

interview

Union:
Trade Union of Metalworkers and Miners of Ukraine (PMGU)
Country:
Ukraine
Text:
Alexander Ivanou



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NATALIA MARYNYUK

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Protecting our members is our goal.

Natalia Marynyuk started her career in 1996 as an economist at the blast furnace shop No. 1 of the state-owned Kryvorizhstal Steel Works. The plant is named after the city where it is located, Kryvyi Rih, one of the ten biggest industrial cities in Ukraine.

 www.pmginfo.dp.ua

- 1 Natalia Marynyuk. *IndustriALL*
- 2 Natalia Marynyuk. *PMGU*

Tell us how you rose through the union ranks at a male-dominated workplace

“When I started working, I joined the Trade Union of Metalworkers and Miners of Ukraine (PMGU), affiliated to IndustriALL Global Union. In August 2017, more than 20 years after I first started, I was elected leader of the trade union committee. I became the first, and so far, the only woman elected chair of the local union in its 85-year existence.

“Even though female workers represent slightly less than 30 per cent of the company workforce, women are far more active in the union than their male colleagues. Out of 114 PMGU activists at ArcelorMittal, almost 60 per cent are women.”

Kryvyi Rih was a large iron-ore mining and metallurgy centre during the Soviet Union and Kryvorizhstal Steel Works exported products to over 30 countries around the world.

Producing along the full metallurgical cycle, including mining of ore, production of concentrate, agglomerate, coke, cast iron, steel and rolled products, and with around 57,000 workers, the steel works was an attractive proposition to buyers when it was privatized in 2004.

In 2005, the company was sold to Mittal Steel for US\$4.81 billion, far exceeding the US\$3 billion predicted by analysts. When Mittal Steel took over Arcelor in 2006, it became ArcelorMittal Kryvyi Rih.

What did privatization mean for you and your colleagues?

“When the process of privatization was announced in 2003, workers and trade unions expressed concerns about the future of their jobs. There was a series of protests demanding what we called a social package to be adopted by the government. It was to protect workers and to be respected by a new owner after privatization.

“As a consequence, Kryvorizhstal Steel Works was privatized with a compulsory social package, containing 19 conditions to be observed by the new owner. This was a first in Ukraine. However, due attention was not paid to all the 19 points, and the union responded by organizing protest actions and meetings to make the employer deliver on the commitments, including promises of wage increases.

“Between 2005 and 2018, ArcelorMittal effectively more than halved the workforce, from some 57,000 workers to less than 21,000. The cuts were mainly done through voluntary retirement, although that did not make it easier for those who remained on the job. Despite a drastic reduction in the workforce, the company’s production of cast iron, steel and rolled products has remained more or less the same, even slightly increasing.

“Add to the increasing workload a lack of investment, leading to deteriorating buildings and equipment, and you can see a clear decline in workers’ conditions.”

How did your union handle union-busting from the company management?

“Conditions for the workers in the plant started to seriously deteriorate when a new human resource director was employed in 2017. There was clear hostility towards unions from the start; the terms of the collective agreement were not respected and union proposals were ignored.

“The situation deteriorated, there were fake union flyers, as well as social media posts and articles in local media slandering the union. The HR director even developed a special union-busting programme for 2018 called ‘Action plan aimed at reducing unions’ influence’.

“Appeals from the union were ignored by the management. When we called workers for an assembly, the HR director promoted false information about the



venue and agenda in an attempt to stop workers from expressing their collective demands. But the union and the workers managed to hold the rally. They also sent an appeal to the CEO of ArcelorMittal Kryvyi Rih, signed by 12,000 people, demanding higher wages, better safety and improved social dialogue. After getting no answer, the union voted to begin a collective dispute in April 2018.

“The following month, through mediation during a marathon 26-hour mediation meeting, an agreement was reached between management and the unions. The CEO increased the wage fund to UAH1.1 billion (US\$40 million), and also dismissed the questionable HR director who had failed to establish a social dialogue in good faith with the workforce.

“There are still problems, but at least today we have social dialogue with the company.

“Since June 2017, there has been an agreement on visa-free entry with the European Union, making it easier for Ukrainian citizens to travel to Europe. As a result, many people have left Ukraine looking for better working conditions and, consequently, for the first time this year, the company has had problems finding enough skilled drivers.

“After a roof collapsed in March last year, killing a worker, assessment of the buildings and reparation works have started.

“So, the issue of better wages and conditions remains a crucial question for the company.”

How important is international solidarity for your union?

“Recognition of our dispute and international solidarity to support it were important in finding a solution. Already in 2015, with the support of IndustriALL, trade unions at ArcelorMittal in Kazakhstan and Ukraine sent a request to the company CEO, asking to let their representatives become part of ArcelorMittal European Works Council.

“At a meeting in Luxembourg in July 2018, unions at ArcelorMittal formed a global network and committed to pursue global social dialogue with the world’s largest steel company. And the Ukrainian unions were part of it.

“This platform has allowed the union to raise its concerns on social dialogue with the top global leadership at ArcelorMittal. I am currently part of the ArcelorMittal Joint Global Health and Safety Council, which has also helped improve local social dialogue.”

PMGU

PMGU is currently the largest union at ArcelorMittal Kryvyi Rih, representing over 70 per cent of the workers. Around 10 per cent of the workforce is not organized, and the remaining 20 per cent are represented by 10 other unions including IndustriALL affiliate, the Independent Trade Union of Miners of Ukraine.