

Ukrainian Free Trade Unions

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With the beginning of perestroika in the USSR, it became possible for the first time to exercise the right to freedom of association. As a result, workers collective committees and strike committees arose in many enterprises in Ukraine and elsewhere in the Soviet Union. The best organized of these groups grew into trade unions.

The Ukrainian free trade union movement was started by five trade unions, including my union—the Free Trade Union of Railroad Engineers—the Independent Miners Union, and three unions in the aviation industry. We first came together in the summer of 1992 in an effort to gain recognition from the Ukrainian government, which until then had been able to ignore us.

Our threat to strike that summer forced then-President Kravchuk to order the government to sit down and negotiate a general tariff agreement with us. After a month of fruitless talks, when it was clear the government did not take us seriously, the leadership of our five unions, including myself, declared a hunger strike that lasted for seventeen days. The hunger strike also failed to move the government. On 2 September 1992, we began an indefinite nationwide strike of railroad engineers, air traffic controllers, airline pilots, and coal and ore miners. The Ukrainian transportation system was paralyzed for thirty-six hours and the movement of freight was halted all the way to the Urals.

Finally, the president had to take us seriously and listen to our demands. A tariff agreement was concluded and the strike was stopped. The government was forced to resign, and free trade unions were recognized for the first time as an influential force in Ukraine.

This episode demonstrated the potential of free trade unions to affect the direction of Ukrainian state policy. But at that point, we were seeking recognition and putting forward economic demands on behalf of our members. In 1993, we demonstrated the potential of free trade unions to influence political events. In September of that year, the Free Trade Union of Railroad Engineers conducted an eight-day political strike demanding the early dissolution of the Supreme Soviet. All political parties of a democratic orientation joined with the free trade unions in supporting this demand. The Supreme Soviet bowed to this pressure and adopted a law providing for early elections.

When, in 1994, the elections for the parliament (Supreme Rada) and local councils were held, free trade unions took an active part in them. Thanks in part to skills our local union activists learned from seminars conducted in Ukraine by American organizations, including the AFL-CIO, we were able to run effective campaigns and had some impressive successes. Two out of the four candidates our union nominated won seats and became deputies of the Supreme Rada. This was quite an accomplishment, given that the average district had fifteen candidates running for one post, and that this system usually favored the local factory or kolkhoz director or another well-known person. So the fact that we were able to obtain two seats in the parliament testifies to the authority of free trade unions among the electorate. In addition, seventeen members of our union succeeded in winning election to local councils.

Seymon Karikov gave this statement during meetings at the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies, Washington, D.C., and the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Our participation in the elections taught us some important lessons about politics in Ukraine today. There are over forty parties, and none of them—with the possible exception of the Communists and Socialists—have significant membership or power. This is explained by the fact that the people of Ukraine for the most part do not trust political parties. The discrediting of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union led to the discrediting of all parties.

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In this situation, the free trade unions are playing an important political role. Their membership is much greater than the combined membership of all the political parties. They are a unifying force: while the parties splinter into numerous factions, the free trade unions are uniting groups of workers from all over the country. Our

confederation, “Free Trade Unions of Ukraine,” which started with five trade unions two and a half years ago, today has almost forty unions belonging to it. For their part, the political parties are constantly seeking the support of the democratic trade unions.

We also consider it an indication of our growing influence that in the fall of 1994, the Ukrainian government gave us six seats out of twenty-six on the national negotiating committee for the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade.

The role of independent trade unions is especially important during this period of economic transition. The old pro-communist trade unions are trying to hinder market reforms, since their major function, which is to distribute goods and social benefits at the workplace, can exist only under a planned socialist economy. Our unions, on the other hand, support reforms.

Free trade unions have an interest in supporting economic reforms for three reasons. First, these reforms will give them the opportunity to negotiate directly with the employer, with the government acting as an intermediary, whereas now the employer and the state join together against trade unions.

Second, the reforms will demonstrate to workers, once and for all, that the official trade unions cannot defend their interests, and these old unions will collapse. The dissolution of post-communist institutions, like the old trade unions, lessens the possibility that a totalitarian society will return.

Finally, the economic reforms will force legislative bodies to revise a whole series of laws, providing a real opportunity for Ukraine to become a state based on the rule of law.

As President Kuchma's economic reform program is implemented and Ukraine moves toward a market economy, the role of trade unions will change from what it has been. We expect that the role of free trade unions in negotiating with management at the national, branch, and local enterprise levels, already recognized by the Ukrainian government, will be expanded, and that enterprise managers who are interested in the transformation of the Ukrainian economy will take part in these negotiations. In order to guarantee the success of the reforms, they must be supported by workers, by the ordinary citizens of Ukraine. Unfortunately, not all Ukrainian workers today are represented by genuinely democratic

organizations, but hundreds of thousands of them do have such representation. These workers have a voice, and we expect the president and government to continue to listen.