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Ukraine

# Evolution of the Trade Union Movement in Ukraine

- Features -

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The [International Labour Network of Solidarity and Struggle](#) writes:

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”We are publishing [this article](#) on the website of the International Labour Network of Solidarity and Struggles about developments in the trade union movement in Ukraine. Giving a voice to those who are involved in trade unionism is a priority for our Network!”

The Ukrainian trade union movement is at a historic crossroads. To continue to operate with outdated models and methods is to embark on the road to insignificance and decline. Faced with the profound transformation of society and post-war reconstruction, the trade unions must choose: extinction or modernisation.

# 1. Introduction

The trade union movement in Ukraine originated within the framework of the Soviet system, where trade unions primarily played a decorative role, focusing on the distribution of social benefits rather than advocating for workers' rights. The collapse of the Soviet Union marked the beginning of a new chapter. As early as 1990, independent trade union organizations began to emerge, challenging the 'old system' institutions. Over time, a significant number of these organizations consolidated into the Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Ukraine (CFTU).

Simultaneously, the Federation of Trade Unions of Ukraine (FTU) – the largest coalition of the so-called 'traditional' or 'yellow' unions – continued to operate. This entity inherited considerable assets and institutional positions from the Soviet era. Despite maintaining a formal organizational structure, including reports, committees, and youth divisions, its operations were largely symbolic and lacked substantive engagement. In particular, youth participation within such organizations was nominal, without genuine involvement in decision-making processes or advocacy for labor rights.

By the onset of the full-scale war in 2022, the trade union movement found itself in a state of profound crisis. Key challenges included:

- Institutional Weakness: Trade unions exerted minimal influence over legislative processes and economic policymaking;
- Political Isolation: Labor issues had been marginalized, and trade unions lacked a dedicated political platform;
- Organizational Stagnation: Strategic vision was absent, legal frameworks were underdeveloped, and progress in digital transformation remained insufficient.

# 2. Legal and Political Context of Wartime

The outbreak of full-scale invasion in Ukraine has brought about radical transformations in the legal framework of

labor relations. Law No. 2136, adopted in 2022, significantly restricted the rights of employees: strikes were prohibited, social guarantees were reduced, and key provisions of collective agreements were cancelled. As a result, trade unions were effectively stripped of their legal and public mechanisms of influence.

Territorial Recruitment Centers (TRCs) have become an additional instrument of pressure. There have been documented cases where mobilization was allegedly used to target trade union activists and employees with firm pro-labor position. Employers, in turn, acquired new discretionary power – namely, the capacity to determine which employees would be mobilized and which would be exempted from mobilization, often on the basis of personal loyalty or involvement in trade union activities. These developments have significantly impacted on the representatives of independent trade unions, who are typically more vocal in their criticism of both employers and state authorities.

Furthermore, a significant number of people with an active civic position, including leaders and activists volunteered for military service in the beginning of 2022. This significantly weakened the human capital and intellectual leadership of the trade union movement, deepening existing crises of governance and institutional resilience.

Simultaneously, the effective suspension of the State Labor Service's operations – especially labor protection inspectorates – has led to unpunished violations of safety standards and working conditions. The suspension of scheduled inspections has created a permissive environment for abuse, particularly in hazardous and low-wage sectors.

Thus, the trade union movement has come under dual pressure: from the state, which has imposed restrictive wartime measures, and from employers, who have exploited the war as a means of exerting control. In such a context, the defense of labor rights demands not only legal expertise but also exceptional personal courage.

Key elements of this context include:

- Law No. 2136 and its associated restrictions on workers' rights, including the prohibition of strikes and the reduction of social guarantees;
- Martial law and pressure from Territorial Recruitment Centers (TCCs);
- The mobilization of trade union activists, leading to the weakening of organizational structures;
- The de facto suspension of labor protection inspectorates, resulting in unmonitored workplace violations.

### 3. The Response of Trade Unions to the Challenges of War

In response to the unprecedented challenges posed by the full-scale invasion, Ukrainian trade unions have mobilized a wide range of initiatives aimed at supporting workers and defending social cohesion. Despite institutional limitations and political constraints, trade unions have demonstrated resilience, adaptability, and a strong commitment to solidarity.

- Volunteer Activities and Humanitarian Assistance: Trade union organizations have played an active role in volunteer efforts, providing essential support to internally displaced persons and vulnerable populations. These initiatives include the distribution of food, clothing, medicine, and shelter, as well as the coordination of logistical support in cooperation with local communities and international partners.

- Support for Workers in Critical Infrastructure and the Defense Sector: Trade unions have extended targeted assistance to employees engaged in essential services – particularly in energy, transportation, healthcare, and defense-related industries.
- Protection of the Rights of Mobilized Workers
- Engagement in International Trade Union Initiatives: Ukrainian trade unions have actively participated in global solidarity networks and international labor forums. These engagements have facilitated the exchange of best practices, secured material aid, and elevated awareness of the Ukrainian labor movement's struggles within the broader international community.

## 4. Strategic Dead-End and the Loss of Influence

The Ukrainian trade union movement in the context of the war found itself in a position of not only external adversity but also profound internal strategic crisis. We faced the absence of a coherent, forward-looking, proactive strategy capable of addressing contemporary challenges and shaping the future of labor relations in the country. The crisis has been most visibly reflected in organizational passivity, the inability to influence legislative processes, detachment from national public discourse, and, critically, the loss of the trade unions' political voice.

A significant number of Ukrainian trade unions have, by inertia, preserved the Soviet-era tradition of apolitical behavior. However, in the context of the far-reaching transformation of the Ukrainian state and society, such position ceased to be neutral. On the contrary, it has become destructive. Remaining apolitical when fundamental decisions affecting workers' rights are being made is actually a form of complicity in the infringement of these rights. As a result, trade unions are not merely absent from the political sphere – they are forfeiting the limited influence they previously held.

The contrast with European countries is striking. Across the continent, left-wing political forces are increasingly focused on labor-related issues: equitable income distribution, social security, managing the effects of automation and digitalization. European trade unions actively engage with progressive political parties, participate in parliamentary debates, and lobby for the interests of workers at both national and supranational levels. In Ukraine, by contrast, this strategic synergy is virtually nonexistent. Trade unions and their potential political allies operate in isolation, without shared platforms, strategies, or ideological alignment. This has resulted in marginalization – trade unions are now largely without allies, and without influence.

The implications of automation and the rise of artificial intelligence are particularly urgent. In other countries, trade unions are at the forefront of advocating for the recognition of digital labor, fighting for job preservation, ensuring data protection, and securing access to upskilling and retraining. In Ukraine, however, these critical areas remain almost entirely neglected. There is a real danger that the country will fall behind in responding to the Fourth Industrial Revolution, thereby giving the initiative to transnational corporations and local oligarchic structures.

The strategic dead-end currently afflicting Ukrainian trade unions manifests across multiple dimensions:

- The absence of political partnerships and meaningful engagement with left movements;
- The failure to shape legislative agendas in defense of workers' rights;
- A disregard for the digital transformation of the economy;

- The refusal to form a coherent ideological and value-based foundation.

This dead-end can be overcome only through a fundamental re-evaluation of principles and practices. Trade unions must reclaim their historical role as political actors, agents of societal change, and active participants in public dialogue. Without this transformation, the movement will remain unheard, untrusted, and ultimately irrelevant.

## 5. Problem of Yellow and Fake Trade Unions

One of the most pressing and damaging issues facing the Ukrainian trade union movement is the continued existence of so-called ‘yellow’ or fake trade unions. These are organizations that outwardly resemble legitimate trade unions but, in practice, serve the interests of employers, public officials, or other power structures. Their primary function is to simulate social partnership and replace genuine advocacy for workers’ rights with superficial activities tailored to the convenience of capital and authority.

The roots of these formations can be traced back to the Soviet era, when trade unions were integrated into the state apparatus and functioned more as organizers of leisure activities and ceremonial events, distributors of holiday vouchers than as defenders of labor rights. To this day, for many Ukrainians, the concept of a ‘trade union’ remains synonymous with ‘gifts and celebrations’ rather than struggle, solidarity, and collective action.

Employers actively use fake trade unions to pressure workers and discredit the independent trade union movement. In several sectors – most notably public administration, transport, and energy – employees are often compelled to join such unions under threat of dismissal, loss of social benefits, or as a de facto condition of employment. This practice constitutes a direct violation of the fundamental right to freedom of association. Yet, due to the limited capacity of labor inspections and the absence of effective public control, these violations frequently go unpunished.

These pseudo-unions are often granted privileged access to official dialogue with both the state and employers. They participate in tripartite commissions, sign collective agreements, and thus help to legitimize the deterioration of labor conditions. Meanwhile, genuine, independent, and active trade unions are pushed to the margins of the institutional landscape.

The presence of ‘yellow’ trade unions poses a deeper, more insidious threat: it undermines public confidence in the trade union movement as a whole. Workers who have encountered such fake trade unions are more likely to become disillusioned, losing faith in the possibility of effective collective representation. This leads to widespread apathy and reluctance to engage in self-organisation or protest. Without trust and belief in the power of collective action, the very essence of trade unionism is rendered void.

Addressing the issue of fake trade unions requires a comprehensive and systemic response, including:

- Official recognition of the problem at both the state and societal levels;
- Establishment of a transparent national register of trade union organizations, with clearly defined authenticity criteria;
- Public awareness campaigns to educate workers about the differences between genuine and ‘yellow’ unions;
- Direct institutional inclusion of representatives from independent trade unions in state-led negotiation processes and consultative commissions;
- Strict accountability mechanisms to penalize employers who coerce workers into joining compliant or employer-controlled trade unions.

This is not a peripheral or technical matter – it is a strategic imperative. Without confronting and resolving this issue, the development of a strong, democratic, and solidarity-based trade union movement in Ukraine will remain unattainable.

If we aspire to be respected voices within the global labor community, if we seek equal participation in international leftist dialogue, we must first clear the institutional field. We must restore integrity to the concept of the trade union. Only then will a new era of solidarity become possible.

## 6. Future of Trade Unions in Post-War Ukraine

A widely held yet misguided belief persists within Ukrainian society – the notion that everything will begin anew “after the war.” However, the reality is much more complex. The post-war period will demand not only the physical reconstruction of infrastructure but also the resolution of deep-rooted socio-economic imbalances that the war has both exposed and exacerbated.

Ukraine is already facing a paradox: despite the ongoing war, the service and trade sectors continue to dominate over industrial production. In many regions, a critical deficit of manufacturing jobs exists, with capital and labor largely concentrated in service area and consumption. A striking example is that in major urban centers, shopping and entertainment complexes employ more individuals than large-scale industrial enterprises do. This economic model is highly unsustainable — especially in light of the anticipated return of hundreds of thousands of veterans and the ongoing wave of emigration.

The wartime partially mitigated the effects of unemployment by integrating large segments of the population into the defense-volunteer economy. Activities such as manufacturing FPV drones, repairing military equipment, supporting army logistics, and developing civilian electronic warfare systems have created short-term employment opportunities. For many households, such engagement constitutes a primary source of income. However, these solutions are just temporary and will either transform or require fundamental restructuring once the active phase of the war ends.

One of the most serious threats in the post-war context is the potential criminalization of labor relations. Post-war Ukraine may face a surge in unregulated employment (“grey” and “black” labor), a growing shadow economy, corporate raiding, and forced labor outsourcing schemes without social guarantees. Vulnerable groups – including veterans, persons with disabilities, youth, and residents of formerly occupied territories — are at particular risk of exploitation and marginalization.

Unless the state and society are able to offer secure, dignified, and forward-looking employment opportunities, a significant part of the workforce will continue to seek livelihoods abroad. Labor emigration has already become one of the dominant survival strategies. With open EU borders and persistent domestic instability, this trend is likely to intensify.

The appropriate response to these emerging challenges is not the preservation of existing trade union structures, but their comprehensive transformation. Trade unions must evolve into modern, dynamic institutions capable of shaping the post-war socio-economic order. Key areas of reform include:

- Digital Transformation: Transition to modern means of communication, digital mechanisms for accounting and rights protection;

- Legal Defense: Expansion of legal support functions within unions, including enhanced training for activists and greater involvement of trade union lawyers;
- Strategic Thinking: Long-term planning based on demographic, economic, and geopolitical trends;
- Political Subjectivity: Development of institutional capacity to influence legislation, engagement in negotiations with the government, and form coalitions with other social institutions.

Trade unions of the future must not only perform their traditional role as defenders of wages and working conditions. They must become strategic institutions capable of articulating and implementing a national vision for labor development strategy, thereby preventing Ukrainian society from descending into post-war socio-economic chaos and despair.

## 7. Conclusion: The Choice between Extinction and Modernization

The Ukrainian trade union movement stands at a historical crossroads. Continuing to operate under outdated models and methods is a path to irrelevance and decline. In the face of profound societal transformation and post-war reconstruction, trade unions must choose: extinction or modernization.

Modernization must be understood not as a cosmetic adjustment, but as a comprehensive transformation. It means the consolidation of all protest actions and strikes under a coherent strategic vision. It means the politicization of trade unions and their active representation within legislative bodies at all levels of government.

Today, Ukrainian trade unions reflect, in part, a broader pattern of social and political infantilism. Too many trade union leaders remain locked in a narrow conception of their mission – isolated within the technical boundaries of labor representation and dismissive of political engagement, which they view as the realm of opportunists or adversaries.

But this attitude comes at a cost. In modern democratic societies, abstaining from political participation is not a mark of virtue, but a relinquishment of agency. Those who disengage from politics inevitably surrender their future to those who act without regard for the public good. The result is not neutrality, but vulnerability.

The trade union movement must reclaim its voice and relevance. The slogan of the 21st century must be clear: from defense to offence!

27 May 2025

Translated by Patrick Le Trehondat for the [International Labour Network of Solidarity and Struggle](#).

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