

INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS

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Spotlight interview with Anatoliy Akimochkin, vice president of the Ukrainian trade union confederation KVPU and first president of the Independent Miners Union of Ukraine

A life in exchange for 250,000 tons of coal in Ukraine

Brussels, 31 January 2006 (ICFTU OnLine): Anatoliy Akimochkin is vice president of the Ukrainian trade union confederation KVPU and first president of the Independent Miners Union of Ukraine. As the ICFTU publishes its latest Trade Union World Briefing on Ukrainian coalmines (*), he denounces the bad management of these mines, which has placed them amongst the most dangerous in the world. He also tells us of the clandestine mines that have emerged and explains why the status of the mining profession is declining.

What is behind the generally dilapidated state of Ukraine's mines?

In 1978, the USSR decided to abandon coal production in the Donbass region and prioritise other regions, such as Kazakhstan, where the coal is closer to the surface. As a result, no more mines were opened in Ukraine, investment declined, and the existing mines started to disappear. When Ukraine gained independence, the government would have had to invest massively in the mining industry to put it back on track, but the State had other problems to deal with, other priorities. On top of that, the money earmarked to help this sector was misappropriated; it wasn't invested in the mines. 1.6 million euros had been allocated to restructuring, but no one officially knows where the money went. Money was given to create jobs in companies that didn't exist...

The oligarchs amassed fortunes for themselves by misappropriating public funds intended for the mines, in collusion with people in very high places. The Ukrainian government wants to privatisate the coalmines, but only the newest, those requiring very little investment, have found serious buyers. There are many businessmen in this sector who do not deserve to be called investors. The equipment they supply the mines is often very old. One oligarch, for example, supplied a Donbass mine with a shaft sinking machine that he claimed to be new and worth around 250,000 euros... but we discovered, thanks to its serial number, that it had already been used for many years in a Russian mine.

Is bad management the only reason behind the high rate of accidents?

On average, four workers are killed for every million tons of coal extracted in Ukraine, not to mention the amount who die as a result of occupational diseases. It is one of the highest accidental death rates in the world. The poor quality of the materials and the very complex geological conditions in Ukrainian mines go some way towards explaining these accidents, but the way of calculating the wages is also a factor: the workers should be paid by the hour, like in other sectors, rather than for the number of tons extracted, which sometimes incites them to overlook the safety regulations in order to secure a higher yield.

Your union has also denounced the existence of many illegal mines, where children are sometimes employed.

The illegal mines are located in the Donetsk and Lugansk regions, where the coal is close to the surface. They are dug in the garden of a house, in a yard, near a roadside, or in the woods, for example. Just a few people are needed to operate such mines... along with the paid protection of influential people within the authorities. The work in such mines is very hard, as it is generally done by hand, with the help

of only primitive tools. Some miners agree to go down them as there is hardly any other work in the region, whilst others leave the legal mines to work in the clandestine ones because the salaries are paid out daily and are slightly higher, as the employer doesn't pay taxes or invest in safety.

It's difficult to estimate the exact number of illegal mines in operation as they often switch location, but there are definitely thousands of them. It is true that children sometimes work there with their families. Not much has changed really since the arrival of the government emerging from the Orange Revolution, which declared a war on clandestine mines. Some illegal mines were, of course, closed down, but a portion of them later reopened, sometimes on a different site. Where possible, these clandestine mines should be legalised, in order to create formal employment for the jobless adults, so that they no longer agree to work under such conditions.

What does the future hold for coalmining in Ukraine?

We have enough coal to supply our energy needs for 400 years. So the mines shouldn't be closed down, even if they are among the most difficult to exploit given their depth and the very high concentration of methane. Relying on the private sector to develop them is not a good idea, as most Ukrainian mines require substantial investments that will not see any returns for several years. Consequently, the State must maintain a strong presence in this sector and urgently restore the prestige of the mining profession, as it is no longer attracting the younger generation.

The stature of the mining profession has fallen, as wages are higher in other sectors. The average salary in the State-owned mines is just 250 euros for underground miners and 65 euros for surface workers. One of the advantages of being an underground miner is that they can retire after 20 years, but around 60% continue to work as the pensions are too low to live a decent life. Many young people are turning away from this tough yet poorly paid job. Those reaching retirement continue to work, as they have no alternative.

Interview by Samuel Grumiau

(*) To read the Trade Union World Briefing : "Ukraine: the miners' great depression":
<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991223357&Language=EN>

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For more information, please contact the ICFTU Press Department on +32 2 224 0204 or +32 475 67 08 33.

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