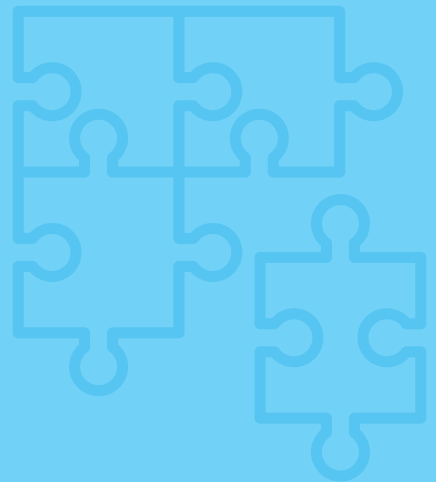


Trade Unions in the Industrial Sector in Ukraine

*Activity During the War and
Vision of Postwar Reconstruction*



Contacts

Representative Office of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Ukraine
Borysohlibska 15a, Kyiv, 04070, Ukraine

Responsible

Felix Hett | Director of FES-Ukraine

Contact

Tel.: +38-044-234-00-38
ukraine@fes.de

Translation from Ukrainian

Roksolana Mashkova

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Natalia Lomonosova, Tamara Khurtsydze
July 2025

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Table of Contents

Introduction 1

The war’s impact on the industrial complex: Trade union activity during
the war and new challenges in their work 3

The impact of the full-scale war on the human resources potential of the
industrial sector and prospects for its recovery 14

Vision of postwar reconstruction and participation in defining its priorities. . . 19

Introduction

Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine has a significant negative impact on the lives of millions of Ukrainians: due to the hostilities and their consequences, millions have lost their homes, jobs, health, and were forced to leave their usual place of residence. Thousands of men and women have taken up arms to defend their country. The war is also a major challenge for the Ukrainian economy: according to estimates by the Kyiv School of Economics, as of September 2024, the amount of damage from military activities in the field of infrastructure and industry and the losses of enterprises had reached \$36.6 billion and \$11.4 billion, respectively.¹ At the same time, the total indirect financial losses of enterprises are estimated at almost \$410 billion (revenue) or \$133 billion (value added).²

Due to the significant scale of infrastructure damage, the destruction of production capacities, the disruption of production and trade chains, and the decline in production volumes, the recovery of the Ukrainian economy after the end of the war will require a substantial amount of time and material resources. In addition, postwar recovery and the further development of Ukraine's economy will require, above all, people — professionals in their field, on whom the economy of any country relies.

Discussions about postwar reconstruction have been ongoing almost since the beginning of the full-scale invasion — both at numerous international platforms and within Ukraine, and possible visions of reconstruction are presented in dozens of recovery plans. At the same time, members of trade unions, which represent thousands of workers, are not frequent guests at conferences in London, Berlin, or other European capitals where the postwar recovery strategy is being discussed.

That is why, over the course of 2024, we spoke with representatives of Ukrainian trade unions that are part of the international IndustriALL network, which unites

¹ "The total amount of direct damage caused to Ukraine's infrastructure due to the war has reached \$151.2 billion — assessed as of September 1, 2023" ("Загальна сума прямих збитків, завдана інфраструктурі України через війну, сягає \$151,2 млрд — оцінка станом на 1 вересня 2023 року"), Kyiv School of Economics, 2024. Access at: <https://bit.ly/4l6zKl3>

² Andriyenko, D., et al. (2024). Report on the indirect financial losses of the economy as a result of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine as of July 1, 2024 (Звіт про непрямі фінансові втрати економіки внаслідок військової агресії Росії проти України станом на 1 липня 2024 року). Access at: <https://bit.ly/3lk9swS>

50 million workers in the energy, manufacturing, and mining sectors, about how the war has affected their industry as a whole and the activities of the union itself, as well as what is of primary importance for the postwar recovery of this sector, particularly in regard to the human resources potential lost during the years of war. In this text, we have summarized the key opinions and ideas we were able to hear from the trade unionists.

The war's impact on the industrial complex: Trade union activity during the war and new challenges in their work

The full-scale war has caused many new difficulties in the activities of trade unions and has exacerbated the numerous challenges that existed before. First and foremost, these are the difficulties in the operation of enterprises themselves and entire sectors, caused by military actions. Sectors such as the mining and metal industries, and accordingly, the trade unions in these sectors, have been facing challenges since 2014, when the operation of some enterprises was halted due to the war, and others ended up in territories not controlled by Ukraine, as a significant portion of mining and metal enterprises are located in the Luhansk and Donetsk Regions. For example, as of the beginning of 2014, there were 145 state-owned coal mines in Ukraine; by the beginning of 2022, only 49 state-owned mines remained operational. After two years of full-scale war, their number has decreased to around 20, and not all of them are currently extracting coal, as their infrastructure has suffered from flooding, power outages, etc. The damage inflicted on the mining industry since 2014 has had a negative impact on other sectors of Ukrainian industry as well, due to the resulting shortage of fuel for production needs and the disruption of internal production chains; the production capacities of many enterprises were designed to operate, for example, on specific coal grades, access to which has been lost.

Since February 2022, the Ukrainian industry has been suffering even greater losses due to the full-scale war. Coal mines, mining and processing plants, metal and steel enterprises, and petrochemical enterprises in the Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kharkiv Regions have now found themselves in or near combat zones. As a result of offensive actions by the Russian army, some of these industrial facilities have ended up in temporarily occupied territories; this has also affected important nuclear energy facilities crucial for the country's energy infrastructure. A significant number of critical infrastructure facilities located in other regions are subjected to regular shelling. All of this leads to the inability to operate fully or to complete shutdowns due to security risks, as well as to the relocation of workers to other regions. Production volumes in the industrial sectors whose trade union representatives we interviewed are showing a downward trend (mostly partial reductions, but there are also cases of complete shut-

downs), as it is difficult to maintain a continuous production process under conditions of military activities and the threat of shelling. Export of products is also complicated, as this process depends, in particular, on the functioning of port infrastructure, which is regularly attacked by Russia.

Each of these enterprises [...], its production facilities [...] are viewed as targets. Therefore, during every air raid alert, workers are forced to move to safe locations. [...] The number of air raid alerts essentially makes certain production processes impossible. If you understand what metal smelting is, it cannot be stopped, because it is a process that requires constant electricity or gas.

Representative of the MachMetal trade union

The suspension or limitation of production volumes, in turn, can lead to a decrease in enterprise profits and, as a result, to the transition to part-time work-weeks, the declaration of downtime, the emergence of wage arrears, or the suspension of employment contracts.

The majority of enterprises, around 60–70 percent, are either not working or their working schedule is minimal. That is, 1–2 working days per week. [...] We have one enterprise [...] located very close to the border. All employees have been transferred to downtime. This means the production process is completely halted, and for the second year now, credit is due to the owners of the enterprise who are finding ways to pay [workers] for the downtime. At other enterprises, employment contracts are being suspended [...] or there is a reduced work schedule, with wages paid only for the actual hours worked.

Representative of the MachMetal trade union

As informants noted, due to the suspension of employment contracts, workers find themselves in a situation where they are not officially unemployed but have neither income nor the right to receive unemployment benefits. This often leads

such a worker to decide to resign. Working in a part-time mode also results in a reduced monthly income and can become a reason for employees to quit, and then possibly relocate, as a significant number of industrial enterprises in Ukraine are located in single-industry towns, where it is difficult to find other employment.

In sectors classified as critical infrastructure, security risks are even higher, as workers must continue their work even in the presence of direct threats. The same applies to workers at enterprises in frontline cities and cities near the border with Russia.

[...] we are in the critical infrastructure sector. [...] our people work under these very dangerous conditions. [...] our operations staff cannot leave their workplace even during an air raid alert. While others can go to a bomb shelter, these people stay in place voluntarily. [...] this is the energy frontline, and our people are heroes. [...] Our stations operate very close to the front line. And our people suffer. [...] under shelling, they rebuild what has been destroyed so that we have light and heat. And people now simply think, well, there's light, there's heat, whatever, that's good. [...]

Representative of the UkrElectroTradeUnion

Thank God the workers of the enterprise [in a city located near the border with Russia] still have the necessary technical equipment, boom cranes, which they use to try to do something, to repair things [damaged by] constant shelling. And this also needs to be taken into account and understood. The danger of [construction] work in general. That is, the value of this work is just impossible to measure. And we are also speaking about the general danger of such work today. Yes, construction workers are used to working in difficult conditions, but the war has added risks which, well, which cannot even somehow be assessed in terms of the price [of such work].

Representative of the ProfBuild trade union

The leadership of some trade unions currently cannot even accurately calculate the exact number of their members, as some workers have ended up under occupation or have been forcibly displaced. Informants also reported that the full-scale war has complicated communication between different levels of the trade union structure, between the central leadership and local union branches, between workers who remained in place and those who left.

[...] We cannot know our membership numbers, because many people who are currently abroad are working remotely. Many people are displaced, they have no jobs, no documents, no roof over their heads. And they have no support from the authorities. They live on humanitarian handouts. That's why our membership dues income has sharply declined. And we cannot determine our actual membership through membership dues. It's impossible in this chaos, when millions of people are being displaced. [...]

Representative of the Independent Trade Union of Miners

Accordingly, due to the decrease in the number of trade union members and in the inflow of membership dues, particularly because some union members are unable to pay them, the financial resources of the unions have significantly declined, which limits their ability to provide support to their members. In particular, there is a considerable number of workers who have stopped paying dues, for example, because of being mobilized into the military, being located in occupied territories, or the suspension of their employment contracts. Despite this, they remain trade union members and also require material assistance, and it is important for unions to support them. As informants noted during the interviews, membership dues are a very significant source of financial resources for the union, and their reduction is critical, especially considering that employer contributions have also been significantly decreasing. This hampers the unions' ability to organize wellness programs for their members and to provide material assistance for medical treatment, health resort care, and rehabilitation, which is a serious problem, as some professions and types of work in the industrial sector involve harmful and/or hazardous working conditions that negatively affect workers' health; in addition, the need for such support from trade unions has actually increased due to the consequences of the war.

[...] We practically have no other sources [besides dues]... Well, there are [...] some savings we managed to accumulate before the war, a bit, this is passive income from banks, from interest, our money is kept there. [...] our financial capabilities, they are very, very limited under these conditions. [...] In the mining and metal sector, our collective agreements, the level of their coverage and the social and labor guarantees, used to be higher than in other sectors. At one time, there were even official statistics, we looked at it, the level of social and labor guarantees in collective agreements was 2 to 4 times higher. Due to the war, all of this is being suspended, and while there used to be [employer] contributions, say, for employee wellness, cultural activities, sports, those are now gone. Some employers still [...] provide a bit of support to their organizations, [...] but they [the contributions] are very modest now. [...] And here's another thing [...], this applies to all trade unions, under our statute, those whose employment contracts have been suspended remain union members, but do not pay dues. [...]. We probably have about 20,000 of such people. These also include workers who have been mobilized, [...] we have nearly 40,000 of them. [...] They need to be helped, and they turn to us for help. Sometimes it happens that someone comes, he has been wounded, he needs treatment in the hospital. And our organizations reach out — let's provide assistance for surgery, for treatment, for rehabilitation. [...]

Representative of the Trade Union of Metallurgists and Miners

Right now, we don't have the resources. While previously, [...] if someone was diagnosed with cancer, they could count on 30,000–40,000 UAH in material assistance from the trade union; [...] to cover the cost of their treatment in general. If it was cancer, then the full amount [of the total cost]. Today, we can't provide anything at all.

[...] In this case, we are engaged in this [wellness support] because people need it. Specifically during the war. First and foremost, psychological rehabilitation. I spoke at a committee of the Verkhovna Rada last year and said that our workers need psychological support. Because it is extremely difficult to work under conditions where you are working while missiles are flying at you. [...]

Representative of the UkrElectroTradeUnion

In order to support their members in the conditions of war, trade unions have been actively engaged in volunteer work since the first days of the full-scale invasion. One of the areas of such activity is providing assistance to trade union members who have been mobilized into the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

Well, at the same time, we are also doing a lot of work to provide assistance and support to the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Unfortunately, we have rather, not very bright numbers. Many workers, our union members, have been drafted and are or were on the front line. Sadly, [...] many have already died, quite a lot. Therefore, in this regard, we try to provide financial assistance and support to the families of these people. [...]

Representative of the AtomTradeUnion

[...] about two weeks after the beginning [of the invasion], we held a meeting of the presidium. [...] At that meeting, we decided that the priority of our work would be [...] supporting the Armed Forces of Ukraine, because our workers were being mobilized into the Armed Forces of Ukraine, [...] 20 percent or more of those working at enterprises are going [to serve], forced to leave their peaceful professions and join the Armed Forces. [...] The most recent initiative that happened, [...] our trade union purchased five drones for our soldiers, specifically for a certain military unit.

And at the beginning of the war [...] we allocated 1 million hryvnias to the Come Back Alive foundation. [...]

Representative of the Trade Union of Metallurgists and Miners

Trade unions are also engaged in providing humanitarian aid, particularly at enterprises located in frontline areas — not only to union members and their families, but also to residents of the communities where the enterprise is located.

In addition, some trade unions also provide assistance to the families of workers who are internally displaced persons (hereinafter referred to as IDPs), helping with evacuation and subsequent accommodation. To organize this support, trade unions use their own funds and resources, receive assistance from international trade unions, and often cooperate with charitable foundations and non-governmental organizations.

[...] We spent quite a lot of time throughout 2022, from the moment of the war, and in 2023, on issues of [...] social protection specifically for workers and their family members. Because it was necessary to evacuate people. In the pre-war period, the trade union [...] had its own action program, and at that time we [...] formed a reserve fund [...]. So part of those funds was spent on displaced persons, and on providing assistance to our union members during the occupation and later de-occupation of the city of Slavutych, the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant, and enterprises in the exclusion zone [...]. And we continue to do this today.

Representative of the AtomTradeUnion

[...] Unfortunately, since 2022, humanitarian aid has become a separate and major area of activity. For trade union members, for temporary displaced persons in our unions who are relocating from the East to the West. [...]

Representative of the ProfBuild trade union

[...] in wartime conditions, we are carrying out functions that trade unions typically do not perform, and that we ourselves did not perform in peacetime. These are humanitarian efforts. This includes interaction with the military and all kinds of support for their daily needs and lives. Cooperation with the families of service members and the fallen. Various forms of support and assistance from our side for internally displaced persons. [...]

Representative of the Independent Trade Union of Miners

Overall, based on the interviews conducted, it can be assumed that in the first year of the full-scale war, due to the scale of security threats, there was a temporary shift in the focus of trade union activity from their traditional areas of work to responding to urgent challenges caused by the full-scale invasion. Nevertheless, despite active engagement in the humanitarian sphere, especially during the first year of the war, the main priorities of trade union activity remain unchanged. In addition to the already mentioned area of social support, these also include legal protection of workers from violations of labor rights, in particular from unlawful dismissal; representation of workers' interests in labor disputes, including participation in resolving collective labor disputes; monitoring and oversight of the implementation of collective agreements at enterprises; and, in general, ensuring compliance with proper working conditions and occupational safety standards.

[...] One of our traditional areas is safety, we monitor this. Unfortunately, even in peacetime, such incidents occur [...]. Our people don't work in easy conditions, but somewhere up high, on the fuselage [...] There are lots of different electrical wires there [...]. And if you step the wrong way or put your head or hand in the wrong place, God forbid, of course. [...] We periodically conduct certain training sessions, we set safety requirements in our sectoral agreement for directors, for employers. Essentially, [...] we control this situation related to safety.

Representative of the Trade Union of Aircraft Constructors

In addition, trade unions continue to engage in negotiations on wage increases both at the sectoral level and at the level of specific enterprises.

[...] the trade union is always ready to negotiate wage increases for our workers, for union members. [...] with private enterprises, we conduct separate negotiations on wage increases [...] in accordance with their grade-based pay systems. [...]

Representative of the UkrElectroTradeUnion

We, as a trade union in the coal sector, have constantly fought for the payment of wages. [...] Look at the wage arrears table. It's over 853 million hryvnias. But this table doesn't include the LysychanskVuhillia and PervomaiskVuhillia mines, or Vuhledar. [...] So in reality, the wage arrears amount to more than 1 billion hryvnias. That's a very large sum. Clearly, we are not letting these issues out of our control. [...]

Representative of the Independent Trade Union of Miners

We have always worked, and continue to work, on wage-related issues, both regarding wage levels and arrears where they occur, as well as on wage negotiations. We also lobby for wages, including in state contracts related to reconstruction. We work on labor safety for all workers at construction enterprises. Both during construction and demolition, including in destroyed buildings.

Representative of the ProfBuild trade union

It should be noted that in Ukraine, trade unions have long carried out their activities under rather difficult conditions, even before the full-scale war. Since a significant portion of industrial enterprises has been privatized, trade unions increasingly have to deal directly with employers to resolve various issues, which is not always an easy task. In addition, according to more than one of our in-

formants, even before the full-scale war, the growing closedness of government representatives to open social dialogue, and at times direct bureaucratic obstacles, significantly complicated the fulfillment of trade unions' direct functions and limited their influence on decision-making regarding important issues of socio-economic development and the protection of labor rights at the national level. Moreover, since 2022, a number of legislative changes have been adopted that, under martial law, restrict trade union activities and the application of collective agreements, as well as generally weaken labor rights protections. Trade union representatives we interviewed emphasized that such changes — aimed, in particular, at further liberalizing labor relations and deregulating the labor market — increasingly shift the balance of power in favor of employers. At the same time, the tools available to trade unions to protect the interests of workers, as the more vulnerable party in labor relations, and to carry out their negotiating and representative function, have been restricted.

There are also challenges related to changes in labor legislation. A law on the specifics of labor relations regulation has been enacted, which, in certain ways, has narrowed the powers of trade unions. And, well, it has directly affected workers' rights. Currently, the gradual reform of labor legislation continues. For example, a new law on leave has come into force, which affects both trade union rights and workers' rights. And, well, there is also ongoing work on the draft Labor Code.³ What's especially painful is that under martial law we cannot [...] do any marches... That used to be our main method, right? For expressing protest and dissent. So now we are restricted in that, and that is a challenge. [...]

Representative of the Trade Union of Aircraft Constructors

Finally, it is worth mentioning another important area of trade union work today. It is international activity and cooperation with trade unions from other countries, which, according to many of our informants, has significantly intensified since

³ The Ministry of Economy of Ukraine has completed work on the draft of the new Labor Code of Ukraine in late 2024. At the time of writing this paper, the Joint Representative Body of Trade Union Associations had not approved the draft.

2022. In addition to humanitarian aid, trade unions are cooperating with their colleagues in Europe in the areas of experience exchange and the organization of training events for union activists. Our informants said that they continue to actively work on the internal development of their unions, updating approaches to organizational structure, and actively adopting international experience.

We are changing our structure according to the European model. Right now, we are more interested in the Danish model. And we are working with Danish trade unions, particularly with 3F, on training our representatives. We also conduct many seminars with the support of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in order to change our structure [...]. We are moving away from the structure that previously existed in Ukrainian trade unions. We are a progressive trade union. And we are building a two-tier system, like the Western model: a central office and a local primary organization. [...] We are currently implementing certain measures to make our union one of the first in the Federation [of Trade Unions] to be actually closer to the European model. Through negotiations, through skills in conducting negotiations, through representation. [...]

Representative of the UkrElectroTradeUnion

They [representatives of IndustriALL] teach organizing, teach us how to achieve the resolution of our social indicators. How to conduct collective bargaining.

Representative of the Trade Union of Aircraft Constructors

[...] Thanks to these seminars from the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, and the Ukrainian-Danish project with the 3F trade union, I learned how to build systems, form collectives, make people cooperate. [...] And I learned how to do it using my own workshop as an example. [...]

Representative of the Trade Union of Chemical and Petrochemical Industry Workers

The impact of the full-scale war on the human resources potential of the industrial sector and prospects for its recovery

One of the main challenges both for trade unions and for the industrial sector and the Ukrainian economy as a whole has been the exacerbation of the skilled labor shortage in the conditions of the war, an issue that had already been observed across various industries even before the full-scale invasion.

Trade union representatives primarily emphasized a deep-rooted issue: **the lack of a strategic vision at the state level for the development of specific industries**, and, accordingly, the lack of clarity on which educational training programs are needed to supply those sectors with the necessary number of specialists. They also noted the absence of a systematic state approach to creating conditions that would retain existing personnel in Ukraine's labor market and prevent the outflow of qualified specialists abroad. Because the shortage of skilled workers is, above all, linked to the long-standing history of labor migration among workers dissatisfied with wage levels in their sectors in Ukraine. During the war, millions more working-age individuals have been forced to leave Ukraine. Trade unionists we spoke with expressed concern about the possibility that many of these workers — primarily women, but not only them — might not return: given their high and, in some cases, rare qualifications (such as in the nuclear energy sector), and the labor shortages in Western European economies, they may quickly find employment abroad.

We are concerned that the countries where most of our displaced people are currently located, namely Poland, Germany, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Moldova, are interested in our workers. In Germany, there is even a whole program to recruit our workers. [...] And women are already finding their place there, and [when] the men return from the front, they will, of course, go where their children and wives are. This is a serious threat. [...]

And of course, many qualified specialists had already been leaving for work in the EU or Canada even before 2021.

Representative of the MachInstrument trade union

[...] In order for people to return today, in conditions when there is no more war, it is necessary to provide a good salary, a social benefits package, period. And, well, good working conditions at the workplace.

Representative of the Trade Union of Chemical and Petrochemical Industry Workers

As already mentioned, under conditions of reduced production volumes and, consequently, the transfer of workers to part-time schedules or even downtime, as well as the introduction of employment contract suspension practices, a significant portion of industrial workers face a substantial reduction or complete loss of income. In such circumstances, many choose to resign in order to seek other ways to provide for themselves and their families. As a result, the industry often loses qualified specialists. Representatives of some trade unions emphasized that, alongside the financial support a union can provide to its members in such situations, the state should implement a more systemic policy toward workers who risk remaining in this gray zone for many months or even years. Instead, according to informants, government authorities are to some extent withdrawing from addressing the existing problem. Moreover, our informants pointed out **the lack of a systemic approach from the state** not only in supporting industrial sector workers, but also the enterprises themselves, which are unable to maintain the production process under wartime conditions.

I get the impression that it's like, you're on your own, struggle however you can, if you survive — good. If not? Well, there's the bankruptcy procedure, we'll cut it up and build a shopping mall in its place.

Representative of the MachMetal trade union

There is also an outflow of qualified personnel to other sectors due to the low level of wages at many industrial enterprises.

We talk about our migrants who left, but what about these people who have stayed [...]. No, this topic isn't of much interest. [...] Respectfully, who is going to motivate these people? [...] Wages need to be raised to motivate people somehow. There are big problems here too. Some companies are in a slightly better position, but others, well, excuse me, people are earning 8,000, 9,000, 10,000 hryvnias. That's peanuts today. People have no incentive to work. Sometimes people say: "I go to the enterprise from bell to bell, so to speak, from the moment I enter through the gate, they don't let me out, you have to work from this hour to that hour, and then you get paid peanuts. And sometimes there's even wage arrears." So they say, "I'll just go work at a store or some warehouse, I don't know, it's the same salary essentially, and less responsibility." [...]

Representative of the Trade Union of Metallurgists and Miners

Under martial law in Ukraine, men of enlistment age are being mobilized. At the same time, some men may seek to avoid mobilization, including by avoiding official employment — our informants noted that this has made it more difficult for enterprises to hire new workers. In addition, unlike other sectors of the economy (such as the service sector), the industrial sector in Ukraine is characterized by a high level of formal employment, which is generally a positive feature. However, in wartime conditions, this paradoxically has a negative effect on the staffing situation at these enterprises, as the rate of worker mobilization, according to some informants, is higher than in other sectors of the economy. In particular, some trade union representatives spoke about cases where workers were mobilized during transport to the workplace in employer-provided vehicles, and about enterprises where, as of 2024, more than half of the full-time staff had been mobilized. Additionally, some informants drew attention to the fact that, after demobilization, many servicemen may require a significant period for physical and psychological recovery, and some — due to harm to their health and acquired injuries or disabilities — will be unable to return to work in the sectors where they were previously employed.

Representatives of nearly all industrial trade unions we spoke with also emphasized another problem: although enterprises are allowed to reserve highly qualified specialists, in practice, these individuals may still be mobilized if they hold a scarce military specialization, despite having reservation status. This, in turn, affects production processes, as many of these workers are extremely difficult to replace amid a labor shortage. At the same time, uninterrupted production for the needs of the defense sector is a crucial condition for Ukraine's resilience in the war, since, for example, sectors such as metal and steel industry or aviation are key to the production of weapons and military equipment.

Thus, it becomes evident that under the difficult conditions of martial law, many of the problems are exacerbated specifically due to the shortage of qualified personnel across numerous sectors of the industrial complex. In addition to labor migration abroad over the decades preceding the war, the current labor shortage is also linked to the decline of vocational education in Ukraine and systemic issues in the training of specialists for the needs of industry in general. Low wage levels and the lack of clear prospects for wage growth, combined with difficult, and at times hazardous, working conditions, in turn, make the industrial sector less attractive to young people, who increasingly choose employment in the creative industries and service economy. The low quality of training programs offered by vocational education institutions, their mismatch with labor market needs, the reduction of the network of such institutions, and the fact that full mastery of many industrial professions requires skills that can only be acquired directly on the job all contribute to the reality that training a new generation of workers takes a considerable amount of time. According to representatives of some trade unions, in sectors such as nuclear energy or aircraft construction, the training of a highly qualified specialist can take up to 10 years. Therefore, the loss of each such worker is extremely significant for their sector in wartime conditions, and the current staffing situation poses a long-term threat to the recovery and development of the industrial complex after the war.

For example, not a single educational institution in Ukraine trains specialists for the cement industry. And yet there are currently 8 functioning plants. Once again, training happens ad hoc, based on early 20th-century technologies, with students going through all stages of learning up to becoming, say, a kiln operator. And then,

if one kiln operator is mobilized, there's nothing left in that key part of the production chain, for example, at a cement company. [...]

Representative of the ProfBuild trade union

[Even] before the military aggression, there were problems [...] with personnel in blue-collar professions. Because wages were not very high [...]. And vocational education was somewhat unbalanced. Vocational schools that provided qualifications, they... Well, the system had been destroyed. And the employers themselves were unable. [...] Previously, we had [...] large, powerful enterprises. But smaller ones, they cannot independently provide workforce training or create their own [training] base. So they relied on the older generation or on individual training [of workers], picking people up here and there.

Representative of the MachInstrument trade union

Vision of postwar reconstruction and participation in defining its priorities

Just a few months after the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Ukrainian government began working on the development of national recovery plans. In July 2022, at the Ukraine Recovery Conference in Lugano, Switzerland, the authorities presented draft plans for recovery in various sectors of the economy and public life. Since then, international conferences dedicated to recovery have been held annually. Both national government bodies and Ukrainian civil society organizations, as well as various international organizations, participate in discussions on recovery at these events and beyond. In our interviews, we asked representatives of industrial trade unions how informed they were about the content of current recovery plans in their sectors, whether they were involved in the recovery discussion in any way (for example, participating in working groups on recovery plan development, public events, consultations with national authorities or international partners, etc.), and if not, what, in their opinion, hindered such involvement and whether their unions in general would like to participate more actively in shaping recovery priorities.

Trade union representatives said that, in their view, both their own union and trade unions in general have insufficient opportunities to participate in the process of shaping the vision and priorities of postwar recovery. According to them, they are generally not included in international events or working groups. Overall, based on what we heard, it can be assumed that trade unions are largely not regarded by the authorities as full-fledged and important actors in shaping the vision of postwar recovery, despite the fact that many industrial unions express a willingness and desire to be involved in this process. They also emphasized that trade unions are typically very well informed about the situation in their sectors, both in terms of workforce and production resources. Therefore, their involvement is important not only as representative bodies speaking on behalf of thousands of workers across the country,⁴ but also as carriers of up-to-date knowledge, data, and problems, capable of developing predictive models for sectoral development.

⁴ In this context, it is also worth noting that trade unionists generally agreed that other representatives of civil society—such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), charitable foundations, etc.—have significantly more opportunities to participate, if not in shaping reconstruction priorities, then at least in events where these issues are discussed. At the same time, informants emphasized that non-governmental organizations, despite the importance of their activities, cannot replace trade unions, as they are not representative bodies.

Trade unions always have constructive proposals on these issues [postwar reconstruction]. But, well, they just don't want them, they brush us off. Like, what are you doing there interfering? They're moving ahead. Well, that's bad. [...]

Representative of the Trade Union of Aircraft Constructors

We would very much like to be involved at the international level in platforms where the overall direction of recovery is being discussed. [...] for the third year, we have been raising this proposal at all levels: from the ILO to our own government. And we are ignored, because there is no understanding. This is our sandbox, and we'll be in it. Governments and international banks, we're going to play in it. And you, trade unions, you're in your countries and working on the process. [...]

Representative of the ProfBuild trade union

We would like to see and work together in these programs [for developing recovery plans]. Especially as preparatory work for EU integration is taking place in parallel. Documents are being drafted, some commissions are being formed. We are not included anywhere. The Cabinet of Ministers doesn't see anyone. Neither at the federation level, nor at the level... We're not invited. Only if you manage to break through somehow, as they say, then it works. But otherwise...

Representative of the AtomTradeUnion

[...] There are nice presentations, nice pictures, slides, everything. But there's no reality in those programs. [...] So much has already been said, so much... but it's all happening without us. That's the problem. Without trade unions. The state simply doesn't see us.

Representative of the Trade Union of Metallurgists and Miners

Since the recovery of Ukraine is the recovery of its economic model, we would like to see a place for our industry in that economic model. That's why we want the trade union to be involved in these negotiations. [...] I absolutely do not want to hand over all the powers and all decision-making entirely to the authorities. [...] In other words, there is a desire from the trade unions to be involved in this.

Representative of the MachMetal trade union

Based on the interviews, it can also be assumed that a major factor influencing a trade union's ability to participate in shaping recovery priorities in its sector is the presence of productive communication between the union and the relevant ministry or its department. Some trade unions also reported that in the part of their work focused not so much on long-term reconstruction, but on current recovery within their sector, they are more often able to communicate their proposals to government bodies. Trade unions that attempt to engage in the recovery discussion at a higher, international level are trying to strengthen their representation and convey their vision through partnerships with international trade union associations — first and foremost, the IndustriALL network.

[...] at the latest IndustriALL Europe meeting, we were informed that representatives from IndustriALL Europe are included in a working group under the European Commission, the European Parliament, where issues related to Ukraine's recovery and possible assistance will also be discussed. So now, through IndustriALL, our voice may be heard somewhere in the European Commission, in all these... developments. [...]

Representative of the ProfBuild trade union

According to some informants, the reluctance of government representatives to involve trade unions in the formation of recovery plans and related discussions reflects the overall unsatisfactory state of social dialogue in Ukraine. They emphasized the importance of restoring full-fledged social dialogue in Ukraine in a way that aligns with general European standards.

From the perspective of social dialogue, there is the National Tripartite Socio-Economic Council. [...] There is no willingness on the part of the state for this body to function. I believe Europe will help us in this regard, because in Europe there is no such misunderstanding. We know that the opinion of trade unions, just like that of any entrepreneur, is taken into account in every country, and in the European Union as well. Our representative from IndustriALL Europe is always present around the highest levels of leadership within the European Union. [...] our international trade union colleagues emphasize to the government that Ukrainian trade unions must be participants, full participants in the dialogue. And they must be listened to. In Europe, well... there can simply be no other way. [...]

Representative of the Trade Union of Aircraft Constructors

One of the problems that prevents trade unions from effectively participating in shaping the vision of postwar economic recovery, according to their representatives, is the lack of transparency in the recovery plans themselves and in the procedures for discussing them.

[...] it's about the openness of the procedures themselves: so that we can see where these funds are being spent. Not like when it's just some line or section [...] like with the state budget now, some amount is listed for funding. And [...] all of it is, to some extent, restricted information with limited access. We only see the line item and that's it [...].

Representative of the MachMetal trade union

We have to spend a lot of effort monitoring who is doing what in recovery. The plans that were in Lugano differ from those presented in London, everyone knows that. And I don't think that was the last plan. [...] And all of it is very scattered [...]. Perhaps there is some kind of

strategic direction, [but] it has not been communicated to the trade unions. That's why we collect this information from open sources. And of course, we would like to work in a more systematic way. That's why we are demanding to participate in the recovery conferences.

Representative of the ProfBuild trade union

We don't know about the plans of the Ministry of Economy. They don't communicate these plans to us. They're closed off, sitting in buildings with thick walls built back in Stalin's time. [...]

Representative of the Independent Trade Union of Miners

At the same time, some informants emphasized that, based on the information available to them, they have the impression that the government lacks a clear vision for the postwar economy and the role of industry within it. This aligns with the broader criticism expressed by trade union representatives in the interviews regarding the absence of a long-term national industrial policy, resulting in a labor shortage, technological lag, and the risk of a complete loss of the country's industrial potential. They also voiced concerns about possible negative economic consequences stemming from restrictions on the production of certain goods and limited access to markets as a result of Ukraine's further EU integration.

The main concern [...] is that Ukraine's industrial future is being called into question altogether. [...] Emphasis is being placed on agricultural production and IT services.

Representative of the MachMetal trade union

We don't know what kind of economy the government plans to build in Ukraine. An agricultural economy or a high-tech one? An industrial economy, a tourism-based one, or a service economy? We don't know the model at all.

Representative of the AtomTradeUnion

Industrial trade unions, as expected, are convinced that Ukraine's postwar recovery must be based primarily on the restoration of its manufacturing sector, which should continue to play a central role in the country's economy and be further developed. They emphasized that industry holds a key position in the structure of the gross national product of developed economies and is capable of driving over-all economic growth while creating a significant number of jobs. They also stressed that, to support Ukrainian industry, more public procurement must be directed toward domestic producers, and one of the conditions embedded in recovery plans should be a clear percentage of Ukrainian enterprises to be involved in rebuilding infrastructure, supplying construction materials, and so on.

[...] Unfortunately, in Ukraine, a situation has developed in which, if you look at the distribution, small and medium-sized businesses now represent about 80%. That means we are destroying our industry. And a country without industry is a country without a future. [...] Industry is real gross domestic product. In small business, it's often like this: money circulates, money makes money. But what we need is for money to make goods, and goods to make money. [...] And today the state seems to be placing its bet precisely on that kind of business. [...] We still don't have a strategy for the development of our industry. [...] IT technologies are great [...] but IT makes up only 7–8% of the gross product. Industry contributes 30–40%. [...] we had excellent machine-building enterprises, a chemical industry, a metal and steel sector, everything was there. To lose that and fall to the level of [small businesses]? Then Ukraine will have no future [...].

Representative of the Trade Union of Metallurgists and Miners

[We should] forget our past as a raw materials exporter. Everyone knows that 75% of our exports are raw materials. This is despite the fact that we have high-tech industries. That's not right. We are not a raw material appendage for other countries. [...] an aircraft is just the tip of a large iceberg. And what lies beneath—you need metal, which means the metallurgy sector must be

working. Those who extract it, those who smelt it, and those who make something out of that metal. And then it reaches us for processing. This requires developing science and education. Because it's clear that technology won't appear without science. Clearly, we also need doctors, teachers, utility workers around it all. Statistics show that for every aircraft engineer in the world, between 8 and 12 workers in other fields are needed to make that product a reality. So in that sense, it's a multiplier: if our sector is working, other sectors will be pulled up alongside it.

Representative of the Trade Union of Aircraft Constructors

According to trade union representatives, Ukraine's industry has significant growth potential, but to realize it, it is first necessary to increase labor productivity, upgrade enterprises with new equipment, implement new technologies, and expand the share of high-tech production.

[...] unfortunately, labor productivity in Ukraine is low. Even back then, in the pre-war times, this was already a challenge. We talked about modernization, about reequipping the sector. So that our workers could produce more. [...] To be more competitive on the global market. And with that, wages should also increase. [...] Technological reequipping of Ukraine's entire industrial sector must be included in the [recovery] plan. Otherwise, we will not be competitive compared to them [EU countries]. On the contrary, we'll become a source of cheap labor for rough work. [For example,] the metal and steel industry is harmful. [...] That's why [we need] new technologies, people will feel better working with the newest equipment. [...]

Representative of the Trade Union of Aircraft Constructors

For the recovery of the industrial sector and for Ukraine to reclaim its role as a producer and processor of raw materials, rather than merely their supplier, resolving the labor shortage is of critical importance. This includes training qualified personnel capable of implementing advanced technologies and working with new equipment. In the context of recovery plans, our informants emphasized that specialist training, first, will require significant investment in education and training; second, it must be systematic (some trade unions are already implementing their own informal vocational training initiatives to improve qualifications, but this is not sufficient); and third, it must be aligned with a clear vision for the future path of economic development and, therefore, implemented in advance.

We have these plans, it's green energy [...]. If there is going to be a just transition to green energy, energy workers need to be trained starting today. Because when certain plants or enterprises are shut down, for example, who will work at the facilities that belong to the green energy sector? People need to be retrained now. For example, workers from thermal power plants; we should already be starting to involve young people in training at these green energy enterprises. [...]

Representative of the UkrElectroTradeUnion

In Lugano, they said: modernization, advanced technologies. But we, as a trade union and as experts, have a question: who will then be responsible for monitoring all these mechanisms and equipment? That means people need to be properly trained within companies. Or there must be companies that will provide maintenance, and so on.

Representative of the ProfBuild trade union

Trade unions also emphasized the need to search for new markets for the products of Ukrainian industrial manufacturers and the important role that Ukrainian diplomatic missions abroad could play in this process.

[...] It's difficult for us to compete in the markets of Europe, the US, and Canada. But we do have the opportunity [to export] to countries in Asia and Africa, and Ukraine had embassies there. However, there were no specialists, professionals, or anyone at those embassies promoting the potential of our industry. So, it's about finding new markets [...]. With relatively low investment, our enterprises might have gained access to new markets. And could fund the salaries of these specialists. [...] And this would benefit Ukraine's economy, it's [positive] [balance of payments, increased] employment and incomes for our workers.

Representative of the MachMetal trade union

When discussing the development and preservation of human resources potential in the industrial sector, in addition to the development of vocational education programs, we also addressed how, in the view of trade unionists, socio-economic policy should change after the war in order to prevent the outflow of specialists abroad and to promote greater social justice and an overall improvement in living standards. Among the key prerequisites for such changes mentioned by informants were higher wages, stronger protection of labor rights and social guarantees, as well as improved workplace safety. Among the means to achieve these changes is the already mentioned increase in labor productivity in industry, which would help grow the enterprise's wage fund and, consequently, create more opportunities for wage increases. In addition, trade unionists emphasized that contracts to be concluded with foreign and national contractors involved in the physical rebuilding of infrastructure (industrial, social, residential, etc.) should specify real wage levels in the sector.

Improving workplace safety in Ukrainian industry, and especially in construction, is a separate and essential demand of trade unions that must be taken into account in postwar reconstruction. The physical rebuilding of infrastructure will be one of the fundamental processes of recovery, which is why the ProfBuild trade union, representing construction workers, places particular emphasis on this issue. Even before the war, there were numerous safety violations on construction sites, as well as a high level of informal employment in the sector. Informal employment in construction work makes workers even more

vulnerable—both in asserting their right to safe working conditions and in cases where a worker is injured and loses the ability to work.

Workplace safety is also a concern for representatives of industrial trade unions. Although the high level of formal employment enables workers at industrial enterprises to access legally guaranteed protections in the event of a workplace injury, the scope and nature of these guarantees have been significantly altered as a result of legislative changes adopted by the Verkhovna Rada, specifically Law No. 2620, which, starting in 2023, significantly changed the principles of funding medical rehabilitation and care for individuals who have become fully disabled due to a workplace accident.

Trade union representatives also emphasized the need to reinstate the powers of the State Labor Service of Ukraine to oversee and monitor compliance with workplace safety regulations, which were suspended during martial law. They also called for expanding these powers — specifically, simplifying access to inspection sites and ending the practice of canceling such inspections as a means of “stimulating” business development. In the context of workplace safety enforcement and accountability for violations, representatives of several trade unions also stressed the importance of preventing the potential fragmentation of responsibility for occupational injuries in cases where long chains of contractors are involved in the reconstruction of a certain industrial or infrastructure facility.

[...] We expect large construction contractors from Europe to arrive following the flow of funds from the countries where they mainly operate. And our enterprises will end up performing subcontracting work, with lower profit margins and reduced influence over business processes. [...] If this chain of contractors expands to 5, 10, or even 50 companies one after another, it will be difficult to control who was ultimately responsible if a crane collapses at a construction site. [...] That's why this is directly mentioned in our international statement on the core principles of a just reconstruction, which we adopted together with the Building and Wood Workers' International last year. [...] Labor inspection is not only part of our international obligations, [...] it's not just an EU requirement [...], it is one of the key elements of labor

market stability. [The current situation] does not instill any confidence in people that they will go to work and return with money, not with an injury. So on the one hand, there are EU requirements, and on the other, we are working to ensure that this also becomes a requirement for all international financial institutions during the recovery. That means it should be clearly stated that labor safety must be observed, and under that section there should be a 1,000 lines of key guarantees, or at the very least, a list of the relevant international conventions and European directives.

Representative of the ProfBuild trade union

Trade union representatives also repeatedly mentioned the many qualified specialists from their sectors who joined the Armed Forces of Ukraine and sustained disabilities or injuries as a result of participating in combat. They emphasized the importance of increased state support for employers in developing and implementing adaptive technologies and equipment, so that more inclusive workplaces can be created at enterprises which would be adapted to the needs of employees with disabilities.

In the context of postwar socio-economic policy, trade unions also spoke about the need to raise social standards and guarantees.

[...] Labor relations where everything is timely, socially vulnerable groups are protected, social guarantees are in place, the benefits package is good, pension provision exists. This is very important. Even for a young person.

Representative of the Trade Union of Chemical and Petrochemical Industry Workers

They also expressed concern about the future of the social protection system and its funding. At present, social expenditures are primarily financed by funds from Ukraine's international partners. At the same time, it is currently unclear what the situation will be in the postwar period if such assistance from partners ends, while budget revenues may remain insufficient for a long time.

In one of last year's interviews, the head of the National Mediation and Reconciliation Service, Dmytro Kukhniuk, suggested that after martial law ends, the service expects a surge in collective labor disputes and social protest actions, including strikes. Some of our informants tend to agree with this forecast. They noted that the current restrictions on protests and strikes under martial law, as well as workers' desire not to interrupt production during a difficult wartime period, are significant restraining factors. However, most agreed that in the post-war period, the number of labor disputes at enterprises—particularly collective ones—is likely to increase, as will the level of socio-economic protests, provided that the core issues raised by trade unions are not addressed.

[...] it's not hard to predict that after the war ends, millions of people who are now in the army will return to civilian life and see that no one is taking care of them, that their rights were taken away through changes to labor legislation. That they are unprotected. That trade unions in Ukraine are unable to defend people, because Ukrainian trade unions cannot even defend themselves right now. The unions have been stripped of their rights. [...] If this disgraceful practice is not stopped, changing Ukraine's legislation in violation of the constitution, international norms, and standards, and if they don't stop ignoring these issues... Then it's not hard to see that today's soldiers, who will be tomorrow's civilians, will go out to protest. And these will be protests no longer led by trade unions. These will be spontaneous protests.

Representative of the Independent Trade Union of Miners

About the authors

Nataliia Lomonosova is a sociologist and policy analyst, and a research fellow in the Ukraine Research Network at the Centre for Eastern European and International Studies (ZOiS). Her research focuses on social and labour policy, care work, welfare attitudes and the provision of public services in post-socialist contexts.

Tamara Khurtsydze is a sociologist and analyst. She researches topics such as social policy, housing policy, gender studies, and critical discourse analysis.

Trade Unions in the Industrial Sector in Ukraine: Activity During the War and Vision of Postwar Reconstruction

1. This analytical paper is based on qualitative interviews conducted with Ukrainian Trade Union Representatives and sums up their views on their work during war and recovery. Since 2022, a number of legislative changes have been adopted that, under martial law, restrict trade union activities and the application of collective agreements, as well as generally weaken labor rights protections. Trade union representatives emphasized that such changes — aimed, in particular, at further liberalizing labor relations and deregulating the labor market — increasingly shift the balance of power in favor of employers. At the same time, the tools available to trade unions to protect the interests of workers, as the more vulnerable party in labor relations, and to carry out their negotiating and representative function, have been restricted.

2. According to some informants, the reluctance of government representatives to involve trade unions in the formation of recovery plans and related discussions reflects the overall unsatisfactory state of social dialogue in Ukraine. They emphasized the importance of restoring full-fledged social dialogue in Ukraine in a way that aligns with general European standards. One of the problems that prevents trade unions from effectively participating in shaping the vision of postwar economic recovery, according to their representatives, is the lack of transparency in the recovery plans themselves and in the procedures for discussing them.

3. Trade union representatives also emphasized the need to reinstate the powers of the State Labor Service of Ukraine to oversee and monitor compliance with workplace safety regulations, which were suspended during martial law. They also called for expanding these powers — specifically, simplifying access to inspection sites and ending the practice of canceling such inspections as a means of “stimulating” business development. In the context of workplace safety enforcement and accountability for violations, representatives of several trade unions also stressed the importance of preventing the potential fragmentation of responsibility for occupational injuries in cases where long chains of contractors are involved in the reconstruction of a certain industrial or infrastructure facility.

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