



Solidarity with Ukraine



**Report of the Scottish UNISON branches
delegation to Kharkiv in Ukraine**

September/October 2025

UNISON Scotland Ukraine Delegation September/October 2025

The delegation consisted of Tracy Anne Miller and Carolyn Casey of UNISON Lothian Health Branch, William Shearer of UNISON North Lanarkshire and Stephen Smellie of UNISON South Lanarkshire.

The delegation left Glasgow on Saturday 27 September, arrived in Kyiv on Sunday 28 September before arriving in Kharkiv in the evening of the 28th. The delegation stayed in Kharkiv until Thursday 2 October when they returned to Kyiv, spending the night there before departing Ukraine to return to Scotland late on Saturday 4 October.

This report will detail the week's activities report on our conclusions.

Summary of conclusions

Since the full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022 Ukraine has been waging a defensive war to protect its independence and territory. The invasion was condemned by UNISON and other trade unions, and UNISON passed a motion at its National Delegate Conference in 2024 in full support of the Ukrainian people and extending solidarity to the Ukrainian trade unions, with the aim of strengthening links with Ukrainian trade unions.

Our delegation sought to enact the terms of this NDC resolution.

We spent most of our time in the city of Kharkiv where we met trade unionists from FPU and KVPU affiliated unions. We visited children in underground and Metro classes, spoke to social care workers, teachers, health workers, local politicians, some workers who were now in the military,



student and youth leaders, sports centre staff who organised food banks and rehabilitation for those, military and civilians, who had been disabled and traumatised by the war, journalists who risked their lives reporting from the frontline and LGBTQI+ activists.

We visited council buildings, a sports college and a large peripheral housing scheme, that had suffered severe damage, some outright destruction from missile attacks, the sites of many deaths. The signs of damage to buildings were everywhere. And yet the people of Kharkiv seemed to continue as, near, normal. They went to work; they visited the shops. They were fairly nonchalant about air raid sirens. This was their daily lives, and they were getting on with it.

However, behind this normality, the people we spoke to all had a story to tell about their experiences of war, of shelling, of losing

loved ones. It is hard to understand the trauma that these people are coping with and the impact that this is having on them, or how it will affect them in days to come.

The organisations we met and listened to had all changed how they operated. The Sports Centre was no longer simply focussed on training future Olympic champions, they were organising food banks for the homeless and rehabilitation for the wounded, a safe space for children to play and make friends.

The LGBTQI+ group were continuing with their HIV prevention work but were also organising to deliver medicine to people who could not leave their homes due to injury or shelling. They were providing counselling to gay men on leave from the frontline.

The teachers were using all the techniques they had learned during Covid to provide online education.

Local politicians and officials were adapting services to ensure education continues, underground where possible, that homeless people from the destroyed homes in the city and the wider region were found somewhere to stay, often in the vacated student dormitories that foreign students had previously occupied.

The trade unions were adapting to enable them to support their members in the workplace and in their community by providing counselling, first aid training and food parcels, as well as ensuring that those workers who joined the military would have a job when they return to civilian life. They know many of them won't and that many of those who do, will return disabled, physically and mentally, and will need support to be able to return.

By adapting to address the needs of their members now, the unions are building a trade union consciousness and loyalty amongst members that will enable them, they hope, to be stronger and able to play a powerful part in building the fair society they want after the war.

However, the first priority of all these people and organisations is that the war must be ended and that it has to be won.

When we asked what kind of support they needed, the answer was always, help to win the war. And for that they were clear, our government should supply Ukraine with the material they need to stop Russian attacks and to protect their people and independence.

They also need immediate humanitarian assistance. We heard of needs for powerpacks to enable a social care centre for elderly, disabled and homeless people to maintain their heating when the Russians disrupt power supplies. We heard of the need for more supplies for food for the homeless and equipment to help with rehabilitation. We heard of lots of areas where funds raised in the UK can help people survive.

We also saw that the trade union movement is doing great things in supporting members but that they are aware of challenges that lie ahead of them to address poverty wages, poor conditions and insecurity of work. They are looking to learn how to negotiate and win for workers. They need solidarity now and in the future.

Our delegation visit reinforced for us that the decision of UNISON National Delegate Conference was the correct one and that our union must take the action called for to support the trade unions and help build a powerful union movement in Ukraine.

Proposed Actions for UNISON

1. UNISON's National Executive Council must implement the terms of the National Delegate Conference 2024 resolution. It called on the NEC
 - To actively support Ukraine's struggle for liberation from Russian imperialism; immediate withdrawal of all Russian troops from Ukraine; and the struggles of trade unionists, socialists, etc in Ukraine and Russia for workers' rights, social provision and democracy as well as Ukraine's right to self-determination.
 - To organise campaigning on this basis, including:
 - a) Strengthen links with unions in Ukraine;
 - b) Provide details of Ukrainian trade unionists who will speak at branch, regional and national events;
 - c) Holding online and real-world events to educate members about these issues;
 - To affiliate to the Ukraine Solidarity Campaign and encourage branches etc to do likewise.
2. Building on the above, UNISON should engage with appropriate Ukrainian trade unions, to explore what assistance can be given to help them develop their activists and staff to achieve their ambition of becoming powerful independent trade unions.
3. UNISON branches are asked to continue offering support to Ukraine. This can include organising collections or materials such as medical supplies, linking with voluntary organisations who regularly transport equipment to Ukraine, donating to appeals from Ukraine Solidarity Campaign and Ukraine Solidarity Campaign Scotland.
4. Support the campaign to stop Russian fossil fuels being exported with the support of UK based companies with ships insured by London insurance companies. The export of LNG is funding the Russian war effort. Information on the Seapeak Campaign from [Ukraine Solidarity Campaign Scotland – Building solidarity with Ukraine among trade unionists, socialists, and in political parties and social movements.](#)

Our Solidarity Fund

Our delegation raised money from UNISON branches, Scottish Committee, the NEC's International Committee, from other trade unions, and many individuals to create a Solidarity Fund. We are using that Fund to support some of the groups that we met with in Ukraine and to support trade union organising. Full details of how that Solidarity Fund is spent will be published separately. In the meantime, we would like to thank all those who contributed.

We would like to thank the Ukraine Solidarity Campaign Scotland for their support in preparing for the visit, Ivana Krapkov for help with arranging the various meetings, the interpreters who assisted us during our time in Ukraine, and Colin Turbett, retired UNISON member, whose inspiration and guidance was critical. Finally, we thank all the people and organisations we met for their hospitality and friendship. We salute your resilience and determination.

Our delegation - Getting to Kharkiv

All flights and train journeys were organised by Willie Shearer, our volunteer logistics expert. The flight to Frankfurt and the connecting flight to Warsaw went smoothly. Our journey to Kyiv involved a train to Chelm, near the Ukrainian border, switching to the overnight sleeper to Kyiv. Our logistics expert had to travel to Warsaw Centralna station and then proceed to the Post Office to pick up tickets.

A Polish man, hearing our Scottish accents, kindly offered to help us find the correct train and took us to the platform and directed us on to the train. Unfortunately, it was the wrong one. After half an hour or so sitting on the train as it passed the city centre and started heading for the suburbs we realised “our” mistake and had to get off at the next stop and get another train to Centralna.

Once there, Willie and Stephen set off to find the Post Office and learned that the Warsaw Marathon was running that day with lots of children’s sprints being run in the closed off streets.

Tickets collected, we headed back to Tracy and Carolyn and after a bite to eat headed back to get the train that would take us to the station for the train to Chelm. Fortunately, that went smoothly, and we arrived in plenty of time for the train to Chelm.

Chelm at night looks pretty desolate but there is a supermarket next to the station where we were able to stock up on provisions for the journey.

The night train to Kyiv was packed with mostly Ukrainian women, many with children. Our cabin with 4 fold-down beds was small but sufficed for our needs and being tired from the early morning departure from Glasgow, all of us slept well, except for being woken by Ukrainian border control waking us to check our passports. We did hit a problem when the conductor delivered us cups of tea, and we realised that we had neither Polish nor Ukrainian currency and no Ukrainian to allow us to communicate with the conductor. He had as much English as we had Ukrainian and he eventually understood that we were not paying for any tea! Same issue arose in the morning, but Tracy negotiated and paid in Sterling, at a rate of exchange that was very beneficial to the conductor!

We had a few hours in Kyiv where we had lunch in a Georgian café before meeting **Ivanna Khrapkov** from the **State Employees Union of Ukraine (SEUU)** and Chair of the **Federation of Ukrainian Unions’ (FPU)** Youth Committee who had helped to organise our programme for the week.

We had a brief visit to a union office where a first aid class was underway for union members. This was our first indication of how the unions are operating in a country that has been invaded, where many union members have joined the military and where civilian casualties in the cities and workplaces are common.

The first aid classes and food deliveries are part of the **Trade Union Lifeline** project ran by the unions to support members in the current circumstances.

At the office we met Tristan from the US **AFL/CIO’s Solidarity Centre** (1) and Nataliya Yeremeyeva from the **Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO)** (2). Both organisations offer material support to the trade union movement in Ukraine. The Solidarity Centre has suffered a significant cut in its funds as part of President Trump’s cuts to USAid which has put at risk some of the projects that were being planned. The LO have stepped in to plug part of the gap in funding

but the planned projects are all under review, which could be a serious setback for trade union organising in Ukraine.

After our brief visit we boarded the train to Kharkiv. This is a modern train where we were served passable chicken curry and rice for our evening meal.

We were met by **Valentia and Igor Kudinova**, who escorted us to our hotel.

Tired, we all slept well and were ready for a busy few days.

Keeping Safe

Kharkiv is 30 km from the Russian border and in the first days of the invasion Russian troops reached the city and launched attacks, destroying many buildings and killing thousands of people. They were forced to withdraw and over the past 2 years most of the fighting on the ground has been further south around the Donbas Region. However, Kharkiv has been subjected to frequent missile and drone attacks.

There are apps for phones that alert citizens to any incoming drones and missiles that are detected. This allows people to get to a shelter or basement before they arrive. However, most Kharkiv people largely ignore the alerts as they have access to more detailed information on Telegram channels that tells them more precisely where the drones are headed. Missiles are more difficult as they are fired from a town about 10 Km inside the Russian border and so only take a few minutes to arrive, if targeted at Kharkiv.

We were told that Kharkiv had been quiet for the past few months and so we hoped not to have to spend too much time in the basement corridor that served as the hotel's shelter. However, sirens went off on 3 of the 4 nights we stayed in Kharkiv and the last night in Kyiv, so we became accustomed to spending hours in a shelter. Fortunately, we were not close to any missile hits and remained safe and well looked after throughout.

Monday 29 September - Aquarena Sports Complex

Aquarena is a charitable run sports complex which celebrated its 50th anniversary in May 2025. It has Olympic size and children's swimming pools, dance studios, boxing facilities, well-equipped gym and outdoor football pitches. In recent years it has developed a sizable kindergarten in the basement that means that children, many of whom cannot attend school or nursery, can meet friends and play in a safe, underground space.

The facilities are used by many people, soldiers and civilians, injured in the war, as part of their rehabilitation, with Physiotherapy offered alongside access to the gym, and pool.

The Centre Director, **Maksym Bondarev**, welcomed us and showed us around the facilities. The Centre receives no funding from the City Council or State and relies on the Vitaliy Danilov Foundation, and income generated from customers and other private donations to keep the place running and accessible to people on low incomes.

The Centre is decorated with pictures of champion swimmers and gymnasts, and a collection of autographed football tops, including Maradona!

The Centre also serves as a base for co-ordinating food and clothes banks to support homeless people and others who are suffering financial hardship, , including people injured in the war and the families of people killed in the war.

UNISON North Lanarkshire has previously made a connection with Aquarena, donating to their social provision. They are also, with UNISON South Lanarkshire, raising money to transport surplus gym equipment to Aquarena that will assist in providing opportunities for young people.

KVPU

Aquarena also provides office space for the KVPU (the Free Trade Unions of Ukraine) which organises its affiliated unions in the Kharkiv region from here. All the staff at Aquarena are members of one of the KVPU unions. Their Regional Organiser, **Mila Yakushko**, whose office we visited, and Regional President, **Igor Pryhodko**, met us at Aquarena.

The KVPU organises many smaller unions across Ukraine in private companies and enterprises. Mila stayed for a short time in the Northeast of England in the earlier stage of the war but returned to work on organising the union. We met one of the KVPU local leaders who organises in a military manufacturing factory. He presented us with a souvenir from the factory, a medal commemorating the factory's 130 years of production. When he was asked what the factory produced, he laughed and, presumably observing some Official Secrets Act, only said, "Things the Russians don't like!"



Igor is also Director of the **Kharkiv Sporting College**, and we travelled there to meet staff and witness the devastating damage that was done to the building during the early days of the invasion when Russian troops fought local residents in the grounds of the college. The football pitches still display the shell holes caused by mortar fire and two burned out school buses sit in the car park. The entire top floor of the boys' dormitory was destroyed when a missile hit. Fortunately, all pupils, aged 13 to 18, had been evacuated and none were present. A visit to what is now the ruined roof where we looked down from the 4th floor offices, now open to the skies, through the floors to the students' beds below, covered in rubble, highlighted that many lives could have been lost here. One lecturer was in the building at the time, working on his computer as the missile hit within metres of where he was sitting. His colleagues joked that he is a cat that has lost one of

his lives.

The college has produced many national and Olympic champions in the past. Students now study at home and access sports training sessions at the Aquarena facility. Staff are hopeful that the college can be rebuilt after the war and they can again produce champions.

Kharkiv City

Kharkiv has a long history going back to before the Russian Empire and the origins of the famous Cossacks. In recent times it was a major Soviet city with many artists resident here as well as major manufacturing industries such as aviation and heavy vehicles. In 2012 the city was one of the host cities for the Euros (European Football Championships). Scotland didn't qualify and so we skipped over much discussion of that, but we learned that the city had invested a lot in the event creating a major new airport, now closed due to the war, and some beautiful gardens that drew visitors to the city from all over the country and many visitors from nearby Russia for holidays and weekend breaks.



At one end of the enormous Freedom Square sits the **Regional Government Headquarters**. This is similar to the City Chambers in many UK cities. The building was destroyed in 2022 by missile strikes. 44 public sector workers were killed in the attack and a further 35 seriously injured. At the other end of the square sits one of the

city's Universities that we later visited. It had several floors of its vocational building destroyed in another missile attack.

In just the first day in the city, it was clear that Russian attacks were not targeted on military installations. Council offices, universities, schools, hospitals, union offices and residential areas had been destroyed, and thousands of civilians had been killed.

In one of the central squares there is a large flagpole with, what we were told is, the largest Ukrainian flag in the country. We were told that this is make it clear to Putin, "That Kharkiv is Ukrainian." We were later told the same story by another person who put it differently. "It says f*** off, Putin!"

Journalists' Solidarity Centre

Colleagues in the NUJ branch in Edinburgh had given us contacts with the Ukrainian journalists' union and they had suggested that we visit the **Journalists Solidarity Centre** located in the outskirts of the city. Here we met **Anna Chernenko** and **Volodymyr Pavlov**, two journalists from the city who have been reporting on events from the first days of the invasion. The Solidarity Centre offers support to foreign journalists visiting the area and is funded by the national union with support from NGOs who have provided flak jackets, helmets and other equipment. They described how journalists across the region continue to report on events, on the missile attacks and damage being done, on the fatalities and on the successes in pushing back the Russians from the region. Local journalists in small towns and villages continue to produce local newspapers, often with small print runs, and websites recording all events. This is despite the dangers that this has presented to them.

The first journalist to be killed following the invasion was Ihor Hydenko who died on the 26 February 2022, days after the invasion started. Several have died since. We were told that wearing a flak jacket with PRESS in large type across the chest is no protection from Russian attack. A vulnerability that has increased with the increasing use of drones that can identify press personnel and follow them, pinpointing them for attack.

When asked why Anna and Volodymyr continue to put themselves at such risk, they conferred and said, “People need to know what happened here. There will be a Ukrainian government and a Russian government version but only journalists can independently say what happened. This is our home and if we don’t report what has happened here, it can extend to other regions.”



The threat to journalists from drones has increased with their improved capability. Drones can send back live video to an armed unit who can then pinpoint the exact whereabouts of their individual targets and fire a guided rocket to the precise co-ordinates shown on the drone video. Technology exists that can intercept the drone video and allow the journalist to move, hide or run away before a missile strike happens. This

has already saved lives, and more are needed.

Anna and Volodymyr, like all other people we met, thanked us for visiting but specifically asked us to send thanks to the NUJ Edinburgh branch and journalists generally in the UK for their support.

Two days later we saw Anna on a news programme reporting on the missile attacks on Kharkiv that occurred while we were in the city.

Tuesday 30 September

Ivanna Khrapkov of the State Employees Union of Ukraine (SEUU) joined us for the day along with her colleague **Olena Uhodnikova** of the Education Union.

Children

Children have been amongst the most affected by the Russian invasion. They have been subject to displacement from the areas that Russia invaded, lost parents or seen fathers, and sometimes mothers, being enlisted into the military, and suffer the trauma of regular missile and drone attacks. Many children left the country with their mothers at the start of the war as refugees to Poland, Bulgaria and further afield, including the UK. Many have returned but others remain abroad.

60% of schools in Kharkiv city have been damaged and it is considered too dangerous to continue classes and so the online provision of education has become the norm. This built on the experience of Covid with the systems in place for this. However, children are missing out on the socialisation of school, the opportunity to play and meet friends.

To partly address this a number of schools have been established in the city Metro system, in the basements of schools and, where resources have been available, in underground schools built afresh.

We visited the Pischyn Community, a district outside the city made up of 8 small towns, and were met by the **Mayor Oleh Chernobai** and **Julia Dsielova**, a former teacher and now Head of Education in the Community administration. Here we visited a new school, **Korotych Liceum**, that had been built with 27 classrooms for the school roll of 700. However, most of these cannot be used except for those that are underground. The school is built to a depth of 11.5 metres below ground level to accommodate 7 classrooms, a medical room and kitchen.

This underground safe facility allows the pupils, and those from a neighbouring town, to attend classes on a part-time basis in 2 shifts, 6 days a week, whilst also continuing with online classes.

The Mayor and the staff at the school were proud of the facility. It is a bright and cheerful environment and the children seemed happy in class. The school cost 2 million Euros with half of that funded from the local council and the rest from Central Government with assistance from EU funds.

This is an example of how the authorities, with public support, have decided to re-build what they can, to repair damage and to get on with life despite the damage being done by the war.

The mayor then took us to a neighbouring town where a new kindergarten/nursery was being built. This is an impressive building and includes several underground rooms to allow children aged 2 to 6 to enjoy early years education even during war.

Kharkiv is 30 miles from the Russian border and missiles fired from there can reach the city and surrounding areas within 2 minutes. This means that, despite effective air-raid warning systems it is impossible to get classrooms full of children to a shelter in time to be safe. This is the motive for investing in the underground schools.



Our next visit was to one of the Metro schools in the city where **Iryna Tarasenko**, Head of General Education with the City Council met us and took us on a tour of the 7 classes and medical room that has been assembled within the metro station. The classrooms are small but brightly decorated and lit with modern teaching aids available for teacher and assistant in each classroom. Again, children attend part-time on a rota basis starting at 8am to 12, with the second shift running from 12.30 to 6. They are provided with a free meal and with the public transport system now being free, buses, trams and underground, there is

no cost in getting to school.

The University Metro station school that we visited was one of the first and biggest. There are now 18 Metro and underground schools in the city catering for around 18,500 children. However, there are many more children unable to access classes and who continue with only online education.

Kharkiv City Council

Ahead of the visit we had written to the **Mayor Ihor Terekhov** to ask for a meeting. He was unavailable but a meeting was arranged with the **Deputy Mayor Oleksander Novak**.

The Deputy Mayor started our meeting by recording his thanks to the United Kingdom for the country's support for Ukraine since the invasion. Kharkiv was on the frontline from the first day when Russian forces invaded and made for the city. In the Kharkiv region the predominate language spoken was Russian and the Russian forces were led to believe that they would be welcomed. They were mistaken with civilians as well as military and police forces resisting the invasion. Now, most people try to use Ukrainian whenever they can.

In the battle that followed the invasion thousands of people died. Hundreds of high-rise flats were destroyed, 50% of houses were damaged and 106,000 people were made homeless, leaving a major problem for the city. Reconstruction was begun and 1500 homes have been built with further work ongoing. However, the city continues to be attacked and damage to housing continues.

Before the invasion the city had a population of 1.3 million. This dropped to as low as 300,000 with people moving to safer cities and to Europe. However, the city has absorbed 200,000 Internally Displaced People (IDPs) and many citizens have returned following Russian forces being pushed back and the city's population has grown to over 1 million. Many of the IDPs have been housed in student dormitories that were previously used by the thousands of foreign students who attended the local universities. This increase in the population has added to pressures on the city authorities in regard to housing, education and other services.

Whilst the city seeks to restore the damage it understands that supplying the military is the priority, but they seek to protect the civilian population and restore housing and education as soon as possible. To assist the populace all public transport is now free and businesses have been exempted from some local taxes to protect existing businesses and promote new ones, creating employment for the city.

The significant expenditure on creating the Metro and underground schools is supported by the population as they recognise the need to provide safe places to educate young people and to encourage families to stay in and return to the city. More underground schools are planned with a view to ensuring that education can be maintained even if the threat of missile attacks continue.

With winter approaching, where temperatures fall to -10 and less, the infrastructure of the city has not been fully restored. In the 2022/23 winter, Russia targeted power stations which resulted in regular blackouts. They have therefore invested in decentralising the energy system with several small power plants built. In the past week one of those new sub-stations was attacked leaving 50,000 people with no electricity.

The Deputy Mayor explained that the city needs support to rebuild but better air defence would be a priority to stop the kind of damage that continues to be inflicted on the city. Bi-lateral links with UK businesses is being sought to develop the economy.

He described how the city had broken ties with Russian cities and established links with cities in Europe, including a Friendship Oath signed with Leeds. He remarked that, so far, they had not established relations with any cities in Skottlandi.



The delegation delivered letters of solidarity and a gift from the Provosts of North Lanarkshire and South Lanarkshire Council and in return we were gifted with a presentation medal to mark Kharkiv's recognition by President Zelensky as a "Hero City" for its resistance to the Russian invaders.

Kharkiv's Young People

We had learned about the importance that the administrations and people of Kharkiv placed on education for children and young people. Ivanna leads the **Federation of Ukrainian Trade Unions' (FPU) Youth Committee**, and she had arranged for us to meet a Youth Forum organised by the Regional Government's Youth Services Department.

We were met by **Daniel Makhmudov**, Director, and **Maria Bella Beigel**, Deputy, and introduced to the **Youth Forum** of around 25 young men and women who proceeded to give us a presentation on their activities which included social, sport, discussion and meeting with the authorities to raise their concerns.

They listed 5 objectives; Youth employment; Culture; work with students and NGOs; Development of national identity; A future for young people and their health. These were all focussed on encouraging young people to stay in Kharkiv.

In pursuit of these they had organised a Youth Festival as part of Ukraine in Europe Day which included music, talent shows, workshops to speak to soldiers, and discussions with students with a view to develop activities, promoting physical health and Ukrainian language and identity. They emphasised that they felt aligned with Europe.

They then posed several questions to us! What did we think of Kharkiv? What were the main issues facing young people? Are young people in Scotland able to meet and influence government? As 4 people whose own youthfulness is in the distant past we did our best to answer but turn the questions back to them. They were interested to learn more about Scotland's Youth Parliament.

The session was a lively one and the young people were impressive in their enthusiasm and commitment.

Saltivka

Saltivka is a large residential area of mostly high-rise blocks on the outskirts of Kharkiv sitting astride a main road that leads in a mostly straight line to the Russian border. This area sustained major damage in the early days of the invasion. Russian shells struck several of the blocks destroying many of them, damaging many others and killing around 20,000 residents.

The impression is of a peripheral housing scheme much like in many other cities, that could have



been very bleak and uninspiring in the first place but was now a scene of devastation with the area scarred by the impact of merciless Russian attacks. The fiction that Russia attacked military targets is destroyed here as the high-rise blocks, the homes of hundreds of thousands of men, women and children, bore the brunt of missiles, tank shells and gunfire.

In a short tour of the area, we witnessed whole blocks that had been destroyed and cleared with only the concrete foundations still left as a marker for the people who lived there and the many who died there. Almost every remaining block bore the scars of attack with boarded up windows and vacant, burnt-out flats. The tragedy of what happened here was obvious to see. And since then, the area has suffered further occasional attack by drone and missiles from Russian forces just 20 miles up that road.

Wednesday 1 October – Kharkiv’s trade unionists

The morning saw us meeting a collection of trade union activists from across the social care, education and health sectors and some student activists. These people work daily to promote trade unions, support workers and deliver services to vulnerable people, children and the sick, and in the current situation, the wounded from the front and civilians caught out by the missile and drone attacks on the city that continue. More on this later.

Representatives of the **Social Work Union** first asked us to send best wishes to **Colin Turbett** who had visited them in 2024 and who had co-ordinated raising funds to supply local social workers with 2 motor scooters to enable them to reach their service users. We were delighted to hear that the scooters, emblazoned with the Scottish Saltire, continue to be used by the social workers. **Olena Kravtsova** described the situation facing them as they support older and disabled people and numerous homeless people, in the Territorial Centre for Social Services. They have few resources and as winter approaches with the likelihood of more power blackouts and the certainty of months of sub-zero temperatures they feared for the health of the people they support.

Social Care workers, like those in the UK, are paid at the minimum wage level which causes real hardship for the workers. Few young people see it as a career option and so there are staff shortages. The union has been calling on the government to invest in social services but they described not being able to get a meeting with the relevant Minister for 4 years!



The Regional Head of the **Education Union** described how Education was the most unionised sector in Ukraine with over 1 million members in the education union that covers everything from Kindergarten to University education.

As we had heard in the schools the previous day, members explained that most education in the region is online. When it only takes one minute for a missile to reach Kharkiv from the Russian border, there just isn't the time for a school, college or university to move everyone into a shelter when an alarm goes off.

Teachers and lecturers continue to work to provide the online education that young people are still needing. An interesting fact is that the mobilisation, "call-up," to the military is delayed till 25 to allow education to be completed.

Most education establishments have been damaged, some completely destroyed. It will be a major task to repair the damage when it is safe for on-site education to resume and this will need specialist workers for this construction challenge.

Several teachers referred to the significant levels of post-traumatic stress amongst both staff and children. That will also take specialist workers to address. Despite this they said that they were resilient and determined to stay and teach the children. As one said, **"We are fighting for a future and that future is our children. Please share that message."**

Health facilities, hospitals and clinics have also sustained significant damage with 70% being hit by explosives. As well as the number of people injured in the war and the missile attacks on the city there have been increases in diseases associated with poverty and the elderly and children have been the most susceptible. Mental health issues are a significant factor also.

Each union represented at the meeting and others we met during our visit described how the unions were working to support their members materially, organising food packs, first aid training and counselling. They supported their members who had gone to the military and ensured they had a job and support when they returned. They believed that the unions had an opportunity to earn the respect of their members and other workers by being seen to be organised and to look after the people.

Ukrainian unions come from a background where, in Soviet times, everyone was in a union, but the unions did not represent the workers against the employer. At best they organised holidays and concerts and the officials looked after themselves. Union activists are breaking from that tradition and looking to represent the members in the workplaces, negotiating with employers and lobbying the national, regional and local governments over conditions and resources.

We were to learn more about this when we attended the State Employees Union of Ukraine (SEUU) forum in Kyiv on the Friday.

Kharkiv Central Hospital

This is a 50-year-old facility that has suffered numerous missile and drone attacks since the start of the war. The evidence of this is in the damaged walls and some boarded windows. However, there are also signs of new windows and repairs as the authorities, and the staff, are determined to keep the hospital functioning.

Olena from the **Health union** introduced us to the hospital leadership team and the lead union rep in the hospital, a doctor.

The hospital has been hit many times by shell fire and sustained damage. During the early months of the war when Kharkiv was on the front-line of Russia's attack, the hospital was under direct attack whilst catering for thousands of wounded and dying, mostly civilians. Staff stayed at the hospital partly due to the pressure of work but also because it was not safe to be travelling to and from their homes. The health union supported bringing some of the workers' families to stay in the hospital during this period.



The hospital continues to support casualties from the war, both soldiers injured in fighting and civilians hurt in the missile and drone attacks that are the feature of civilian life in Kharkiv and other cities, towns and villages.

The hospital is well-equipped, as we saw in our tour of the Accident and Emergency unit, which looked very much like ones we are familiar with,

although some of their equipment was more modern and, very unlike A&E in the UK, there were no queues of waiting patients!

The hospital, like all buildings in the city continues to be vulnerable to damage from missiles and drones and so plans to build an extensive underground facility, 3 storeys deep are underway, with initial construction work started in the grounds of the hospital. When completed, this will allow operations and patient care to be carried out safely even when the city is under missile attack. The funding for this is coming from government funds, with some aid from the EU, and they hoped other international funders. Our delegation could not help but think that it would be cheaper to

help end the war than to build hundreds of underground hospitals across the country. A sentiment that the hospital staff agreed with!

University life

Kharkiv was famous as a student city. The numerous universities and colleges attracted students from all over Ukraine who were joined by thousand from abroad, including Europe, Africa and Asia. The foreign students no longer come, and the Ukrainians are studying online most of the time. Therefore, when we visited the **Beketov University of Urban Economy** (3) it was a mostly empty building with only some staff to meet us.

The university buildings have suffered from 42 missile strikes including a major shell attack in 2022 which destroyed the upper floors of one wing of the main building. Being a university of architecture and construction, plans were quickly devised to rebuild and that work is almost completed, which the deputy rector was proud to show us.

There are an impressive range of classrooms, labs and workshops, including in the wing catering for the hospitality and tourism industry, a fully functioning cocktail bar where students learn all the skills required for entertaining tourists. Unfortunately, it was not functioning that day and all we could do was look at the cocktail shakers and glasses arrayed on the shelves behind the bar!

Since the invasion alternative virtual laboratories have been created to allow students to get familiar with the physical facilities that they are now prevented from experiencing. In this they collaborate with Loughborough University in England (and would welcome a Scottish University to extend their international links).

The online university continues to enrol and support students resident in the occupied territories, including from the Crimea which has been occupied since 2014, something that puts those students at risk but which the students have positively opted for.

The Education union organises staff and had previously negotiated improved canteens and creche facilities for staff.

The university has a museum opened in 1967, which focusses on the architectural and cultural history of the city and the heritage of the museum. We had a whirlwind tour guided by the museum keeper. It is an open museum that exhibits local artists and hosts the city's cultural and artistic communities. As we were shown round the museum, we were advised that a local college had been hit by a missile the previous night.

At the conclusion of our visit, we presented the deputy rector with a modest gift, a UNISON decorated plate, which we were told would be placed in the museum as an exhibit celebrating international solidarity.

Thursday 2 October - Spectrum Kharkiv

The LGBT+ community in Kharkiv are supported by Spectrum Kharkiv, based at their community centre. The centre provides a meeting space for LGBTIQ+ people and groups. Spectrum provides an extensive programme of HIV prevention services, including advice, testing and support.

They run book clubs and English language classes as well as social events, workshops and counselling.

We met 2 of the volunteers who run the centre, **Vasyl and Paul**. They spoke about the centre's work and how the war has impacted on it and the LGBTIQ+ community.

Stigma and discrimination remained a feature of LGBTIQ+ life in Kharkiv pre the Russian invasion and most people would not be "out" in their workplace. There were a few clubs in the city where they could meet and the centre provided a focus for support and organising, including Pride events.



The clubs have closed since the invasion with some people moving away, some joining the military and the restrictions on movement and a nightly curfew curtailing most of the city's nightlife. The demands on the centre have increased. There has been an increase in HIV transmission, along with other sexually transmitted diseases, and so the centre's testing, support and education services are needed as much as ever.

During attacks and blackouts, the centre has helped to coordinate and deliver the supply of medicines to people who could not otherwise access them due to injury, lack of transport or curfew restrictions.

When either volunteering or being called up to the military, mobilised, people are asked about and sometimes tested for HIV. If positive they are often turned away, despite their condition being stable with the help of medication. However, government sources have confirmed that there are thousands of people in the military who are HIV+ and supports are available for them.

Whilst the centre, and other similar centres across Ukraine, work closely with health services, there are no formal links with trade unions and no trade unions have LGBT+ groups in the way that UNISON and other UK unions have. This is something that the Centre and its sister groups across Ukraine are seeking to address.

Soldiers on leave, who previously attended the centre, return to the centre to meet friends and share their experiences. The walls of the centre are adorned with full size photographs of LGBTIQ+ people who are serving in the military.

Along with all other organisations we met, the end of the war is the most immediate priority for the centre and the community it serves.

Back to Kyiv

Our trip back to Kyiv in the afternoon was uneventful and we arrived late in the afternoon as people were travelling home from work in what, on the surface, looks like any other busy city. The McDonalds next to our hotel was doing a fair business but the signs pointing to the Shelter were a reminder that this was a city that continued to experience missile attacks every night and in recent days, after Putin and Trump's meeting in Alaska, these attacks had been stepped up.

Razom – the Ukrainian environmental movement

We met, over dinner, **Oleh Savytski** of environmental group **Razom** who campaign for a stop to the export of Russian liquified natural gas (LNG) and who have worked with the Ukraine Solidarity Campaign Scotland to expose the role of Seapeak Maritime who have played a major part in the shipping of LNG from Russia from its office in Glasgow. Despite the UK government banning Russian oil and gas it has taken no steps to stop Seapeak providing ships to export LNG or to preventing UK companies from providing the insurance needed for any ship to sail. The profits from the sale of LNG are a significant part of the funding of Russia's war effort.

The environment movement was a growing movement before the invasion with many Ukrainian groups highlighting issues and campaigning for action, with groups like Greenpeace joining them. The environmental damage of war is immense and will take many years to repair.

Like all other organisations the war has changed the priorities of the environment movement. For Razom their priorities include stopping Russia exporting fossil fuels like LNG and to promote a reconstruction of the economy after the war along environmental lines. Their Build Back Better campaign demands no reliance on Russian fossil fuels, greater use of renewables, energy efficiency, sustainable construction and transport. They also seek to support eco-tourism, a movement that began some years ago and is growing in the west of the country, out of range of Russian missile attacks.

Friday 3 October - The State Employees Union of Ukraine and building the Ukrainian union movement

Our last day in Ukraine was spent as guests of the **State Employees Union of Ukraine (SEUU)** at their local leaders' forum. This brought together regional and local leaders from across the country where they discussed the priorities for their members. Also present and sponsoring the



gathering were **Hans Kristian**, International Officer, of **Fagforbundet**, the Norwegian Union of Municipal and General Workers. He and his colleagues made presentations on the Nordic Social Dialogue model, the structure of their union and how they seek to engage with members.

At the start of the meeting the video we had made with **UNISON's Christina McAnea, General Secretary, Lilian Macer, Scottish Secretary** and Stephen Smellie, one of our delegation, sending solidarity greetings to the Ukrainian trade union movement was shown, to an

enthusiastic response with applause ringing round the room from delegates.

The Chairperson, **Yuri Pizhuk**, presented a draft action plan "5 years: Movement strategy" for discussion. This covered the 4 priorities of the union:

1. Protection of Labour Rights and Development of Social Dialogue
2. Active Participation in the Ukrainian and International Trade Union Movement

3. Leadership, Training and Internal Union Politics
4. Financial Sustainability and Policy of Openness and Transparency of Funds.

There was a lively discussion that the regional and local leaders would continue in their areas and feed back to a future conference before a final action plan is agreed.

The discussion reflected both the situation facing all Ukrainians, the war, and how to build a union that could represent members working in the municipalities and civil service. Most Ukrainian trade unions, including SEUU and other affiliates to the main trade union centre the FPU, originated in the Soviet era where the role of trade unions was very different to that which they are seeking to fulfil today. The Chairperson described their soviet era existence as arranging entertainment and holidays for workers whereas they now seek to represent members in winning better pay and conditions. That will mean learning new skills like bargaining, representing members and campaigning to influence governments.

Addressing the forum **Tristan Masat** from the US Solidarity Center made the point that trade union rights are central to a democratic society based on human rights. Social dialogue that the Ukrainian government spoke of, and which the Norwegians had been sharing their experience of, required trust on each side but also needs the workers' side to be powerful. For that, the trade unions needed to bring the workers with them.

Martial law remains in place restricting unions taking strike action. However, the workers present seemed clear that they will need to learn how to organise members to take action up to and including strike action for when the war is over and the struggle to build a fair and just society, where workers are treated and paid well, will start all over.

At the start of the meeting a minute silence was observed for those who had been killed resisting the Russian invasion and the war that continues. The end of the war is what they all hope for but they, and other union reps we met, seemed clear that the war had to be won and that meant defeating Russians on the battlefields. For that they needed arms. This message was constant in almost all the meetings we had during the week.

There were a few occasions where Boris Johnson was praised for the support he had offered Ukraine in the early days of the invasion. This led to us explaining that Johnson was not a friend of trade unions or their members. This they accepted, "We know you cannot support Boris Johnson, we understand your position on him," the Kharkiv regional head of the Education Union had explained to us, "but the support that the UK has given us is very important."

We were honoured to be presented to the forum and to receive gifts. We thanked all those present and presented Yuri with a Scots quaich (3) as a token of our friendship and solidarity.

The journey home

We left Kyiv on the overnight train, after filming a last video with Ivanna. In it she thanked us for our visit and extended an invitation to Christina (McAnea, UNISON General Secretary) to visit them in future.

The train journey went smoothly but we learned, as we approached the Polish border that a train in the east of the country, where we had come from, had been hit in a missile attack with people killed and many injured. A final reminder of what the Ukrainian people, its workers, are experiencing every day.

The journey to Warsaw airport was uneventful, no wrong trains, and after a long wait for our flight we left on time. Arriving at the gate in Frankfurt we were advised that we were not checked in for the flight and that they had overbooked it. The thought of being stuck overnight in an airport was not a good one and Stephen was sent to search out Tracy and Carolyn, who had disappeared to find the smoking room. Fortunately, when the three of them returned, Willie had successfully negotiated to get all four of us onto the flight. He had obviously been paying attention to the lessons on social dialogue!

We finally arrived back in Glasgow just before 11pm on the Saturday night. Glad to be home but thrilled to have met our many new Ukrainian comrades and had the experience of taking solidarity from UNISON and Scotland to them.

Notes

- (1) The Solidarity Center is the largest US based international worker rights organisation, dedicated to helping workers secure safe and healthy workplaces, fair wages, dignity on the job, and respect in their communities. It has been active in Ukraine for over 20 years, working closely with the trade union movement.
- (2) The Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO) has started a comprehensive 3-year programme- Trade Unions Fighting Inequality and Reconstructing Peace and Democracy in Ukraine – aiming at building capacity of Ukrainian trade unions
- (3) Beketov University is named after Oleksiy Beketov, who lectured in architectural design and drawing in Kharkiv Practical Technological Institute.
- (4) A quaich is a two handled Scottish drinking cup that allows friends to sup from different sides of the cup, traditionally containing whisky. No alcohol was consumed during the SEUU meeting.

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The Ukraine Solidarity Campaign [Ukraine Solidarity Campaign \(Кампанія Солідарності з Україною\) – Supporting the Ukrainian Labour Movement through Solidarity and Information](#)

