

“Workers form the exemplary class of economic, social, and psychological ‘losers’ of the postcommunist transition.”

Working-Class Resilience in Russia

JEREMY MORRIS

Ever since the end of the Soviet Union a joke has been making the rounds of the Russian factories and workshops that stretch from St. Petersburg to the Pacific Ocean: “In the Soviet Union, ordinary people always knew the authorities were lying about communism; now they realize that they were telling the truth about capitalism.”

Labor Shifts

Second in a series

A comment I heard during my fieldwork among Russian workers, barely scratching out a living in the harsh realities of this decade’s industrial capitalism, also sticks in my mind: “An ordinary *muzhik* knows many tricks and so won’t ever lose out. . . . Ask the people around you for help, try to do it, and people will try to help you.” These words of a 40-year-old forklift driver working in a brick factory sum up two indelible facts of Russian working-class life both before and after communism: the adaptability and resilience of workers, stemming from their deep conviction that the state cannot be relied on, and the essential need for mutual aid and informal social networks of support in order to survive as an “ordinary *muzhik*.” This word originally meant “peasant” but now approximates to “guy” or “bloke” and connotes working-class status, if anything in a positive way, similar to “Joe Sixpack.”

While the effects of Western sanctions on Russia remain unclear, so too does the impact of the state’s attempts at reviving domestic industry and agriculture. The situation of workers and labor relations therefore becomes ever more important. On the one hand, the government—even the security services—is devoting increasing attention to coercing workers (witness recent draconian anti-

strike restrictions under the Labor Code of 2001, and harassment of independent unions). On the other hand, there have been piecemeal attempts to co-opt workers by drawing them into a populist movement, the All-Russia People’s Front (ONF) proposed by then-Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in 2011 as a response to Moscow protests against election rigging, without any real attempt to improve their material lot. Incomes for manual laborers have fallen alarmingly since 2009.

These and other efforts indicate that the government has come to realize that workers have potentially formidable structural power, given a general shortage of skilled labor in the country. Indeed, the initial focus in the founding of ONF was on industrial modernization and the inclusion of business and union organizations under the movement’s umbrella. However, this front, like multi-party elections and other government structures, is largely a façade. Beyond personalized elite politics, there is an absence of effective institutional mechanisms for responding to policy challenges in today’s Russia.

SLOW BLEEDING

Never before since the end of the Soviet Union has the policy challenge from labor been so pressing. Particularly for people in blue-collar jobs, the past 25 years have illustrated the grim reality behind that joke about communism and capitalism: they have had to endure the dislocations inherent in the massive economic transition to a system at least resembling market capitalism from a previous order promising full employment, secure jobs, social mobility, and decent employee benefits, if not pay, to working-class people. Many factories closed completely, while some hung on through the 1990s in smaller and smaller iterations of their former selves before disappearing. It is often thought that the transition brought about mass unemployment, but in the blue-collar sector it was

JEREMY MORRIS is an associate professor of Russian and postsocialist studies at Aarhus University. His latest book is *Everyday Postsocialism: Working-Class Communities in the Russian Margins* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

more of a slow loss of industrial lifeblood as enterprises used natural attrition to reduce headcounts.

Much more keenly felt in the living memory of working people is the massive destruction in the purchasing power of incomes and the real-terms reduction of those incomes, which were left unindexed throughout the high-inflation 1990s and early 2000s. Employees of some obviously insolvent enterprises faced long-term wage arrears. This is really the story behind blue-collar workers' support for the present government: relatively early in Putin's tenure, they, more than the small middle-class, experienced sustained above-inflation boosts to their take-home pay. However, that recovery ended and in fact went into reverse after 2009 with the global economic crisis, falling oil prices, and now the sanctions imposed in response to Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and military intervention in eastern Ukraine.

For example, one of my key informants earned 18,000 rubles (\$600) a month in a cement factory in 2009, which could just support a family. In 2016, because of stoppages due to falling demand, he earns only 8,000 rubles. Compounded by ruble devaluation, this is barely \$125. Add to that high inflation in staples (only partly due to sanctions, including the self-inflicted retaliatory embargo on Western food imports), and you have a situation where many Russian manual workers are experiencing a reduction in standards of living worse than after 1991. Indeed, they are being pushed back into third-world levels of subsistence.

But there is an equally important context to labor in Russia: the thousands of Soviet enterprises, large and small, that somehow managed to soldier on to the present—often with the support of state orders, particularly in the military-industrial complex, which in the USSR was all-consuming. Another group managed in the age-old Russian way—with a kind of sticking-plaster hodgepodge of diversification. A steel-fabricating company I've researched now also makes fiber water filters and allows its workers time off during slack periods to work in the informal economy as taxi drivers and day laborers. In the raw-materials processing sector (cement, metals, and so forth) up until around 2009, some factories even thrived.

So, when we speak of “workers after workers' states,” we are not really talking about a singular but rather a plural experience of transition. And

not even of a single transition, but multiple forms of transformation of the command economy as experienced in the workplace by ordinary people—people whom we seem to be afraid of calling the “working class.”

In the 1990s, both Russian and international media focused on the waves of miners' strikes that threatened President Boris Yeltsin's hold on power and turned into long-term, if ineffectual protests. However, the overall tone was quiescence. Existing unions were ineffective or unable to lead workers—no surprise, given that for the entire Soviet period they had acted as disciplining appendages of the state. New, truly independent unions emerged, which continue to confront the inheritors of the old Soviet unions. However, just as they faltered in the 1990s when it seemed the political and economic climate was ripe for workers to reassert themselves, the success of independent organized labor today is by no means guaranteed. The veneer of corporative state-industrial relations is increasingly bolstered by anti-labor laws inhibiting union activities and the influence of the security services in business enterprises.

The informal economy is an ever-present insurance policy against destitution.

LOST GUARANTEES

However, the topic of organized labor is not my main interest here. Events around the globe—from the rise of populism to the rejection of elite plans for greater globalization and competition—should be forcing us to rethink our assumptions about the “silent (working) majorities” and the end of class divisions. We should refocus on two related issues. First, the blue-collar experience, faced by people with no more than a secondary education who for at least a generation have globally borne the brunt of eroding income-based living standards. And second, the meaning of “precarity” more generally: a lack of access to reliable, long-term employment with the possibility of household social mobility.

Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the former communist world, where employment was guaranteed by the state and where workers, relatively speaking, were rewarded with a meaningful social contract—both of which ended overnight in 1991. Even during the Soviet period, socialist oppositionists like Boris Kagarlitsky expressed fears that too-rapid globalization would hurt workers and other vulnerable groups, pushing them into “third-worldization.” So, while this

article focuses on the general situation of blue-collar workers, work, and industrial Russia after the end of the Soviet period, my argument has clear parallels in other deindustrializing and globalizing contexts further afield.

While considering the rise of populist sentiment associated with the grievances of working people, it is important to contextualize the political trend in the historical, cultural, and anthropological understanding of what it means to be working class in today's Russia. We must examine the relative separation of the industrial world from the rural and cosmopolitan geography of Russia, which has resulted in middle-class Russians' lack of understanding of the precarious situation confronting workers. We must also assess the cultural and historical influences on workers and work in Russia, particularly the peasant influence on work culture, and the Soviet organization of work. These influences are still felt almost everywhere in manual workplaces.

Workers constitute the exemplary class of economic, social, and psychological "losers" of the postcommunist transition. This also means they are a highly sensitive socioeconomic barometer—one that should not be understood as narrowly reflecting political populism, but which is equally unlikely to express itself in the way Russian opponents of Putin would like.

MONOTOWN ISLANDS

The Soviet industrial project, as historians like Stephen Kotkin and Donald Filtzer have shown, involved mass, and massively coercive, movements of people to formerly empty spaces for the creation of a primary industrial base unrivaled in its scale and rapidity of development. But these spaces were not really empty; they were usually the sites of raw materials like iron ore. This led to the growth of both small and large "monotowns" where most employment related to a single activity or enterprise—coal mining, aluminium smelting, or, later on, secondary production: automobiles, military hardware, and so forth.

Another term for these phenomena is "town-forming enterprises." But in the Soviet context this really meant "ministry-forming," particularly branches of the defense ministry. From the outset this system had a military bias that skewed things to a degree that made it difficult to adjust the apportionment of resources to consumer goods or light industry. Even now this effect is felt. For example, in the former monotown I study, the main-

stay of production is still aggregates (gravel, sand, lime, clay), which were initially needed in the 1960s to build a railway complex to support the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons. Plastic extrusion, using the plentiful inputs of both oil and local minerals, remains the secondary activity, though it is more consumer market-friendly (there is an ongoing boom in replacing Soviet-era wooden window frames with plastic ones).

Rather like in tsarist times, monotown settlements functioned as the fiefdom of a single (state) employer. The "company city" gave the enterprise an exceptionally important role in the provision of quasi-state systems of welfare and patronage. Housing was built and maintained by the factory organization, and leisure, health care, and other amenities were partly funded from the same source. Many monotown enterprises acted almost as "total social institutions" and "states within states," as the British sociologist Simon Clarke has argued.

The most important living legacy of this history is the expectation among monotown inhabitants of a kind of social contract between the state and labor that is somehow a world apart from city and rural life—"islands" of factory settlements in a sea of forests and rural lands. However, with the exception of a few key military enterprises like the tank producer Uralvagonzavod, the state is in no position to restructure blue-collar employment to sustain living wages, let alone replace the loss of social benefits that were enjoyed in the late Soviet period.

These extractive and processing centers exist beyond the horizon of experience for the millions living in the relatively comfortable, cosmopolitan cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg. And yet, while they now make up only 25 percent of urban space in Russia, they still provide about 30 percent of gross domestic product (most of the rest comes from gas and oil). There is a relatively small number of large monotowns (with a population over 100,000), though 10 million people live in them. The typical monotown is somewhat smaller. Fourteen million Russians, or 10 percent of the country's population, live in these small cities with fewer than 100,000 inhabitants. In such isolated islands of industrial urbanization, the attendant sense of relative separation, self-sufficiency, and local identity, however illusory these may be in reality, is significant.

Recently the "problem" of monotowns, and moribund industrial urban spaces in general, came to more widespread public prominence largely

thanks to the demographer Natalia Zubarevich, who attempted to neatly categorize Russian socio-geography into four types. Her Second Russia is made up of the urban industrial towns and cities founded on the low-technology and undiversified structure of Soviet industry. The Third and Fourth Russias are the rapidly emptying rural hinterlands and the ethnically diverse and politically restive Caucasus.

Such a division rests implicitly on a thesis that everywhere should become more like First Russia, that is, Moscow and St. Petersburg (a hierarchy based on an idealized vision of the urban West as socially liberal, politically progressive, and secular). Second Russia, for Zubarevich, is a land of middling industrial towns where the Soviet “spirit” and “way of life” is still strong. Her language is striking for its tendency to link workers as a class to the failures of the communist past. Second Russia is the land of the “blue-collars.” They are politically and socially “backward.” Their low life expectancy is perceived to be due to their failure to adapt to new market realities as much as it is the fault of reforms themselves. We are left with a quasi-Soviet vocabulary of confused social Darwinism.

It is ironic that the industrial urban poor are condemned in this fashion for being politically conservative and yet repeatedly draw attention as a potential “motor” of social protest, as happened in 2009 when workers in the monotown Pikalevo blocked a main highway in the Leningrad region over late payment of wages, forcing Putin to personally intervene. The “motor” idea regained prominence in 2011, but for the opposite reason. The authorities, fearful of the Moscow protests against election fraud, used pliant labor-union organizers in a key military monotown to physically threaten the protesters, if only via the medium of a carefully orchestrated television broadcast. A shop steward personally appealed to Putin to allow him to bring his workers to Moscow to “sort out” the demonstrators. His enterprise, none other than Uralvagonzavod, was rewarded handsomely in the aftermath.

PRODUCTION CULTURES

If the separateness and backwardness of industrial spaces and their inhabitants have political and social significance in the present, and their

economic basis in the immediate Soviet past, the cultural influences of the past are also salient and deserve some discussion. Soviet industrialization was necessarily rapid and, in comparison with other developed countries, relatively recent, with industries and their settlements springing up like mushrooms after rain. This entailed a massive displacement of people.

In the longer term it resulted in their sense of local identity—which can be as strong as national or political allegiance—being more likely to relate to their identity as workers, and attachment to their enterprise, than to regional location. This happened in the West as well, for example when black workers moved from the US South to northern industrial towns, or in the earlier migration of discrete regional communities in England to places like South Wales or the Midlands. But in Russia it is still an observable phenomenon—many people still have a keen sense that they come from a family that within living memory migrated large distances for employment.

In contrast, there is also the peasant heritage: the large number of working-class people who did not move in space, but in time. Many industrial workers are just three generations removed from ancestors

who worked the land where the factories now stand. And this time travel is more miraculous still if one considers the subsistence agriculture that was prevalent up until the 1930s. Many workers still have household rural plots that they cultivate in their free time, retaining that precious link with the past.

In other words, the Industrial Revolution as experienced Soviet-style is not quite history yet, and the urbanization of the peasant is somehow incomplete. This reality finds distorted expression in unfair stereotypes of the lazy Russian worker accustomed to countryside rhythms of the seasons (intensive cultivation and long, do-nothing winters), or unable to learn how to use high-tech machines. A more sophisticated sociology of the rural-urban shift from the Soviet period to the present has developed arguments concerning tangible effects of this rapid transformation of land workers into machine operators. These usually originate with the influential early Soviet sociologist Alexander Chayanov, who propounded the subsistence principle of Russian peasants, claim-

Russian workers are experiencing a reduction in standards of living worse than the post-1991 slump.

ing that they worked hard up to the point of meeting basic needs but no further.

The problem with this notion of a subsistence mentality is that it can be used to explain any industrial production issue. In other words, it is a dubious psycho-social category that belies scientific falsification. It has led, for example, to overly simplistic theories about the effectiveness of piece rates—we are told that either workers will rush to meet the minimum production number, sacrificing quality in the process, or not even try to meet it, making do with their basic pay instead.

SOVIET RHYTHMS

Contemporary sociologists like Alexander Temnitsky and Alexander Prokhorov have looked at the organizational logic of Soviet industrial production to explore what kind of workers its legacy produces. Since self-provisioning and self-reliance are inherent to peasant cultures (subsistence farmers must be able to fix their own tools), Temnitsky argues that a culture of initiative and independence is part of the genesis of Russian labor history. He builds a picture of how a particular level of freedom in carrying out tasks and the labor regime itself was inscribed in the very development of a working class in Russia, despite the tradition of forced labor.

This was partly due to Russia's late adoption of the factory model and the necessity of adapting it to a peasant culture. Over time, a negotiated, personalized form of labor relations set in. The planned economy in the Soviet Union put an emphasis on the spontaneous yet ideologically motivated nature of work, in contrast to Taylorism, the organizational theory of managing mass production that was ascendant in capitalist societies at that time. Communitarian values inherited from the social organization of village life served as a partial substitute for punitive labor discipline.

In the late Soviet era, spontaneity and initiative were infused with what Temnitsky has called the "wit and skill" of workers coping with poor labor conditions, economic stagnation, and an inferior technological base. Such conditions were reflected in the characteristic rhythms of Soviet work: "rush work" (*avral*) often requiring personal sacrifice from the worker, interspersed with much slower

periods where production bottlenecks and lack of resources meant that little meaningful work could be carried out. This rhythm may be seen as another link with the peasant past.

As a result, a hybrid form of flexibility between Fordism and individual craft-work emerged in many industrial contexts—and remains salient to this day in Russian production cultures. According to Prokhorov, the less than successful adoption of Taylorist/Fordist production techniques in the Soviet Union allowed for a considerable degree of self-management on the shop floor in "unit clusters" of autonomous task fulfillment.

Comparing the relative alienation of workers under postwar capitalism and socialism, the British anthropologist Chris Hann points to the greater significance of consumption in the West. If Fordism contributed to the stability of the capitalist social order by creating satisfied consumers at the expense of workers, the legitimacy of the socialist system rested on a more general social contract—a sense of security that was not tied to consumption

norms resulting *from* labor (the ability to consume), but tightly connected to security *in* labor, and certain basic social guarantees.

As a consequence, Russian understandings of security and its lack—precarity—remain infused with particular legacies of class position as propagated in the socialist era: that the state would look after workers, no matter what (even if these may be, in part, false memories). These legacies also mean that expectations of social unrest resulting from impoverishment or a general shutting out of workers from leisure consumption are unlikely to be fulfilled, even if economic conditions deteriorate further in Russia. Belt-tightening, creative solutions, and resignation are another three characteristics of working-class "self-management."

UBIQUITOUS INFORMALITY

The ubiquity of the informal economy is another overlooked aspect of precarious workers' adaptation to the conditions they face. It includes the cash-in-hand, unskilled or skilled work in construction, petty trade, and a myriad of other contexts that is everywhere available to the worker, yet invisible to the tax authorities and largely tolerated. Participation is by no means restricted to blue-collar workers, but for them the infor-

The state is in no position to restructure blue-collar employment to sustain living wages.

mal economy is an ever-present insurance policy against destitution—and more importantly, an alternative to formal employment.

The “black” economy is advantageous to both the state and individuals, and may encompass up to 50 percent of Russia’s GDP. The state benefits, particularly politically, since informal activities such as gypsy cab driving or day laboring provide a buffer against unemployment and obviate the need for meaningful social security for the working-age population. On the other hand, informality at all levels is a major barrier to the Russian state’s ability to derive any kind of adequate tax base from employment.

The informal economy is also a barrier to the institutionalization of workers’ structural power in independent union movements. The turnover of workers in even the factories with the best pay and conditions is exacerbated by the availability of alternative informal work. Wherever effective and politically motivated unions do spring up despite the obstacles, as in the automotive industry, they are severely hampered by the instability of cadres and the escape route from poor working conditions that is available to workers in informality.

SILENT MAJORITY

On the face of it, Putin’s system has effectively sidelined any potential militancy by workers. While its mechanisms, taken separately, are relatively weak (anti-union laws, political co-optation), they pale in comparison with the one big success and the one big truth of the Russian political economy. These relate to the whole population, but are most important among workers.

The big success is the careful management of the media and the general population’s exposure to news. The formula calls for adding to that control the age-old accelerants of xenophobia and nationalist fervor, with a dollop or two of war. All of my working-class informants wholeheartedly support all of Moscow’s current military adventures and shudder with disgust at the “fascistic” machinations of the West and its puppet Ukraine. This type of populist distraction takes real effort, but is all the more effective in a country where most people get information from the television alone.

The one big truth is the bottomless resilience of working-class Russians. They will take any punishment thrown at them. The Russian elite, unfortunately, knows this characteristic and cynically makes use of it.

As I write these lines in a little industrial town hundreds of kilometers from Moscow, my worker informants are out on their household allotments—they were not so shortsighted as to give them up even in those all-too-brief good years at the beginning of this century. Stoically, in whole family groups, they go on digging their potatoes, salting their river fish, and sealing their summer fruit and vegetables in jars to make preserves. They rake through the rubbish from the factories, salvaging and gleaning bits and pieces they can use for domestic do-it-yourself and building projects. There is no need for them to buy stuff when they can supply their needs in this way. It will take a lot more than a total lack of social mobility and wholesale destruction of household incomes to rouse them. If Russia really wants autarky, resilience, and isolation, it has no better model than Russian working-class life. ■