Ukraine: From sporadic resistance to war to the first hotbeds of collective struggle

Ukrainian journalists
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Since the beginning of the summer, a wave of mass protests has been sweeping across the planet from the United States to South Asia. Ukraine is no exception. At the end of last year, we pointed out, *"Both Ukrainian and Russian public opinion is currently focused on the presidential elections in the United States, with many having the misguided hope that a Trump victory could provide the basis for a quick, peaceful settlement of the war. It seems that only the failure of these expectations can open the way for mass interest in a revolutionary alternative. We are at a turning point in history."* The beginning concentration of antiwar direct action around certain locations marks a new stage in this process.

This summer, the region of Volyn became one of the country's leaders in this regard. Then, on September 19, according to the regional TCR (territorial center for recruitment), its employees fought off a crowd of workers in the town of Kovel with tear gas. While the man's documents were being checked, he fled into the premises of a critical infrastructure facility. The enlistment group followed him but was surrounded by approximately 18 workers, "who began resisting, threatening, and attempting to cause bodily harm, harassing the military servicemen and damaging a service vehicle." The Odessa-based left-wing historian Vyacheslav Azarov wrote:

> In Kovel, this is likely the first recorded case of resistance to the TCR not by individual citizens, but by the labor collective of the Gas Distribution Networks enterprise. According to the military commissars, a draft dodger entered the enterprise's premises and a patrol followed him, while the workers refused to allow them into their facility. Given the numerous false stories the TCRs uses to explain its actions, the workers might not believe this version and suspect they are to be detained, despite the exemptions of critical infrastructure [from mobilization]. Only the full, unedited video from the military commissars' bodycameras will be able to clarify the situation. But the very fact of the collective's joint defense gives tentative hope that Ukrainians will finally remember the experience of worker solidarity, which was deliberately erased from our society under the pretext of decommunization, in order to throw us to the wolves of corrupt bureaucracy and aggressive capital.

Another example of workplace resistance occurred on October 4 in the Kievsky district of Odessa. While checking a citizen's documents, the police and the TCR discovered that he also was listed as a draft dodger. His attempt to escape was thwarted, but his girlfriend, a group of other civilians, and ambulance staff blocked the service vehicle. Due to a combination of threats and physical pressure, the abducted man managed to leave the enlistment car. This is not the first case of such resistance from Odessa medical personnel. On June 11 of last year, an ambulance driver came to the same district TCR to update his military registration data. When they refused to let him out, he complained of high blood pressure and called an ambulance. A team responded to the call, but they, too, were not allowed to leave the building. Then, other teams arrived to help their colleagues, engaging in a mass fight with the TCR employees and their civilian-clad voluntary assistants. Eventually, the TCR was forced to release the medics. A criminal case on aggravated hooliganism was opened on the fact of a mass clash.

In Vinnytsya, an unsuccessful attempt of an anti-mobilization uprising took place on the evening of August 1. A smaller confrontation happened three weeks later. Then, on September 27, a crowd of people again surrounded a police car in this city, demanding the release of the man sitting inside. Amid chants of "Shame!" by the crowd, the man eventually got out and was taken away by his relatives.

On September 22, 15-20 people gathered outside the TCR building in Kalush of the Ivano-Frankivsk region; it is the same district where two weeks earlier there was a road blockade against the mobilization of the village chairman. Four of them broke windows and doors, while the others watched. Three of the detainees managed to escape. The Security Service of Ukraine has opened a criminal case for obstruction of the lawful activities of the Armed Forces during an extraordinary period.

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In the same month, in the neighboring Lviv region, servicemen of the repair battalion of the 125th Mechanized Brigade announced their intention to leave the unit without permission due to the command's decision to send them to an assault unit. According to state TV, these are specialists from the former 219th Battalion, who were among the first to begin performing combat missions in 2022 and continue to do so. The combat order concerned 24 people out of about 70. Most of them are over 50 years old. On September 21, it became known that after the outcry, the order was canceled. Thus, the men will continue to serve in their previous place, so it was not desertion but a military strike.

Meanwhile, desperate acts of individual violent resistance against the forced mobilization also continue. On September 20, in a village near Novoukrainka in the Kirovograd region, an unknown man opened fire during an identity check with a revolver that had been converted to a combat grade. The chief of the patrol police response sector was wounded in the stomach and had to be hospitalized in serious condition; his colleague was wounded in the arm. The suspected shooter, a local resident born in 1979, was detained the same day. On October 2, a passerby in Krivoy Rog seriously injured with a knife two enlistment agents, aged 36 and 53, during a document check and then fled. Both were taken to the hospital, one in serious condition. The brave man has been identified, but it is not entirely clear whether he has been arrested.

Last month, two unusual court verdicts were issued. On September 1, a court in Chernihiv convicted a local resident who fought since 2022 and then went in unauthorized absence (SZCh) to avoid being assigned to a TRC security platoon. He pleaded not guilty: from his words, after returning from treatment, he stated that he wanted to continue his military service, in any other unit, but not in the enlistment office while another unit is difficult to find. The soldier received a 5-year prison sentence.

On the other hand, on September 12 in Chernomorsk of the Odessa region, an unemployed local resident received a surprisingly lenient sentence for pepper-spraying a TCR employee during a document check and smashing their service Renault Duster with a hammer from his bag. This happened on November 23 of last year. He got off with a fine of 850 hryvnia (about $20) and 1 year of probation under supervision for hooliganism.

And, of course, throughout the entire government-controlled territory of Ukraine, non-violent civil disobedience is spreading like an avalanche. Pro-presidential MP Mariana Bezuhla stated on October 11 that the number of personnel who fled the Ukrainian army equaled the total number of personnel that there was before the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022. A few days later, crime statistics emerged, showing that twice as many military servicemen had escaped this year than in the first two and a half years of the war. In total, nearly 290,000 criminal cases for SZCh and desertion were opened during the war. From January 2022 to September 2024, there were nearly 90,000 cases. This means that over the past year alone, an additional 200,000 were opened. It is important to underscore that we are not talking about the number of fugitive persons, but only about the number of registered criminal cases.

The permission to travel abroad for boys aged 18-22, largely as a result of them exercising their right to freedom of movement without authorization, also has some consequences. Sergei Lukashov, a company commander of the 46th Airmobile Brigade, who previously headed a district police department in the Dnepropetrovsk region, posted on his Facebook on September 13: *"I receive information from my former police colleagues that young law enforcement personnel under the age of 23 are resigning from the National Police of Ukraine in dozens and going abroad."* Denis Shvydkyi, head of the 28th Mechanized Brigade's recruiting section, said on TV on September 29 that after this permission, despite the plans of some who had left to return to the country, the number of youth requests to recruitment centers to voluntarily join the army dropped by approximately 30 percent.

Let's return again to the publications from a year ago, namely to the analysis about the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees: *"Objective social conditions, as well as the massive political and social crisis gripping the US and the world, are driving the working class into social struggle."* As we see, the disillusionment of the Ukrainian working people with the promises of the fascist Trump administration to bring peace is intensifying the social struggle unfolding before our eyes. This does not mean that this will be an automatic and uninterrupted process. Any public activity moves in fits and starts, and surges are often followed by periods of apathy. What is most important is the very fact that workers are now emerging as a new social force against the war that is being waged by the political followers of World War II-era Ukrainian fascist Stepan Bandera and the Nazi collaborator General Vlasov. How far this process goes depends less on progress in American-Russian peace talks and more on the development of social struggles in Western countries.

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