

Ukraine: Workers protest utility price hikes demanded by U.S., IMF

written by Greg Butterfield
February 3, 2021



Vysoky protesters block Kharkov-Simferopol highway, Jan. 10.

On New Year's Day, the price of electricity, gas and oil for heating, and other utilities doubled for most households in Ukraine. The surprise price-hike was

announced by President Vladimir Zelensky's government under orders of the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The IMF, dominated by U.S. and Western banks, demanded these harsh measures in exchange for loans to bail out the government.

Throughout January, thousands of people took to the streets in protest across this country of 44 million people in Eastern Europe, in large cities, small towns and rural areas. They blocked highways, occupied government buildings and took other actions to demand immediate relief from the unbearable price hikes.

For many, it was the last straw after seven years of austerity, war, fascist violence and sped-up privatization of the country's industry and natural resources.

Since Ukraine's democratically elected government was overthrown with U.S. support in early 2014, the price of utilities has risen by approximately 900%. Pensioners and many workers now receive bills for these basic necessities equal to or greater than their monthly income. Their only choice has been to go into debt until they are dragged into court, or sit home in the cold and dark.

Except now, people have decided they have another choice: to resist.

"The 'tariff gift' for the holidays was a real shock to the people," [says Andriy Manchuk](#), editor of Liva.com.ua. "This inhuman policy is a direct result of pressure from Western creditors."

He explained: "The Ukrainian authorities signed a memorandum with the IMF, pledging to raise tariffs, force accumulated utility debts from non-payers, and end controls on pricing in the gas market so that residents in Europe's poorest country buy gas at the price paid by consumers in the European Union — even if this gas is produced on Ukrainian territory."

On Jan. 28, protesters in Kiev, the capital city, [marched on the U.S. and EU embassies](#) to demand a repeal of the utility prices, aid for small businesses struggling during the pandemic, and against restrictive language laws.

Why did they go there?

Activist and journalist [Dmitri Kovalevich writes](#): “They used to [protest] in front of Ukraine’s parliament and presidential office with no result. Then they realized who the real masters of Ukraine are and who is responsible for everything in our country.”

The group [Chevroni \(Red\)](#), which participated in the Kiev march, reported: “The demands of the protesters already go much further than just demands for lower gas prices. ... Protesters noted that the Ukrainian government is a servant of the oligarchs and the IMF. And it was at the request of the IMF, contrary to the Constitution, that the sale of land, medical, educational, labor and pension reforms were introduced in Ukraine.”



Protest against utility price hikes in Mirgorod.

Mass action, real dangers

In 2014, Democrats and Republicans in the U.S. and the NATO military alliance shared a goal with neo-Nazis in Ukraine: to establish a military beachhead to threaten the neighboring Russian Federation.

After the coup installed a new government under Washington's thumb, the fascist gangs took over the streets as its enforcers. They attacked communists and socialists, immigrants and national minorities, union activists and Jewish people,

feminists and LGBTQ2S people, and anyone else perceived as a threat to the new regime.

The ultra-right groups were recruited into the ranks of the police and military. They also formed their own military battalions to wage war against the Donbass region of eastern Ukraine, where there was mass opposition to the coup. Military attacks on residents of Donetsk and Lugansk began in April 2014, and a month later people in those areas voted overwhelmingly for independence.

Most progressive political expression in Ukraine has been suppressed since 2014. At least 48 people were massacred by the neo-Nazis on May 2, 2014, in the city of Odessa. Thousands of leftists were forced into exile under threat of death or imprisonment, and thousands more were jailed.

Today, fascist groups scour the internet and social media looking for individuals to target with threats and violence. Those singled out can also count on being “investigated” by the government security services. Recent victims include [a young woman](#) from Kiev who posted on TikTok that she would like to visit Russia as a tourist, and a visiting [African medical student](#) in Zaporizhzhya who objected to the government’s suppression of Russian and other languages.

This Jan. 1, as they do every year, far-right groups held their [annual torchlight parade](#) in Kiev commemorating their hero, Ukrainian Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera.

So it was no small thing for working people and pensioners to take action publicly against the utility hikes. Both the government and the fascist movement denounce the protesters as “unpatriotic,” “pro-Russia,” and “communists.” In Ukraine, any one of those charges can mean being fired, beaten, jailed — or worse.



Zhytomyr residents occupy regional council building, Jan. 15.

‘No tariff genocide’

On Jan. 10, 100 residents of Nikolaev [blocked the Ingul Bridge](#), while in the village of Vysoky, 50 people blocked the Kharkov-Simferopol highway. Holding posters reading “No tariff genocide” and “People are not cattle,” they allowed emergency vehicles to pass and let traffic through every 15 minutes.

These tactics inspired others. On Jan. 12, a coordinated action by protesters in five regional cities blocked three major highways connecting the eastern and western parts of Ukraine.

Then, on Jan. 15, [300 protesters in Zhytomyr](#) stormed the regional council building (similar to a state capitol), demanding to meet with local officials to discuss ways to roll back the price of utilities.

In many cities, the protesters have been supported by local officials.

On Jan. 16-17, [a new left-wing group, Livytsya](#), joined protests in Dnipropetrovsk: “Dnipro doesn’t give up! Despite the raging frosts, the left came out to protest against tariff genocide.”

On Jan. 19, young people affiliated with the Party of Shariya, a political party founded by an opposition blogger, held actions in six cities, [wearing only T-shirts](#) in the frigid cold to draw attention to the plight of pensioners suffering without heat.

“While the authorities are basking in warm offices or relaxing in the Maldives, Ukrainians are forced to turn off the heat in order to pay the bills,” the group said.

This is just a small sample of the creative, courageous protests people are undertaking in Ukraine.



Jan. 28 rally in Dnipropetrovsk. Photo: Livytsya

End U.S. intervention!

What about the new U.S. administration? Where does it stand?

Joe Biden, in his previous position as vice president, served as the Obama administration's point person on Ukraine after the 2014 coup. Biden's job was to keep the new government in line, to make sure that austerity was being imposed on the people and privatization was being carried out to please Wall Street, while keeping up military pressure on the independent republics of Donbass and Russia. This was carried out under the signpost of "fighting corruption."

Now President Biden and his new Secretary of State Anthony Blinken signalled that they would [continue this "anti-corruption" focus](https://www.struggle-la-lucha.org/2021/02/03/ukraine-workers-protest-utility-price-hikes-demanded-by-u-s-imf/) at the expense of Ukraine's workers

and poor.

“Demanding the results of the fight against corruption from Ukraine’s anti-corruption agencies, created with the help of the United States, is like demanding results from the treatment of a disease by an agent who simply pretends to be a doctor,” Dmitri Kovalevich wrote in his [January update](#) for the website New Cold War.

“Ukraine’s corrupt officials are held accountable only if they dare to deviate from the pro-American course. Evidence is collected by the anti-corruption agencies, but nothing is investigated while they are loyal to the U.S. and they are allowed to continue stealing,” Kovalevich said.

In 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. warned, “The bombs in Vietnam also explode at home; they destroy the hopes and possibilities for a decent America.” Working people in the U.S. saw how Washington’s support for fascist movements abroad boomeranged with the white-supremacist attack on the Capitol on Jan. 6.

When our class sisters and brothers in Ukraine are defying danger unleashed upon them by the U.S. government, we have a responsibility to support them and demand: Stop the IMF’s killer austerity measures! End U.S. intervention in Ukraine!

