Unions Strive to Keep Ukraine's Mines Running, Protect Civilians and Appeal for Solidarity

written by Christopher Ford, Nataliya Levytska | September 12, 2022



Interview with Nataliya Levytska, Deputy Chairperson of the NGPU (Independent Mineworkers Union of Ukraine), by Christopher Ford, Ukraine Solidarity Campaign.

Christopher Ford – Please explain your own position in the NGPU. How many workers do you represent; where do they work; and in which areas of Ukraine?

Nataliya Levytska – The independent trade union of miners of Ukraine (NGPU) represents mine workers in coal, iron and uranium ore, non-ferrous metals, peat and energy. It has representation in the regions of Donetsk, Luhansk, Dnipropetrovsk, Kirovohrad, Chernihiv, Zhytomyr, Rivne, Volyn, Ivano-Frankivsk and Lviv – a total membership, as of January 1, 2022, of 43,500 people. At the 9th NGPU Congress of May 27, 2021 I was elected to the post of first deputy chairperson. I have been working in independent trade unions for more than 20 years. The NGPU, together with members of trade union organizations, fights for the rights of miners, preservation of jobs, prevention of deterioration of labour legislation and social protection of miners and their families.

CF – What is the NGPU trade unions' view of Russia's war on Ukraine?

NL – The NGPU and our leading organizations consider Russia's attack to be a cynical attempt by the Russian regime to destroy Ukraine and its people. From the first days of the full-scale invasion, many miners voluntarily went to defend the Ukrainian land in the territorial defenses and the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Most of our members volunteer and help civilians, the military and medics. We consider the Russian-Ukrainian conflict a war against democracy not only in Ukraine, but also in Europe and the world, as well as a genocide of the Ukrainian people.

CF – There was already war in Donbas since 2014, how has the situation changed there with the full-scale Russian invasion in February?

NL – In 2014 Russia attacked Ukraine and occupied part of the territories of Donbas. Some of the mines ended up in the occupied territory and actually stopped work. Miners and their families were forced to leave their homes and flee because they were in danger. The activities of the NGPU were banned by the occupation authorities of the so-called 'DNR' and 'LNR' and In May 2014 our leaders in Novogrodivka were kidnapped and tortured.

At the same time, mines on Ukrainian-held territory were still working so miners there had jobs and provided for their families. In the territory of Donbas, controlled by the Ukrainian government, local and central authorities invested in the development of local communities, with reconstruction of schools and hospitals. New jobs were created, children's and sports grounds were built, together with new parks and squares while hospitals and schools received modern equipment. But on February 24 changed everything.

Lysychansk, Severodonetsk, Popasna, Rubizhne and other cities of Luhansk region were actually destroyed by Russian troops. Almost the entire territory of Luhansk region is occupied. Most of the residents of the region became refugees, while others ended up in Russian filtration camps. All industrial enterprises were destroyed. There is no electricity, gas, or water supply in the cities. Most of the buildings have been destroyed and the housing stock is unusable. Fighting continues in the Luhansk region and the enemy uses air bombs, rockets and prohibited types of weapons.

Fierce battles continue in the Donetsk region, and our members are heroically defending it as well. Most of the cities of Donetsk region are subjected to bombings and rocket attacks every day in which civilians die. Cities turn into ruins. Mines are subjected to shelling and forced to stop work. The infrastructure of the region is being destroyed by the Russian invaders – schools, hospitals, kindergartens, churches, cultural institutions. With the impossibility of preparing for the cold season, the authorities announced the evacuation of residents of the Donetsk region but the miners have worked on heroically in the mines despite the threat to their lives due to shelling.

CF – What was the situation of mineworkers before the invasion, were mines and industry functioning?

NL – Mines and industrial enterprises in the territory of Donetsk and Luhansk regions held by Ukraine were working. The workers had a job and a salary. Even if there were delays in the payment of salaries to the miners.

CF – Have mines stopped working since the invasion began?

NL – In Luhansk region, all seven mines stopped working. Some were damaged by shelling, some were flooded, but the full picture is unknown because the territories are occupied by Russia. And what consequences it will have for the region's ecology is also unknown.

In the Donetsk region, two mines in Vugledar stopped working because they were destroyed by shelling. Others are operational but are close to the war zone.

CF – What has been the impact of war on conditions of life in the mining communities, especially in East and Southern Ukraine?

NL – The war changed the life of every citizen of Ukraine. We live in the conditions of war every day and every night and when we hear the warning sirens we do not know where and when Russia will use its weapons against us. Russia not only kills the population, including children, but also tries to psychologically break the Ukrainian people who are resisting and defending their democratic rights.

CF – Are civilians and civilian areas being deliberately attacked by Russian forces?

NL – I am convinced that Russia deliberately attacks civilian targets and the population, destroying all infrastructure and life support facilities. In addition, medical and school equipment, industrial equipment, grain and everything that is left is taken out of the captured territories. For example, even playground equipment was taken from Mariupol.

The KVPU, of which the NGPU is a member organization, constantly provides assistance to hospitals that have been damaged or looted by Russian troops. We are grateful to our brothers and sisters from other trade unions and partners for their help in this. Also, our local organizations in Donetsk and Dnipropetrovsk regions provide assistance to hospitals – from baby food to equipment and generators.

CF – Russia appears to be trying to terrorize the population – how have Russian tactics affected the will of Ukrainians to resist?

NL – Ukrainians have rallied and are trying to defend with all their might. Terror only increases resistance and hatred of enemies. Everyone is doing everything to bring victory closer: the population helps the Armed Forces, collects funds, organizes volunteer units and uses the smallest opportunities to resist the enemy. Even children are active participants in the volunteer movement.

Imagine that for the seventh month We live with constant alarm signals, destruction of our cities and threats of a nuclear disaster from Russia. Some of our members lose their loved ones to airstrikes and shelling while others who have become soldiers die in combat.

Despite this, Ukrainians continue to fight. International support helps us in this, because it shows that the whole world is with us.

CF – Has there been a mobilization within mining communities to organize and assist each other since the invasion?

Of course, everyone helps each other. A family of miners from Donetsk and Luhansk regions found protection in Lviv and Volyn regions. Miners from Donbas were employed at the mines of the Dnipropetrovsk region.

As I already mentioned, we also help medical institutions. Moreover, we will provide humanitarian assistance to all those who need it, not only our members. The head of the NGPU, Mykhailo Volynets, often takes essential items to Donbas, Kharkiv, and Chernihiv regions himself.

CF – Alongside the Ukrainian Army, are the territorial defence forces, and other battalions in mining and industrial areas mostly composed of workers?

NL – Members of the NGPU take an active part in the fight against the enemy. Some were mobilized into the Armed Forces of Ukraine, others joined the ranks of territorial defence, the rest became participants in voluntary formations for the protection of territories. Until February 24, these people worked in mines, mined coal, and made plans. And today they protect the country. Unfortunately, we also have casualties among the mobilized miners. Yes, more than 20 miners from DC 'Lvivcoal' State Enterprise have already died at the front, there are also miners from other state-owned coal mining enterprises who have died.

In addition, our NGPU members work to ensure the energy independence of Ukraine.

CF – In the local mobilizations to provide aid and organize defence, is there a significant involvement of women alongside men?

NL – Women defend the country together with men. According to the Ministry of Defence, 5,000 women are on the first line of defence. In addition, women play a major role in the volunteer movement.

Our members volunteer in Donbas, Dnipropetrovsk, and Kirovohrad regions. Even those who are

currently forced refugees in Europe are trying to help: they collect funds, buy and hand over medicines and supplies for the military, and help to organize support for Ukraine in European cities.

CF – What has been the role of the NGPU since the invasion began?

NL – From the first days of the full-scale invasion, the members of the NGPU actively participated in the defence of the country. In addition, NGPU members work extracting coal that the country needs.

Also, the NGPU immediately began to use its resources to help the affected communities and defenders. We are grateful for the help we receive from our brothers and sisters, because now our work opportunities have decreased due to the destruction of the economy and the growing unemployment. Russia is deliberately destroying our businesses and infrastructure in order to destroy our state, as well as – to get rid of a competitor in global markets.

CF – Is the NGPU organizing aid and assistance to families in the mining communities?

NL – The NPGU provides humanitarian assistance to miners and their families, helps them to evacuate to safe cities and provides other necessary assistance.

CF -Are all trade unions organizing to defend Ukraine from the invasion?

NL – Today, all citizens of Ukraine, including members of all trade unions, are making maximum efforts to fight the enemy and bring Victory closer.

CF – There was previously some division between trade unions in Ukraine. Has the war led to greater solidarity across Ukraine amongst trades unions?

NL -There may be differences between the unions and beyond, but now we are united in the fight against the enemy.

CF – Russia claims they are fighting to 'liberate' Donbas and other areas from 'Nazis'? How do you respond to this allegation?

NL – There have never been Nazis in Ukraine and there are none. There are no right-wing radical parties in the Ukrainian parliament. Both world politicians and celebrities come to Ukraine, and they see it for themselves. We do not need protection and liberation from anyone. Russia used 'Nazism' for propaganda purposes and as a pretext for an attack.

Ukrainians are a friendly, hardworking and free nation. We never attacked anyone. And if we see that the government is doing something wrong, we go to Maidan and resolve all issues. No aggression will stop our European and democratic aspirations.

CF – Among the Russian forces there appear to be extreme right wing fascist groups. What is the politics of the Russian forces, including the so-called Donetsk Peoples' Republic?

NL – All those who fight against Ukraine on our territory are fascists, whom we call racists. What they are doing on our land is worse than what happened during the Second World War. By the way, people who survived the Second World War are surprised by the current atrocities of the Rashists.

CF – Russia also suggests that there is a threat to the Russian language in Ukraine, and of 'genocide' against Russian and Russian speakers?

DL – This is pure delusion. In Ukraine, people have always been able to speak the language they are

comfortable with. There was no oppression of Russian-speaking citizens. As a person who was born and grew up in the Donbass and spoke Russian, I never felt oppressed for my language. But now even Russian-speaking citizens are trying to switch to the Ukrainian language.

CF – How has the war impacted on how people think about Ukrainian language and national identity?

NL – We are proud to be Ukrainians and we all try to speak Ukrainian.

CF – What is the current situation in the occupied areas of Ukraine?

NL – According to the information of our members who remained in the occupied territory, the situation is difficult. In Donbas, men are afraid to go outside because they are being forcibly mobilized into the Russian army. They catch people with a pro-Ukrainian position, forcing them to get Russian passports. Those who refuse are subjected to torture. All are passed through filtration camps. Also, the Ukrainian language and education in schools in line with the Ukrainian curriculum are prohibited in the occupied territories. Residents of the occupied territories are waiting for the Armed Forces of Ukraine, but they do not talk about it openly. There is also a resistance movement in these territories.

CF -nIs there a free trade union movement in occupied areas?

NL – No.

CF – With a growing economic recession, some people in the UK have argued that there should be a ceasefire and peace now – how do you respond to such a position?

NL – We want peace, but we are not ready to give up our territories. In 2014, we ceded Crimea, then part of Donbas, without firing a single shot, but this not only did not lead to peace, it led to a full-scale war on Ukrainian soil. We already know that Russia does not adhere to any agreements. Therefore, we will fight to Victory and we really hope that the whole world will support us. Because we are fighting not only for ourselves, but also for every European country.

CF – Do you think a peace which involves partition of Ukraine is acceptable?

NL – Ukraine is a free, independent country. We don’t want anyone to divide us, and we won’t allow it.

CF – There is already discussion about the reconstruction of Ukraine after the war. Do you think the current struggle for national liberation should also have social objectives?

NL – We must rebuild a social, European Ukraine. Our objective for the social reconstruction of Ukraine should be a decent salary, quality jobs, safe working conditions and social justice. And trade unions must always be an effective tool for protecting the rights of employees.

CF – The Ukrainian parliament is processing laws which will significantly undermine employment rights and workers conditions, such as Draft Law 5371. What is your view of these new laws?

NL – New laws must meet international and European standards, protect workers and create new jobs. We are now fighting against Draft Law 5371 and other bills that violate workers’ rights.

CF – What do you believe is the motive for these changes?

NL – Perhaps certain representatives of the authorities believe that if they deregulate labour relations, they will increase investments in the country. But it is not so. The deterioration of labour legislation will have a negative impact on the post-war economy of Ukraine.

CF – Do you think these changes can be reversed?

NL – We will do our best to make it happen.

CF – What solidarity can trade unions in the United Kingdom provide for you?

NL – We will be grateful for any solidarity support and help.

Should we campaign for the British Government to send more weapons to Ukraine?

CF – It must be so, because our defence and our Victory depend on the number of weapons.

CF – We are supporting your appeal for assistance – Can you explain what specific aid is needed to help the mineworkers' resistance?

NL – Ukrainians, including miners, need humanitarian and military aid. Any help would be greatly appreciated. For example, the members of the NPGU who defend the country need vehicles, unmanned aerial vehicles, thermal imagers, medical equipment, long-term storage and quick-cooking products. And the mining families who were forced to move to other regions need warm clothes, heaters, generators and food. Together with the support of our trade union brothers and sisters, we will definitely win!