

Kakhovka Dam explosion exacerbates social catastrophe facing the Ukrainian working class

Jason Melanovski
18 June 2023

While the Ukrainian government continues its vaunted NATO-backed counter-offensive against Russian-held territory in the east at a horrific human toll, the explosion of the Kakhovka Dam, which occurred in the first 48 hours of the counter-offensive, is set to inflict huge consequences on the already catastrophic economic and social situation facing the Ukrainian working class.

Already, the collapse of the Kakhovka dam has led to a major ecological and humanitarian crisis. Within less than two weeks following the dam's explosion at least 17 deaths have been reported, and thousands of local residents in both Ukrainian and Russian-held territory have been evacuated from their homes.

At least 35 people, including 7 children, are missing. Rescue efforts continue, but they have been complicated by the ongoing war.

In the Dnipropetrovsk region, 300,000 people are without clean drinking water and over a million could face water shortages according to the head of the regional council. The right-wing government of President Volodymyr Zelensky has allocated \$4 million to provide alternate sources of water, a paltry sum compared to the billions currently being spent on sending Ukrainian soldiers to their deaths in the counter-offensive.

Over 150 tons of machine oil were swept into the Black Sea, which was already Europe's most polluted sea. Large amounts of pesticides and fertilizers have been washed away and the risk of outbreaks of waterborne diseases such as cholera has greatly increased.

Anti-tank and amphibious mines were also washed away and will now pose a huge danger to civilians who encounter them even far away from the frontlines. Debris from the dam has been spotted as far away as in the city of Odessa on the Black Sea.

Aside from the immediate ecological and humanitarian

disaster, the dam collapse has immense economic consequences for an already devastated Ukrainian economy. The Kakhovka dam played a central role in providing irrigation for farmland and hydroelectric power to important factories in the region.

Completed in 1956 as part of the Soviet Union's development of hydroelectric power, it also created Ukraine's second-largest freshwater reservoir and provided four separate provinces with water through a system of canals.

The dam's primary role as an irrigation reservoir was essential to turning an area typically subject to regular droughts into Ukraine's most productive agricultural region.

Vadym Dudka, an agronomist and CEO of Agroanaliz Ltd, an international agro-consulting company, told the *Kyiv Independent* that prior to the dam breach, the region contained 330,000 hectares of irrigated land and provided 80 percent of all vegetables in Ukraine as well as a large percentage of fruits and grapes. According to Dudka, 85 to 90 percent of the region's fields were dedicated to corn and soybeans. Ukraine is one of the world's largest exporters of both.

Over the previous year and a half, the war had already caused global food prices to skyrocket and the dam's explosion will further accelerate global food inflation. In Ukraine itself, food prices rose 26 percent within the first year of the war and prices for basic items such as fruits and vegetables have continued to rise over 20 percent compared to the previous year. Prices for eggs have increased nearly 130 percent.

As UN aid chief Martin Griffiths told the BBC in a recent interview, "This is a breadbasket—that whole area going down towards the Black Sea and Crimea is a breadbasket not only for Ukraine but also for the world.

We're in difficulties already on food security but food prices, I'm sure, are bound to increase."

"It is almost inevitable that we are going to see huge, huge problems in harvesting and sowing for the next harvest. And so what we are going to see is a huge impact on global food security—that's what's going to happen," Griffiths predicted.

Within the first year of the war alone, Ukraine's agricultural sector already lost \$4.3 billion according to the Kyiv School of Economics.

While the extent of the damage on the Russian side of the flooding is unclear, Monika Tothova, economist at the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, told *Al Jazeera* that Ukraine's harvest this year will almost certainly be a disaster.

Based on the satellite images and modeling of the flooding, "it is very likely this year's harvest will be a complete loss, depending how long the water stays," Tothova said.

The dam collapse has also forced the closure of a number of factories in the region while national unemployment is already shockingly high at 26 percent. This number does not include the nearly 8.5 million Ukrainians who fled abroad as a result of the NATO-backed war, nor the hundreds of thousands who have been drafted—willingly or not—into the Armed Forces.

The region around the Kakhovka dam is still a major steel-producing region and the reservoir's water was used in manufacturing processes. Ukrainian steel companies Metinvest and ArcelorMittal had a number of factories in the region employing tens of thousands of workers. One day after the dam collapse, on June 7, ArcelorMittal, the world's largest steel producer, which owns Ukraine's largest steel factory, suspended crude and rolled steel production, while Metinvest was already operating at 35-45 percent capacity due to the war.

In addition to the consequences of the flooding, both companies have lost a number of factories to Russian forces, including the massive Azovstal factory in Mariupol. Metinvest alone employed 37,000 workers in now Russian-controlled territory, and the war has effectively split in half a major productive industry.

Prior to the war, Ukraine provided a tenth of Europe's steel imports, a fading remnant but still substantial sign of the industrial power that was concentrated in Ukraine during the Soviet Union. Overall Ukrainian steel production has fallen over 70 percent since the start of the war to 6.26 million tons.

Like the war as a whole, the collapse of such massive

productive industries, with huge job losses and lives ruined, is ultimately a consequence of the destruction of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism by the Stalinist bureaucracy in 1991.

Rather than immediately pause the war to address the ecological and humanitarian crisis caused by the war, the Ukrainian ruling class with the backing of Western imperialism is driving its forces on an ever larger scale and with ever greater speed into mass slaughter.

Moreover, the loss of jobs caused by the flood will undoubtedly drive large numbers of Ukrainian workers into unemployment, where they will be subject to conscription in the war. A recent report in the Ukrainian news outlet *Strana* indicated that a desperate Zelensky government is now requiring Ukrainian men to register with the military in order to obtain a job. Thus, many are now torn between being unemployed and the risk of being handed a military summons and sent to the front.

As the WWSWS has reported, despite the virtual ban on dissent and criticism of the war, widespread opposition exists among Ukrainian workers and youth who are bearing the brunt of the catastrophe unfolding around them.

Meanwhile, both Russia and Ukraine continue to accuse one another of intentionally destroying the Kakhovka dam. This week the Washington D.C.-based Institute for the Study of War reported that "flooding has deprived Russian forces of previously held positions in at least 12 settlements on the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River and has pushed Russian lines back as far as 10 kilometers in some areas." If true, the dam collapse which occurred just as Ukraine began its counter-offensive might well have been the result of an act of sabotage by the Zelensky government.

But regardless of who is to blame for the disaster, workers must understand the dam collapse is yet another demonstration of both the immense dangers posed by the NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and of the already catastrophic consequences the war is having for the working class in Ukraine and internationally.



To contact the WWSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact