

Ukrainian uranium mines shut down amidst protest wave, threatening radioactive contamination

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Three uranium mines have been shut down in the Kirovohrad region of central Ukraine over disputed payments between the state nuclear energy company Energoatom and the state-owned enterprise operating the mine, Eastern Mining and Processing.

As a result of the alleged nonpayment, approximately 5,000 miners have been placed on unpaid leave. They are still owed approximately \$5 million in months of back pay. The shuttering of the mines could also lead to an ecological catastrophe if the mines lose power and water pumps fail to operate, creating a toxic mixture of radioactive uranium-contaminated groundwater that could spread throughout the vast river systems of central Ukraine.

Eastern Mining and Processing maintains that the government nuclear energy monopoly still owes it approximately \$5 million to keep mining operations running and pay workers. Energoatom has, for its part, disputed the company's allegations, stating that it had already paid \$92.5 million to the company, according to the terms of an agreement signed last year.

As a state-owned monopoly, Energoatom is the country's only buyer of uranium. The uranium is converted into nuclear fuel in Russia and then sent back for use in Ukraine's nuclear power plants. Ukraine produced 801 tons of uranium last year, according to the World Nuclear Association.

Since the destruction of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukraine's mines, which during the Soviet Union employed hundreds of thousands and provided dependable jobs, have been left to deteriorate into extremely dangerous conditions. Agreed upon contracts are routinely violated by management, and workers in both the private and public sectors can go months

without pay. According to the Independent Miners Union of Ukraine, the situation has deteriorated to such a point that miners working at state-owned mines are now owed over \$60 million in unpaid wages.

There are currently 148 mines in Ukraine, 102 of which operate under some form of government management. Sixty-seven of the state-owned mines are located in the separatist-occupied Donetsk region. As a result of the NATO-backed six-year-long civil war that has split the country and decimated the lives of thousands, Kiev was forced to begin importing coal in 2014, even though Ukraine is one of the world's major coal producers.

While current President Volodymyr Zelensky came to power on promises of improving the country's impoverished wages and crumbling industrial infrastructure, he has, in fact, accelerated the selloff and closure of Ukraine's remaining state-owned mines.

According to plans discussed publicly by Ukraine's Ministry of Energy, all of the country's unprofitable mines are to be shut down or privatized by 2030. Of the 33 remaining operational coal mines in the country, just four are profitable, according to government statistics.

In October, Ukraine's parliament approved a major part of Zelensky's privatization push, which calls for the division of the country's mines by profit level and their integration into a state-owned enterprise Centrenergo for subsequent selloff at auction. In November, the representative of the Ministry of Energy, Maxim Nemchinov, publicly stated that "... 15 of the 33 coal mines in operation today will be closed. The problem is quite serious."

Zelensky's privatization push and failure to resolve the low or outright unpaid wages plaguing Ukraine's

mining industry have been met with increased resistance and sit-down strikes from miners throughout the country.

This week alone, the now unemployed Kirovohrad miners headed to Kiev to protest in front of Zelensky's presidential office, while miners participated in the occupation of mines over unpaid wages in both Eastern and Western Ukraine. In L'viv, a city in Western Ukraine, 75 miners at the Lisova coal mine have occupied the mine and are refusing to leave until they are paid over \$2 million in back wages.

In Volyn, also located in Western Ukraine, miners at the Buzhanska mines likewise occupied the mine and demanded their unpaid wages. Meanwhile, in Eastern Ukraine, not far from the border of the separatist-controlled areas of the Donetsk region, miners have also refused to work. They joined with the miners in Western Ukraine to announce their preparedness to block roads and shut down city centers if the Zelensky government continues to drag its feet on unpaid wages.

This week's growing strike actions were preceded by an underground strike carried out by miners in the city of Krivoy Rog in September. The miners stayed underground for 43 days to protest the low wages and unsafe working conditions.

Their actions were followed by a quick succession of strikes in mines and other workplaces across the country.

The Krivoy Rog Iron Ore Company, which is jointly owned by Ukraine's billionaire oligarchs Rinat Akhmetov and Igor Kolomoisky, eventually entered into an agreement with the miners, promising increased wages and better conditions.

Highlighting the huge wealth disparity of modern Ukraine, Akhmetov has a net worth of over \$6 billion, while workers at the Krivoy Rog October Mine reported making just \$330 a month to work 1,200 meters underground in extremely dangerous conditions.

Just a day after the end of the strike—news of which was virtually blacked out due to oligarchical ownership of the country's media—the company opened civil court proceedings against 417 of the striking miners for alleged “illegal actions.”

After Zelensky's own political party “Servant of the People” met with the striking workers and urged them to enter into negotiations with the company, they are now silent over the betrayal of the workers, and the

legal case against the workers is being prosecuted with the full weight of the local government legal system behind it.

One worker, Tatiana Garkusha, speaking with *OpenDemocracy*, stated that despite the betrayal, “This strike made me feel like a fighter—I didn't even know that I had it in me. After all, many of us are rooting for some kind of revolution. But it turned out that it was hard to get involved in the protest and start, but it was easier to fight. You find like-minded people who have the same language as you.”



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