

Ukrainian miners strike for better pay and conditions in defiance of the unions

By Jason Melanovski
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Sixty iron ore miners in the city of Krivoy Rog in eastern Ukraine have spent almost the entire month of September underground, carrying out a strike for increased pay and benefits and against the incompetent oligarch-backed management.

Beginning on September 3, twenty-nine workers refused to come to the surface, occupying the October Mine which belongs to the privately owned Krivoy Rog Iron Ore Company (KZRK). Within days, three other nearby iron ore mines had joined the strike and the number of miners occupying the mines had grown to 393.

While the number of miners remaining underground has fallen due to health issues incurred by staying underground for such long periods of time, workers have continued to strike with the support of their families and the Ukrainian working-class who have carried out protests supporting them both in Krivoy Rog and the capital of Kiev.

The Krivoy Rog Iron Ore Company is jointly owned by financial firms Metinvest and Privat, which are owned by Ukraine's billionaire oligarchs Rinat Akhmetov and Igor Kolomoisky, respectively.

While Akhmetov has a net worth of over \$6 billion, workers at the Krivoy Rog October Mine reported making just \$330 a month. They work 1,200 meters underground in extremely dangerous conditions.

After striking in 2017 and receiving assurances that wages would rise in increments, management has recently cut off all raises and reverted to its former poverty wages.

As a result of their direct confrontation with Ukraine's wealthiest oligarchs, striking miners and their families have reported being harassed by management, with their personal details and addresses menacingly posted to social media by KZRK's

management. Thugs, who had been tipped off by company management that the workers were not at home and how to best break into their homes, have broken into the apartments of strikers.

While the Krivoy Rog workers are nominally represented by the Independent Trade Union of Miners of Ukraine, the union has done its best to prevent the miners' occupation from spreading. It has even refused to call it a "strike" so as not to anger the Ukrainian government. Workers and their families have led the occupation independently from the union, setting up tents outside the company's headquarters and circulating their own petitions.

Predictably, the miners' courageous strike has been met with a media blackout from much of Ukraine's oligarch-controlled capitalist press. The media blackout is motivated, above all, by fear that the strike could spread further throughout Ukraine and to other former Soviet republics. In August, a strike wave, which also included many miners, shook the government of Alexander Lukashenko in neighboring Belarus.

Despite the media blackout, within days following the outbreak of the Krivoy Rog strike, reports surfaced of workers taking inspiration from the miners and carrying out their own actions against the ruling class.

On September 8, workers at the Berdyansk Sea Trade Port, located approximately 400 km southeast of Krivoy Rog, stopped work and demanded the resignation of the port's management.

Later on September 14, three-hundred workers at a pipe plant in the northeastern city of Sumy likewise stopped work and demanded payment for unpaid wages.

On September 21, workers at the Kremenchuk Automobile Plant, which is owned by another Ukrainian billionaire oligarch Kostyantyn Zhevago,

stopped work and took to the streets. They blocked the streets in front of the factory to demand promised wages that have not been paid out in over eight months.

As a result of the ongoing privatization of state-owned enterprises that has been carried by successive Ukrainian governments and accelerated by the current regime of President Volodymyr Zelensky, many Ukrainian workers have seen their wages, benefits, and working conditions plummet. Their factories have been passed from one oligarch-owned investment firm to another, following privatization. Agreed upon contracts are often violated by management and workers in both the private and public sectors can go months without pay.

Like all over the world, the coronavirus pandemic has led a further, massive deterioration in the already miserably low living standards of broad sections of the working class. Ukraine is now in the midst of a second wave and has recorded several new record highs of new cases in the past few days. As of September 30, there were over 202,000 confirmed cases in the country of just over 40 million.

The strike in Krivoy Rog itself was preceded by a strike of coal miners at the Nadiya coal mine in the western region of L'viv who struck underground and occupied the mine throughout the summer due to unpaid wages. The strike only ended when the Ukrainian government intervened and promised to compensate the miners for unpaid wages. The government also announced that it would investigate the mine's management for its failure to pay the salaries and selling coal at below-market prices.

Ukraine's mining industry employs approximately 194,000 workers. Despite extremely hazardous conditions and crumbling equipment and infrastructure, it is still highly valued by international finance capital due to the large amount of mineral deposits present in the country.

According to Innspired Investing News, Ukraine "is home to one of the largest proportions of iron ore deposits on the planet with an estimated 27 billion tons accounting for more than 10 percent of the earth's reserves." The country also has the highest titanium reserves in Europe as well as large deposits of coal, natural gas, oil, salt, sulfur, graphite, magnesium, kaolin, nickel and mercury.

Both the current Zelensky government and the

previous regime of Petro Poroshenko have carried out a policy of closing Ukraine's remaining unprofitable state-owned mines while privatizing the more profitable ones, which contain sought after minerals such as iron ore.

President Zelensky, who was born and raised in Krivoy Rog, has neither commented on the miner's strike nor visited his hometown to speak with the striking workers.

Zelensky is well aware that to do so would anger the very same forces to which he owes his entire political career. Last week it was revealed by the newspaper *Ukrainska Pravda*, that Zelensky's own Servant of the People party only exists due to the beneficence of the oligarch and Krivoy Rog mine-owner Rinat Akhmetov, who doles out approximately \$2.5 million per month to back Zelensky and his party. Above all, Zelensky fears drawing any further attention to a strike that threatens to encourage a much broader movement by the working class.

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