Millions of Ukrainian migrant workers forced to search for employment in Europe under unsafe conditions

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11 June 2020

Millions of Ukrainian migrant workers who returned to their native country at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic are now searching for opportunities to return to Europe in search of much needed work as quarantine measures are relaxed both in Ukraine and across Europe.

Ukrainian migrants are a huge source of labor across Europe, making up the largest group of migrant workers on the continent.

According to estimates from the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine, "up to 9 million Ukrainians out of a total population of 42 million annually work abroad for some part of the year, and 3.2 million have regular full-time work outside the country." The working age population in Ukraine comprises 28.5 million people, out of which 12.5 million are officially employed. Thus, about a third of Ukrainian workers work abroad for at least part of the year.

The main reason for these staggering levels of labor migration is the devastating impact of capitalist restoration on Ukraine, which has been compounded by decades of austerity on behalf of the Ukrainian oligarchy and imperialism. Since the US- and EU-backed far-right coup in Kiev in February 2014, living conditions have deteriorated particularly sharply. Minimum wages in Ukraine are now below those of Thailand, Morocco or South Africa. Approximately 60 percent of the population lived beneath the subsistence level before the coronavirus crisis hit.

These conditions have forced a large portion of the working age population to seek employment abroad, where their desperate situation is brutally exploited by major European corporations. Ukraine's migrant workers, many of whom look for work through recruiting firms, are primarily working in low-wage manufacturing construction jobs and on farms picking fruit and produce.

Approximately 2 million Ukrainian migrant workers reside in nearby Poland where they account for 2.5 percent of the country's GDP. Large numbers also work in Italy, the Czech Republic, Finland and Germany.

In March, just prior to the beginning of the coronavirus crisis, Germany adopted the so-called Skilled Immigration Act that will significantly ease the way for Ukraine's migrant workers to find jobs in Germany. The act will place German companies in direct competition with Polish corporations for Ukraine's migrant workers. In 2019, polls of Ukrainian migrant workers found that Germany was their preferred final destination for work and they would leave their current work country for Germany if offered the opportunity.

The labor of Ukrainian migrant workers also serves as a large source of income for the Ukrainian government. In 2019, remittances from Ukrainian migrant workers were the highest in Europe: with $16 billion they accounted for 11 percent of the country's entire GDP.

As the coronavirus pandemic spread across Europe in March, the Ukrainian government urged its migrant workers to return home before borders were shut down for an indeterminable period of time. Approximately 2 million Ukrainian workers returned home rather than risk finding themselves stranded in a foreign country without a job and no social or legal protections.

However, as soon as they returned, these workers found themselves out of work within Ukraine, Europe's poorest country. On top of these millions of migrant workers, up to 2 million workers have already lost their jobs as a result of the coronavirus crisis and salaries average approximately $200 per month.

The government of President Volodymyr Zelensky, who made recruiting Ukrainian workers back to the country one of his main presidential goals when first elected in

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April 2019, is now struggling to keep workers within its borders. As contract migrant workers, they can earn approximately ten times more in Europe than in Ukraine.

Despite the huge amount of remittances Ukrainian workers send home, their absence has a created a shortage of labor within the country with small businesses often unable to find workers and rural areas depopulated of workers during harvest season. In 2018, the then foreign minister of Ukraine, Pavel Klimkin, admitted that approximately 100,000 people were leaving the country per month and that the situation was creating a massive demographic crisis for the country.

In December of last year Zelensky's government announced a program of a business-friendly incentives intended to attract young migrant workers back to Ukraine, such as low-interest loans for small and medium-sized businesses and funding for construction jobs.

These measures have done little to stem the exodus of workers and while the coronavirus pandemic has returned a sizable number of workers to the country, there is little evidence they will stay once quarantine measures are even further relaxed.

According to *Politico*, Ukraine's Gremi Personal, a recruitment agency which sends Ukrainians to work in Poland, found that 67 percent of Ukrainian migrant workers who returned to Ukraine as a result of the coronavirus already want to leave the country in search of work in Europe.

In April the Ukrainian government attempted to stop charter flights leaving for Finland and the United Kingdom. Due to widespread outcry over the lack of work within the country and the inability of workers to leave the country, the Zelensky government announced it would allow workers to leave only with a guaranteed three-month minimum contract, health insurance covering coronavirus, housing and transportation to their work country and back.

President Zelensky also commented that he would honor diplomatic requests for workers from Ukraine's backers in the EU, primarily Germany and Poland, stating, "When we get diplomatic requests, we let everyone out. When they show us a copy of the [labor] contract, according to which a person will be hired for at least three months—good luck! There is no slavery in Ukraine."

In a written statement to *Politico*, the deputy minister's Office for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration fraudulently attempted to pose as a protector of Ukrainian workers: "No one is prohibiting the departure of seasonal workers from Ukraine, but the government seeks to protect both workers themselves and citizens who will come in contact with them upon their return."

In reality, the Zelensky government is concerned about the ability of companies in Ukraine, both foreign and domestic, to exploit the working class. In recent months, it has introduced a range of labor reforms on behalf of major corporations that will limit Ukrainian workers' rights and their ability to receive benefits and unemployment insurance. During the coronavirus crisis medical workers were left without personal protective equipment and were infected themselves, with many engaging in walkouts.

The coronavirus crisis, which has been exploited by the Ukrainian oligarchy to implement further assaults on the Ukrainian working class, is aggravating the already severe demographic crisis in the country. Many of the workers who are now trying to leave will likely never return.

Meanwhile, in Europe, they will be faced with dangerous working and living conditions as the bourgeoisie across the continent has pushed for a premature reopening of the economy, under conditions where the virus is still spreading and workers are not offered adequate protection at their workplaces. Migrant workers from Ukraine and other countries, who often lack medical insurance and are forced to live under cramped and squalid conditions, will be among those hardest hit by the further spread of the virus.

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