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CHAPTER 27

WORKERS UNDER
COMMUNISM: ROMANCE
AND REALITY

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INTRODUCTION

WORKERS are glorified in Marxist thought. Associated with advanced capitalist production, they are yet impoverished and alienated by it and thus have an interest in overthrowing capitalism and building a society free of exploitation and oppression. Where workers were drawn into revolutionary movements against capitalism, their relation to the regimes that claimed to represent their interests was fraught with tension from the start, even in the Soviet case where there was significant support among the small working class for the revolution of October 1917. Such tension was due in part to the chaotic post-revolutionary conditions that created considerable hardship for workers, and in part to the need of communist regimes to create the industrial base that Marx had supposed would pre-exist socialist revolution by depressing wages in favour of investment. Moreover, the fact that the communist regimes generally took industry into state ownership meant that worker dissatisfaction with poor working conditions tended to be directed against the government, notwithstanding their claim to be workers' states.

As communist states matured, their relationship with workers settled into an uneasy mutual dependence. Workers depended on the state for employment and frequently also for housing and food, while state enterprises counted on them to fulfil plans to modernize the economy. Although millions of workers experienced upward social mobility either by moving from agriculture into industry or by being promoted into managerial positions within industry, the majority of workers, especially women, remained in low-paid, low-skilled jobs. The romance of workers being the masters of the socialist workplace increasingly contradicted the reality that trade unions were weak and subject to party control and legal rights to protest were non-existent. However,

workers enjoyed some latitude in the labour process, often able to impose their own rhythm of work and to resist the state's drive to raise productivity and improve the quality of output. Politics in the workplace was complex and varied over time and across countries. A minority of workers—sometimes large—believed in socialism and enthusiastically supported the state in its drive for rapid industrialization. Collective protests were rare, although they did occur, usually motivated by economic grievances rather than demands for political freedom. Communist regimes celebrated the working class and, to some degree, workers were privileged compared to the peasantry; but in reality, though they came to enjoy social and economic security in developed socialist societies, they were far from being major beneficiaries of socialism.

This essay compares the experiences of workers under communism in the Soviet Union, Poland and East Germany, China and Vietnam. The literature is richest for the Soviet Union, but since the 1990s new archival sources and other materials have become available for all communist countries. First, the essay examines the early formation of state-labour relations that occurred in the context of war mobilization, the nationalization of industries, and the implementation of key socialist economic programmes such as collectivization and forced industrialization. What transpired in this period often cast a long shadow over the life course of communist regimes. The second section turns to the factory environment to analyse the authority structure governing the shopfloor and the behaviour of workers. In the conclusion, I will suggest how the study of workplace politics helps us understand the contradictions of communism and its eventual failure to provide an alternative to capitalism.

THE MAKING OF SOCIALIST WORKFORCES

All communist regimes emerged either from revolution or war. Some, such as the Soviet Union, China, and Vietnam, became embroiled in new wars shortly after their establishment. Workers' support for communism varied from fairly strong (the Soviet Union) to fairly weak (China) to non-existent (Eastern Europe, North Vietnam). While workers often welcomed the revolutions that were ostensibly on their behalf, their relationship with revolutionary governments was tense and occasionally violent. This was due not only to the fact that war and revolution produced economic strain and sometimes chaos, with pressure on living standards and desperate efforts to increase productivity, but also to the fact that most regimes moved quickly to take privately owned industry into state control, thereby making the regime the target for working-class disaffection. Over time, the massive expansion of the workforce that took place with rapid industrialization enabled communist states to shape its overall character; yet workers were far from being passive and submissive in the process.

In the Soviet Union, the First World War and the turbulence of 1917 had disastrous effects on the economy. The working class shrank as factories closed down, as workers returned to the villages, and as workers were recruited into the Red Army. The number

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of workers in Moscow fell from 190,000 in 1917 to only 81,000 by early 1921.¹ The loss of skilled workers, who had often been the Bolsheviks' strongest supporters in 1917, was particularly acute. Worker support for the Bolsheviks soon began to ebb in spring 1918, as economic conditions deteriorated. Workers took factories under their control in an attempt to keep them functioning; some were nationalized but many closed down. During the civil war (1918–21), there were severe shortages of food and fuel and the new government sought to curb labour turnover and intensify labour discipline. Workers' productivity plummeted, falling to 25 per cent of the 1913 level by 1919.² The government limited the autonomy of factory committees and trade unions, and sought to move to one-person management of factories, albeit with trade-union involvement. Trotsky's attempts to put key sectors under military discipline backfired. By spring 1921, there was an upsurge in worker discontent at continuing food shortages, abuses in the ration system, attempts to curb the independence of trade unions, and growing hostility to Bolshevik repression. Coinciding, as it did, with widespread peasant rebellion and the uprising by sailors at Kronstadt in March 1921, popular dissent forced the Bolsheviks to abandon grain requisitioning from the peasantry and labour militarization.

By the mid-1920s, economic recovery was under way but unemployment was rising as a result of demobilization of the Red Army, rural migration to the cities, and government efforts to rationalize production.³ Workers made some gains, as average real wages struggled to reach the pre-war levels and the average workday decreased to 7.5 hours from 10 hours in 1913.⁴ The emergence of food shortages in the cities in 1927–8, however, convinced Stalin that a mammoth effort to industrialize the country was necessary, which must be financed through the collectivization of agriculture. The First Five-Year Plan (1928–32), called for a 77 per-cent increase in industrial output, later upgraded to a 145 per-cent increase, to be achieved in four years.⁵ The sharp rise in demand for labour attracted to the cities millions of peasant migrants who fled the collective farms. About 23 million Soviet peasants moved to the cities during 1926–39, but labour shortage remained a serious problem until the mid-1930s. The massive entrance of young and unskilled peasants into the workforce led to high turnover and low productivity. Worker living standards declined throughout the 1930s. The labour unrest that had continued in the 1920s, albeit at a lower level than in the civil war, began to tail off in the 1930s as draconian labour discipline was enforced, although as late as 1932 there was a wave of strikes in the Ivanovo Industrial Region.⁶ Yet urban life was still better for the millions of new workers who were former peasants. Many of them could take advantage of new educational opportunities and socialist competition campaigns to advance their status.⁷

A different situation existed in East Germany and Poland, as well as in most of Eastern Europe. Prior to the war industrial development was relatively advanced in East Germany and there was a large and disciplined working class. Amid the chaos left by war hungry workers roamed the countryside looking for food and failed to show up for work. Pre-Nazi workplace councils were revived in thousands of enterprises, through which workers seized control of enterprises to create better working conditions, to take revenge on former Nazis, or simply to protect their sources of income as food became scarce. The Soviet occupation government at first neglected industrial production, but

changed its policy when economic conditions worsened at the beginning of the Cold War in 1947. The new policy, which amounted to the full transfer of Soviet-style labour regime to East Germany, included measures to improve welfare and working conditions together with incentives to strengthen discipline and boost productivity. A socialist competition movement was launched, modelled after similar campaigns in the Soviet Union. The government also sought to strengthen its control over workplace councils through communist party organizations in enterprises. While workers welcomed wage rises and better working conditions, they resisted the attempt to restore piecework and wage differentials linked to work norms, viewing these measures as part of a Russian scheme to exploit Germany. The proportion of the labour force on piecework thus increased very slowly, and generally wages rose faster than productivity.⁸ The open border with West Germany and the shortage of skilled labour made it difficult for enterprises to enforce discipline. If pressed too hard, skilled workers could simply flee to the West.

In 1952, East German leaders began the collectivization of agriculture and industrialization as part of a comprehensive programme of socialist construction. Increased investment in heavy industry and defence was to be financed by tax hikes and cuts in social services and consumption.⁹ Workers' living standards deteriorated rapidly as a result, even though workers fared better than other groups such as farmers and artisans. As prices rose, goods disappeared from stores. The Socialist Unity Party (SED) government ordered enterprises to enforce discipline more rigorously and to raise work norms by 10 per cent. This was the context in which workers' protests erupted on 17 June 1953 and spread to 272 cities and towns across East Germany. Soviet tanks brought the country under control, but SED leaders were forced to make quick concessions to defuse the tension: the new norms were rescinded and the government thereafter consistently spent more on consumer goods and social welfare. At factory level the trade unions, controlled by the SED at central level, often colluded with worker demands. By the 1960s, workers were over-fulfilling 'slack' norms by an average 160 per cent.¹⁰ The revolt of 1953 cast a long shadow over labour policy, and SED leaders were ever careful to avoid similar unrest.

Poland was much less industrialized than East Germany and suffered the loss of nearly one-third of its population and 65 per cent of its industrial plants as a consequence of the war.¹¹ Following Soviet occupation in mid-1944, in a desperate economic situation, workers took over many enterprises that had been under Nazi control or private ownership. By 1949 the economy began to stabilize, with wages rising and production of basic industrial goods returning to pre-war levels. But inflation soared in 1947 in part because of bad weather, triggering an open clash between communists and socialists over economic policy and political issues. The communists had initially supported the factory councils but, as they established their monopoly of power, merged the councils into a trade-union apparatus under party control. The socialists opposed this move but were neutralized through the arrest of their leaders. With industry in state ownership by 1947, the Polish Workers' Party found itself increasingly the target of worker disaffection. Proud of being Polish and Catholic, workers condemned factory managers and

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party officials as 'Germans,' 'Nazi collaborators,' or 'Jews'.¹² Lacking popular support, the communist regime was forced to seek an accommodation with the working class and, as in East Germany, it did so by tolerating low levels of productivity and by subsidizing food prices and rents. The wave of working-class unrest eased in the course of 1948, as the communist regime, by now entrenched, cut prices by 20 per cent and raised wages nearly 40 per cent. But real income was still one-third below its pre-war level.¹³

The death of Stalin in 1953 encouraged calls for Poland to develop a form of socialism independent of the Soviet model. In the wake of Khrushchev's 'secret speech' in 1956, which exposed the horrors of Stalinism, workers in Poznań on 28 June 1956 went on strike against new work quotas, for higher wages and lower food prices. The armed forces and security police unleashed brutal repression, killing scores and arresting hundreds. The political crisis that ensued led to the marginalization of hard-line Stalinists in the party leadership and the appointment of Władysław Gomułka as first secretary of the Polish Workers' Party. He sought a more conciliatory relationship with society, the independent workers' councils that had appeared during the uprising, for example, being tolerated until 1958 when the management prerogatives were restored.

In China and Vietnam, in contrast to Eastern Europe, communists came to power through popular revolutions, but in neither case did workers play a prominent role in the overthrow of the old regime. Both countries were far less industrialized than Russia in 1917 so the working class was tiny. In China the Communists did not encourage class conflict between workers and capitalists, calling during the civil war (1946-9) with the Nationalists (Guomindang) for 'mutual benefits for labour and capital'. When the Communists took Shanghai in 1949 workers were organized to protect factories, public offices, and schools against destruction by the departing Guomindang army and to restore production. Nevertheless worker expectations ran high and between June 1949 and May 1950 nearly 4,000 disputes and strikes broke out in the city, an unprecedented number.¹⁴ The immediate problem facing the new government was to stabilize the economy and revive production. To curb hyperinflation, stringent monetary and fiscal policies were implemented which led to lay-offs and closures. In private industry cooperation between workers and employers was encouraged through labour-capital consultative committees, which proved successful in resolving disputes. In industries that had passed into ownership of the Nationalist government, which employed about 750,000 workers and accounted for one-third of output, a 'democratic reform movement' led to increased power for workers through the factory management committees, which comprised equal numbers of representatives of the administration and employees, plus directors and technicians. In December 1951 there were worried reports that workers were indulging in 'extreme democratic phenomena'.¹⁵ Trade unions were given responsibility for social welfare in 1951, but veteran communist Li Lisan, the minister of labour, was dismissed for 'syndicalism', having advocated powers for the unions in the workplace that party leaders thought excessive.

The outbreak of the Korean War (1950-3) threatened China's fragile economy and, like the grain crisis in the Soviet Union in 1928, radicalized leaders' plan for a revolution in the economy. Labour restraint was now replaced by labour mobilization as

political campaigns against employer corruption got under way, the goal being ultimately to nationalize their enterprises. The 'Democratic Reform Campaign', launched in 1951, allowed workers to vent their spleen against their bosses. Simultaneously a series of more violent political campaigns attacked capitalists, managers of private enterprises, and those related to the vanquished republican government. By the end of 1956, nearly all privately owned enterprises had been brought into 'joint ownership' with the government.

The First Five-Year Plan (1953-7), like its Stalinist prototype, focused on building a heavy industrial base and led to more than a doubling of industrial output. Wages were kept very low in order to allow for maximum investment in industrial expansion, but welfare benefits and social insurance were relatively generous, sometimes amounting to as much as 80 per cent of the money wage. Workers in the state-owned sector, who comprised around 40 per cent of the workforce, were organized into work units (*danwei*) which distributed housing, foodstuffs, furniture, and other goods; ran nurseries, schools, and health clinics; carried out social and political campaigns; and approved marriages, divorces, adoptions, passports, and visa applications. Beneath these state employees were workers in the collective sector, which was created by combining formerly private workshops into cooperatives usually run by towns, counties, or municipalities; these were not paid according to state pay scales and were not fully covered by insurance or welfare. Beneath them, at the bottom of the pile, were workers employed on a temporary basis in state enterprises who received only limited insurance and benefits. In 1956 to 1957 more than 30,000 workers went on strike in Shanghai, mainly those left out of the new *danwei* system. The cleavage between the minority of state-enterprise employees who enjoyed an 'iron rice bowl' and the rest of the workforce had no parallel in other communist countries.

Despite the strike wave, economic conflict appears to have been limited. Workers' involvement in political campaigns, however, was a staple feature of Chinese communism. Popular support for the Great Leap Forward (1958-60), which was essentially a leap away from the Soviet model that had been influential up to this point, seems to have been widespread in town and countryside. Workers strove to achieve new records of output, but the result was to bring industry to its knees, as costs spiralled, waste of labour and raw materials reached eye-watering proportions, and productivity plummeted. From 1960 industry underwent a contraction of a magnitude almost equal to the expansion of 1958. In the wake of the disaster, the 29 million peasants who had flooded into industry were forcibly sent back to their villages. Thereafter, in contrast to the Soviet Union, industrial employment became unusually stable, with low turnover of workers in state- and collectively-owned industry.

In North Vietnam the communist government established in 1954 inherited a large portion of industrial enterprises owned by foreign companies. Both management and workers were retained but placed under government direction. As in China, the new government encountered problems of economic chaos and labour disturbances in privately owned enterprises.¹⁶ Within the first year, Hanoi witnessed nearly 700 labour disputes and strikes, in part because workers responded to new, progressive labour

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regulations issued by the government to win their support. Acting under Chinese guidance, Vietnamese communists also promoted consultation and cooperation between workers and owners and were cautious about implementing material improvements. Yet food shortages and inflation in the cities in late 1956 prompted tighter regulations on private trade and the launch of 'capitalist reform'. By 1960 all privately owned enterprises had become nominally 'jointly owned', but were in fact under full state control. This transfer of ownership occurred four years after the same event in China but did not lead to protests as it did in China. Yet the North Vietnamese state was never able to engineer rapid industrial growth as occurred in China, in part because of the war in South Vietnam in the 1960s. Neither was there large-scale rural-urban migration nor high urban unemployment.

The food shortages and inflation in 1956 caused a deterioration of discipline and productivity in many state enterprises and construction sites. Many workers quitted their jobs or simply declined to work for wages that had lost value. The government responded by ordering a wage reform and a new system of enterprise accounting by which enterprises were permitted to retain some profits if production exceeded state plans. In 1958, North Vietnamese leaders switched strategy again, impressed by the Great Leap Forward, launching a campaign for management reform that sought to strengthen party leadership in enterprises and to raise workers' political loyalty. The latter was to be achieved through political education and a new mechanism of 'production groups' designed to encourage workers' participation in managing the enterprise. Labour reports indicated an emerging hierarchy in which workers were assigned to political categories that each carried differential benefits. A divergence between state and non-state sector workers also emerged in North Vietnam in the 1960s, with the former enjoying job security, better welfare benefits, and urban residency that offered advantages in childcare and educational opportunity. This hierarchy was enforced by strict household registration systems that prevented rural migration and protected the position of state workers.

SOCIALIST WORKERS AND WORKPLACE POLITICS

The experiences of workers varied widely over time and across communist countries. The bright vision of socialism, described in the following verse taken from Soviet propaganda in 1930, must have excited many:

Brigade of shock workers form platoons!
 Brigade of shock workers form ranks!
 Look! Around us rise factories
 And smoke is visible from new blast furnaces...
 I hear with each blow of the hammer
 Catch up, catch up, and...surpass!¹⁷

The daily life of a typical worker in the barracks that popped up in numerous new towns at the same time was much less inspiring:

Kuznetsov lived with about 550 others, men and women, in a wooden structure about 800 feet long and fifteen feet wide. The room contained approximately 500 narrow beds, covered with mattresses filled with straw or dried leaves. There were no pillows or blankets. Coats and other garments were being utilized for covering. Some of the residents had no beds and slept on the floor or in wooden boxes. In some cases beds were used by one shift during the day and others at night...I could not stay in the barracks for very long. I could not stand the stench of kerosene and unwashed bodies. The only washing facility was a pump outside. The toilet was a rickety, unheated shanty, without seats.¹⁸

This description of a Soviet worker and his working conditions was made by an American worker who had gone to work in the Soviet Union in the early 1930s.

For manual workers, the story of socialist construction was one of sweat and hard labour, as described by a union cadre who visited a coal mine in Hong Gai, North Vietnam, in 1957:

At an open-pit mine we visited, it was raining on and off but workers had to keep on working to achieve their target. Their clothes were soaked, dried, then soaked again, from 5 am to 3 pm, but they were able to fill only 16 trucks, or six short of their assigned target. This meant they would have to work until 5 pm.... The long workday makes many workers tired but they dare not take a day off for fear of criticism.... For the workers at Coc 6 who live six kilometers away in Cam Pha, their typical day begins at 3 or 4 am and does not end until 5 or 6 pm, taking into account their commuting time.¹⁹

By the 1960s in East Germany, which had the most advanced industrialized economy in the Soviet bloc, socialism came very close to its ideals, as shown in the following recollection of a former female supervisor at the Chemiefaserwerk (CFW) in Premnitz. This factory, which produced artificial silk, was located in a rural area and did not enjoy any particular political connections to the centre.

When I came to the CFW in 1964, this was still a self-sufficient world. There were 7500 employees. The factory maintained a nursery (garden centre), a butcher, a piggery, a hospital, two dentists, a laundry, childcare facilities, cultural centres, sports facilities, a large accommodation block for apprentices, a school for vocational training, a library, a bath house, five canteens and so on...The CFW had flats [for its employees] and financed almost all sporting and social initiatives for the town of Premnitz...Within our family, we talked a lot about the CFW even after work....In the nearly 30 years that we worked at the CFW together, work and private life were often indistinguishable. It was not just 'earning money', it was life.²⁰

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Although material conditions and corresponding living standards were radically different from East Germany to China, socialist workplaces in most contexts shared a common structure of domination and particular forms of politics. These shared structure and forms of politics explain the similar dynamics of workers' relationship to communist states. The structure of domination included three main pillars: ideology, organization, and hierarchical classification.

Ideologically, the communist party devoted enormous resources to motivating the working masses and to propagating a romanticized view of workers, work, and the workplace. Workers comprised a special group to which history assigned the noble mission of burying capitalism and building socialism. Through each unit of output, workers contributed to building a new and prosperous society free from exploitation. Work was defined as a civic obligation of every citizen in the new socialist republic. By producing material goods useful for human society, work infused people with moral rectitude and was not just a means of survival. The workplace was represented not as a place where workers sweated but as a 'palace' where the new 'masters' of society exercised their 'glorious' rights and duties. Even hard labour was considered not so much as a punishment but as a means by which people who had committed the sin of crimes against the collective could redeem themselves.²¹ State-owned media invested huge resources into propagating ideology. Systematic ideological training was part of the school curriculum for all ages, including vocational schools. All workers needed to be taught not just industrial skills but also political literacy, understood as belief in socialism and loyalty to the party. The curriculum for a typical engineering course of study in East Germany included 300 hours of training in Marxism-Leninism, second only to mathematics (352 hours), but more than the class time devoted to engineering.²² Ideological education went beyond the classroom. A common technique used in China at the height of Great Leap Forward and in Vietnam in the late 1950s was the study session which required workers to assemble regularly over weeks or even months to listen to speeches about current political campaigns, world developments, the differences between socialism and capitalism, and actively to relate their own experiences as workers to national and international developments. Comparing China to the Soviet Union, Walder notes the 'utter seriousness with which the Chinese party undertook to educate, resocialize, monitor, and transform the thinking of the masses of workers.'²³ He believes that in Maoist China the political education of workers was a goal as important as that of promoting production.

So far as the second pillar of organization was concerned, a dense set of organizations governed industrial relations at the enterprise level. The administration consisted not only of the director and managerial and technical staff, but also the communist party, its mass organizations, and the security apparatus. Party organizations performed ideological education, oversaw socialist competition, conducted political recruitment, made personnel decisions, and ensured that production served the political goals of the central party leadership. The mass organizations included the trade unions which had a dual function, as vehicles to represent workers' interests and to administer certain welfare benefits, and as 'transmission belts' that mobilized members to carry out

party policies. In practice, the latter trumped the former function. About 97 per cent of all employed persons in East Germany were members of the Free German Trade Union Federation, which was typical among socialist countries.²⁴ More restrictive in their membership were communist youth organizations (the Komsomol in the Soviet Union, the Free German Youth in East Germany, the Vanguard Youth in Vietnam), and the women's associations. All these organizations were led directly by the party at the relevant level.

The security apparatus formed the last set of management organizations. All socialist states employed secret police and networks of informants to maintain surveillance over the people, including workers. Part of their job was to deal with political provocation and suspected sabotage, but the other part was to maintain close daily monitoring of the workplace, especially workers' political attitudes and relationships, through a network of secret informants who spied on their fellow co-workers. In countries such as China an important tool of the security apparatus was the dossier system that kept files on every worker, including available details on their family and class backgrounds, work histories, and political and social relationships. These files followed individuals wherever they went for all their lives.

The third pillar of control related to the systems of hierarchical classification. Through censuses, passports, and the dossier system, class categories were assigned to families and individuals.²⁵ In terms of the official representation of communist society, the working class was the most favoured social group, sometimes followed by the poorer strata of the peasantry or collective farm workers, followed by the intelligentsia or, where they existed, the 'middle peasants'. At the bottom of the hierarchy were 'petite bourgeoisie', 'bourgeoisie', and 'landlords'. In the Soviet Union in the 1920s, people with 'good' class backgrounds were given priority access to higher education, membership in the Komsomol and the Communist Party, and other benefits. Those with 'bad' class backgrounds could be denied housing and services and often suffered political disenfranchisement. Overall, the structure of state domination was both extensive and intrusive. It encompassed material and cultural life. It was embedded not only in the workplace but also in social and economic hierarchies.

How did workers perceive and interact with authorities? Were they ever able to maintain or develop a social identity autonomous from the state? The debate on these questions has been most extensive among Soviet labour historians, although the positions taken by each camp in Soviet studies enjoy support from historians studying other socialist states.²⁶ Early literature emphasized the totalitarian ambitions of communist states and projected an image of atomized workers as disempowered and submissive victims.²⁷ This is the baseline against which virtually all later studies argued. The debate has focused primarily not on the state but on workers. They have been portrayed in three analytically different but not mutually exclusive ways: as enthusiastic supporters, as adaptive opportunists, and as brave resisters/rebels. Socialist states had many supporters among workers. Most prominent among these are the heroes of socialist competition campaigns who were often ideologically committed. Soviet shock workers and Stakhanovites in the late 1920s and 1930s exceeded their output norms by high margins.²⁸

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In other countries model workers responded to the state's call for higher productivity, excelling at their jobs but often alienating their co-workers and even managers. They were often rewarded handsomely with material goods and political honours, so it is difficult to calculate the respective blend of conviction and self-interested calculation. But workers' support ran wider than that of these enthusiasts. In the Soviet Union the First Five-Year Plan opened up enormous opportunities for upward mobility for workers and members of other lower classes. Through extramural classes, through special workers' faculties, through affirmative action programmes to lower the entry requirements into higher education, the regime sought to create a loyal stratum of managers, technicians, and officials and to legitimize its claim to be abolishing privilege and creating equality. For these 'affirmative action' workers and former peasants, Sheila Fitzpatrick claims, the industrialization of the Soviet Union 'was an heroic achievement...and their promotion...was a fulfilment of the promises of the revolution.'²⁹ It was not simply their favoured status that made many workers believe in socialism. 'The generation that grew up in the 1930s took [the official ideology] to heart. Most memoirs about the period, including many written in emigration, recall the idealism and optimism of the young, their belief that they were participants in a historic process of transformation, their enthusiasm for what was called "the building of socialism", the sense of adventure they brought to it, and their willingness (at least rhetorical) to go off as pioneers to distant construction sites like Magnitogorsk and Komsomolsk on the Amur.'³⁰ A study of personal diaries written in the 1930s confirms that many Soviet citizens, including even those from politically disadvantaged backgrounds, truly believed in the justice and visions of the Soviet system and did not seek, or were unable to form, an identity autonomous from the state.³¹ The phenomenon is not limited to the Soviet Union. In East Germany, where socialism was imposed by Soviet troops following the Second World War, most people by the 1970s had come to accept socialist values and norms and expected that the political elites would conform to them.³²

Regardless of whether workers believed in socialism, most sought if possible to avoid, or at least to accommodate, the demands of the regime, rather than to resist them openly. The calculations involved in this operated at multiple levels, depended on context, and shifted over time. In public settings, it was not necessary for workers to believe in socialism, but it was often necessary to 'speak Bolshevik', to 'participate as if they believed'. As Kotkin argues, 'beyond merely calculating what they had to gain or lose, people made their individual compacts with the regime's ambitions, adopting them in whole or, more often, in part, having little else to guide their thoughts and actions and remaining prone to doubts and ambivalence.'³³

At the level of material life, conflict with the regime over work norms, worktime, benefits, housing, and scarce consumer items could be intense yet rarely flared up into revolt. This was because at the level of the shopfloor, workers had significant capacity to obstruct the aims of management.³⁴ This derived from the job security that workers enjoyed, managers under socialism being deprived of the ultimate weapon enjoyed by capitalists, namely, the right to fire workers. Central planning, moreover, created artificial labour shortages, so managements were reluctant to lose any labour, however poorly

motivated.³⁵ Moreover, as Soviet and Eastern European economies stabilized under political and resource constraints in the 1960s and 1970s, shopfloor dynamics shifted further in workers' favour. Most factory directors were now concerned simply to ensure that plan targets were met, even if this entailed semi-legal methods such as additional bonuses and false bookkeeping.³⁶ Managers learned to live with workers' rampant 'violations of labour discipline', such as absenteeism, drunkenness, and loafing, rather than try to crack down on them. Under such conditions only minimal effort was required of workers.

We saw that in 1956–7, workers in Shanghai engaged in strike action, but Andrew Walder argues that clientelism was the dominant mode of labour politics in China during the Mao era. In large state enterprises the party committee and its associated managerial hierarchy controlled distribution of goods, services, and career opportunities, and dispensed these preferentially to loyal clients. Party leaders and work-group leaders relied on a network of 'activist workers' whom they could trust in helping with production goals or with work-group management. These loyal workers were the principal recipients of material and symbolic rewards. But more generally, instrumental-personal ties created networks of loyalty and dependency among workers and employees more widely, which might centre on powerful individuals such as a shop director or party secretary. These networks highlighted the mutual dependence between workers and enterprise management as well as the tendency of workers to operate opportunistically.³⁷

Workers' opportunistic behaviour was also evident in their participation in the second economy, which existed in every socialist country. Studies of Russian émigré families in the 1970s suggested that between 9 and 14 per cent of workers and employees in state enterprises performed private work, averaging about eleven hours a week per person.³⁸ These individuals earned 44 per cent of their total income from their private work. Other studies confirm a similar level of involvement of workers in state enterprises in the second economy elsewhere, especially in Poland, Hungary, and southern Soviet republics.³⁹ In the economy of communist North Vietnam in the late 1960s, collusion between state and non-state sectors and workers' participation in the black market was widespread. Such opportunistic behaviour was so pervasive that it may be interpreted as a form of low-level resistance to the party-state.

A deep cause of dissatisfaction in socialist states was workers' sense of alienation from their jobs due to their lack of autonomy in the production process.⁴⁰ This is a problem Marx had identified in capitalism, yet the problem was just as bad under socialism. The stagnation of socialist economies by the 1960s aggravated the sense of alienation. The rapid mobility observed in the 1930s in the Soviet Union and in the 1950s in Eastern Europe was a one-time transformation that could not be duplicated.⁴¹ While the frame of reference for first-generation workers was harsh village life, the second or third generation who grew up in urban environments naturally expected much more, yet growth was slowing down in maturing socialist economies. While communist rhetoric touted workers as new masters, less than 20 per cent of Soviet workers participated in socio-political activities in the 1970s. Such participation brought a modestly higher wage and other material benefits but no upward mobility.

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Workers' latent but deep frustration due to alienation and lack of upward social mobility did not directly cause protest. Rather, most protests were triggered by sudden rises in food prices or the build-up of economic grievances.⁴² In Novocherkassk in June 1962, for instance, tens of thousands of workers marched on the streets to protest the steep increase in the prices of meat and butter and the tightening of output norms.⁴³ Dozens were killed when the military was sent in and seven workers were later executed. This was perhaps the largest incident of worker unrest in the Soviet Union between the early 1930s and before July 1989, when huge strikes broke out in Ukraine and western Siberia.⁴⁴ The strikes at the Gdańsk shipyard in Poland in December 1970 were similarly triggered by the announcement, two weeks before Christmas, of increases in the prices of essential consumer goods and the change in industrial wage scale.⁴⁵ Unrest quickly spread to nearby towns and even Warsaw, and involved tens of thousands of workers. Despite being violently suppressed, the strikes forced the ouster of Prime Minister Gomulka and the suspension of the price increases. Independent workers' organizations were maintained and led later strikes in 1972 and 1980, when Solidarity was founded.

In China, a different dynamic drove the wave of worker protests during the Cultural Revolution that were especially marked in Shanghai during winter 1966–7.⁴⁶ Some see worker politics as mirroring the factions within the student Red Guard movement, with 'conservative' workers' organizations made up of permanent state employees, defending local party and government authorities, and 'rebel' organizations mobilizing those with a grudge against the system, such as workers with 'bad' class labels, contract and temporary workers, or young apprentices.⁴⁷ Others suggest that both conservative and rebel organizations consisted mainly of permanent state employees. The Workers' General Headquarters, under the command of Wang Hongwen, was the principal rebel organization in Shanghai, consisting of young, relatively educated workers, with rather high proportions of party and Youth League members. These rebels stormed factory offices in search of files, dragged factory officials to mass denunciation meetings where they were publicly humiliated. By contrast, the leaders of the Scarlet Guards (*chiweidui*), the main conservative organization—which claimed at its peak 800,000 supporters—had all been party activists, 'labour models', 'advanced producers', although—to complicate matters—some with questionable dossiers enlisted on the conservative side to minimize risk. Despite the turbulence in factories in 1966–9, industrial relations changed little. The revolutionary committees that the Mao leadership gradually established created new forms of domination on the shopfloor in which patronage and demonstrations of political loyalty were critical.

Workers' experience under socialism varied widely over time and space. Nevertheless, all workers were subject to state-imposed forms of domination at the workplace and in society at large. This domination was the effect of a powerful ideology, dense organizations, and social hierarchies that were mutually reinforcing. Many workers actively supported communist goals and were rewarded, but they constituted a minority. The majority of workers were never passive followers: they learned to manipulate the system to protect their interests: either by appropriating the official rhetoric, or by everyday forms of resistance, or by cultivating personal-instrumental ties. Manipulation provided only

temporary relief but not an escape from the daily frustrations of communist societies, including the lack of individual freedom, alienation from work, declining real wages, severe shortage of consumer goods, and high levels of sectoral inequality in the Chinese and Vietnamese cases. These frustrations occasionally erupted in unrest. In general, it would be difficult to speak of there being class consciousness among workers, although Poland was an exception, since unrest fostered a workers' identity independent of the state and led to their bringing down the regime in 1989 with the help of dissident intellectuals and the Catholic Church.

CONCLUSION

The study of workplace politics under communist regimes suggests that three core elements together formed the character of communism in practice, namely its romantic, ambitious, and coercive tendencies: communist regimes propagated a romanticized view of workers, were driven by the ambition of burying capitalism, and exhibited a penchant for coercion and violence. Here in lay the central contradictions of the system. Workers were heroes in communist ideology yet were treated as mere instruments for the expansion of production. Nevertheless the romantic discourse was as much a part of workers' experience under communism as the coercive institutions they detested. Their general acquiescence in the contradiction between discourse and everyday perpetuation of the system was at the root of the occasional bouts of protest and the eventual rejection of the system as a whole. In the long term, against the background of stagnant or declining living standards, propaganda failed to enlighten most workers and coercion failed to produce disciplined and efficient ones. Workers may have been disempowered but they were not powerless to manipulate and resist the system.

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