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## **The “Socialist” Experiment: Legacies of quiescence and the virtues of institutionalized weakness**

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### **Bio:**

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### **Abstract:**

This chapter discusses the quasi-corporatist labour relations in the USSR. Soviet Taylorism necessitated the absorption of unions into the apparatus of state from the very beginning. Unions’ role became one of assessing the value of workers as applied to production processes. However, Taylorism in the USSR never really developed, and unions became important in implementing a crudely paternalistic workfarism. The second part of this chapter analyses so-called ‘transition’ in socialist countries to marketized capitalism and in China’s case to a so-called ‘socialist market economy’. Path dependency from the socialist period led in the same direction – quasi-corporatism, with co-option by the ruling elite of federated unions and so-called tri-lateralism or tripartite structures, with China diverging somewhat in its search for a legalist solution to labour unrest. In conclusion, the demise of legacy labour representation leaves open the question of the ‘traditional’ unions’ continuing role in authoritarian states lacking the welfare state histories of Western European ones.

### **Introduction**

While the meaning of ‘actually existing socialism’ in terms of typologizing the political economy of communist and socialist countries (state capitalism, bureaucratic collectivism etc), is beyond the scope of the chapter, the first section discusses in some depth the substantive character of ‘quasi-corporatist’ (Pravda 1983) labour-enterprise-state relations in these countries in the period roughly between Stalinism in the USSR in the 1930s, up to the transition of China towards some form of hybrid market socialism in the 1990s and beyond. The point of this section is to argue that such corporatist dependency left an indelible mark on labour subjectivity and relations, organisational forms and resources of unionism. This focus also allows reflection on the degree to which the high socialist period (1945-1989) offers points of similarity between Eastern Bloc countries and social democratic ones. While China, Vietnam, Eastern Europe and the USSR - the places with the most wide-ranging extant academic literature - were all different, their common dependency on the party-state shaped the existential *terrain* in profound ways. This comprised, among other things, the distance between union leadership and activism, a hidebound conservative ideology, and, relatedly, a paternalist, quasi-welfarist, sense of role and identity.

The second part of this chapter analyses so-called ‘transition’ in these countries to marketized capitalism and in China’s case to a so-called ‘socialist market economy’ with the latter characterized by significant political economic diversity affecting organized labour since the 1990s, as evidenced by the Chongqing model. In this section, we also emphasize the spatially comparative dimension. Despite the widespread perception that

China was successful in avoiding the Shock Therapy of the 1990s which resulted in massive strikes in Russia (Mandel 2004), the path dependency created from the socialist period led in the same direction for both countries – corporatism one more time, with co-optation by the ruling elite of federated unions and so-called tri-lateralism or tripartite structures. The chapter reflects on this period as offering some signs of divergence – with Russia and China again the examples. While in the former, this period is seen as a low point – the complete defeat of organized labour, enforced quiescence (Ashwin 1999), with workers sacrificed on the altar of rapid privatization, China in the late 1990s–early 2000s sees an experiment with legal arbitration (Pringle and Clarke 2011) – a false class compromise with a limited capacity to sustain itself given the upheavals of the Global Financial Crisis of 2007-2008.

This path dependency, and partial divergence in the China case, leads to a paradox of organized labour in the present moment of crisis: the weakness in ideology and the existential terrain of what can be called still-dominant legacy forms of ‘transmission belt’ relations (Metcalfe and Li 2006) obscure emergent forms of politicized grassroots labour organisation and activism. In the final part of the chapter, we look to the future by reflecting on key, representative examples of labour conflict in the present (via case studies of medics and utility workers from Ukraine, autoworkers from Russia and China). Despite China’s attempt to substitute legalism for institutional development and Russia’s renewed and yet stunted corporatism, a striking similarity can be observed – politicized ‘new’ labour movements on the rise while decaying ‘paternalist’ organisations continue to play a dominant, and detrimental, role to the cause of labour. Indeed, one question for the future is that posed by Friedman (2014) on China (but equally applicable elsewhere) – why does the particular constellation of labour unrest, failed class compromise, tactical victories and (relatively strong) structural power of labour not lead to substantive institutional change? We answer that given the rapidity of economic change, authoritarian states are particularly weak in substantively co-opting labour beyond phony-corporatism, evidenced by their frequent need to resort to nationalist populism (Kalb 2011). The chapter ends, not by celebrating the demise of legacy labour representation, but by leaving open the question of the ‘traditional’ unions’ continuing role in authoritarian states lacking the welfare state histories of Western European ones.

### **What were quasi-corporatist unions really like under socialism?**

While the historical research on workers and unions, particularly in the Soviet Union might seem a dry exercise in scholastics, it is increasingly relevant to contemporary struggles across the globe. After all authoritarianism and atomization in the sphere of work – two key terms relating to Stalinist labour discipline, are making something of a global comeback, in part due to the advent of platform capitalism which itself can be seen as a novel reinvention of Taylorism. Taylorism is understood as a set of techniques to get more production out of workers through individualized specialization of work, organisation, monitoring and incentivising. Why is Taylorism important? Because right from the beginning of the ‘workers’ state’ in 1917, it had already made inroads into communists’ thinking about the scientific subordination of labour and the centralized management of production that would characterize the whole socialist period (Peci 2009). A dominant view has been that Soviet industrialization essentially ‘imitated’ the capitalist model, with all its ‘stigmata’ (Braverman 1974, cited in Van Atta 1986). The ‘militarization of labour’ in the context of World War, Civil War and then Stalinism, finds in Taylorism a mechanism to discipline and motivate workers, particularly via piece-work in the context of a low-skills and a developmental model. This logic also necessitates the absorption of unions into the apparatus of state from the very beginning. Unions’ role then becomes one of assessing the value and skills of workers as applied to production processes (in a system where productivity of output cannot be measured adequately in aggregate because of the absence of a market for goods or for labour). In unions’ monitoring role and as an appendage of what we now call ‘management’, they can both offer monetary incentives for the achievement of production goals, and allocate and distribute wider social benefits (Bailes 1977). Both have the advantage of distancing the real holders of power – the Party *nomenklatura* and industrial bureaucrats – from the unseemly process of

authoritarian labour relations in a so-called 'workers' state'. That at least was the theoretical logic of the early Soviet state. The reality was quite different, and neither Taylorist methods, nor union as ersatz management were ever effectively dominant in the Soviet system.

Despite the absence of manifest union independence after the Russian Civil War, unions' role in defending workers against abusive management was still acknowledged. Strikes remained legal until the 1930s and there are plenty of documented examples of labour strife and even union activism through the 1930s (Lebskii 2021: 100). The Labour Code of 1922 was liberal, protecting against dismissal and channelling discontent into arbitration (Mandel 2004). The industrial history of Stalinism (1928-53) paints a model of coercion based upon the complete domination of labour by a totalitarian dictatorship but this is simplistic at best. The standard view is that company towns are built around raw materials sites and suck in from the countryside traumatized peasants who are quickly moulded into atomized, submissive and disposable human material in Stalin's drive to industrialize before the looming world war. Company towns far from 'civilization', facilitate labour discipline – physical movement within and between such industrial sites can be controlled. Unions take on an unambiguous role through rationing benefits such as housing and food. Despite the appearance of 'total' control, a particular contractual model starts to emerge: workers trade freedom for at least guaranteed physical survival in a system where concentration camps are visible to all social strata. A long-planned 'autocracy in the factories', based upon Lenin's own assessment of worker control as a disaster, is complete as a system by 1929 (Lewin 1985: 196), but immediately creates the need for delegated control further down the chain – foremen, nominated by the unions, but who are also responsible to the lowest rung in the union ladder – the local workshop *zavkom*. The role of unions in shaping the forms of compensation is reduced, and collective agreements abolished. Infractions of labour discipline and even things beyond worker direct control such as the breakdown of machines are criminalized, sometimes with capital penalties. At the same time, gradually, a crudely paternalistic workfarism develops – workers go to the front of the queue for provisions and shelter and maybe one day will inherit a welfare state. This is bolstered by a more consistent attempt to impose widened differentials in wages, bonuses and preferential treatments (Lewin 1985: 253).

A landmark work in this vein is Kotkin (1997) on the iron ore company town, Magnitogorsk, in the 1930s. Kotkin's approach is based on a Foucauldian analysis of power relations – where mutual surveillance and subjective incorporation of discipline and working-class 'culturedness' are just as important as the machinery of the state. Power is not just about what it oppresses, but what it produces and Kotkin's task is to answer the question: 'how did it come about that within a period of less than twenty years, the revolutionary proletariat of Europe's first self-proclaimed workers and peasants state were turned into Europe's most quiescent working class?' (1997: 198). Kotkin's approach is aimed at correcting – via an argument about internalization by workers of aspects the disciplining ideology of the regime – what he sees as overly simplistic or incomplete explanations. These are, in turn, long held truisms in historical scholarship about repression and class disintegration (peasantization) in the 1930s, and then, to explain supposed support among workers for Stalinism, co-optation or false consciousness. While Kotkin contrasts his approach to another prominent historian of Soviet labour – Donald Filtzer, they both focus on micro-tactics of resistance that could never become collective forms of labour organisation - for a critique of Kotkin as Eurocentrically liberal, see Krylova (2000). Kotkin's addition to the analysis of 'little tactics of habit' (1997:201) is to propose a meagre form of rather schizoid agency for workers – as both acceptance (of the subjectivizing demands of regime) and dissembling and private doubt. He also argues that unions as agents of social insurance gain prominence after 1935 in a nexus of heightened ideological attention to labour. Production becomes a source of heroic 'deeds' and self-sacrifice, but also as a site of conflict about differentiated roles and rewards, and experimentation with conditions of sweating, rationalization and intensification (1997: 213). Unions are institutionally reincorporated, but hardly respected or trusted by either state or workers (1997:369).

After Stalin, coercion slackens but does not disappear. Under his successor Khrushchev, in 1962 a decision to raise food prices led to widespread discontent among factory workers across the USSR. While possible strike

action was a subject of shop-floor and even factory-wide discussion, only in the city of Novocherkassk, in an electric locomotive factory, did a labour stoppage and protest break out. When public protests threatened to spiral out of control and spread beyond the city, interior ministry troops shot dead dozens of people. While harsh, targeted repression replaced mass terror, recent archival work by historians shows discontent and the ever present threat of labour unrest beneath the surface of Soviet society (Hornsby 2013). Unions could not respond to worker demands that the regime should live up to its own worker-orientated rhetoric. Similarly, the repressive state apparatus had no answer to demands from below to make good on the promises of communism (which Khrushchev had promised by 1980). This situation repeated itself across the Eastern Bloc and was investigated by sociologists such as Burawoy in Hungary in the 1980s. He even coined the term 'negative class consciousness' to describe this phenomenon (Burawoy and Lukács 1992). In a similar vein, Ticktin argued that workers were profoundly atomized because the system was 'transparently unequal and exploitative' (1992: 46). In this period between the 1960s and 1990s, regimes exhibit with varying degrees the willingness to make at least token concessions to workers, or at least not overstep certain bounds (Mandel 2004: 3). Union functions are three-fold but with a focus on the administration of social benefits in what were now all more developed and wealthier societies. They retain (at least in the eyes of workers) the secondary role of assisting management. Defending workers is a distant third function. The regime focussed on the problems of increasing productivity and compliance where there were widespread labour shortages. However, a lack of meaningful wage differentiation, and no weapons of unemployment to discipline labour, meant that unions were rarely called on to undertake direct 'defence' of members' interests. Instead, the legitimizing and broad socializing role of the union as the agent of the distribution of the so-called social wage should not be underestimated. While social benefit administration also fell to unions – including sick and maternity leave, pensions and vacation benefits - the so called 'social wage' was much broader, including faster access to better housing conditions, superior food supplies and more fast-tracked childcare and medical care than that accessible to many white-collar workers. This was even more important when we remember the low value of money itself in a society of shortages and, by the 1980s, rationing. Mandel (2004) provides some much needed nuance on what is called the 'late socialist' period. He draws attention to the fact that while the regimes saw union work as primarily directed towards 'productivity-orientated activity', after 1958 (in the USSR) union agreement was required for any dismissals to occur and at least theoretically, they could exercise power in terms of intervening in the production process where health and safety issues were a concern. In reality, most were content to subordinate themselves to management; leaders were appointed by the Party and union officials did not emerge from the shop floor. It remained a serious political, and therefore severely punished, crime to try to 'mobilize workers or assume the leadership of their spontaneous protests' (Mandel 2004:7). At the same time, workers develop structural power despite the toothless-ness of organized labour – they are able to vote with their feet, go slow (at least most of the time), and even absenteeism becomes difficult to effectively punish. Clarke et al. (1993: 16) undertook 'plant sociology' just before the end of the Soviet Union, finding that 'Soviet workers are powerful, in that managers are unable to impose labour discipline, and have to make concessions to enlist their co-operation, but they are weak in that they are atomized and have no means of collective resistance'.

Beyond the USSR, in both Yugoslavia and Hungary, economic reforms allowed a less centralized system and unions were able to make limited interventions especially in the area of wages. In China from the 1950s up to the end of the 1980s, we can speak about a Soviet-type of trade unionism with partial cessation of union activities during the Great Leap Forward, and in Romania, for example, extreme forms of control by the Communist Party of labour representation (Littler and Lockett 1983). Between the 1950s and 1980s more than half of Africa's newly independent countries at one point or another considered themselves 'socialist'. Even though the demise of the USSR led to regime change in a number of self-described Marxist-Leninist states such as Ethiopia, or the dumping of most socialist political baggage in Mozambique and Zambia, socialist ideology endured in some locales, such as Tanzania in a populist variation leading some researchers to assert that in the twentieth century the world's most dynamic socialist movements were to be found in Africa (Pitcher and Askey 2006: 1). As Pitcher (2006) showed in the case of Mozambique, the USSR was very

much the model for the total incorporation of the industrial worker, even if by comparison, the industrial workforce in African developmental states was much smaller. This incorporation included social benefits via union membership with unions also fulfilling a disciplining, ideological, and mediating role (Pitcher 2006: 93).

Overall, the late socialist period saw the strengthening of workers' structural position albeit in a system of decaying paternalism and economic decline. Attempts to improve productivity could not be effective in a system without unemployment and where money had little value. As Ticktin (1992: 12) memorably put it, the Soviet worker 'has to alienate his product to the management. He cannot choose not to work, but he can choose not to work as management would prefer he work'. Ticktin proposes a strong form of worker 'atomization' which is not fully borne out by the sociological evidence. Important legacies that impacted labour relations in the post-socialist period appeared – the delegation of production autonomy to the lowest unit of organisation with inconsistent oversight and even a form of genuine collective identity and even loyalty among workers towards 'their' enterprise. Certainly, debate still continues as to nature of class power and workplace relations in this period. These are summarized by Haynes (2006: 6), who discusses the degree to which we can consider the Soviet workshop as a unique form which was then 'decisive in determining the overall character of the USSR' as a mode of production. Haynes argues that a focus on workplaces is limited in what it can tell us. It might be more important to look at workers in the context of a society where consumption is suppressed and the pressure on workers considerable. From the 1950s, serious attempts were made to develop a management ideology and normative forms of compliance. At the same time, Haynes is less convincing when he questions the importance of paternalistic relations and a web of informal and instrumental deals substituting for meaningful formal labour relations. In our view, paternalism (and loyalty) was, and to some extent remains, visible as a legacy of the lack of trade unionism as it is understood in the social democratic period in the West as mediating relations within enterprises.

### **The Role of Workers and Unions in the Fall of the USSR**

Under Gorbachev (1985-1991), a key aspect of a general philosophy of democratization and transparency as an instrument in raising productivity and commitment saw the institution of work-collective councils (STKs) and election of plant managers. This was hardly 'autonomism'. Gorbachev's overall labour policy (though not worthy of that name) was a confused mix of Leninist voluntarism and renewed collectivism on the one hand, and a groping towards market mechanisms - making the threat of unemployment manifest - on the other. But 1989 was far too late to be tinkering to create market socialism, and mass labour unrest arose in Russia for the first time since 1917. The wider economic reforms of Gorbachev only undermined labour further by freeing prices too quickly (inflation), promoting private ownership in consumer goods areas in ways that disadvantaged the working-class (cooperatives), and widening the 'brigade' system of labour organization where manifest incentives and punishments were to be introduced. In 1988, a conservative and official assessment of the overemployment in Soviet enterprises was 20% of the workforce (Lane 1991). Inequalities between groups in society became more visible as the economy shrank and reforms were inconsistently and half-heartedly carried out. The work-collective councils were not a meaningful concession to labour – the election of managers was subject to veto by the authorities and the councils' powers were vague. More importantly, a genuine commitment to market socialism, or indeed socialism would have meant giving workers a broader political role, but self-management was only ever envisaged at the level of the plant, not the wider economy (Mandel 2004: 11). Nonetheless, workers responded to the greater openness ('glasnost') and discussion of reform by releasing a long bottled-up militancy from 1987. This period also saw the emergence of sympathy strikes, the rise of informal leaders, and the appearance of more democratic political demands. In summer 1989, 300,000 coal miners went on strike across the USSR over shortages and low wages. The government conceded to the economic demands of the strikers. In September, a Russian United Workers' Front had formed. In October 1989, strikes became legal but these rights were still quite limited.

From October 1990, Mandel argued that new alternative unions were emerging spontaneously in response to demands from below for militant and active representation at the very same time as the Soviet leadership reversed course on self-management, abolishing the election of managers. He also argued that despite success in creating new organizational forms to adapt to the new economic circumstances, labour activists were unable to think through the relationship between state and enterprise - that enterprise 'independence' was meaningless without a wider societal consensus on labour policy - and a lack of mobilization from the base to articulate alternatives to privatization. By spring 1991, the USSR was gripped by a wave of strikes which play an indirect role in the collapse of the federal state. Workers support Yeltsin over Gorbachev and then concede power to leaders of the soon-to-be-independent Soviet Republics who promptly adopt further policies that exclude workers from the reform process (Mandel 2004: 15-16). A cycle of conflict similar to that which had taken place in Poland ten years earlier takes place, where economic and organizational demands which could not help have political implications which now end in wholesale systemic change. In Poland in 1980-1981, the Solidarity movement opened up alternatives to traditional unionism, including adversary unionism and neo-corporatism. In Hungary, unions operated within a system of state corporatism weakly institutionalized but more effective than in the USSR, leading Pravda (1983) to argue that unionism in Communist Eastern Europe could be characterized as developing into a form of state corporatism. Whereas the strength of the Polish *Solidarność* movement was enduring, and brought about a broad anti-Soviet social movement, its outcome was hardly different than in Russia. The overturning of conservative communist elites merely hastened marketization, mass unemployment and deindustrialization. Summarizing this period, it is hard to disagree with Mandel that labour organization even at its most militant was easy prey to a hegemonic liberal narrative already well established in the 1980s and to Soviet Republic political entrepreneurs who promised more paternalism, but whose real motives were to increase their own power by destroying the federal state and accelerating marketization in order to transform themselves into capitalists.

### **Post-1989/1991 Economic Transition and Transformation**

The rapid transition to a market economy has been dubbed 'shock therapy', and it is hard to describe differently Russian and East Europeans' sudden encounter with unemployment, high inflation, a massive reduction in state capacity and destruction of social safety nets at this time. The new reality of overemployment in woefully low-productive and uncompetitive enterprises could only result in largescale layoffs in the early 1990s across the former communist countries. Militancy in places like Romania persisted longer than in other places throughout the 1990s and included periodic national strikes, but even there it could not defend standards of living (Kideckel 2008), despite maintaining high protest capacity to this day (Varga and Freyberg-Inan 2015). In the brave new world of transitioning Eastern Europe, where all social strata were under severe economic pressure, militancy by working classes contributed to the emergence of a strong anti-collectivist discourse and even stigmatization of the broader working class who were seen as retarding reform and change (Morris 2017). Even in the poster-boy country of disciplined transition - Poland - unemployment still stood at 17% in 2001. The rise of new enterprises and transnational corporations could not compensate for the loss of state jobs in large industrial enterprises that were the mainstay of employment in communist-type economies. Nonetheless, in Russia in particular, transition was a drawn-out affair with governments throughout the 1990s forced to maintain support for at least some loss-making largescale enterprises because the social costs of closing them would have led to mass unrest. This was compounded in many places, not just Russia, by the legacy of urban planning under communism which created many 'company towns' - sometimes called monotonowns - whose employment was concentrated in just one factory which made it difficult for politicians to allow sudden closure (Crowley 2020). While the social infrastructure like kindergartens and canteens continued to decay or was privatized, what remained of it served as a form of paternalistic glue, cementing the worker to the enterprise into the 2000s and even substituting for welfare provision from the state itself. Thus, the 1990s and even after can be referred to as

a period of decaying enterprise paternalism, fear of unemployment, demographic decline, and a drawn-out period of deindustrialization hardly conducive to labour organization.

Nonetheless, from 1990 onwards there were serious attempts to build alternative unions, suggesting that transformation of the established and inflexible industrial relations system might have been possible (Gerasimov and Bizyukov 2018; Greene and Robertson 2009). However, these attempts failed, partly because of internal organizational conflicts as well as continued support for traditional 'yellow' unions from the state. While alternative unions were able to demonstrate structural power in a number of sectors, especially manufacturing and transport, they experienced significant difficulties in gaining stable associational power or meaningful institutional power. In Russia, the most significant achievement was the emergence of an alternative federation in 1995, KTR (Confederation of Russian Labour) which was able to carve out its own space legally as a more activist-focussed organisation and gain about 2m members. Nonetheless, employment relations in Russia are still dominated by the traditional unions.

An end to the inertia in organized labour came about because of the growing significance of foreign firms in Russia in the 2000s. This heralded a new area of alternative unionism (Chetvernina, 2009; Olimpieva, 2012). Newly emerging unions, independent of the traditional system of employment relations, quickly emerged. Like the alternative unions of the 1990s, small unions at company level grew out of conflicts not about wage arrears – still a problem in 'Soviet-style' factories dominated by the old unions, but in new and foreign owned corporations. These multinationals often sold jobs as 'modern', yet made deals with regional politicians to keep wages low where automation became less necessary or was forgone, as labour costs were so much lower. A pattern emerges across Eastern Europe where various forms of manufacturing relocate from Western Europe in this period to exploit low wages. In Poland, for example, the bargaining power of British workers is undermined when chocolate maker, Cadbury, is able to relocate there and close the British plant (Meek 2017). Many of these transnational corporations are also given preferential legal and tax treatment because they operation in Special Economic Zones. In many zones, unions are restricted because the zones are under the authority of subnational agency not subject to national labour laws (Neveling 2014). In the Polish case, the weakness of unions is a major attraction to the parent company. In a Russian case in the Volkswagen car plant in Kaluga, there are a more encouraging signs which I discuss below. There, unions made use of workers' strong marketplace and workplace bargaining power in the automotive industry, mobilizing large groups of workers in the production process in order to achieve demands relating to wages, but also working time and workplace health and safety. Most of these small local unions are affiliated to the Interregional Trade Union of Autoworkers (Russian abbreviation: MPRA).

### **The State of Post-Socialist Worker Power**

As Crowley (2004:394) observed: 'labor is indeed a weak social and political actor in post-communist societies, especially when compared to labor in Western Europe', and this is best explained by the institutional and ideological legacies of the previous period. The watchword became 'quiescent' labour and unions. Crowley showed that all post-communist societies attempted some form of social compact at this time to maintain social peace, but that, as Ost memorably put it (2000), the result was 'illusory corporatism'. In more detail, Crowley argued that labour weakness has five key causes. First, corporatist co-option constituted by the decaying legacy unions of the communist period continue their existence through inertia and continue their role in acting against the interests of workers. Here, Russia's umbrella union organization is still the largest in Europe with approximately 20m members but it is anti-militant and membership is involuntary, a legacy of compulsory enrolment in the USSR, and since corporatist unions' founding in 1990, these organizations have mainly defended their institutional 'partnership' position, at the expense of their members' pay, conditions, and security (Vinogradova et al. 2012). Second, the relative lack of competing labour organisations or other civil society outlets for worker grievances. I will return to this point below. Third, worker organisation is more effective during periods of economic growth and demand for workers.

Fourth, the large size of the informal and sometimes subsistence economies in the 1990s in these states provided an alternative to collective action for workers – where they encounter in-work insecurity, many choose ‘exit’ into the informal economy. Fifth, the general legacy of communism – both the devaluation of class as a rallying point for organisation, and the inability of unions to rethink their purpose beyond paternalistic buffers between capital and worker (Crowley 2004: 398).

Despite agreeing with the broad thrust of the argument that labour was cowed and organization severely undermined by the 1990s transition period in post-communist states, one can point to a process of diffusion and learning among new alternative unions in parallel to the decaying paternalist corporatism of the traditional unions. Ironically, new and more militant unions have tended to arise in the factories of global capital, with spontaneous and less organized forms of labour protest continuing with varying intensity in the more traditional factories remaining after the Soviet period because of these enterprises inability to pay wages on time (Gerasimova and Bizyukov 2018). Indeed, at political and economic crisis points such as in 1998, mass labour unrest again forced temporary concessions. However, as Greene and Robertson (2009) pointed out, these cycles of intense and desperate protest action beyond the organisational structures of traditional unions in Russia. In the less authoritarian context of Ukraine, Gorbach (2020a) found paternalistic relations more enduring and, therefore, a continuing challenge to new unions. For Ukraine coal miners, transport and utility workers, Gorbach documented examples of disorganized strikes and ‘spontaneous outbursts of collective protest’ showing the similar informal tactics as in Russia, but in the context of a more gradual transition away from paternalism towards militant unionism (2020b: 7). Similarly in the Belarus context, Artiukh (2021: 53) drew attention to the relative strength of postsocialist workers at ‘moments of struggle’.

Returning to Russia, in this period what is also noteworthy is the low level of solidarity between sectors; there is no history of coordination between unions and political parties, although there are trilateral agreements and institutions. Since the early 2000s, an increasingly repressive labour code backed by a resurgent security apparatus is ready to pre-empt industrial conflict by directly targeting activists. At key moments, Putin has made political interventions that combine appeals to ‘authoritarian’ order, paternalistic rhetoric directed at workers couched in the language of social conservatism, and concessions (usually indefinitely deferred) regarding better pay and conditions. At the same time, even the stifling atmosphere of Putin’s Russia cannot completely extinguish resistance on the part of labour. Labour protests elude the repressive code, or utilize the informal or indirect forms of resistance, individualized tactics, or online campaigns. Key sectors like the automotive and service industries, with intense exploitation and a field less dominated by traditional unions, represent niches for new activist labour organizers to colonize. As the nature of work changes and new forms of employment relations arise and union legacies recede, labour organization is increasingly possible, despite, or even because of, the many obstacles in its way.

### **Case Study: Russia’s militant MPRA Union in the 2010s**

The most important independent union association, MPRA, emerged in 2007 out of a local union at St. Petersburg’s Ford plant, after an intense, year-long labour conflict (Olimpieva 2012). MPRA brought together members from across 40 regions. However, at both the plant and sector level, union organizations are still learning and struggle to stabilize their resources within MPRA. The difficulty of uniting the varying interests of members and at the same time informing the workforce about current negotiations with management was a crucial task for obtaining lasting bargaining power. Similarly, bargaining power at the sector level is fragile because collective agreements, where they exist, are limited to the plant level. This keeps the unions’ actions primarily local, limiting their influence. Unionists view any attempt to reach binding agreements beyond the plant as beyond their remit, and prioritize improving basic working conditions in their own factory.



The state's hostility towards union action is visible in the drastically reformed labour code of 2001. This restricted the right to action, especially for smaller, alternative unions (Olimpieva 2012; Greene and Robertson 2009). Their aims of directly affecting policy making and influencing labour markets and social politics, or even of attaining the capacity to provoke forms of social unrest, posed enough of a threat to the government to justify these changes early in Putin's rule. Any transformation of the established system would give alternative unions opportunities to gain leverage; therefore, the government is eager to support traditional unions as dominant actors, despite the fact that their level of approval in society is continually eroding.

So far, as a small union association mostly in transnational and automotive companies within a fragmented system of employment relations, MPRA's scope to expand to the broader working class or society is limited. Overall, this new movement is marked by the difficulties in transforming its successes at the plant level, and even along value chains, into lasting organizational power and meaningful influence in institutions and politics, with the latter being particularly restrained by authoritarianism. It remains an open question whether new unions will be able to not only survive but evolve under these hostile circumstances.

Hinz and Morris (2017) undertook an in-depth case study of Volkswagen in Russia from 2009-2013. The new German plant was successfully unionized by the MPRA with significant outside support, shortly after the factory opened. By 2012 with some 1200 workers organized, the union gained formal and legal recognition from management becoming the dominant union at the plant, though membership was relatively low, around 20% of production operatives. 'Traditional' union representation was also present, which MPRA activists described as 'Soviet-minded' (using the 'yellow' label). There was obvious significant cooperation with management. Relations between management and the MPRA were tense and difficult from the very beginning. The German management underestimated MPRA's ability to gain access to the plant and 'salt' the workers with well-trained activists. In 2012, the union entered into collective bargaining with the plant owners (significant because of the high threshold of membership legally required for recognition of the union) and in 2013 was effective in calling for strikes (the legality of which was ruled unlawful by a court) and protests. A mark of the 'novelty' of this kind of labour activism is the use of unconventional and hybrid tactics – such as protest actions, political pickets of non-VW car dealerships, sabotage of production, as well as working to rule known in Russian as the 'Italian strike'. The union was relatively successful, winning concessions on pay and reductions in agency labour contracts. Spurred on their second campaign sought to reduce shift lengths and limit the hours in the working week. At the time of writing in 2022, the union remains the key player at the plant but less able to mobilize than before.

### **China Labour from the People's Republic to Market Socialism**

As in Soviet Russia, after 1949 the Chinese Communist Party's core concern was 'work stability'. In the initial period industrial relations were characterized by *danwei* – a collective institution similar to the social contract forms of paternalist for workers in the Soviet system, but also containing instruments to ensure low labour turnover, centralized decisions on wages, ideological efforts to integrate managers and workers (Pringle 2011). The infamous *hukou* regulations limiting labour migration underpinned the *danwei* from the 1950s. Pringle sees this party-led administrative system of industrial relations as persisting into the reform period and its withdrawal as presenting unions with a crisis in legitimacy. There is some evidence that Chinese workers benefitted more overall from this system than their Soviet counterparts: lower wage differentials between workers, forced inclusion of managers in the stop-floor, and also more militancy (Lee Ching-Kwan 2000 cited in Pringle 2011). While during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) union activity was virtually prohibited, this period was ambiguous in terms of working class opportunity and identity. The industrial reform period can be dated from 1978 where enterprise autonomy focussed on profit retention and a small bonus paid to the workforce. Further elements included production planning, marketing and capital

utilization (Pringle 2011).<sup>1</sup> In 1982, the right to strike was removed from the Constitution. One effect of later 1980s reforms was the removal of the system of guaranteed permanent employment that a small number of urban workers had enjoyed and the state's control over job allocation. Like in Soviet Russia, the removal of price controls and rise in inflation were a source of discontent for workers. In 1989, students protested in Tiananmen Square against corruption and for democracy. The Beijing Workers Autonomous Federation showed solidarity with the students and were critical of official trade unionism – the fifth example in modern China's existence of workers asserting political demands (Chan 1993). As a result, the Chinese Trade Union Federation called for the banning of the BWAFF and conflict and repression ensued. Another important factor in the reform process was that by the late 1980s the roll out of Special Economic Zones was well underway in more than a dozen coastal cities. Pringle (2011) examined whether workers themselves exercised agency in winning the benefits of *danwei*, or whether the system was really just a form of control over the working class. The former interpretation then sees events in the late 1980s as a rear-guard action by workers to defend the social and economic gains from globalization and reform.

While in a sense, China's reform path was taken more slowly and conservatively, it entailed massive layoffs in a short period from 1995-2000 – state employment fell by 48m in that period (Cai 2005:1). Thus, it is the violation of the 'subsistence ethic' (known as the iron rice-bowl) and economic grievances that primarily drove labour protest in this period (Chen 2000). In a wide-ranging comparison of Russia and China in 2005, Clarke drew attention to further commonalities during the periods of marketization, such as the attempts in the 1990s to exert more control over workers, and the attraction to reforming elites of the role of unions in ameliorating tensions rather than restraining managerial ambitions (Clarke 2005: 4). In characterizing the 1980s to the present as a drawn-out period of the dismantling of all social and economic guarantees by (former communist) states towards workers, Clarke emphasized not the conservatism or indolence of union leaders, but the structural limitations legacy unions are subject to. Unlike in Russia, Clarke saw the outcome of reform in China as characterized by a paradox of both stricter subordination of unions (because of Tiananmen) but also an enhancement of their status and ability to promote unions' own position – within certain limits (Clark 2005: 10). In this sense, the Chinese Communist Party's chosen path has been more effective in stifling the opportunities for independent unions to emerge. Nonetheless strikes and protests, particularly in southern China, came to a head in 2002 – largely outside union structures and challenging their legitimacy. Clarke and Pringle (2011: 64-66) provided evidence of a similar arc of labour militancy in Vietnam rising in the 2000s reaching its height in 2008 and mainly in private and foreign-owned enterprises. Unions there show little appetite for militancy and conflict takes the form of direct action because of the failure of the dispute resolution system – an overly complex legalistic procedure (Clarke et al. 2007).

Scholarship on the renewed labour conflicts in China in the twenty-first century discusses the challenges to cooperation and collective resistance. The main targets of action are local governments and State-owned Enterprises management where workers aim for concrete economic goals in a context where there does exist a political space for collective action to be exploited, and local, peaceful, non-political action is non-contentious, but still a channel to pursue workers' interests (Cai 2005). The solution from the state's perspective has been the development of collective consultation which only involves the top hierarchy of unions. A second aspect is contractual regulation which contains little detail and only minimum standards in wages and safety, essentially just confirming national and local laws. This legalistic tripartite solution was inadequate to stop exploitative forms of labour relations in China in the early 2000s where there were over 100,000 workplace deaths due to accidents (Metcalf and Li 2005), and ineffective and far short of any genuine collective bargaining (Clarke et al. 2004).

The legal regime in labour relations has not prevented growing unrest and protest, particularly after the 2008-2009 Global Financial Crisis. Chinese migrant workers have become more able to challenge the state's

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<sup>1</sup> The rest of this paragraph's historical summary is mainly taken from Pringle (2011).

regulatory regime but are as yet constrained judicially and, therefore, a breakthrough to introduce the recognition of collective rights is unlikely because of both the continuing manipulation of unions by the state and the influence of global capital (Chan 2014). It appears that China will continue to try to impede the emergence of collective contestation by unions by pursuing corporate social responsibility programmes, but this will hardly prevent future conflict. In a case study on Honda, Chan found strikes in 2010 heralded a new stage of labour resistance because of their success, duration, level of organization and political demands (for democratic union reform). Unlike in Russia, these strikes also acted as an impetus for other autoworkers in China. Unlike in Russia, these actions also forced the issue onto the agenda of the Chinese Federation of Unions. According to Chan, only the opposition of overseas business interests halted the process of transformation of unionism in China into a system of collective bargaining. Since those 2010 strikes, Zhang and Yang (2019) are more guardedly optimistic – challenging the view that trade unionism is a dead end but sensitive to the possibility of a more repressive turn. They find that democratically elected unions exploit a limited space of opportunity in the system to carry out genuine collective bargaining and incrementalism, which have improved workers' lives. Friedman (2014) proposes that a key problem in China is the 'insurgency trap' of labour politics – cycles of disorganized violent confrontation over labour conditions, the formation of informal associations that try to resolve grievances, and vigilante and police responses. Insurgent workers are dispersed in so many different enterprises that unions struggle to build meaningful connections with them. Therefore, labour unrest is more like a social movement than the classical framing of labour organisation and contention. Thus, the density of informal interpersonal networks engenders trust, solidarity and reliability in protest mobilisation (Liu 2016), yet fails to translate into coordination and solidarity between different workers (Cai 2005: 6).

Finally, turning again to Africa in the contemporary period, today one can observe similar legacies to those that exist in the global north post-socialist states – widespread yet decaying membership, organized and less organized strikes in response to privatisation and other common grievances, along with coopted and demoralized unions. Pitcher and Askew (2006) writing on Tanzania railway privatization and strikes in Mozambique argued the utopian imaginings of socialist period continue to inspire overt resistance in the present. Collective identities opposed to privatisation in Tanzania were partly facilitated by union work. More broadly, research on unions as engines of social movements is widely accepted in the African cases. Waterman (1993) argued, in the case of South Africa in the 1980s that mineworkers unions were not 'traditional' but inflected by cultural affinities and community loyalties. While South Africa was never a socialist state, the post-Apartheid country has been shaped by the ANC, a member of the Socialist International and an uneasy alliance of nationalists and socialists. South Africa's transition can, therefore, be compared to those in post-socialist countries in terms of its neoliberal turn and privatisation (Peet 2000). Further, unions in post-socialist countries from Africa to Eurasia similarly face the challenge of the growing salience of how to connect to informal workers, something African unions, with their experience of alliance with broader societal militancy, are arguably better equipped to do (Ness 2016).

## **Conclusion**

Ticktin (1992), one of few to predict the USSR's demise, focussed on workers' structural power under communism as a key factor in the system's inability to reform itself. The USSR after Stalin was fundamentally unable to discipline workers. Harrison (2002) argued that the incentive system failed to raise productivity and, under Gorbachev, workers lost their fear of penalization and were rewarded with concessions, accelerating a breakdown in Soviet institutions. Ironically, the Soviet project partly failed because the structural strength of the working class prevented rapid and full marketization, so to 'succeed' the system had to destroy itself, and the destroy the lives of countless workers and their families in the process (Ticktin 1992).

Scholarship since 2010 on unions and labour power more generally after communism can be characterized

as moving away from an interpretation of quiescence and decaying paternalism towards a greater appreciation of three factors. Firstly, an understanding that the potential power of workers' structural position has real effects – in the Russian case the latent threat of labour-related unrest is enough to worry even the authoritarian Russian state. Secondly, researchers pay attention to how new independent unions, even if only occasionally successful provide models of learning and action for others; these forms of action are hybrid forms of labour agency rather than traditional balloted strikes such as informational pickets. In the words on Wada, strikes have become 'modular' (2012). In the West we see the 'strike' transfer to non-traditional labour contexts (sex strikes, student strikes, climate strikes). But we can equally talk about modular labour protest in post-communist countries that use repertoires of contention borrowed, transferred and sometimes adapted from other actors, issues and locations. Thirdly, and relatedly, scholars acknowledge the influence of social movement theory on labour organisation, agency and action – although this position remains subject to critique (Neary 2002).

Varga (2014) in Romanian and Ukrainian contexts drew specific conclusions about the difference between labour strength and representation. Representation requires unions that are autonomous, legitimate and effective. This is simply not possible consistently in places like Ukraine and Russia because most union activity is co-opted or controlled by management. Varga also reminds us that despite continued paternalism and legal constraints there are specific strategies unions can use to succeed in protecting workers, including making their threat-potential known, sometimes in a political manner. So, it is important to recognise that nationalist challenging of grievances by elites has been successful and that the decay of legacy unions continues to be a distracting challenging, elite strategizing, even in the most authoritarian regimes like Belarus and Russia can be countered by workers if they are able to articulate labour interests. Varga (2014: 7-8) argued that 'loyalty' was a barrier to contention in the socialist period and has echoes today. Attachment of worker via feelings of loyalty prevents unrest – an argument of relevance too beyond post-communist countries expressed in the phrase attributed to Gramsci 'hegemony is born in the factory' (in Varga 2014: 189). Varga does not argue that this is a legacy of communism, but this is worth considering, not necessarily as part of the cultural transference of labour relations from that period, but as a structuring constraint given the insights of various scholars about the continuing relevance of paternalistic relationships. It might not be the case that employers can really meaningfully offer workers anything comparable to the social wage they received during communism, but we should not discount how the language of paternalism affects workers living in extremely difficult material circumstances in states where authoritarian populists can blame others and simultaneously prevent any circulation of discourses of worker solidarity or leftist ideology. The shadow of the discrediting of socialism is a long and dark one for workers in Eastern Europe. However, paternalism is still a meaningful language of communication and may yet provide some common terrain for workers and unions together to transform corporatism into contention and real collective action. A number of scholars draw on the concept of 'moral economy', arguing that the articulation of entitlements represents a meaningful resource to unions today and a positive legacy of the Soviet period (e.g., Morrison et al. 2012).

The appearance of independent and democratic unions is possible, even in increasingly authoritarian post-communist states. New unions like the one in Kaluga use unconventional methods of protest to promote worker interests. Entangled interconnections and dependencies of transnational firms along the value chain, as well as the differing national, political, and economic determinants of former socialist countries, make an appraisal of the situation of workers and their unions challenging. New unions successfully represent workers and challenge legacy systems by comprehensively organizing members often in foreign-owned firms. Nonetheless the prospects for lasting consolidation are not overly positive. Workers still have high primary bargaining power in markets where demographic change and pauses in productivity gains from automation constrain firms' actions. The Russian case of MPRA shows a notable drop in members due to the progressive deterioration in automotive employment associated with ongoing economic problems in Russia, leading to stagnation in the development of associational power. The unions' exclusive focus on the local level, while successful, precludes pursuing sector-wide and regional agreements. This obstacle continues up to

institutional level, where those new union formations have practically no way of overcoming the stalled institutions of employment relations marked by a continuing monopoly of traditional unions and a pseudo-paternalist state. Thus, a shift in the power balance of this established system is a long-term prospect. Ironically, it is the actions of authoritarian states that have the potential to accelerate matters. Continuing austerity policies in the public sector in Russia have led to more grassroots labour organization among public sector workers—in 2019, 20% of labour protests were by medical workers protesting low wages (TsSTP 2020). If activist unions are to regain the initiative, they need to transition from the locales of material production and enter the fray where neo-liberalization is now at its most disruptive in Russia—in the public sector, and among the new service sectors like Uber and food delivery (Morris 2023).

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