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Free automotive unions, industrial work and precariousness in provincial Russia

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ABSTRACT
This article draws on ethnographic work carried out since 2009 on workers and automotive unions in Kaluga, Russia. The contrast between secure and temporary contract workers in foreign-owned car plants is a focus of activism among emerging alternative trade unions in Kaluga. Workers in both the ‘new’ production-scape of high-tech foreign-owned automotive assembly, and the ‘old’ low-tech Soviet production contexts articulate similar interpretive understandings of what constitutes ‘precarious’ work: lack of autonomy and the lack of a ‘social wage’ generally in labour. We interrogate this through in-depth interviews with unionised and non-unionised workers in the auto sector and other industries locally. A divide emerges between workers who go to work for the car plants, and those who remain in Soviet-types firms and who reject the labour relations model that it offers and which they understand to contrast with a traditional ‘paternalistic’ Russian model.

1. TNCs, labour and precariousness in Russia

As transnational corporations (TNCs) like AstraZeneca, Toyota, Lotte, Samsung, Nestle, Volkswagen, Volvo, Continental, Peugeot and many others have appeared in the Kaluga region bordering Moscow, a new union movement has developed in the automotive industry, and in associated suppliers. Activists and workers have mobilised their labour power to negotiate collective bargaining agreements with management, despite the existence of unfavourable labour legislation. Firms’ inexperience of industrial relations in Russia as well as the ongoing need for cheap labour often works to the advantage of younger workers who seek higher wages and job security in these globally-connected firms. New plants are often ripe for negotiation of power relations with management, unfettered by established ‘Soviet-style’ trade union cultures and practices. For the alternative trade unions this allows for mostly uncontested entry to plants. This is because, while superficially prominent nationally in the nominally corporatist structure of the economy, the real role of traditional unions is ‘largely decorative and shallow’ (Gimpelson & Kapeliushnikov, 2011, p. 17). In the car plant in which we carried out our research – owned by Volkswagen – the alternative trade union,
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the Interregional Trade Union of Auto Workers (MPRA), organised workers and became dominant in the plant and led negotiations with the management. Partial successes were achieved in collective bargaining and other areas. Nonetheless, it has proven difficult for new unions to consolidate in the context of workers employed in secure labour on the one hand, and in insecure, flexible jobs such as agency work, on the other hand. It has also proven difficult to meet different social and economic expectations within the workplace.

Tactical victories won by labour in the Kaluga-based plant must be examined in the context of a persistent legacy of post-socialist labour relations and worker expectations that we describe as a ‘dual’ reality of blue-collar workplaces. This reality includes: (1) low-tech post-Soviet enterprises characterised by low pay, less managerialist production regimes, and either traditional unions or no unions at all; and (2) modernised Western enterprises with relatively high wages, relatively high demands imposed on workers and active, younger, alternative unions. The intersection of these legacies with the incorporation of the post-socialist working classes into the global economy as low-wage TNCs arbitrage sites, must be considered in any analysis of new trade union activities.

The traditional and emerging alternative unions also differ in their understanding of industrial relations. While the institutionally-incorporated unions focus on ‘social partnership’ with management and the state, as well as on administering social benefits (ranging from material aid to organising summer camps for workers’ children), the competing unions, especially present in international firms, are oriented towards the mobilisation of members to articulate ‘typical’ worker demands in a context of collective bargaining, frequently punctuated by militant action.

While traditional unions are in long-term decline (Olimpieva, 2012), younger unions have achieved some success in collective bargaining through extensive mobilisation and purposeful negotiations with management. Our fieldwork reveals the ambivalence of workers and unionists alike in terms of their expectations at the workplace. These relate to the desire for formal and secure employment, as well as good pay, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the underlying urge to escape the strict modes of just-in-time production in favour of more autonomy at the workplace and greater ‘down time’, often at the expense of lower levels of pay. Alternative unions have struggled to address the desires of workers and their understanding of labour and the life beyond the shop floor, and also to make these compatible with working at an international firm. These conflicting worker priorities underline the multifaceted meaning of precariousness for blue-collar workers in Russia.

This article is structured as follows. In Section 2 we discuss the concept of ‘precarious work’, or precarity, as it is used in mainly Western European contexts. This contrasts with the following sections where we argue that definitions of precariousness must be seen in the context of post-socialism. At best, amendments to the widely accepted definitions of precariousness and its criteria must be made to take into account the rapid transition away from relatively comprehensive social welfare-based employment. In Section 3 we discuss the ethnographic methods used to collect data for this article. We also sketch out the main characteristics of the dual manufacturing economy of Kaluga: low-tech traditional industries based on extraction, and new, high-tech assembly – represented by car plants. In Section 4 we link union activism aimed at reducing agency work in the new car plant to the broader issue of labour turnover. Section 5 comprises an extended ethnographic portrait of the objective and subjective interpretation of precaritisation of workers at the plant. The conclusions highlight the need to understand high turnover more generally as a symptom of
labour dissatisfaction. This stems from the loss of social guarantees associated with Soviet-era work, alongside labour intensification in the present, as contributing to objective and subjective understandings by workers of precaritisation.

2. Embedding ‘precarious work’ in actually-lived experience

The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines precarious labour in a very broad sense as labour in the formal, as well as in the informal economy, characterised by variable degrees of objective and subjective insecurity and uncertainty, as market risks are shifted from employers to workers using temporary contracts, agency work, etc. (ILO, 2012, p. 27). This emphasises the heterogeneity of the concept of precarity (Rodgers, 1989, p. 3) with both objective but also subjective aspects (ILO, 2012, p. 5).

On a subjective level, employment is precarious if it is connected to loss of meaning, lack of recognition and planning reliability to an extent that societal standards are considerably undermined to the disadvantage of workers (Brinkmann, Dörre, Röbenack, Kraemer, & Speidel, 2006, p. 17; Mayer-Ahuja, 2003, p. 15). Both structural and subjectively perceived insecurities are also often linked to increasingly invasive or intensive disciplinary and monitoring actions of those persons securely and formally employed. This makes precarity a relational category that fundamentally depends upon the definition of societal standards of normality (Castel & Dörre, 2009, p. 17). In most global north contexts, precarious work is viewed as an erosion of the Fordist standard employment relationship (Brinkmann et al., 2006, p. 17; Rodgers, 1989). Flexible workers find themselves increasingly in a ‘generation précaire’ in the European context (Dörre, 2010), which prompted Castel (2011) to declare that precarisation is a cypher of the ‘return of social insecurity.’ Most of all, financial capitalism is identified as the driving force for a constantly growing precariat (Dörre, 2009). Guy Standing’s work, while often interpreted in class terms (in contrast to the ILO framing), sees precarisation as a process. He argues that

the way in which people are ‘precariatised’ […] is analogous to ‘proletarianised,’ describing the forces leading to proletarianisation of workers in the nineteenth century. To be precarised is to be subject to pressures and experiences that lead to a precariat existence, of living in the present, without a secure identity or sense of development achieved through work and lifestyle (Standing, 2011, p. 16).

In this light, the meaning of precarity in the post-socialist economies requires further engagement. What are the particular ‘pressures and experiences’ that lead to the experience of precarisation among post-socialist workers? How do they reflect on their structured positioning and articulate self-understanding or dissent?

In Russia for many industrial workers the socialist period was generally characterised by secure, formalised jobs, and an extensive system of social benefits for workers and their families. These benefits implicitly provided compensation for poor working conditions and no political representation (Cook, 1993). In the post-Soviet period, ongoing market deregulation has resulted in the erosion of standard employment practices, concomitant with growing underemployment, sporadic wage arrears, an increasing number of informal and semi-formal jobs, less secure jobs, a lack of the development of legal and social rights of workers, arbitrary wages, a remarkable decline of social benefits, and a trade union system that is largely trapped in Soviet-style patterns of action (Ashwin & Clarke, 2002; Clarke, 1995; Hauslohner, 1987; Stenning, Smith, Rochovská, & Swiatek, 2010). Thus precarity might be
thought of as the status quo for many Russians for more than a generation. The response of workers to the new positioning of labour and production regimes in the global economy varies depending on the inherited norms and prior experiences of workers in their respective states. Russia is no exception.

What also remains significant is the memory of a social wage. In the recent socialist past, standard employment usually carried with it at least the promise of significant social benefits such as access to housing, canteens, kindergartens, etc. In addition, the nature of shop-floor relations was often highly specific: many workers experienced relatively low or intermittent levels of work intensity, with piecework being the exception not the rule, as well as protection from overly individualised relations with management by the brigade system (Clarke, 2007, p. 193).

Practices of incentive and discipline in Soviet factories were (and arguably remain) in many cases ‘personalised’ (cf. Collier, 2011, p. 106; Morrison, 2008, p. 135) but not ‘individualised’, in that shop-floor brigade leaders rather than middle-managers exercised a large degree of discretion based on their personal relations with workers rather than an objective individualised assessment of a person’s output. In addition, as in other socialist labour contexts, Russian workers retain some degree of autonomy on the shop floor (Alasheev, 1995).

In a recent summary of the adoption of neoliberal production regimes in Russia, the accent is put on increased control over workers, an intensification of the work burden and a general tightening of the workday’s regime (or timetable) (Kagarlitsky, 2008; Levinson, 2007). Nonetheless, ‘echoes’ of the perceived social benefits of the Soviet shop-floor relations take a long time to disappear (Morris, 2016). Thus, the meaning of ‘precarious work’ in the context of traditional industrial work takes on a local meaning inflected by the past, sometimes overly idealised by individual workers. The localisation of precariousness for blue-collar workers relates to understandings of ‘bad’ work: quite specific micro-processes of labour including a lack of autonomy in task solving, flexibility in use of time, unmediated oversight by the managers. Thus, when workers complain about ‘bad’ jobs and understand the new positioning of their labour as precarious they tell a wider story about the extension of capitalist relations into the ‘hidden abode of production’.

3. Methods and field-site

This article is based on materials collected in two distinct modes of research. First, we rely on long-standing ethnographic fieldwork focusing on blue-collar automotive and other workers from 2009 to the present day. These materials encompass long-term participant observation with workers in an ex-monotown near Kaluga we call ‘Izluchino’. Initially the focus of the fieldwork was on local manufacturing plants (mainly aggregate extraction and processing, steel and plastic fabrication). Since 2010, younger informants have started to commute from this town to the Kaluga Volkswagen plant, as well as to the other major automotive assembly and supply plants in Kaluga. Second, semi-structured interview data were collected from union representatives and activists in 2013. The authors built a group of informants for in-depth interviewing as well as participant observation, including union activists, ‘ordinary’ assembly workers and former workers at the plants, as well as other blue-collar workers.

In the early 2000s, a number of TNCs located to Kaluga because of the region’s good transport links to Moscow and relatively low production costs. Kaluga benefitted as a
‘goldilocks’ zone: enjoying relatively close proximity to Moscow, but positioned far enough away to enjoy lower average wages and production costs than Moscow. In 2012 a large corridor along the Moscow–Kiev highway was incorporated into the city. As a result, the Kaluga region now borders Moscow City. Despite these advantages, economic and human development indicators for the region continue to show Kaluga as only ‘middling’ overall (UNDP, 2013, p. 150). For example, in the official statistics for 2011 there is a disparity between average incomes in the region (around the average for European Russia) and a much higher level of gross regional product per head (ranking fifth out of the 19 federal subjects in the Central Federal District containing Moscow and Moscow region) (Rosstat, 2013). In other words, while corporations have benefitted from Kaluga's positioning, its workers have not. In 2003, Kaluga region reduced property taxes and simplified customs procedures for international companies relocating to the region. ‘Industrial parks’ were also created. While these were located outside cities, they were close to highways. The regional administration prepared ‘bespoke’ sites in advance of the arrival of international companies to the region.

The Interregional Trade Union of Auto Workers (MPRA) is one of the newly emergent activist unions. The MPRA originated in Ford, the first foreign carmaker that moved to the Leningrad region (surrounding St Petersburg) in 2005. Further alternative unions joined the MPRA and gained a foothold in all the major automobile manufacturers and suppliers throughout Russia, in both domestically-owned plants as well as in foreign-owned plants. Shortly after the Volkswagen plant was built in Kaluga in the mid-2000s, the MPRA became the main union and only activist organisation in the plant. In 2012, the union mobilised enough workers to push management into a collective bargaining agreement and a reduction in temporary and agency labour. While quantitative matters such as wages and working time continue to be dominant issues for the union, the workers also express conflicting needs and expectations. On the one hand, workers seek secure work, but, on the other hand, also express a desire to have the feeling of greater control over their work. The challenge for the union over the longer term is to align their strategic aims for increasing labour power with the enduring labour culture. At the same time, they must continually deal with the strict and punitive management structure that resists compromise.

At first glance, our research informants represent two different poles of labour production processes. In the ‘foreign’ car factories, a high-tech, time-critical ‘conveyor’ of automotive assembly is run on contemporary European models of automation and modularism (Apreu, Beynon, & Ramalho, 2000), requiring relatively low-skilled labour specialisation (repetitive lifting and fitting of axle parts, for example). In the hinterlands of ex-Soviet factories, now privately owned and mainly producing metal and plastic products for industry, we observe low-tech, small-scale, small-team production with single concerns having ‘multi-profile’ outputs, sometimes including unrelated products (e.g. a factory making industrial steel scaffoldings, plastic ventilation pipes and industrial polymer water filters). In contrast to the car factories, skilled labour is often more critical to success. The latter is due to the unpredictable nature of the disaggregation of large Soviet concerns into small niche companies exhibiting low levels of profitability.

From an objective as well as interpretive perspective, there are many similarities between the seemingly ‘high-tech’ new TNCs, on the one hand, and the apparently old-style Soviet type of SMEs, on the other. Firstly, there are similarities in the role of manual work, with the final assembly stage of automobile production remaining only partially automated (Fujimoto, Jürgens, & Shimokawa, 1997, p. 5), and relying on a large degree of low-tech and
labour-intensive physical manipulation, as is the case in ‘low-tech’ Russian firms. Secondly, there are similarities in work flexibility, with the TNCs existing as relatively ‘lean’ work places (p. 7) where a small cadre of workers are engaged in trouble-shooting roles with commensurately high skills. This is also true of many Russian enterprises. Thirdly, there are similar high/low skills divisions. Both contexts are characterised by polarised ‘islands’ of high-tech work (p. 10), on the one hand, existing alongside low-skill manual handling, on the other.

What this means in practice is that both ‘new’ and ‘old’ production-styles are prone to high turnover due to the dualist nature of their work: wastage of low-skilled workers, on the one hand, and mobility for high-skilled workers, on the other. While dualist, these workplaces have flat hierarchies with autonomy within teams. Structures of production and work are prone to disruption by bottlenecks, and worker dissatisfaction or shortages. Research in other global contexts on the rise of dualist production-styles is comparatively instructive. For instance, Marques (2011, p. 415) sees dualism as a response to globalising pressures leading to conflictual workshop politics.

4. Agency work, labour turnover and the role of the union

Approximately 12% (c. 540 workers) of the workforce are agency workers. The exact number fluctuates significantly because the labour turnover rate (tekuchka – lit. ‘churn’) is so high at the plant. This applies not only to agency workers, but also to permanent employees.

Since the early 1990s, labour turnover in Russia has been a major issue facing industry (Tuuli & Lazareva, 2006; Yakubovich, 2006). Labour turnover in Russia remained close to 50% in the period 1992–2000 and is not explained by structural changes alone (Cazes & Nesporova, 2001). Turnover in official statistics expressed as total hires in private enterprises has remained close to 10 million persons annually throughout the last 15 years, reflecting only a gradual decline in turnover as total employment rises (Rosstat, 2015, p. 160). In blue-collar work, turnover was and remains even higher. Registered unemployment remained remarkably low throughout the 1990s and 2000s and most separations remain ‘voluntary’. During the period of positive economic growth after 1999, labour turnover increased, a process connected with a higher volume of job creation.

The phenomenon of labour ‘churn’ rose from being ranked almost at the bottom of a list of labour concerns in 1990, to third place in 2003 (behind worker ‘motivation’ and ‘incentivisation’; see Bashmakov, 2005, p. 90). Various explanations of the persistence in churn after the massive reduction in employment that took place over the 1990s have been offered. These include the increasing inability of firms to hoard workers by tying them to poorly paid work through social benefits and other paternalistic labour policies; the increasing mobility of workers under post-socialist labour and migration conditions; the inability of firms generally to meet the social and economic expectations of workers; and the dissatisfaction by workers of conditions or their inability to adapt to harsher work regimes (Bashmakov, 2005). Churn is thus an example of ‘voice’ and ‘exit’ among the increasingly mobile and reflexive worker. But it is important to note the two-sided meaning of churn for employers: on the one hand, it allows a high degree of labour market flexibility among Russian firms and TNCs alike, who can both simply freeze hiring in a downturn and let churn reduce the workforce (Gimpelson & Kapeliushnikov, 2011, p. 11). On the other hand, churn is a risk factor: it has a clearly demonstrable disruptive role in both ordinary production and in maintaining a subset
of sufficiently skilled and motivated workers (Gimpelson, Kapelyushnikov, & Lukiyanova, 2010).

The foreign car plant is a good example of this. After a third shift was taken on and union activity increased in response to the large numbers of agency contract workers, the HR director commented:

I have never seen such churning of labour as in that factory. Since I arrived we've lost 600 workers in six months. And of these around 60% left of their own accord. The ones forced to leave were due to infractions of labour discipline, alcohol. At first I was surprised but now I get it. Many people who come to work from the edges of Kaluga and worked previously in agriculture or construction. Many were unaccustomed to work in three shifts and on the conveyor. Therefore the majority of those quitting left in the first two months (Gusev, 2011).

His account is revealing of the problems in ‘churn’ due to differing cultural and moral norms of production which feed into how physically exhausting work is interpreted.

Elsewhere it has been argued that Russians are unsuited to the disciplined demands of the ‘shiny’ globalised factory, while ignoring the issue of labour turnover as indicative of worker dissatisfaction (Rytsareva, 2011). The lack of technical preparation of young people in the vocational education sector as well as the inability of Russian firms to act as suppliers to the factory is criticised. Interestingly, a representative of the International Metalworkers’ Federation (now part of the IndustriALL Global Union) associated with the local independent union at the Kaluga plant made a substantive response to Rytsareva’s article: ‘I don’t really get this position: creatively describing the glum, gloomy people without even trying to find out what is actually happening at their workplace’. After describing some issues with safety at the plant the union had highlighted, the IMF representative continued:

So, the main problem is as always, the [quality of the] ‘people’? […] I will make no mention of the fact that the huge pay of the workers (about 20,000 roubles) is lower than the average for Kaluga region in large- and medium-sized enterprises. That’s not the problem – the people are. How many times can the liberal cliché of undisciplined Russian workers be repeated at the same time as refusing to even ask about how things are at the factory? (Matveev, 2011).

The existence of relatively uncompetitive, or, as informants sometimes said, ‘stingy’ wages – especially when deductions for work-clothes, transport and canteens were taken into account – no doubt added to the attraction for workers of the new active conflict-oriented union at the car plants.

Churn is thus both an opportunity to the union – in terms of tapping into and organising ‘voice’ – but also a serious obstacle to the development of the union as it is particularly difficult to organise agency workers. They enter and leave the plant, with little opportunity to develop corporate or union identities. According to the union, churn among agency workers amounts to around 1000 workers a year. Agency work is explicitly used by the plant as a recruiting method, with the most loyal workers having a realistic chance to be taken on permanently by management. This prospect is also an important reason for agency workers not to unionise as it reduces the chance of becoming permanent members of staff. As churn is also quite high within the permanent personnel, Volkswagen management compensates for a permanent worker leaving the plant by replacing the vacancy from the extensive pool of agency workers, instead of resorting to the labour market outside the firm.

According to informants, many workers experienced some sort of a honeymoon period when they first started working at the plant. However, it did not take long until they started to feel ‘cheated’ by management. Management were perceived as operating a ‘scam’, asking
for worker patience (cf. Ashwin, 1998) and explaining that the firm was still young and needed to develop, and therefore required concessions from workers. Management effectively used a rhetoric of ‘we work on this together’, demanding employees work weekends, long shifts, etc. Workers tended to suffer from ‘buyer’s regret’ when they realised concessions were one-sided. Inflexible schedules and rotas (while understandable given the type of production) were a major issue. Russian firms more usually attempted a mutual solution between worker and management and a ‘flexible-paternalistic’ manner was more likely.

While the profitability of many Russian firms in the automotive industry is low, with many enterprises reliant on state subsidies, the opposite is true for transnational firms seeking to expand in the Russian market. Profits derive exclusively from sales and there is less room for personalised production relations in such firms. The realisation of a more intense production-scape marked a turning point for many workers and eventually resulted in frustration and rejection. This, in combination with the high pace of very physical work and harsh disciplinary measures taken by management, are the driving factors that lie behind the ‘churn’ of the labour force (Morris, 2012b).

In interviews, workers and union activists explicitly compared work in a transnational firm with that of a ‘typical’ non-state local Russian plant. In the latter, the ‘prostoi’ characteristic rooted in the Soviet-era remained common: periods of slack (due to either supply or technical problems) and lower intensity. By contrast, in the foreign firm there was always ‘make-work’ (tasks assigned for the sake of the appearance of busy-ness, rather than because of a pressing need). This caused tension and pressure for workers. Even lower-level management (usually native Russian) found this attitude strange, although it trickled down from the upper hierarchical levels of management that even the lowest brigadier (brigade leader) would have to find ‘make-work’. Not surprisingly, workers were subject to much more surveillance and had less autonomy than would be the case at a Russian firm. Some workers claimed they would rather have a lower salary and have the feeling of more autonomy instead. Volkswagen management took ever more disciplinary actions. However, these actions were inconsistently applied and were perceived as based on favouritism and a policy of divide and rule. The fear of losing one’s work and self-disciplinary actions taken by workers indicated subjective precarisation for both permanent employees and agency workers; it revealed that the ostensible secure and formal labour at a foreign Western company was in fact fragile and determined by informal negotiation and barter. Nonetheless, meaningful concessions to, and micro-level negotiations with labour that take place in many Russian firms were not possible at the plant.

Longer-term observation of other workers at the plant (Morris, 2012b, 2016) echoes the meaninglessness and alienation historically observed among conveyor workers described by Beynon under Western Fordist mass production (1973). However, at least for automotive conveyor workers then and now in the global north, there is at least the compensation of relatively good blue-collar wages. By contrast, in Russia, the few possibilities for ‘ordinary’ workers to develop themselves at the workplace are mirrored in the consistently low level of the wages at the plant. They span 26,000–40,000 RUB (in 2013). This means workers quickly reach a wage ceiling after a couple of years and human capital is not bound to the plant. The plant has a very high market share, and although the wage at Tolyatti’s AvtoVAZ is about 2.5 times below that at Volkswagen, the latter is only a little above the average wage paid in the Kaluga region. For workers, the calculation is simple: if Ford as a foreign company near
St Petersburg is able to pay up to twice as much as Volkswagen, why can’t Volkswagen do the same?

As much of an issue is the inflexible scheduling and shifts, as mentioned above. Working long hours and weekends is less an exception rather than a rule. Added to this is the long distance many commute from outlying areas. Similarly, a job at the plant precludes secondary employment and informal work, very common and often lucrative for workers in Russia (Morris, 2016). Thus depending on an employer with a not so secure but all-consuming job, which leaves neither enough spare time to recover nor sufficient time for a further informal job adds to the subjectively understood precariousness of many workers at the plant.

Although, a considerable number of workers are unhappy with the work and self-conception of traditional unions (Vinogradova, Kozina, & Cook, 2012), their established role as a distributor of a social wage is still expected, despite new orientations for alternative and official unions alike. This is not part of the self-conception of the union at the plant. Instead ‘social work’ is seen as a compromise to ‘return the investment’ made by workers in the form of union dues by constantly informing and updating their members on the progress of the union’s struggle. However, given the subjective sense of precarity experienced by workers, the expectation of social wages is understandable. One of the agreements of collective negotiations with management is that the workers receive all benefits associated with a ‘social wage’ directly from the company and not from the union. Social benefits are expenditures that the union is convinced are redundant given their focus on struggle.

The final ethnographic sections that follow illustrate how Slava, a permanent worker, and Petr, who previously worked as an agency worker, each experience the workplace and everyday life. These ‘case studies’ (composite portraits) supplement earlier research on the unsatisfied workers at this plant (Morris, 2012a) and show how workers struggle with conflicting feelings of entrapment in particularised precarity, which eventually paralyses them, and prevents their participation in collective mobilisation.

5. New blood at the car plant

In 2010, a new cohort of workers arrived at Volkswagen and other car plants near Kaluga. This intake included Petr, and Slava, the latter extremely guarded about his new job. Why would that be when other informants are not? In our first few encounters, in the small industrial town of Izluchino where they all live, he and his girlfriend gave little away. Perhaps they were worried about the envy of others; after all, Slava was now earning in a prestigious blue-collar job, relatively speaking. Although some of the men in his social group were recently earning less than half his wage and Slava was no doubt reluctant to hurt their feelings, he was earning no more than 18,000 roubles ($600 in 2010) a month after a relatively lengthy probationary period. By contrast, those at the local Russian factory earned around 14,000 roubles ($470 in 2010). It was only later, after 2012 and the success of the union activities, that car plant workers were significantly better paid. However, even then the car plant pay was not high compared to other jobs in the region.

Petr’s initial job status as an external ‘agency’ worker at Volkswagen put him at the heart of the union’s concerns. He was on a waiting list with numerous hoops to jump through before being transferred to the status of permanent worker with the normal legal rights, benefits and pay associated with that status. Sickness time off was one such issue to overcome, particularly given Petr’s pre-existing health problems. In addition, it was necessary to
have the ‘right attitude’ and get in with the ‘right’ people to make sure one’s name progressed up the list towards the coveted status of permanent employment. Talks with other workers and union activists underlined the harsh physical demands of conveyor work. A major problem in terms of inflexibility was that, unlike in Russian companies, there was no conception of ‘optimisation’ of labour, by which informants meant that if a person can’t cope with the conveyor work (heavy lifting labour) they could be tried out in a different part of plant. The attitude at the car plants was ‘disposable’ towards less fit workers.

With hindsight then it is easy to see why Slava was guarded. Even in this friendly group, the sense of ‘getting above one’s station’ is keenly felt. Later, in 2014, Slava talked about feeling trapped by the better-paid conveyor job at Volkswagen. Petr had been working at the car plant for a few years. He said of another friend, Nikita, who had no overt ambitions to try out Volkswagen (he remained working for a cement works for much lower pay): ‘He has to work, but doesn’t know why, certainly not towards a directed aim. That’s just the way he is and he is happy in himself. Nikita just has to spend all his pay even before he gets it.’ However, it is almost as if, with the benefit of hindsight, Petr and Slava had some secret admiration, as much as scorn, for their friend Nikita’s ‘easy-come–easy-go’ attitude.

Another multifaceted factor contributed to their anxiety: the absolute novelty of foreign employers, managers and relatively high-tech production lines. A number of observations at one of the car plants are indicative of the shock to the individual of the time and productivity demands on Russian workers used to Soviet-style production regimes and practices. Coupled with more general cultural differences, Slava and Petr felt perpetually tested by the new plant and therefore reluctant to discuss it, even with close friends. After taking as much risk with employment as those escaping into the informal economy, what if those going to work for the foreigners come back as failures? It took over a year of Petr working at Volkswagen before it was possible to discuss it openly with him.

While the novelty of the ‘foreign’ plant was both attractive and anxiety-inducing, there is also endemic suspicion and distrust of all things foreign. The watchfulness appeared mutual. Slava expressed surprise at the cultural difference of management. Instead of shouting and swearing, the foreign supervisors were always calm, if insistent and demanding. The stereotype of inscrutability was projected onto Germans and others (such as Slovak lower-level supervisors). Working for and with foreigners was a major milestone, not only in Slava’s working life, but also in terms of his and his family’s life experience. He said it was ‘weird’ in a way he struggled to articulate, but given the formerly semi-closed defence industry status of Izluchino, not difficult to understand. Added to this was the fear that this shiny and relatively prospective work might disappear as soon as it had magically arrived. This also added to Slava’s and Petr’s reticence. ‘Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth’ is a Russian saying, too.

Soon, Slava admitted that he was wary because even as a probationer he had had to sign an agreement not to disclose to third parties any business practices at the plant. Secondly, for the first year or so, Slava’s pay was not particularly higher than that in his local town. As a result, he felt it inexpedient to talk about the work, given the possibility that the ‘risk’ he had taken turned out to be ‘not worth it.’ Just as elsewhere, a significant proportion of salary was paid as a ‘bonus’. However, unlike in his previous experience in Izluchino in ‘Soviet-style’ factories, the supervisors at the car plant had no qualms about withholding or ‘fining’ workers their bonus for what would be considered relatively minor infractions elsewhere. That is not to say the bonus at the Russian factory is superior (usually it is volatile and based on personalised relations); rather that the supplementary wage element is a culturally and socially
embedded expectation as of right. Subsequent talks with Slava and Petr developed this point further and are discussed in the next section.

Anxiety was also heightened by the disparity in production relations between the foreign plant and the inheritor businesses such as the cement works in the town. Coercion was felt in a completely new and unnerving way by Petr and Slava. They were fundamentally disturbed by the ‘indirect’ nature of the more Taylorist, compartmentalised and highly organised production regime. This took time to get used to, but they, unlike others, stuck to it and with time were able to articulate more and more of what they felt to be ‘weird’. ‘Normal’ Russian management practice was conspicuously absent at the European and Asian plants: minimal oversight, lack of forward planning, a lot of slack followed by ‘storming’ to meet deadlines with a bonus for the whole team at the end regardless of quality. Instead, as Slava sheepishly admitted, ‘they really know how to get every ounce out of you all the time, every day, from the start to the end of the shift.’ His soon-to-be-wife Marina articulated, ‘he’s not trying to avoid talking about the conveyor; he’s just completely exhausted!’ A fit young man of 24, Slava would collapse into bed at home after his shift and fall asleep in front of the television.

In 2012 Petr had started working for Volkswagen. At the end of the summer, all the car plants have a furlough period when they retool. In autumn 2012 Slava was promoted to foreman on the conveyor. After the independent trade union had instigated industrial action at the plant and in supplier plants, the collective wage agreement brought better wages and conditions. Yet Slava looked ever more like a haunted man. On a village plot, as the women busied themselves with putting children to bed and clearing away, a group of men gathered to talk. Stumbling over his words with a pained look into the fire, Slava kept talking – somewhat in awe – of the mortgage he’d taken out on the new-build Kaluga flat and his new ‘physical’ realisation that he was now ‘tied’ to the foreman’s job permanently. Petr, just a conveyor worker, but also destined for a more specialised role, used the word ‘trap’, but left it unclear whether he referred to the mortgage, or the higher-paid foreman’s role.

Moving on from the long-term debates on the merits of the ‘new deal’, within the small social circle containing Petr, Slava and others, it is possible to draw on more widely collected ethnographic material, including from semi-formal interviews with other workers, union activists, clerical workers at car plants, and publicly available material. Locally in Izluchino the opening of the car plants and other enterprise facilities was a major source of bitterness: the best and youngest workers were the most likely to leave the town’s struggling enterprises. The anxieties displayed by Slava in his new work were replicated by others. ‘We’re the blacks of Europe alright’ said one worker. ‘Do you know how much the Slovak Volkswagen workers building the cars in Bratislava get paid? Twice as much as even our specialist workers! Are they any more productive? Of course not!’

While many locals were genuinely concerned for their town because of the competition for labour, many more clearly articulated politically aware cynicism towards the companies and their government. They talked of Kaluga becoming a low-wage global outsourcing site of blue-collar labour. Once the ‘honeymoon’ period of workers like Slava at the plants was over, the labour turnover in the foreign plants and its workers’ militancy came as no surprise. Churn was even higher than in the Russian and ‘Soviet’ plants. These two issues, while related, need to be separated.

As illustrated in earlier work on the same fieldsite (Morris, 2012a), even relatively young workers often could not reconcile themselves with the increasing imperatives to self-exploit on the production line and in more general terms in order to work up the career ladder at
the car plants. They clearly articulated frustrations at a lack of autonomy in regulating their own pace and approach to solving tasks and meeting production targets. Second was the awareness of the ‘off-shoring’ and state-within-a-state nature of many of the industrial parks, one of which is dominated by Volkswagen and its most important suppliers. How ironic that in some ways they resembled those ‘closed’ factory towns of the Soviet period, like Izluchino: gated entry; only works buses in and out; significant monitoring and searching of staff entering and leaving (workplace theft was immediately a problem at Volkswagen); heightened labour discipline (alluded to above in terms of summary dismissal for even smelling of alcohol).

Those of a more reflective nature went further: weren’t these little fiefdoms of Germany, France and Japan like colonies in the Third World? Extracting surplus value to be shipped back home? ‘And we’re not even up to the standard of Brazil!’ said another worker. ‘They even get better pay in the Anchieta factory that makes saloon cars near Sao Paolo.’ Multiple generations of Marxist–Leninist education had not gone entirely to waste – even the less educated could readily join the dots to spell ‘exploitation’ and ‘proletariat’ – objective understandings of precaritisation were widely shared and discussed, along with the subjective interpretations, highlighted in this article.

6. Conclusions

Slava and Petr did not join the union yet benefitted from its work. Their paternalistic expectations of a union echoed an older understanding of industrial relations and were a source of frustration to the new union. It is important to highlight how pervasive and enduring are informants’ idealisations of Soviet paternalism. Many of the aspects of ‘bad’ jobs they complain about were also features of Soviet enterprises (e.g. discretionary benefits and punishments, subordination and humiliation; see Ashwin, 2003). Thus there is a distinction between workers’ construction of the Soviet enterprise (and its inheritors with their decaying, but somewhat still intact paternalistic relations) and the actual experience of it, which for most informants was lacking due to their age (under 40). Similarly, the idealistic imagining by workers of the past focuses on real benefits (canteens, kindergartens, housing) now so visibly absent, but ignores the discretionary and often unjust implementation of those benefits in the past. This adds up to an interpretative, or subjective understanding of precaritisation, and also grounds an understanding of high degrees of labour turnover more generally, both in new and old production-scapes.

In addition, the interpretative understandings of what makes the VW jobs ‘bad’ (interpretively precarious) aids an understanding of the challenges faced by new unions. Most striking about the union activist conversations – triangulated with insights from other workers – was the slowly-dawning realisation that however successful in the short term in addressing the core issues of labour (pay, conditions and a general commitment to redressing the capital–labour imbalance in power), unions like MPRA must also recognise the ongoing salience of the ardent desire for a ‘social wage’ in Russia – a subjective aspect of precaritisation in the present. The dream of a more social state remains very much alive and linked to the ideals of the ‘deservingly’ labouring person and the ‘just’ enterprise. A key achievement of new unions might be leading the struggle for this without the personalised and informal dependences that traditionally accompanied social wages within the Soviet and inheritor enterprise. Activist unionists try to compile information on workers’ problems, needs and demands, not only to have a meaningful position towards management in terms of collective negotiations,
but also for union members themselves as a form of ‘returning’ their dues, as well as those more ‘subjective’ issues, we examined here, like autonomy at the workplace or insecurity through informal practices despite formal agreements, which also allude to rather qualitative characteristics of workers’ precariousness.

Notes

1. We use ‘neoliberal production regimes’ to refer to the Russian version of a global process which sees organisations increasingly adopt practices emphasising market processes (particularly greater use of metrics and monitoring) to optimise economic performance in an intensely competitive environment. In blue-collar settings, this is mainly experienced in three negative ways by workers: higher intensity deployment of labour, micro-monitoring and ‘piecework’ style evaluation of output, focus on the subjective attitude of labour – having a ‘positive attitude’ and flexible approach to demands becomes more important than previously. At the same time, workers may frequently be required to retrain and take on responsibilities different from their ‘core’ competencies.

2. By contrast, in Central and East European (CEE) countries labour turnover fell rapidly: from 54% to 38% in Poland (1994–1998) and from 44% to 22% in the Czech Republic (1993–1998). In comparable ex-Soviet countries it was relatively lower than in Russia (Cazes & Nesporova, 2001). More recent statistics show very high levels of ‘involuntary temporary hirings’ in CEE countries and ‘churn’ more generally (European Commission, 2014, p. 39).

3. We lack the space to explore this further here, but demographic factors leading to skill shortages, and the ease of moving into and out of the informal economy are also important.

4. Obligatory busy-ness, regardless of productivity need, can be seen as part of the logic of intensified (self-)exploitation and (self-)monitoring associated with the broader rise of ‘responsibilisation’, theorised as part of neoliberal governmentality (Rose, 1996).

5. Many enterprises continue the practice of a two-tier wage structure: basic pay ‘oklad’, and a ‘top up bonus’, or ‘premiia’/’nadbavka’, ostensibly dependent on results or productivity, but often expected as a right by workers.

6. Of course, it may well be in these individual cases that work rather functions as a catalyst for a situation the men are not entirely happy with in the first place. Nonetheless, the nature of work and subjective value of labour plays a major role in dissatisfaction.

7. It should be noted that the cars produced for the TNC in Russia are for the domestic market. However, this does not negate the point about exploitation made by workers. Slovak workers in similar roles were paid around 50% more than Russians.

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