Perestroika and the Soviet Working Class

PATRICK FLAHERTY

Introduction The watershed party plenum of January 1987 propelled the debate on the future of the U.S.S.R. beyond the discussion of whether the Gorbachev government would undertake a fundamental restructuring to how far and in what direction these reforms would go. The majority of the Soviet power elite would undoubtedly prefer a simple decentralization of the old administrative matrix, including an increased role for markets and a consolidation of the Rechtsstraat, without any problematic experiments in economic democracy. However, there are other forces at work, forces which can best be understood by focusing on the attitudes of the Soviet working class.

Western observers customarily fasten on the obvious production apathy, the seeming passivity of Soviet workers, without bothering to inquire into its material and ideological determinants. As a result, the political character of the Soviet working class remains ill-defined and constitutes a missing link in conventional analyses of the Gorbachev reform process. This article will try to provide such a link by examining the motives which underlie the political disengagement of Soviet workers. In doing so, the aim is to establish whether some change in the attitudes of the Soviet working class is possible and to what end. Might some segment give their active support to a reform coalition committed to a transforming the rationalizing Perestroika of current liberal reformers into a radical Obnovlenie (democratic socialist renewal)?
The Making of the Soviet Working Class

In 1985 the Soviet working class numbered 94 million (81.7 million urban workers and 12.5 million agricultural workers) and made up 72 percent of the economically active population. The main characteristics of this group reflect its historically telescoped origins: the rapidity of the accumulation process drew a flood of dispossessed rural migrants into an urban industrial environment in a very short time. An estimated 8.5 million made this move during the First Five-Year-Plan alone. Overall, the educational levels attained by this new industrial workforce were low: on the eve of Stalin’s death, a mere 1.4 percent of the industrial labour force had a secondary education while 24 percent had no schooling of any kind. Sociologists uniformly describe this first generation of the working class as selflessly nationalistic and relatively undemanding in material terms; the difficult and emotionally charged years of industrialization, war, and reconstruction bred spartan attitudes.

Educational levels among the working class had risen from an average of 2-3 years of schooling in 1941, to 5-6 years in 1960, and to almost 10 years by the mid-eighties. Over 60 percent of those now entering the workforce have a full secondary education and half are certified specialists in some vocational trade. The proportion of industrial workers in highly skilled job categories has doubled, going from 14 percent (3 million) to 28 percent (8.8 million) between 1962 and 1985, while the proportion of unskilled labourers declined from 52 percent to 29 percent. By the early eighties, roughly 70 percent of industrial workers in the major manufacturing centers had had at least ten years of on the job experience, and 40 to 50 percent had spent their entire working life in the same factory. The gigantism and anonymity of the typical Soviet factory has become a commonplace but what this means in concrete terms is that 66 percent of the industrial labour force works in plants employing more than 1,000 people, and an additional 13 percent hold jobs in enterprises with between 500 and 1000 workers.

The improved levels of education, skill and experience have been accompanied by very slow improvement in living standards. The Stalinist accumulation model was driven mainly by forced savings which kept industrial wages hovering close to the minimum subsistence level until the mid-sixties. The heavy emphasis on investment meant that between 1940 and 1985, the total value of fixed production assets expanded by 2200 percent, and capital investment by 2400 percent, while the production of
consumer goods and real income increased by only 1300 percent and 650 percent respectively.\textsuperscript{9} Most of the progress made by consumers came during the Brezhnev era. Indeed, by 1986 the number of Soviet families earning a monthly per capita income of 100 roubles leapt from 4 percent to 65 percent; 31 percent were earning above 150 roubles a person.\textsuperscript{10}

However, even these levels still fall well short of the 200 rouble budget stipulated by some Soviet sociologists as the minimum required to enjoy a well-rounded life. The continuing limitations of the Soviet diet are evident from estimates suggesting that annual per capita meat consumption comes to 75 percent of an ideal nutritional norm,\textsuperscript{11} while the equivalent figure for milk and dairy products is 80 percent, eggs 89 percent, vegetables and melons 78 percent, and fruits and berries 51 percent.

Although the deficiencies remain, Soviet living standards have also registered the effects of the income revolution of the past two decades. Radio ownership has increased from 46 percent in 1960 to 96 percent in 1985, television ownership from 8 percent to 97 percent, and possession of a personal automobile from a minuscule fraction to 16 percent of all families today.\textsuperscript{12}

The Soviet industrial working class is no longer dependent on a barely literate and politically pliant, surplus agricultural population for its own renewal. The core of this working class is now a cohesive, social group with an inherited collective memory, accustomed to improving living standards and increasingly demanding in both economic and political terms. Having recognized this change, Soviet reformers regularly urge orthodox economists to overcome their habitual “neglect” of questions of consumption and living standards. They warn of the political dangers inherent in conservative proposals to push the level of popular consumption beneath a consensual “minimum threshold” in order to finance industrial modernization.\textsuperscript{13}

Even at this early point in the reform process, cautious Soviet observers are commenting on the way “people are beginning to take a second look at social flaws that previously had been viewed as necessary and natural.”\textsuperscript{14} Entrenched in a full employment economy and working in highly concentrated settings, the Soviet working class would seem to have enormous latent power and organizational resources at its disposal. If the current version of Perestroika were perceived as operating against their common interests this latent power might well be used to affect change. Of course, such an objective potential is always limited by the
collective capacity for solidaristic action as defined by the historic process of class formation. A more thorough inquiry into the subjective dimension of class is required to determine whether some segments of the Soviet working class could eventually enter the reform struggle as the advance detachments of a politically conscious ‘class-for-itself.’

The Underpinnings of Negative Integration In a recent industrial experiment, a group of managers was granted the authority to broaden wage differentials between their specialized white collar staff and manual workers. Yet 85 percent of the sample declined to avail themselves of this new prerogative for fear that a steeper salary gradient “would strain relations within the collective.” Efficiency-minded Soviet economists constantly bemoan this informal egalitarian spirit or “levelling tendency” which prevails in worker collectives and which results in a grassroots hostility towards ‘excessive’ wage differentials. Orthodox sociologists voice similar complaints arguing that a chronic labour shortage and a rising minimum wage have provided the unskilled and semi-skilled segments of the working class with undue leverage in the unofficial bargaining for personal bonuses and perks used to supplement the low nominal salaries. The apparent circumspection of line managers, combined with the ‘levelling’ obstinacy of the workers, suggests the existence of a mutually advantageous social contract within the enterprise.

In addition, unorthodox voices are increasingly being heard. The Gorbachev Thaw has provided a few hints of the impending rehabilitation of the pioneering Soviet industrial sociology of the sixties. A liberal academic curtly brushed aside the ritual ideological verbiage to describe the objective social role of the industrial worker as “hired labour...in a situation where others decide everything for them.” A journalist compared the typical kolkhoz to an Antebellum “plantation” where the party official is reduced involuntarily to the role of a hard-driving “overseer” because only “compulsion and fear” can make up for a lack of material and moral motivation among the workforce. These iconoclastic sketches portray the typical worker as one who views the instruments of his labour as “somebody else’s property, as state property,” and treats them accordingly.

Reformers blame the authoritarian production environment for instilling a sullen “hired-hand psychological complex” in the vast majority of Soviet workers. A mere 11 percent of the workers
surveyed in one study agreed with the proposition that they personally had any influence in the running of their enterprise, and only 13 percent believed that the factory director paid any attention to the views of the work collective as a whole.\textsuperscript{21} Polls consistently reveal that more than 85 percent of the workforce see themselves effectively shut out of administrative decision-making both individually and collectively. The same number of workers also frankly admit to pollsters that they never put out to the best of their ability on the job.\textsuperscript{22} Soviet workers predictably respond to a demeaning \textit{dirigisme} with what the old I.W.W. wobblies used to term a 'conscientious withdrawal of efficiency.' This constitutes a heavy drag on productivity growth. Eloquent statistical testimony to the demoralizing and dangerous overall working conditions is the current official minimum job turnover rate of 15 percent, and the 690,000 workplace accidents (including 14,600 fatalities) in 1987, a rate which is three times the American average.\textsuperscript{23}

Rampant shopfloor dissatisfaction does not, however, lead directly to class confrontation. It represents one substratum of a multi-layered collective consciousness which could best be described as "negative integration."\textsuperscript{24} At present, the main divisions within the Soviet working class run along sectoral lines. The labour force working in the priority manufacturing industries was coopted into the "extensive growth" coalition assembled by Brezhnev in the late sixties. Tensions within the excluded part of the working class were dampened by the raising of the minimum wage and by greater official tolerance of the practice of supplementing sub-standard incomes by illegal means. The chief consequence of this Brezhnevian form of social contract has been to accentuate the tendencies towards a two-tier economy of privileged capital goods branches on the one hand, and resource-beggared light industry and service sectors on the other. The wage spread across sectors mirrors the overall investment pattern, and balkanizes the working class into branch-affiliated strata. In the construction trades the average salary is 112 percent of the average industrial wage (210 roubles per month); in transport the figure is 105 percent; and in science-related branches it is 96 percent.\textsuperscript{25} Conversely wages in secondary and tertiary sectors range from 63 percent of the average in health-care, to 69 percent in education, culture and the arts, 70 percent in housing and services, 71 percent in trade and 86 percent in agriculture. This segmentation of the labour force is further reinforced by a system of perks through which all workers employed at large production conglomerates,
regardless of job category, can count on both higher take-home pay and free access to a wide range of membership privileges, extending from child care and the provision of rationed goods to health facilities and vacation resorts. These “privileges for all” contrast starkly with the plight of the low-paid salesperson in a commercial establishment or a labourer in light industry, neither of whom are afforded these branch benefits; workers such as these must frequently resort to petty graft to make ends meet. In one particularly notorious instance, 83 percent of the 600 workers at a meat processing plant had been brought up on pilferage charges, and 17 percent were repeat offenders.

For the favoured strata of the workforce, this clientelism provides a deterrent to risky collective action and thus contributes to the torpid stability of Soviet society. While the divides of a dual economy are not nearly as gaping as those of Western capitalism, such dichotomies do foster class divisions. A patron-client political identification together with a protectionist branch patriotism supersede a common class identification.

Under the Brezhnev regime, the problem of occupational wage differences was addressed in a way which succeeded in further complicating these divisions. For instance, the median wage of a lower middle-class specialist relative to an industrial worker declined from 146 percent in 1965 to 110 percent in 1986. Income was redistributed away from the specialized cadre (chiefly the lower level polyvalent engineering-technical workers and junior administrative officials) to the industrial working class and especially its skilled segments. This policy, initiated by the Khrushchev government to redress the wage differential problems inherited from the Stalinist era, was transformed under Brezhnev into a new social contract. During the sixties the express aim of the regime’s Tory socialism was to privilege key strata of the working class and inculcate in them the particularistic consciousness of a labour aristocracy, thereby making them immune to the subversive views of the the liberal intelligentsia. Whatever its longterm costs, Brezhnevism proved to be a viable alliance strategy for a conservative power bloc.

While the modern Soviet welfare state was, thus, largely the product of an alliance of convenience between Tory socialists and the working class, as in most Western capitalist states the political configuration reflects the relative strength of the major class contenders. The neo-liberal wing of the reform coalition attributes the Soviet economic slump to the exorbitant costs of maintaining
full employment and social entitlements. They point to the onerous costs of public consumer subsidies which have far outstripped real economic growth. These subsidies increased by 2400 percent over the past two decades from 3.5 million roubles in 1965 to 84.6 billion roubles in 1987. As a remedy the technocratic reformers propose at least the partial recom-modification of many essential social services. A scheme to establish a two-tier public and private health care system typifies their thinking in this regard. The storm of public protest elicited by this first skirmish in the struggle to renegotiate the microeconomics of the Brezhnevian social contract, provides a rare glimpse of the power relations sustaining the political equilibrium of the past twenty years. The reproduction of the existing system remains very much contested terrain both within the workplace and the broader political sphere.

The inevitable outcome of Tory socialist corporatism in a full-employment command economy is an “endless power game of passing the buck” in which enterprise management and the workforce arrive at a mutually self-serving modus vivendi, and effective central authority is dissipated in a maze of alibis. It is here that many reformers identify the main political obstacle to Perestroika. A non-antagonistic contradiction between the interests of the “administrators and the administered” has been transmuted “into a solidarity of a different type—the joint interests of the administrators and the administered in reducing the exacting intensity of demand in regard to the results of labour.” Some are even claiming that the real power in the Soviet system has gravitated to these branch corporations, unifying through a mutuality of interests the entire administrative-economic hierarchy, from ministers to workers, and forging a formidable sectoral alliance “corrupted” from top to bottom by a common stake in the preservation of a parasitic status quo. Most of the Soviet working class was successfully incorporated into the Brezhnevian power bloc on the basis of a demobilized and depoliticized negative integration which became one of the essential mainstays of the conservative consensus of the late sixties and seventies. The mutuality of interests between the hegemonic fraction of the dominant class and the working class remains ambivalent and contingent.

Working Class Consciousness To publicly report on the realities of factory life is a risky undertaking for a Soviet worker. But the
recent publication of several thoughtful letters to newspapers from workers, along with a rash of hard-hitting articles on industrial strife offer new insight into the politics of the daily grind. A young worker on his first job was told that his future prospects would be contingent on his submission to the unwritten law that "we do not criticize managers even at the local level, and we [reconcile] ourselves to this reality."\(^{36}\) Another described being browbeaten into internalizing the first commandment of survival in the industrial jungle: "You are the boss and I am a fool."\(^{37}\) Soviet workers are pressured from the outset to trade away the possibility of industrial democracy for the tangible benefits of immunity from managerial coercion and reprisal.

The informal rules of the game came demonstrably into play when a worker, who lacked the proverbial "flexible backbone," persisted in demanding the immediate introduction of Gorbachev’s self-management legislation after management had made known its uncompromising opposition.\(^{38}\) The factory administration eventually responded by framing the activist for theft, arranging his expulsion from the party, and then firing him in order to deter other would-be Sutiaga (shop-floor lawyers). In the face of a newspaper investigation, the factory manager did not even bother to justify the legal basis of his retaliatory action, warning that the vindication of this upstart would only embolden the other workers to "get out of hand." In his view, the occasional rebel must be made to pay for violating the central tenet of the Brezhnevian social contract — managers and employees "should not cross paths," administrative prerogatives cannot be infringed upon. In a more infamous incident, the management of a Leningrad factory succeeded after three bribery attempts in having a troublesome young worker committed to a psychiatric hospital in June 1986.\(^{39}\) The woman’s alleged mental aberrations consisted of her concern for the strict enforcement of health and safety regulations in the shop and vocal criticism of the maintenance of plush private dining quarters for management while workers went without.

These punitive acts should not be construed as emanating solely from a vindictive management lording it over a cowed workforce. The published accounts make it clear that the co-workers of both victims at best reacted derisively towards them, viewing their behaviour as quixotically naive. Yet others were genuinely resentful of those seeking to disrupt a factory routine with which they had long ago made their peace. This grassroots conservative

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dynamic also emerged in the case of an individual who dared to publicly expose the fiscal transgressions of his enterprise's party organization. He found himself immediately ostracized by his fellow workers as a "plague carrier." This estrangement even extended to his own wife and children who regarded his actions as foolhardy, and took to referring to him as the "recently deceased." The whistleblower provided a concise summary of the organizational rules of the game within the Soviet factory when he observed that "all know well the zones where criticism is prohibited and these are studiously avoided because the administration has taught memorable lessons to those attempting to trespass into these zones."

The corporatist status quo of the Brezhnevian social contract is the balance between the most that the dominant class will concede and the best that the subaltern class can expect, given the "mercilessness of life" in a modern industrial society. The Soviet working class has learned to be wary of change, as is reflected in an industrial survey which disclosed that 60 percent of those polled doubted whether Perestroika would bring them higher wages, while 37 percent were fully convinced that reform would result in a reduction of their income. In another study, 60 percent of workers expressed reservations about entrusting the collective to elect the enterprise director, and 30 percent agreed with the proposition that manual workers were not competent to evaluate management policy. The generalized deep-seated pessimism about the chances for the democratization of authority relations in the workplace is evident in the results of a poll taken at one major plant: only 7 percent of workers believed that self-management reforms would ever be implemented in full.

Intertwined with a defensive nationalism, this resignation and stunted sense of political efficacy represent the main strands of the stolid popular consensus which legitimated the Brezhnevian status quo. This closely parallels the pervasive sense of powerlessness and retreat into privatized apathy which drives much of the American working class into a politically inactive disengagement. A Soviet truckdriver frankly attributed the widespread "alienation" of his workmates to an autocratic production regime which forces individuals to "divorce[...] themselves not only from the administration but also from the collective, and immerse[...] themselves in the pursuit of personal advantage and comfort." This first-hand observation is borne out by recent sociological studies uncovering a rapid general shift of interests among workers.
away from the socio-productive spheres and towards the personal, family and consumer realms. In 1962 for example, 30 percent of the workers polled chose as their favorite activity a job-related, educational, or political pursuit; this figure had fallen to 5 percent by the mid-seventies. A leading industrial sociologist drew the inescapable conclusion from his findings that labour under Brezhnevism had undergone a definite process of “instrumentalization,” with workers beginning to seek gratification entirely outside the spheres of production and politics. However, accommodation and utilitarian individualism are only facets (albeit the most salient facets) of the complex subjective dimension of class and domination in Soviet society.

**Workplace Democracy Denied** Soviet conservatives ask if “it is worth letting the democratic genie out of the bottle” to overcome a stultifying social apathy, while radicals rephrase the question as: “How do we pry the democratic genie out of the bottle” when it stubbornly refuses to budge? The more candid journalists report that the public has reacted coolly to such Gorbachev innovations as multi-candidate local Soviet elections because they have no confidence in the “reality of change.” Little has been done as yet to dispel the “mentality established over the years that nothing depends on the expression of the will of the citizens.” Many workers view the government’s self-management legislation incredulously, as a rehash of the experience of the sixties when the industrial democracy provisions incorporated in the Kosygin reforms remained the most moribund of the many dead letters in that economic program. Some radicals are already despairing, on the basis of the first year returns, that the Perestroika will surely founder because the “resistance of the bureaucracy has become bound up with the passivity of the working class.”

However, informed observers and Soviet sociological surveys have consistently indicated that the notion of self-management remains extremely popular among the workers even if they are dubious about the possibilities for actually realizing it, and there exists real pressure at the base for the extension of direct worker participation in production — particularly among the younger workers. While more than one-third of the workers polled in the survey cited above lacked confidence in their self-management capacity, another 47 percent proclaimed themselves fully prepared and competent to evaluate and pass judgement on the most crucial administrative matters. A barrage of letters to the press disclose a
pervasive sense of resentment at the autocratic power structure within the workplace and the unwillingness of management to enforce even the existing legal procedures for worker consultation. A thirty-year veteran of one factory noted that he had outlasted eight different enterprise managers, and that, despite the legal obligations to do so, the central authorities had never once sought the advice of his plant party committee during any of these executive turnovers.54

Official unions are perceived even more contemptuously as a compliant adjunct of the party-managerial technostructure. As one shopfloor radical noted during an open plant meeting, the shop steward appeared to “care more about the production of motors than the interests of his fellow workers.”55 Inevitably this polarization encourages managers to treat workers like “second-class individuals,” and increasingly pits one against the other as the hierarchical pressures for increased productivity and quality intensify.56 Not surprisingly, many workers complain about the cavernous social distance between the administration and the labour force in huge anonymous enterprises, and demand the introduction of effective means to bridge this gulf.

Drawing on their own experience, the more radical workers reject, out of hand, changes directed at refining the existing system. Instead the shopfloor democrats call for the direct democratization of production on the logical grounds that a politically assertive working class can only be educated into existence through “participation in socially useful labour.”57 The most detailed manifesto of this grassroots anarcho-syndicalist tendency came to light in the form of a collective letter to Pravda signed by 38 workers and 8 engineers who advocated the immediate establishment of “direct workers’ control over the actions of economic managers from the enterprise to the ministerial level” as the most effective means of combating bureaucratic resistance to reform.58 Apparently influenced by the Yugoslav model, they contended that “workers control should be first of all democratic without any kind of central organs.” Under this radically democratized organizational structure, every elected official will be “obliged to resolve all questions imperatively on the spot, and remain accountable through this mechanism to the collective which elected him.” The anti-bureaucratic polemics of the Perestroika left have struck a receptive chord within the working class: the number of individuals identifying the apparatus as the main pole of conservative opposition increased from 6 percent in
1987 to 22 percent in 1988. A sociologist noted that the line which divides Soviet public opinion at present runs along the functional separation between "administrator and administered," and the latter are very much aware of the existence of a "power elite." Widespread egalitarian and populist sentiments are viewed suspiciously by liberal (as opposed to democratic) commentators as the political legacy of a compressed transition from an agrarian society to industrial modernity. These pose a danger because they breed "various forms of adventuristic vanguardist tendencies as well as strivings towards the regeneration of authoritarianism." While broaching the possibility that this working class political instability may give a third wind to Stalinism, the liberals appear much more concerned that the Perestroika left could find a solid base of support here for a maximalist program of reform.

The Soviet working class, both compromised by social power relations and pragmatically accommodating to the existing system found its niche within the Brezhnevian system as a result of concessions by conservative elites, seeking allies against a reform challenge. The relatively generous terms of the social contract were in part a means of appeasing the potential power of the working class, a pacifying tribute which the right felt obliged to pay. Now the self-confessed need of elite reformers for working class support against the right, has created an opening for a reordering of power blocs.

While completely untested in large-scale collective struggle, Soviet workers do not appear to be inextricably bogged down in a resigned fatalism or compensatory consumerism. Some, quite possibly substantial, segments have at least a vague sense of a feasible radical alternative to established production relations, and a confidence in their own collective political abilities. Soviet workers manifest a resentful sense of their subordinate status with respect to management and a developed awareness of group identity and common interests. The immediate grassroots success of the anti-apparatus campaign also testifies to a broader grasp of the totality of the power structure. At present, the reform elites are deliberately repoliticizing the working class as a prelude to remobilizing it if need be. A hard-fought contest, waged to liberalize the existing system, could quite conceivably galvanize the diffuse oppositionist strands of the worker mentality into a coherent collective class consciousness with its own autonomous identity and the will to push beyond an elite-led liberalization into
radical democratization. The Soviet working class has the structural capacity to become a major independent political force but only time will tell if it also possesses the organizational capacity.

**Working Class Subculture in Statist Societies** Soviet journalists constantly admonish that a “considerable number of workers are reacting unenthusiastically to innovations in the formulation of wages and even resort to outright resistance.” A recent survey disclosed that 40 percent of the workers at one plant favoured the maintenance of the present “levelling” wage structure, and opposed neo-liberal designs for steeper salary differentials. The resistance to neo-liberal attempts to disseminate a more aggressive ideology of meritocratic individualism emerged also in a public row over Special Schools for ‘gifted’ students in particular disciplines. These have provided children from the professional-managerial strata with a precious advantage in the race for entry into the ‘prestige’ universities and elite career tracks. Working class parents, egalitarian-minded intellectuals, and some liberal-baiting conservatives all complain that these Spetsshkoli were producing Spetsdeti (special children) whose academic leg-up was transforming an already skewed educational sweepstakes into a reliable mechanism for the transgenerational reproduction of a privileged class.

The festering resentment over educational inequities is significant for it suggests that a great many working class families have a shrewd grasp of the subtle class biases incorporated into nominally meritocratic school system. As in all other advanced industrial societies, working class socialization or learning to labour must remain a tense and contested process of social reproduction. A willingness to accept the terms of competition and conformism to dominant class values may benefit the occasional individual from the subaltern class but not that class as a whole. On the other hand, the determination not to compete on these terms may be interpreted as a radical act in itself, and an indication of a notable degree of collective class consciousness, because it represents a deliberate refusal to become complicit in a process of self-domination. The objective position of Soviet workers would leave them politically predisposed to take the egalitarian values propagated by the official ideology more seriously than the organs disseminating them, because they have the most to gain as a class by these values and the most to lose by any wholesale retreat from them.
Reform and Industrial Action Already during the first stages of Perestroika, festering antagonisms have erupted in acts of revolt against the old administrative structures. In one oblast, Soviet candidates nominated by the local authorities were completely shut out when normally rubber-stamp public meetings were allowed to vote by secret ballot. An enterprise collective rejected an apparently decent and capable managerial candidate who had been given the blessing of the ministry because the workers wanted to elect a favourite son in a calculated assertion of their autonomy. Obviously threatened by this turn of events, conservatives are raising the alarm about the proclivity of workers to elect managers who are at best “weather vanes and soft touches” and at worst “manic troublemakers and lying demagogues.” Roughly 20 percent of the managers in Soviet enterprise and an even smaller number of lower-ranking administrators had been subjected to a direct ballot by June 1988. Workers, however, have already proved that they have a mind of their own and are not afraid to exercise their new prerogatives against the wishes of the local political machine. Shopfloor determination not to defer blindly to expert opinion has led liberals to criticise the worker collectives for their attachment to what is disdainfully described as “mass meeting democracy” or, decoded, the tendency to insist on a meaningful self-management process.

Most of the reported shopfloor disturbances over the past two years have involved lone individuals courting martyrdom in duels of principle with a domineering management. But the grassroots ferment in recent months has assumed a more collective form with the organized insurgency of small groups of factory militants. The Summer 1987 Chekhov transport workers’ strike remains an isolated outburst of working class discontent which led to the formation of an unofficial strike committee. The informal representative group quietly ousted the discredited official union local, and entered into collective bargaining with management for better working conditions and benefits.

Iaroslavl: The Politics of the Factory Floor Last December, workers at a Iaroslavl diesel plant established their own “initiative group” to bypass a coopted trade union officialdom and organized a public picket in sub-zero weather. This wildcat action forced management to convene a plant-wide meeting over the sensitive issue of meaningful worker participation in the formulation of the enterprise plan. The insurgents were 60 first shift workers or
roughly ten percent of the factory workforce. After a raucous open meeting, the Initiative Group could only persuade 45 percent of their fellow workers to vote against the original management proposals stipulating a sharp increase in mandatory overtime. But in order to have their way on the 1988 enterprise plan, the factory management was forced to concede a far more limited overtime schedule for the following year.

The Iaroslavl dispute is noteworthy because it sheds much needed light on the micro-politics of the factory floor. The less sympathetic journalists singled out a "trouble maker and scandal monger" named Lev Makarov as the chief ring leader of the job action. Makarov has thirty years work experience behind him in metallurgy and construction, rising as high as foreman and clerk of the works on building projects. He holds a secondary school specialist certificate and managed to work his way through college, obtaining an evening school degree in the late seventies. His "difficult personality" has led him into frequent clashes with managements which do not gladly suffer working class malcontents. A long succession of administrative disciplinary actions and reprisals has forced Makarov to become what one administrator scornfully termed a "typical drifter" who changes jobs and residences often. Makarov has now been reduced to the "modest position" (not to mention back-breaking and dangerous) of a junior-grade smelter in the factory foundry.

Despite his low professional status, Makarov remains extremely well respected among his workmates. In the words of one journalist, Makarov has established himself "as what is scientifically termed a neformalnyi lider (informal leader) of the kind who does not allow a single managerial injustice to slip by and is always willing to stick up for the working man." The smelter earned his popularity by inserting himself into the vacuum left by a craven company union. Makarov has, in effect, become an unofficial mediator between a restive workforce and a pragmatic management which recognizes that this informal liaison work is indispensable to meeting production targets and keeping the lid on shopfloor tensions.

The outspoken Makarov also invites trouble for himself by the radical views he espouses. The foundryman is one of a sizable segment of the Soviet labour force which orthodox industrial sociologists categorize disparagingly as maximalists or anarcho-syndicalists. Even the most hostile accounts concede that Makarov "especially wins supporters among his fellow employees by
advocating the idea of complete worker self-management, that the administration should transfer power to the workers.” In arguing against mandatory overtime, Makarov contended that the immediate introduction of direct democracy would spontaneously yield the “discipline, order, rhythm, quality and efficiency” needed to achieve plan objectives which could not be attained through the old authoritarian methods.

At first, the factory management moved quickly to have Makarov fired when irate workers asked him to lead their campaign against the new work schedule. But the factory party committee, most likely under the prompting of a recently installed regional officialdom, intervened to rescind the punitive action. Only three of the two dozen speakers at the open meeting publicly endorsed the radical demands. The vast majority of workers continue to hedge their bets in this war of position with a vengeful management, held in check for the time being by more sympathetically disposed party functionaries. However, conservatives worried about mounting labour militaracy have to pause and reflect on the fact that almost 300 workers cast their votes in a secret ballot for a maximalist counter-program, even if they were not yet ready to risk public support. Despite the obvious difference in historical context, the spectre of Lech Walesa must haunt those Tories who are condemning the guarded media attention paid to Makarov, and demanding that this spate of labour unrest be “nipped in the bud.”

Far from a rara avis, Makarov is probably quite representative of the more well-educated and politically conscious strata of the working class, chafing under petty regimentation and prone to take literally the official ideology of a workers’ state. These subterranean factory group networks still remain inaccessible to Soviet and Western scholars alike. All that can be safely said at this point is that the presence of catalysts in the person of “informal leaders” and receptive constituencies within a disgruntled workforce, should be factored into the Soviet reform equation.

Liuberetskii: Democratizing the kolkhoz Another closely watched instance of these grassroots insurgencies flared up at a large kolkhoz in the Liuberetskii region of Moscow county where a small group of activists managed to persuade one-third of their fellow workers to sign a petition, which would legally oblige the farm administration to schedule an open meeting of the collective. By all accounts, the management of this collective
farm was a cut above average in terms of its efficiency and humane paternalism. Most significantly, the petition which gathered 443 signatures, was not motivated by a shallow populist desire to throw out some especially venal administrative rascals and replace them with more benevolent autocrats. The organizers of the petition were instead seeking a thoroughgoing democratization of the administrative process whereby the entire work collective would participate directly in the formulation of policy making and budgetary allocation.

The direct cause of the controversy was the unilateral decision of the kolkhoz management to assign newly constructed housing complexes to the highest bidder instead of continuing to assign them by seniority and need. The most aggrieved were the veteran kolkhoz families who argued that over the years, they had contributed the most to the investment fund used to build the apartments but now were no longer in a personal financial position to compete with younger newcomers on a free housing market. This controversy provides an example of the way in which the market-oriented economic reforms of the Gorbachev administration may come into direct conflict with democratizing political reforms designed to encourage workers to voice opinions that run contrary to a commercial ethic.

While clearly sympathetic to the predicament of the rebellious older workers, the investigative journalist made it clear that the antagonisms between management and the labour force cut much deeper than the immediate issue of housing. The controversy stirred up the resentment of a broader segment of workers who were no longer willing to put up with crucial decisions affecting their livelihood being made over their heads with only a pretense of consultation. This democratic assertiveness was also bound up with an egalitarian animus which called into question such petty but galling injustices as the Generalitet (General Staff — a sarcastic title for management) dining at their convenience in well-stocked private quarters while workers lost their whole lunch break in the long trek to and from the fields or by standing in endless canteen queues.

After some initial confusion, this relatively enlightened kolkhoz leadership responded to the controversy by strongarming some of the signatories into renouncing the petition, and branding the organizers as “enemies of the Perestroika,” and assorted other
Stalinist epithets. The crux of the dispute from the managerial perspective was aptly stated by one farm official:

They are the workers and we are the administration and the administrators. To each their own place and responsibilities. We concern ourselves only with the general interest of the kolkhoz.

The workers retorted that management routinely invokes the "interests of the collective" to impose its technocratic will on the farmers. Caught in the glare of the national media spotlight, management grudgingly caved in and agreed to abide by the law and convene a general conference. However, the determination of the kolkhoz authorities to defend their absolute prerogatives became evident when they later brazenly reneged on their promise and called only the compliant administrative board into session. Like other revanchist elements within the party-state establishment, the farm management had apparently interpreted the fall of Boris Yeltsin as a signal to begin once again stonewalling democratic initiatives at the base. The fact that Izvestiia chose to give banner headline treatment to the administration's betrayal of its earlier public compact, signifies that this strategically and symbolically important dispute is far from over.

The Iaroslavl and Liuberetskii industrial actions probably provide the most representative examples of the struggle to define self-management in the Soviet context at the present stage. But even at this early juncture in the reform process, it has become evident that the concerns of workers extend well beyond the anticipated economic issues to the most politically sensitive areas. Contrary to expectations, worker delegates delivered some of the most hard-hitting speeches to the June Party Conference in proposing the erection of a monument to the victims of Stalinism, assailing food shortages, or calling for total freedom of information with the scornful question: "What are we afraid of?"

The potential scope of grassroots initiative is exemplified by the case of workers in a large industrial town who established their own ecological defense organizations after learning of the high quantity of especially noxious air pollutants being emitted by local factories. Their organizing activity led to an open clash with management when workers at one plant defied orders to bring new machinery on line until pollution control devices were fully installed and operational. Their common program bears a distinctly Green tinge in advancing proposals for the elimination of nuclear power, the alternative development of solar, wind, and...
biomass power technology and a ban on the use of chemical fertilizers which are believed to be contaminating the agricultural produce of the region. Workers in Leningrad, Sverdlovsk and other major industrial centres have been following the example of intellectuals in spontaneously establishing their own factory political clubs for the ostensible purpose of coordinating their efforts in support of Perestroika. Responding to conservatives dismayed by these new social energies, one journalist warned that a new political age had arrived in which “labour conflict and even strikes have also become a part of our everyday life, whether we want to acknowledge them or not.” Gorbachev’s ambiguous appeals for industrial democracy are designed to shake up a lethargic power structure. But they also seem to be finding a popular resonance in much the same way that Franklin Roosevelt’s vague pronouncements on trade unionism created a more favourable political climate for CIO organizers. Currently this intricate war of position is fragmented into innumerable separate episodes of organizational hand-to-hand fighting which makes it difficult to draw hard and fast conclusions on any score, much less the final outcome. But all of these scattered outbreaks of moral rebellion share in common a latent democratic and egalitarian popular temper which in a charged political climate, can override an “Immediate Consciousness” shaped by the integrative mechanisms of the Brezhnev era. They may also portend the first stirrings of the new emancipatory possibilities believed by Bahro to be immanent in the conflict between existing social relations, and burgeoning technical-material and especially subjective forces. This democratic socialist awakening would take the form of a revolt of the “Surplus Consciousness” of working people against an insular bureaucratic rationality.

Conclusion This essay has tried to show that the Soviet working class is not the regimented and dispirited mass depicted in totalitarian theory. Instead factory life is governed by the obscure but ubiquitous shopfloor micro-politics of a tacit social contract embedded in an egalitarian sub-culture. Corporatism in late capitalism will favour the disaggregation and weakening of the class power of the labour movement, but the operation of a similar “triangle” of the party apparatus, managerial technostructure, and trade union machine may be promoting a process of class formation in statist societies. This would then be a necessary stage in the maturation of the Soviet working class towards self-
organization and the capacity of collective action.\textsuperscript{78} The solidaristic social wage cementing this mode of regulation could never be spontaneously maintained without the reinforcement of informal support mechanisms at the base. A disciplined permanent slow-down strike requires the existence of a shopfloor network of workers outside the established administrative channels, channels which ensure the modicum of collective exertion is applied to achieve plan targets and no more. This production soldiering and the brokering of a ‘fair day’s work’ must be enforced by individuals and mores commanding a genuine consensual authority, if an ingrained egalitarian bloodmindedness has remained so impervious to the determined onslaught of Soviet efficiency experts. The rapidly consolidated regional infrastructure of Solidarnosc sprang fully primed out of roughly the same sort of arbitrating primary groups which operated within the interstices of the production process during the seventies.\textsuperscript{79} Soviet workers can no longer count on the corporatist protection of Tory socialists against rationalizing neo-liberals eager to perform marketizing surgery with minimal or no anasthesia. An Optimalist scalpel which cuts repeatedly to the quick of working class interests, could eventually transform these informal base organizations like the Jaroslavl initiative group into the formative cadre of an autonomous labour movement, which either seizes control of the existing company union and brigade structures, or bypasses them to establish alternative defense organizations.

Notes

1. See G. Chiesa in \textit{L'Unita}, 13 November 1987. Chiesa argues that the cleavage within the power elite on the question of democratization precipitated the factional tensions which led to the November 1987 demotion of Boris Yeltsin.
10. Izvestiia, 10 October 1987.
23. Izvestiia, 27 January 1988; V. Gurev in Sotsialisticheskaia Industriia, 2 October 1988. The figure on job turnover is low by the American standard of roughly 20 percent annually. Soviet economists may assume that this figure is deliberately understated by managers with a budgetary interest in not reporting fully, or they could measure the present against the rates of the Stalin Era when "drifters" were subject to long prison terms. With respect to the appalling accident rate, it must be added that present levels are down 25 percent from that of 1980, and the Gorbachev government appears determined to improve safety standards by enlisting the joint efforts of workers and scientists.
35. V. Bogachov in Voprosy Ekonomiki, May 1988, p. 8; B. Kurashivili, Ekonomica Promyshlennogo Proizvodstva [Economics of Industrial Production], October 1987, p. 29.
37. Ibid. 2 June 1987.
38. Ibid. 1 March 1987.
39. Ibid. 11 November 1987.
42. Sotsialisticheskaia Industria, 7 August 1987.
44. Izvestiia, 16 June 1987.
52. See the survey of A. Nazimov and L. Gordon in Rabochii Klass i Sovremennyi Mir [Working Class and the Contemporary World], No. 4 (1986); A. Bogavic, Kommunist (Belgrad), 30 January 1981.
54. Pravda, 10 November 1986.
57. Pravda, 8 December 1986.
58. Ibid. 4 January 1988.
60. O. Shkaratan in Polityka, 4 June 1988.
61. A. Uliukaev in Nedelia, 9 May 1988. Soviet sociologists estimate that at least half of the present urban population originally immigrated to the cities from rural areas, and reason that the culture shock involved leaves these strata especially susceptible to radical politics of both the right and left.
63. Izvestiia, 5 May 1987.
64. V. Smilga in Lituraturnaia Gazeta, 24 June 1987.
66. Ibid. 18 April 1987.
69. C. Vadrot cites independent sources at the scene of the strike; See Le Matin, 17 September 1988.
70. Izvestiia, 26 December 1987; Sovetskaia Rossiia, 20 December 1987.