

Hunger strike against inhumane conditions, forced labor and torture in Ukrainian prisons

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On August 5, 162 Ukrainian prisoners, among them 92 political prisoners, engaged in a one-day hunger strike to protest inhumane conditions, torture and killings within the Ukrainian prison system. According to the website anti-imperialism.by, over 200 people from 15 other countries, including Russia, Turkey, Great Britain, Germany and Greece, joined the hunger strike. Some 50 left-wing activists and anti-fascists, as well as 20 relatives of political prisoners in Ukraine also joined the protest action.

The *World Socialist Web Site* expresses its full support for the political prisoners and demands their immediate release and an end to the inhumane conditions in which prisoners are held!

In Ukraine, prisoners from six prisons and pre-trial detention centers participated in the hunger strike, including in Kiev, Lvov (Lviv), Vinnitsiya and the Dniepropetrovsk oblast in East Ukraine. In the Nikolaev pre-trial detention center in southern Ukraine, nine prisoners went on a hunger strike. This is the pre-trial detention center where the Ukrainian Trotskyist and war opponent Bogdan Syrotiuk is held, whom a Ukrainian fascistic court just sentenced to 15 years in prison for “high treason,” despite the complete lack of any evidence. One political prisoner at the Nikolaev pre-trial detention center, Igor Savitskiy, was reportedly punished with transfer to solitary confinement for his participation in the hunger strike. This cruel punishment was protested immediately by dozens of left-wing activists.

Participants of the strike also include the brothers Mikhail and Alexander Kononovich, two leaders of the Ukrainian Communist Youth League (Komsomol), who were disappeared at the beginning of the war and tortured by the Ukrainian Secret Service (SBU), which is well-known for being completely infested with neo-Nazi forces. The Kononovich brothers are now under house arrest.

The hunger strike was co-organized by the Association for the Rights of Political Prisoners and Human Rights—co-founded by the Kononovich brothers, and the Platform for International Solidarity with Political Prisoners.

While met with deafening silence by the pro-NATO media, the hunger strike sheds light on the horrific conditions within the Ukrainian prison system. It confirms that, as the *World Socialist Web Site* warned, the vindictive 15-year prison sentence for Bogdan Syrotiuk, who has fought to unite the Russian and Ukrainian working class against the war, amounts to a death sentence.

The hunger strike was directed, specifically, against inhumane conditions and cases of torture in the Vinnitsiya Penal Colony No. 86. One letter by a prisoner, quoted in a report by Ukraina.Ru, described conditions there as follows:

The ceilings are collapsing and have to be propped up with wooden posts. The kitchen hasn't been renovated since the Soviet era—back when the penal colony was first built in the 1940s. Rats

and cockroaches scurry through the barracks. The floors are made of rotting, painted planks. The walls are practically crumbling apart. The food served in the canteen is worse than slop for pigs—wheat porridge mixed with fat and worms that makes you retch instantly. The bread baked here contains debris, moths, and worms; the flour isn't even sifted. Regulations stipulate a daily meat allowance of 100 grams per inmate, yet the actual serving doesn't even amount to 25 grams. And you can hardly call it meat; it's waste product—uncleaned and unsorted—simply boiled and served to the prisoners. When inmates complain about this, the guards scream: “You scum, shut your mouth—you'll get your full rations at home!”

Packages aren't handed out on time; they are delayed by five days or more. Inmates aren't taken to use the phones for stretches of 10 to 12 days, even though the law and internal regulations require daily access once a request has been submitted.

Disciplinary reports and reprimands are issued for whatever reason they choose, and inmates are thrown into the “pit”—a solitary confinement cell—for 14 days simply for refusing to perform “two-hour tasks” such as scavenging for scrap metal in a burnt-out workshop—work not even provided for in the colony's charter....

The medical unit is appalling. The chief physician is so indifferent to the prisoners that you can't even get medication out of him. There was an incident where a 75-year-old man collapsed onto the concrete in the street after suffering a stroke. The chief physician just laughed and claimed the man was faking it.

Prison staff abuse, humiliate, and beat the inmates. They take them into the headquarters—specifically the operational unit—where ten men surround them, kick them repeatedly, slam them against the floor, break their ribs, and strike them on the head. They stretch the inmates out by their arms and legs and beat them on the ribs and body with glass bottles to avoid leaving bruises. They threaten to strap them down and beat them like a dog for two hours. Unit officers Tsip and Vygorsky take prisoners to the headquarters and beat them alongside the operational staff. On July 5, the head of the quarantine unit, Vitaly Vladimirovich, was drunk at work and struck Georgy Mikityuk—a disabled man who has a metal plate in his skull. He punched him right where the plate is located and said, “I'll drive that plate right into your head, you f****ing scum.”

One of the prisoners who participated in the hunger strike, Alexandr Melnyk, has gone through a years-long ordeal in the Ukrainian prison system. He was sentenced to seven years in prison for “collaboration” with Russia. He insists that he is innocent and was only arrested because he distributed human aid from the Red Cross instead of fleeing Russian

forces when they occupied parts of the Kiev region. In a letter, published in September 2024 by Ukraina.Ru, he described the systematic violation of his rights to a fair trial in the first phase of his torturous experience with the Ukrainian prison system. After the court's first ruling, despite an ongoing appeal, he was illegally transferred from a pre-trial detention center to Penal Colony No. 101. This Penal Colony, he wrote,

...used to be a standard maximum-security prison for those convicted of serious crimes. It had been closed as the frontline approached, and the inmates were dispersed to other prisons across Ukraine. However, as the SBU stepped up its efforts to identify "internal enemies"—and the number of convictions consequently rose—a need arose for a specialized camp.

The transfer from the Lukyanivka pre-trial detention center to the Kamianne colony [Penal Colony No. 1] was an "experience" in its own right. It involved a month spent in detention centers in Dnepropetrovsk and Zaporizhzhia, characterized by appalling cell conditions and constant beatings by the guards. During that brief period, I was subjected to twenty-one humiliating searches, where my belongings—a prisoner's meager worldly possessions—were turned inside out and scattered across the floor.

After enduring what felt like a nightmare, I looked forward to arriving at the colony as a form of deliverance. After all, Ukrainian television had aired several segments about this "paradise for political prisoners"—describing how inmates were respectfully given lectures on Ukrainian history and highlighting the calm atmosphere and decent living conditions. They claimed the colony had been repurposed specifically to protect "collaborators" from potential violence at the hands of the criminal—yet patriotically inclined—inmate population. But, as it turned out, not from the guards themselves.

Upon our arrival, we were met by the penal colony's warden, Alexander Solovyov. He set the tone immediately: shouting and swearing in nearly every breath, he made it clear that we were nobodies—or rather, *nothing*—and that we had no standing whatsoever. And that was the reality. Constant shouting filled the colony from 6:00 AM to 10:00 PM. No one actually spoke to you; they screamed, swore, and hurled insults. From 6 AM to 10 PM, a prisoner wasn't even allowed to sit on his bunk....Guards would frequently kick inmates in the back—not for lagging behind, but just to "keep them on their toes." Consequently, almost everyone there bore bruises. Yet, that was just the beginning.

To enter the main compound, one first had to go through quarantine. Officially, this was a time and place for hygiene and disinfection. In reality, however, it was the first and most critical stage of breaking a person's spirit. Everyone there was forced to perform the filthiest, most degrading tasks: emptying trash bins and scrubbing toilets. To put this in perspective: the colony employed a dedicated staff paid to do this work. But it was more advantageous for the administration to use new arrivals for these chores, thereby vividly demonstrating the truth of the warden's opening speech: either you swallow every humiliation and submit, or your life will be made impossible—both literally and figuratively.

I refused to submit.

I was beaten every other day. It began the morning after my first refusal to carry out a humiliating—and, crucially, illegal—order. Immediately after the report of my insubordination was filed with the leadership, the "physical procedure" would follow. The beatings weren't administered by ordinary staff members, but rather by—as I called them—the "broilers," beefed-up musclemen

whose T-shirt sleeves looked ready to burst at the biceps. It was as if these guys had bulked up specifically for this job—and clearly took pleasure in it. It brings to mind the line from [a song by Vladimir] Vysotsky: "And as he crushed my ribs, he thought: 'Life is good, and living is sweet!'" It was the same here: punches, elbows, kicks... At a certain point, you stop reacting rationally and just start laughing right in the middle of the beating.

Occasionally, they amused themselves by forcing prisoners into the "spread-eagle" position—placing your hands against the wall, spreading your legs wide, and standing like that for hours. The third or fourth time they hauled me in for this "procedure," they filed the standard report and ordered me to take the position. I said, "Just beat me already—what's with this circus?" They fell silent, looking at each other in bewilderment.

"What are you staring at?" I asked. "Do you really think that if you beat me a time or two more, I'll forget my human dignity? You might as well just kill me."

But they don't kill people at Penal Colony 101. After all, dead men don't work. And work is required.

Under Ukrainian law, prison labor isn't mandatory, but Colony 101 had its own addendum to the rules: sure, you *could* refuse to work, but then the "broilers" would go to work *on you*. Most of the two hundred inmates (as of now) at Colony 101 spent their time weaving barbed wire. Who were these people? During my two years in the Lukyanivka pre-trial detention center, I saw plenty of the "collaborators" and "traitors" the SBU used to fill the cells. In reality, only about one in ten had actually collaborated with the Russian Armed Forces or engaged in "subversive activities." The rest were mostly just people who had found themselves in territories occupied by Russian forces.

The Penal Colony 101 has now been shut down and many prisoners, including Melnyk, were transferred to the Penal Colony 86 in Vinnitsiya, which is now considered the worst in the country. Here, they have also been forced to engage in what amounts to slave labor. Melnyk recently told Ukraina.Ru,

We clear the area, hauling scrap metal, bricks—whatever. Last month, we earned between 190 and 550 hryvnias —basically nothing [between \$4.24 and \$12.27]. The workday runs from 7:30 AM to 4:00 PM, plus an hour for lunch. They treat us like cattle, like in a Nazi concentration camp. The food in the prison canteen is so bad—my parents back in the village probably fed their pigs better. The bread looks like a mix of shit. The potato soup is just murky water with a couple of potatoes in it. No sautéed base, no oil. For the main course, they ladle out two small, stinking pieces of meat—sometimes with the innards still attached. On the wire-twisting line—where you have to stand for eight hours winding barbed wire—guys take home 2,000 to 3,000 hryvnias [between \$44.63 and \$67]. Officially, it's around 4,000 [hryvnias or \$89], but they deduct about half for utilities. In short, it's pure penal servitude. On top of that, there's the abuse: for every refusal to work, they file a disciplinary report and throw you in the isolation cell—and they might even tack more time onto your sentence. They threaten you with the "pit"—the punishment cell—or extra time. First comes the pit no matter what; then, after a stint in the strict-regime unit, they add time to your sentence once you've been thrown in the pit three times.

These conditions, indeed, resemble nothing so much as those of fascist concentration camps. They violate a whole series of human rights, enshrined in the European Convention of Human Rights. Article 3 of the Convention explicitly prohibits torture—whether mental or physical—as well as inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Article 4 prohibits forced labor and slave labor which, based on these letters, likewise occurs in Ukraine’s prison system. This is not to speak of the basic rights to liberty, freedom of expression and a fair trial, the violation of which has formed the basis for the arrest and detention of tens of thousands of workers and youth.

The United Nations Human Rights Office estimates that criminal charges against 20,000 workers and youth have been opened for “high treason” or “collaboration with Russia.” Figures from 2024 put the number of those held in prison under such charges much higher, at 55,000.

The conditions prevailing in Ukraine’s prisons are a sharp exposure of the true character of the NATO war against Russia. It is not a war for “democracy” or “freedom” but for the violent subjugation and exploitation of the entire former Soviet Union by the imperialist powers and sections of the oligarchy. Its principal political and social basis are fascist forces who call the shots within the army and state apparatus. It is a war not only for resources but against the working class and its social and democratic rights, in Ukraine, Russia and throughout the world.

This state of affairs underscores the urgency of the fight for the freedom of Bogdan Syrotiuk, and all other political prisoners. This fight must be connected to a struggle against imperialist war, based on the mobilization and unification of the international working class. We call on all readers and supporters of democratic rights to get involved. Make a donation! Sign the petition to free Bogdan! Submit a statement to the WSWS! Fill out the form below to actively support the campaign!



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