine's foreign debt and impossibility of withdrawing funds offshore.
- Support for all refugees, regardless of their nationality, ethnicity, religion, etc. Abolition of all discriminatory laws and practices.
- Stopping anti-social reforms in Ukraine and abolishing high administrative fees that hinder the participation of the working class in political life.