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Executive Summary

GORBACHEV AND THE WORKERS: THE PRICE OF REFORM*

Walter D. Connor

1. Gorbachev's commitment to radical reform—to perestroika, glasnost', and change in elements of Soviet social and political life—emerges from a diagnosis of the sources of the Soviet system's economic ills. Unlike previous attempts at economic reform in the USSR, Gorbachev's prescriptions promise to cut deep into grass-roots life, as they confront the "human factor" in the economy. Those prescriptions are likely to be controversial.

2. It is the Soviet working class--blue-collar workers in industry and related branches, their families and dependents—who largely constitute the grass roots. Today, this represents a very different social/political reality from the small, but heavily hereditary proletariat of Lenin's time, or the large working mass created by Stalin-era industrialization out of millions of peasants, new to the cities, to factory life and industrial discipline. Gorbachev's inheritance, from the long-term developments of the Brezhnev years, is a large, heavily "hereditized" blue-collar workforce, accustomed to urban/industrial life, and possessed of

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many of the characteristics of a potential "class" with which the regime must reckon: an "accidental proletariat." Just as the slowing of economic growth and social mobility contributed to its formation, so rising levels of general education since World War II have made the working class more demanding, especially with respect to intrinsic and extrinsic rewards from work and work life. This has meant policy problems, whose resolution in the Brezhnev era produced a mixed record.

3. Brezhnev-era policy and developments produced, in the end, a working class marked by the following characteristics:

- relatively favored in wage policies, which saw blue-collar compensation "drifting" upward against managerial-professional pay
- secure in their jobs, by virtue of the labor-hunger of the economy, and state policy
- possessing the resources and experience to assert a significant amount of control over the pace and demands of work, even in the absence of participation in management or independent trade-union protection
- given to "militance" (strikes, stoppages) only on occasion, and often, at the plant level, finding their demands met (though repressive responses remained very much available to the authorities)
4. It was to these realities, among others, that Gorbachev's program of perestroika was designed to respond. Habitual elements of working-class behavior and the surrounding environment were diagnosed as important sources of the stagnation in the economy. Thus, several elements of the strategy of restructuring represents attempts to alter long-familiar elements of working class life, in a way that may be anything but welcome. If perestroika ultimately is meant to provide a mix of stick and carrot, in the short run workers will see more of the former than the latter.

Employment security. A central element in Gorbachev's perestroika is more efficient deployment of the labor force. This involves attacking the stockpiling of redundant manpower, especially in core production sectors of the economy. Thus, jobs in material production are projected to shrink by 15-20 million by the year 2000. At the same time, new additions to the labor force are to be directed primarily into the service sector. For the workers, energetic pursuit of these new policy lines promises dislocations of varying sorts, from transfer to an inconvenient shift to unfamiliar work in a new sector of the economy.

Wage policy and preference. New wage policies and practices introduced in 1986-1987 provide smaller percentage increases for blue-collar production workers than for the engineers and managers who direct their work. The new
wage/salary system also awards larger increments to many of the low-paid professionals outside the "productive" sphere who have long earned less than workers. The "symbolism" here is important in itself: beyond it, the new wage system ties workers' pay, especially the bonus components, more tightly to the "results." This promises frustration for many, benefits perhaps for some, and a greater differentiation of reward.

Management and participation. Perestroika promises more autonomy and responsibility to the enterprise and its manager. It also endorses the election of managers and other supervisors by the workforce, and offers seemingly hefty participatory roles to new "councils of workers' collectives" in the plant. However, these are sufficiently hedged to indicate that any sort of workers' control—a departure from all prior Soviet practice—is not intended. Most likely, the intent is to provide another channel through which certain kinds of control can be maintained on more "independent" managers, rather than new power for workers.

Price reform. Workers and their families make up the majority of the Soviet consumer population. As such, they face the prospect of a new price policy, to be introduced in the early 1990s, which should see rents and food prices, long controlled at the cost of massive state subsidies, rise significantly. Perceptions of eroding living standards have evoked worker protest in the past: price hikes on daily
necessities, against the background of tougher labor discipline and less certain wage packets, may prove stressful in the future.

5. Given the foregoing, workers on the whole should not be seen as a pro-perestroika constituency. Whether they will present an active obstacle to the policy depends on the interplay of numerous factors (see pp. 45-53). The capacity of workers to organize in a "Polish" scenario should not be overestimated, nor the coercive resources of the state underestimated. But the freer flow of information and discussion under glasnost' and the indeterminacy of contemporary Soviet politics raise the possibility that working-class discontent may find more channels of expression than in the past. To the degree that such might seem to threaten order, workers' "welfare" may become the pretext for complex politicking by lukewarm supporters or opponents of perestroika. Under the guise of adjustments in a reformist course, warranted by violations of "legitimate" working-class expectations, Gorbachev's programs, and his power, could be gutted. In substance if not in slogans, radical reform would come to an end, in the name of defending core elements of the socialism the working class had achieved through its efforts. This is a possibility, not a certainty. Reducing its probability involves, for Gorbachev, the attainment of more, and better, results in areas that touch on the material lives and prospects of workers than have been seen thus far.
The risk is that a combination of factors (leadership disagreement about how much reform is desirable, perceptions of the impact of various price-wage-employment measures on the workers, their morale and propensities to use their "negative control" against innovation) will "trim" reform measures to the point where what follows in the late 1990's will threaten to reproduce in somewhat altered form the Brezhnev-era economic and social malaise that bespoke the need for reform in the first place. This is not a simple case of deja vu: the workers, if their perceived or expressed discontent with the "stick" part of reform blunts its use, will not necessarily be resigned to the absence of the "carrots" reform promises. This, perhaps, is the essence of the "new worker" Zaslavskaiia and others describe. He/she is not as resourceless as the worker of the 1930s. While the resources may not be sufficient to alter the system, and are not likely to be deployed in any attempt to overthrow it, they can guarantee an ongoing and uncomfortable stalemate. In this context, social order will be preserved, but the political line to be taken from the top will become a more controversial matter. Leadership politics in the 1990s may witness a fight between alternatives farther apart than those most specialists perceived as testing leadership unity in the late 1980s. Gorbachev's perestroika, accompanied and to some degree driven by glasnost' and a broad demokratizatsiia in the political sphere, lies on one side. On the other, a
harder, narrower line, attributed to Ligachev and some others, would back the economic thrust, but press to accomplish its results without much loosening of political controls or expansion of public controversy. Neither may "work." It is possible that, in retrospect, either may seem benign in comparison with what the end of the century might bring in a USSR which fails to bring off the economic reform and the requisite social transformations which are the aim of perestroika.
GORBACHEV AND THE WORKERS: THE PRICE OF REFORM

In some other communist countries, give people an inch of reform, and they will grab a yard. Mr. Gorbachev is having to force the first inch into Russia's fist.

The Economist, July 4, 1987

Our political culture is still inadequate. Our standard of debate is inadequate; our ability to respect the point of view even of our friend and comrade even that is inadequate.

M.S. Gorbachev, July 10, 1987

...ours is a terribly inert system...

Tatiana Zaslavskaia, 1987

From the perspective of The Economist's leader-writer, Gorbachev faces a reluctant Russia, resistant to the reform medicine he prescribes for it. Gorbachev's own words also show exasperation and frustration over the difficulties of carrying forward the message of perestroika and reform. Zaslavskaia's express the diagnosis of many supporters of reform.

This is no wonder. If reform is new to the bureaucracy and political elite, its implications are no less profound--
or potentially disturbing—to the working class. The
demographic center of Soviet society, the social "core," is
in danger of displacement from the central position it has
historically occupied in the minds of Soviet planners and
political leaders.

In the retrospect of 1987-88, it becomes clear that the
late 1970s-early 1980s were years of "agonizing reappraisal"
of the design and performance of Soviet economic institu-
tions, in which political actors soon to enter major places
on the national scene participated. Reform-oriented econo-
mists had "floated" various ideas for change in journals and
the press against a background of declining growth rates and
the perennial problems of bottlenecks, consumer- and service-
sector deficiencies. These inadequacies increasingly were
seen as contributing to the general economic distemper and
the problems of morale and motivation among the workforce,
including its blue-collar component.

This was nothing new—economists, after all, had always
discussed the economy; if gloom was not the main note struck,
there had been little of triumphalism in the rhetoric of
economists for some time. New, however, was the degree to
which political generalists began to "get the message." Not
a majority, to be sure—but certainly a minority, better-
represented among the younger generations of political
leaders: those whose careers were set in the post-Stalin
USSR, and whose coming to power through the aging process of
the Brezhnev gerontocracy would—however delayed—signal a major generational change anticipated by analysts of Soviet politics.¹

The "learning process" is not easy to trace. In detail, it may elude us for some time to come; forever, if Gorbachev's General Secretaryship is cut short by personnel and policy reversals. In any case, that is not our major concern here. What is important is that Gorbachev's—and his allies'—commitment to restructuring of the economy, and to "radical reform" (his own adjective) was genuine.

The Gorbachevian commitment to reform emerged to a significant degree from a grim assessment of the Soviet Union's lag in many areas of leading-edge technology. The impact of the lag on Soviet security, notably in the area of new (and misnamed) "conventional" weaponry, as well as on the whole industrial economy, impeded the future defense effort. Technology was not the only element, but it seemed a "key" to many others—restoring adequate growth rates, increasing labor productivity, and the creative substitution of more efficiency for more inputs of labor and natural resources—the latter two elements growing scarcer and more "expensive" in the Soviet economic reality of the late twentieth century.

In all this, the "human factor" was critical as well. Much of the social organization of the economy seemed inimical to the effort, innovation and resource conservation necessary to move forward into better technology and more
impressive results in producer and consumer sectors. It is in this focus on the human factor that Gorbachev's economic policy stands out in sharp relief against previous Soviet practice and previous aborted attempts at what has been called reform.

"Reform" as such was not new as a concept and rallying-cry in the Soviet economy. Analysts had written of a "treadmill of reform," about a "conventionalization" of economic change, a "routinization" of alterations in planning and management, well before Gorbachev. But previous reforms, subjected to bureaucratic foot-dragging and stran-gulation, are not necessarily a good guide to the contingencies of the late 1980s. If Gorbachev succeeds the positive impact could be great; if he fails, current and long-term costs in denied economic (and, following it, political) change in the USSR will be great. Besides this, two factors make for a very different set of contingencies around Gorbachev's reform.

Previous reform designs, including those identified with Kosygin in 1965, promised--or threatened--much less by way of alteration of life at the grass roots. Managerial autonomy vis-a-vis layers of ministerial bureaucracy was one thing, but not likely by itself to alter workers' lives, or their relationship to the power of managers. The Shchekino "experiment," or "method," was unlikely to divest Soviet enterprises of any large amount of redundant labor when
incentives for managers to "economize" in this area were so
weak, reasons to retain reserve labor power against end-of-
month "storming" so strong. Employment security thus
continued within the context of wage rises and controlled
prices and subsidies, making the worker's life a predictable
one, even against the promise of reforms that never quite
jelled. 1965 was the wrong year for reform, in any case. In
retrospect, the economy was not doing "badly." Generational-
ly, it was in the hands of people familiar with its institu-
tional structure, comfortable with it, and unlikely to depart
willingly from it. Organizationally, the economy--and the
reform--were in the hands of a bureaucracy with no great
interest in carrying out the decentralization and deconcen-
thration that would reduce its own power.

The present situation is different. While there remain
elements of bureaucratic resistance, Gorbachev's path has
been decisive. He has restocked the Politburo and the upper
levels of the Party secretariat and the ministerial struc-
ture. "Generational" elements in this turnover now combine
with a growing consciousness of severe economic problems,
fostered by the "communications revolution" under glasnost'.
This makes it more likely that profound changes in policy
will come to the Soviet economy "from the top," as all
profound changes have come in the past.

Thus, the grass roots of Soviet society--the majority
that is the "working class"--are likely to be affected by,
and react to, Gorbachev's programs. Its implementation is more likely than previous, half-hearted and less comprehensive programs. Its content, unlike earlier programs, includes much that will affect the world of labor, welfare and consumption workers inhabit. Before examining the relevant elements of that content, it will be useful to recapitulate factors which define some of the nature and expectations of the "accidental proletariat."

GORBCHEV'S WORKING CLASS: A DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE

Within the Soviet period, history has witnessed the "destruction" of a small working class which took shape under Tsarism; the formation of a mass of industrial workers in which remnants of that earlier class were dissolved or submerged, but which itself could take on few of the characteristics of a class, due to political and demographic dynamics, until well after the death of Stalin. It has also witnessed the emergence, from a mix of regime-sponsored policies and more spontaneous social and economic processes, of what may again be called a working class, or an "accidental proletariat."

In the course of each of these developments, internal policy priorities have had their impacts on the situation of workers. The changing composition of the workers' class, or
mass, has also had its impact on policy. The small, mainly hereditary working class the Bolsheviks "inherited" from Tsarism declined in size as it supplied soldiers and party cadres during the heady years of War Communism (1915-1921). Many did not return to the factories after 1921. The strategic retreat of the more market-oriented NEP after 1921 left workers in a more complicated situation. Assertiveness via trade unions was encouraged versus private employers in the large non-state sector, discouraged versus state employers. In general the NEP period signaled intolerance for independent worker organization—a distinct property of a conscious working class. Economically, the market rules under which most of the economy functioned were not particularly favorable to the blue-collar sector, nor was the free play of prices. The regime did face a "class," some of which was allied with the regime in general, other elements of which were increasingly disaffected with its policies. Workers in large numbers were politically astute, with their own ideas of what the revolution, and working-class power, were supposed to "deliver." In some sense, NEP was born in response to working-class and other pressures, to working-class revolt and the sailors' uprising at Kronstadt in 1921. However, its rules, while generally fostering more economic rationality than hitherto, were not especially favorable to workers as such.
The end of NEP, the onset of the "Plan Era" and the massive upheaval of the 1930s rendered the earlier regime-working class relationship irrelevant. Demographically, the remnants of the old "hereditary" working class—veterans of life-long urban/industrial existence—were rapidly submerged in the massive influx of peasants from the countryside in the first and second five-year plans. New to the city, new to the industrial work environment, and disoriented by the journey from the field and village, from a world under the assault of collectivization, these newcomers swelled the working mass. Uneducated and unskilled, these were—in Tatiana Zaslavskaiia's phrases—"dark masses who could be ruled, whose minds could be controlled." They were not the material from which a class is made.

Only after Stalin's death did this mass begin to experience a dual process that would generate elements of the classic definition of class. The maturing of the economy, the slowing pace of alteration in the shape of the labor force as industry grew large, as the rural/farm sector ceased to be a ready pool from which always-excess manpower could be drawn, conduced toward a new hereditization of the new large blue-collar mass. As the shape of Soviet society and the stratification hierarchy showed increasing signs of stabilization in the later years of Khrushchev, and also during the Brezhnev era, the proportional peasant inflow to the working class slowed. The outflow of worker offspring into intel-
ligentsia occupations likewise moderated, enlarging a hereditary "core" of workers who had not experienced mobility from the rural environment to the "city lights," and who would spend their work lives in the factories and urban environments they had known all their lives. These are now a solid majority, nationwide, among the blue-collar workers. It is this proletariat that Gorbachev has inherited from Brezhnev.

Education—if not a class characteristic, one which can affect the probability/manifestation of "class" politics—has increased among workers as among other strata of Soviet society. From the marginally literate ex-peasants of the 1930s and 1940s have emerged workers with substantial exposure to the large educational system that is another legacy of over 60 years of Soviet development. If few among the oldest workers (whose ex-peasant share is still large) have much formal schooling, the younger entrants to the blue-collar world over the last 10-15 years are typically graduates, or nearly so, of the complete secondary education cycle: 10 years of formal academic education. Education, as well as the natural habituation to the urban-industrial environment, has bred added sophistication in the aspirations and expectations of workers, both with respect to consumption and to the nature of work itself. The "hereditary" worker, unlike his ex-peasant predecessor, cannot credit the state with having provided the opportunity to move "up" from
agriculture to industry, and the urban life which, if threadbare by Western standards, vastly betters that of the countryside. Added years of education alter tastes; expectations regarding the intrinsic elements of interest in work have grown, much in excess of the supply of interesting jobs in a blue-collar economy still heavy in moderate- and low-skilled positions. From the planners' and managers' perspective, young recruits to the working class, even those from working-class families, are doubly troublesome: to expectations elevated above the average of jobs on offer, they add a lack of job skills to offer the employer on arrival at the plant. Altogether, it is a difficult problem, and one quite the reverse of fitting uneducated and unskilled peasants to jobs which demanded more than they possessed, even in the simpler 1930s.

The "shaping" of this new working class is one in which the Soviet educational system, as a mechanism of selection and "channeling" as well as instruction, has played a major role. Not only are young workers increasingly "products" of 10-year education, they are also evidently often unsuccessful competitors in the higher-education "sweepstakes."

This is not the case, though for all young workers. Social and cultural factors, working in the medium of the family and household, serve to limit aspirations of many working-class youth, and "ready" them to enter blue-collar life. Many veer off from the academic curriculum after the
eighth year of schooling, and onto the "vocational" track, the PTU, before entering the world of their fathers' work. But for many others, ten-year academic schooling has fed aspirations to continue on in the higher education which "logically" follows, and thus leave the working class. It is not, however, so easy. Ten-year education has grown more socially inclusive (under Stalin, only a minority of Soviet adolescents went so far as these final grades, much as turn of the century American society rated finishing high school as an accomplishment beyond the career needs of most). It is worker, and peasant, children who have been added to an initially small enrollment of mainly VUZ-bound offspring of the relatively privileged. In the face of a much less impressive expansion of places in higher education, the competition to get from tenth grade to a university has thus grown sharper. In that competition, working-class youth again face disadvantages, well-documented in Soviet social research, which leave them proportionally under-represented in lecture halls.

Whether they "aspire" or not, both familial/class socialization and the educational competition precipitate working-class youth disproportionately into adult lives in that class, intensifying the process of hereditization. Concerns stemming from labor shortage, low entry-level skills and general economic conditions, emerged--in the transition period from Brezhnev to Gorbachev--in a particularly sharp
form, to further promote hereditization. The educational reform of 1984, among many other provisions, envisioned an earlier and more "administered" separation of the university-bound minority from the rest. A new type of trade school, offering an academic diploma as well as job training, was to become the major educational vehicle for the Soviet 16-17 year old. While the earlier proportions between those continuing after eighth grade into academic secondary education or the trade schools had been ca. 2:1, the new plan reversed these proportions, promising to duct twice as many onto the vocational track. The language of the reform left little doubt that the criteria for selection to one track or the other would press yet more working-class youth into the "trade" track and away from entry into the tenth-grade competition for places in higher education. Neither youth, nor their parents, seemed pleased with the implications of this more direct "streaming," whatever its justification in the need for a higher-skilled, better "adjusted" set of entry cohorts into the plants and factories, or in a prospective moderation of the frustration so many feel when the (predictable) failure in the higher-education competition occurs. By early 1988, it was clear that this part of the reform had been abandoned: but the "natural" social processes favoring hereditization were left in place.

For the majority, being a worker does not mean massive relative disadvantage vs. any other large segment of Soviet
society. In material terms, the story of workers' rewards is a complex one, but not one of unalloyed poverty and deprivation by the Soviet domestic standards which are all the worker has to go by. Many workers are paid well—especially male workers in heavy industry. However, (predominantly female) workers in light, consumer-oriented industry, get much less. But after the poverty of the Stalin years, the general drift of the post-1953 period, at least in recorded wage and income figures, has emphasized trends favorable to the Soviet blue-collar world. General salary increases for white-collar professionals and administrative personnel, both in industry and other sectors, have not been impressive. The upward "creep" of blue-collar wage rates, comparatively, has been impressive, as have been successive rises in the minimum wage which have benefited the "bottom" (collective farm peasants as well as low-paid workers and "pink-collar" functionaries) while to some extent compressing the degree of inequality between various skill-levels within the working class.

The absolute living standards of Soviet citizens—workers among them—have improved vastly from the nadir of the Stalin years (it was only at the end of these, ca. 1952, that real wages reached the levels of 1928, the last year before the onset of Stalin's industrialization.) For the oldest workers, with the best memory-fed perspectives on real poverty, the distance travelled has been impressive. For the
younger, who entered the plants and mines in the Brezhnev years, the relative improvement is necessarily less striking, the feel that living standards have stagnated in recent years all the more palpable. To them, living standards beyond their fathers' or grandfathers' dreams are more likely to seem a mix of low prices on some items (among them bread, which is plentiful, and meat, which is not), very high prices on others, shortages and unpredictable interruptions in supply; apartments offering privacy, but poorly maintained (even if cheap beyond the imagination of a Westerner). As research shows, these standards are below those workers feel they "merit," with an unfilled (though fairly moderate) gap between the wages workers receive and what they feel they need to "buy" the life they deserve.

But these rewards, and the jobs that provide them, are secure. Workers "consume" elements of the Soviet welfare state in many guises, but the central one is probably a long-term rock-solid security in one's job. Neither unemployment nor relocation threaten in the Soviet economy, whose labor-hunger and commitment to maintaining full employment are of long standing. Many of the sizable number of "well-off" worker families have difficulty in finding goods on which to spend excess rubles. (The plaint of many economists is that it is just such imbalances that make it difficult to motivate workers to do "more and better" by way of the pay packet.) But, on the other side poor performance has threatened little
with disciplining of workers by way of lower wages and/or separation from the job. Tinkering with such security of tenure, or with an ostensibly working-class centered system of wage compensation, would be a likely source of controversy.

Jobs need not be "interesting" and fulfilling to be tolerable. Much depends on how much of life's enjoyment one anticipates from work per se, and on the durability of early high aspirations in this area as life wears on. The "world of work" experienced by the blue-collar Soviet citizen is a peculiar balance of a number of elements. Most jobs, to reiterate, are not interesting; Soviet workers show a good deal of dissatisfaction with their jobs, when surveyed on the topic. Despite decades of rhetorical exhortation, workers show little sign of perceiving themselves as "bosses of production" because the factories, mines etc. are their--the "people's"--property. Rather, they seem well aware that control emanates from the director's office, conscious that in the workplace they are objects rather than subjects of authority.

Whether that authority is onerous is another question. Certainly, workers do express a desire to "elect" managerial personnel, rather than having them imposed from above--managers, however, in general show an understandable reluctance to endorse such proposals, discussed several times since the mid-1960s. But workers seem most interested in
electing the lower-level supervisory personnel with whom they have the most direct contact—not directors of enterprises numbering personnel in the hundreds or thousands.

In this, workers probably express their primary concern about that part of work life where they already enjoy, if not authority, a good deal of power, where their "negative control" and ability to resist, are marked—the day-to-day routine of the smallish group on the shop floor. Job security as policy, labor shortage as fact, reduce workers' downside risks. Within these limits on what may befall them, workers have come to control a good deal of the pace, procedures, and (to a degree) pay they receive. Time-off and absences, schedules, links between job classifications and wage rates, are all subject to "negotiations" unforeseen in the official organizational blueprints. Workers' power to withdraw effort, to retard the production process and therefore the pay, bonuses and advancement of all, including directors, is recognized at the plant level. The accommodations—secure pay for little work, egalitarianism via "topping up" the rates paid for unskilled, onerous work, the notion of a "minimum" a worker must receive whatever the nature of his job—have been the despair of reform economists as well as some Moscow bureaucrats. Their ubiquity, however, testifies to the pervasiveness of the "negative control" which, up to a point, serves workers quite well, even in the absence of independent, combative trade unions.
Yet the plant is hardly ground from which the state has retreated. Its presence is pervasive in a general sense—it "owns" the factories, its agencies set the "plan", specify the suppliers from which the plant gets its inputs, and the destination of the same plant's output. So, too, in a more specific sense, the state is present, in the party organizations in the plant, and in the plant-level trade union organization. Only a minority of workers are party members, to be sure—but not a randomly selected one. The highest-skilled workers tend more to be party members than others. They are often the best-educated, the best-paid as well. The party, given its history and ideological rationale, obviously cannot "afford" to absent itself from the factory. It propagandizes, it carries on its general supervisory role as it does in other institutions.

Do its worker-members, however, constitute a group "split off" from the blue-collar non-party majority, a core of regime "allies" vs. an unconcerned, or oppositional mass? This seems unlikely. Worker members of the party do not seem a species apart: the return for their activism and support is mainly monetary (and not very large at that), not advancement out of the working class. They "do well" by the system—it, as they probably see it, does well by them. If their number includes many whose turn of personality makes them particularly conformist, enamored of "order," and receptive to the Soviet black-and-white, all-questions-have-
answers style, this would be no surprise. But the mass of workers' non-membership hardly signifies profound political alienation. They too are subject to the same political socialization; they too are "patriotic" more often than not. If their commitment to major policies and symbols is less active, it does not mean they see party members as an alien presence. Whether they see them as "careerists," or as over-conforming "eager beavers," etc., are questions however, as yet lacking clear answers.

On trade unions, one may most safely say that workers' feelings of affiliation or valuation are "not strong." The concept, memory, and experience of "real" trade unions is distant and dim, the reality of the official unions neither strongly negative nor positive. Workers value the services and benefits channeled through the unions, as well as the defense against unjust firings or dockings the unions provide to an aggrieved worker if the rules specify he is entitled to it. It seems most likely, though, that they realize the union's status as another institution of the regime, its policies--many welcome--determined by the regime. A more "combative" stance might be welcome to the workers, but it is doubtful that they see the lack of such as detracting from the "authenticity" of the institution, given their expectations of it. Worker militancy, in those instances where it has arisen on Soviet soil, has often included the failures of
unions as a sub-theme, but not as the major gravamen of protest.

There has been protest: not enough to make us regard the Soviet working class as a Polish-style repository of insurrectionary impulses, but more than enough to show that, at times, frustrations do build to a point where they are expressed in collective forms. This suggests that workers' negative control exercised on the factory floor, and regime policy which shows sensitivity to some worker concerns, do not always suffice to hold to the terms of the "social contract" which undergirds worker-regime relations. Those terms are violated most often on the local level. New piece-rate norms, local shortages, intolerable conditions or particularly corrupt or recalcitrant management have set off strikes and stoppages. The interaction of local wage-cuts with price rises (matters of national policy) can be particularly volatile, as at Novocherkassk in 1962. On the whole, the (undeniably incomplete) record of Soviet strikes and stoppages indicates a regime tendency to (1) settle the situation by granting immediate demands and often sacking "guilty" administrators, and (2) later punish the ringleaders, though not the rank-and-file.

This is far from national militancy by workers stressing "class" interests opposed to government bureaucracy. Yet, some hint of "class" thought does appear in the rhetoric of worker petitions, in a "legitimist" appeal for redress from
(locally-caused) grievances by (central) political authority. More often than not, either as a manifestation of legitimacy with which workers invest the political system, or as a kind of "protective coloration," the language is one of trust in the good will of central authorities. It identifies the workers not as anti-Soviet, or even, impliedly, as hard-to-please intellectuals, but as loyal Soviet people, appealing, after all, to the leadership of a workers' state.

Collective protest of the episodic "strike and stoppage" sort shows limited goals, little pre-planning, and ambiguities in the ultimate scope of the targets at which blue-collar wrath is directed, as well as an appreciation of how unyielding, in the face of any general politicized challenge, Soviet rulers have shown themselves to be. Compromised by some similar factors is the thus-far-underwhelming record of Soviet attempts to form free trade unions. The readiness to repress which has distinguished the Soviet regime from the Polish is important here, of course. "Solidarity"-type unions could not arise in a Soviet-type system unless it were weakened by the peculiar, long-term debilities which compromise whatever leadership reigns in Warsaw. Beyond this, the few, narrowly-based attempts at independent union organization in the USSR remain linked to a degree with the tactics and style of the political dissidence of intellectuals. Workers per se have not always been the moving spirits of these attempts, and the gulf between workers and
intellectuals remains a hard one to bridge. These factors lessen the likelihood of independent self-sustaining worker organization.

All in all, then, elements of worker content and discontent, "class-type" features of educational and social-origin homogeneity vs. internal differentiation, present a complicated picture. Some elements suggest that the "accidental proletariat" is a class with which the regime must contend. But these are balanced by a still-strong legacy of political repression, traditional political culture, slack morale and discipline in the workplace reflected in non-working life in low culture, alcoholism and escapist behaviors. Such elements suggest that the Soviet working class is lumpenized, the "accidental" also a lumpen-proletariat; less than a class. But should this be the case, it also presents a problem--one economists and advocates of "discipline" have lamented for some time--to a regime which needs a blue-collar labor force of at least acceptable degrees of motivation, morale, and utility for the national economy.

But, real "class" or not, workers remain the central Soviet social reality. That reality is likely to prove recalcitrant, as the radical ambitions of the leader who came to power in 1985 are translated into policies which break with the past. Implementation of those policies aims to change many practices, many patterns to which workers and bosses have grown accustomed over the years. Not far into
the "Gorbachev era," commentary which had earlier focused on likely resistance to his designs from other elements of the leadership, and from mid-level bureaucrats long-secure in their state and party posts, broadened to consider the possibility that grass-roots resistance to, and incomprehension of, Gorbachev's designs might be important as well. The workers are the "grass roots"—and there is no reason to think that they will welcome perestroika and what it promises to bring.

EMPLOYMENT: "STREAMLINING" VS. SECURITY

Long the beneficiaries of what a senior Western student of the Soviet economy calls a "job rights/overfull employment" syndrome, Soviet workers face, since the coming of Gorbachev, serious and controversial challenges to this central element of the welfare "net" that has sustained a predictable way of life.

Specification of the economically costly linkages between managerial labor "hoarding," job-switching with impunity, low per-capita productivity and poor discipline on the factory floor, is not new. The rationale of the Shchekino experiment, or "system," was to encourage managers to de-stock unneeded labor. The state could provide other work; on the whole, after all, the economy of the 1960s and 1970s
remained labor-hungry. Thus, few lost jobs, and they were
hired elsewhere. But, if Shchekino had been universalized,
as many could ask, where would all the unwanted workers have
gone, in a system committed politically to full employment?
Some plants may have benefited, but not the economy as a
whole in any major way.

Portents of change going well beyond all this came on
the heels of Gorbachev's accession. In early 1986, the
economist Vladimir Kostakov raised a furor with projections
of 13-19 million jobs in manufacturing disappearing by 2000,
if productivity targets were met.8 "One," more efficiently,
would "do the work of seven" in a streamlined economy.
Retirements and smaller labor force entry cohorts would
moderate the pains of the process, as would the expansion of
service-sector jobs. Still, in a TASS interview soon after,
Kostakov denied that his projections meant unemployment was
stalking Soviet society.9 Reform economists have continued
to make the point that the iron job security of old is,
however, insupportable. Zaslavskaya has connected the
abolition of unnecessary jobs with "laying people off,"10 and
Leonid Abalkin, director of the Academy of Sciences' econom-
ics institute, quoted a 20 million figure in a context
similar to Kostakov's in mid-1987.11

What, in concrete terms, will this weakening of job
security mean? A range of possibilities is implied, from the
(relatively) minor to the more radical. Intra-plant reas-
signments of workers to other jobs, as theirs are made redundant—a "Shchekino"-type change—is perhaps least disruptive, although the new work, even if as well paid as the old, may be an unwelcome change to the worker. Plants and enterprises moving from a single to a two- (or three-) shift system will redeploy some workers to new, less desirable shifts. Such disruptions are not small ones for workers long-used to a predictable life. Fewer workers will be expected to produce more on "their" shift than a larger number did on a single-shift system, and without an automatic guarantee of premium pay for night or swing shifts. As one authority on labor questions put it, the "right to work" guaranteed the Soviet citizen was not a guarantee of a right to a particular place of work. Some jobs, if perestroika means anything, will disappear. An uncertain, but presumably sizable, number of these will be abolished as retirements occur. These will increase with the "aging" of the Soviet industrial labor force. (Significant numbers of retirees may, however, be encouraged to find work in cooperatives, as individual ("private") workers, or in certain service-sector positions not justifying or implying long-term career commitments.)

Other job cuts will be more painful. A readiness to "bite the bullet" may be manifested in what many economists have called for—the winding-up of enterprises which cannot justify themselves economically: output unneeded, unsaleable
at the standard price, inherently loss-making. Such a policy seems likely to put at special risk enterprises in classic heavy industry and extraction, whose workers have been among the most-favored in relative wage terms. In a strong call for closing what is inefficient, Abel Aganbegian noted that 30 coal mines in the Donets basin consume large resources but yield little coal: closing them would, in his words, free up resources allowing the extraction of three times as much coal as they produce. 13 Could miners thus released anticipate finding other work in mining, or jobs with equally high pay? It seemed unlikely: one official source projected a 23 percent reduction in the work force in coal mining by 1990. 14 Where, then, would they go—to what sort of work, and at what pay? Thus far, the successful redeployment of large numbers found redundant in their old jobs has been stressed (the well-publicized 12,000 on the Belorussian SSR railways, 15 the cutting of industrial workers by 9 percent, construction workers by 15 in Zaporozh'e oblast over three years, the "folding" of a Leningrad construction trust 16 with 2000 workers, and other instances. 17 But one may ask how cost-effective those new job placements are, since the tension of tinkering with past employment policies is great. Officialdom may be satisfied with the appearance of efficiency in the pared-down labor forces from which the redundant have been cut loose, without excessive concern about the new destinations and how efficiently the relocated work out in them.
Overall, as a matter of policy, those new destinations will be in the trade-and-service sectors, whose buildup and improvement are seen as important for the overall economy after decades of starvation in manpower and resources. But what, in concrete terms, does this mean? Shifting high-paid production workers to service jobs for which they are not trained (or, perhaps, trainable), at the current low pay rates for those jobs? This seems unlikely. Coal miners into clerks? Or, as an interviewer for Izvestija questioning L.A. Kostin, the economist who serves as first deputy chairman of the State Committee on Labor and Social Problems, put it,¹⁸ lathe operator moving into barbershops? Kostin denied that this was the point, citing instead the need to reduce the inflow into industry, and reorient training toward preparing people for work in non-material production spheres. Fair enough, but this is no more than a restatement of broad policy; it does not specify how persons currently in one economic sector may be transferred to another, if such is at all the intent. Such dislocations seem loom large among the contingencies many blue-collar workers, long secure in plant and job, are likely to face. (Ryzhkov's speech to the 27th Party Congress in 1986, projecting that all the net increase in the labor force would be added to services in the 12th five year plan vs. a 50-50 industry-service "split" in 1981-85, was not reassuring.¹⁹)
Beyond the various adjustment pains of large-scale redeployment lies the issue of unemployment itself. It would be asking too much of glasnost’ to countenance calling it such, even were it allowed to occur, either in long-term structural form, or in shorter-term but large-scale "frictional" variety. Both of these are different from the "willing" inactivity of many job-changers between jobs in the process of labor turnover. The USSR is not in the sort of depression that has created real joblessness in Poland. Nor has it embarked on the economic strategy followed by China, where population pressure makes it impossible to offer state-sector job security and benefits to all new labor force entrants, thus forcing them into cooperative and individual enterprise. "Unemployment," then, remains a sensitive issue indeed.

Early in 1986, Kostakov was controversial even in suggesting that, in the future unlike the past, people might have to "look for jobs," rather than vice versa—though he did not suggest that the looking would be too hard.

Thus far, endorsement of unemployment as a "spur" to work, to effort-via-insecurity, as a threat to the lazy, has been halting. This befits an idea so controversial, in a Soviet context whose statistical records have known no unemployment since 1931. The controversial economist and essayist Nikolai Shmelev, in a Novyi mir article in 1987 condemned "overemployment," cited the "parasitical" quality of the certainty of employment, and calculated that labor
turnover, plus "tramps" off the record, made for a 3 percent unemployment rate at any given time in any case. In a generally very critical article on Soviet economic structure and practice, he argued that a (relatively small) "reserve" unemployed workforce--supported by some state benefits--might serve better than overemployment as a guard against "laziness, drunkenness, and lack of responsibility." Losing a job, and going on a temporary benefit, or going to a job "chosen" for one, would change the dynamic of worker versus job so long canonized in Soviet practice. A few months of "sufficient" unemployment compensation, Shmelev felt, would be cheaper than stockpiling the destructively lazy at the workplace.

In all, Shmelev obviously called for no "reserve army" of jobless losers, thrown upon their own resources. But the general tone of his article (which left virtually no aspect of the Soviet economy untouched, and accused anti-reformers of a cynical "ideological virginity") guaranteed controversy. Still it was the view of job-losing, of paid (and, evidently, disreputable) unemployment that seemed to attract the most attention. It was, on the one hand, a measure of glasnost', and on the other of the sensitivity of the issue, that Gorbachev expressed his disagreement with ideas on employment attributed to Shmelev in a "meeting with voters," distancing himself from unemployment-as-tactic without reading Shmelev
out of the multifaceted discussion of the economics of perestroika.  

Whatever Shmelev's words and meaning, other "reform" economists have dealt with the issue in a gingerly way. Gennadi Lisichkin, an economist frequently engaged in controversies in the press, argued that one of perestroika's tasks was the prevention of unemployment. Ivan Gladkii, chairman of the State Committee on Labor and Social Problems, rejected the idea of unemployment as a "spur," although he did project a 10-15 million (smaller than Kostakov's projection eighteen months earlier) cut in production employment. He stressed that in certain branches of the economy, 10-15 percent reductions had already been achieved, but with no problems in job placement of those released.

There has been a balancing of "tough talk" with policy reassurance. Minister of Finance Gostev cited 13 percent of all state enterprises as unprofitable, and suggested the possibility that they might be closed. Aganbegian, in an interview with Newsweek in August 1987, spoke of cutting the prices on unneeded goods by 30 percent to stop factories from producing more of them: a prelude, given some of his earlier statements, to necessary closure of such factories. But suggesting that the result might make for unemployment has come much harder. Even Abalkin, who was ready in 1986 to project 20 million jobs disappearing by the end of the century, in mid-1987 edged away from any notion of tolerable
unemployment in an interview in *Sovetskaia Rossia*; and Aganbegian has not suggested that the state's responsibilities do not encompass providing other work for those released from uneconomic jobs.

WAGES: WORKER AS SCAPEGOAT?

If the seemingly cast-iron security of continued employment in the branch, plant and job to which one had grown accustomed seemed threatened by Gorbachev's program, so was a long-term emphasis in wage policy which ostensibly favored workers over other groups. If dominant thought and policy encompassed the notion that—finally—employment in material production would shrink, and that the service sector necessarily had to grow were it not to continue to act as a "brake" on the whole economy, then changes in wage and salary priorities were logical components of the shifts foreseen over the next decade and a half. Politically, however, they were likely to run counter to many long-held assumptions and expectations.

As we saw earlier, Stalin's "plan era" brought a radical shift in the wage hierarchy of sectors and branches. Under NEP, workers closer to the "market" in the sense of producing consumer goods, etc. did relatively well. But with the "plan" came an emphasis on (heavy) industrial production,
on extraction and construction, which made miners and steelworkers the focus of symbolic poster art and elevated their economic rewards over other blue-collar, as well as many white-collar, functionaries. Down the years since, workers had been the beneficiaries of this preference. If Brezhnev-era rises in minimum wage levels had disproportionately benefited rural dwellers, people at the bottom of the white-collar category, and workers in least-favored branches of industry, such changes were not necessarily so perceptible to traditionally more favored blue-collar workers as other alterations might have been. For all that economists had, at various times, criticized the precise pattern of wage-and-salary scales, no major challenge had emerged to the centrality of "the worker" in the economy, and in the minds of its directors.

In a sense, the image—and reality—of the relatively well-paid worker, accurately or inaccurately, provided a base of affirmation for egalitarianism in the economy. Stalin's denunciation of uravnilovka had never been repudiated, and reward under socialism was still "according to work" rather than "need." But, in grass-roots psychology, an egalitarianism focused on the inadmissibility of extraordinarily high rewards for anyone had taken deep root. The Brezhnev era saw a minimization of the earning advantages of engineering and technical personnel over manual workers, and advantages of the latter over people in rank-and-file positions in medi-
All this reflected a seeming assumption that, were all "well" with workers' rewards, all was, in general, in order. Whether these trends were products of choice, or of the "incremental" style that went with Brezhnev's "chairman of the board" leadership, is not totally clear, but the cause was less important than the effect.

From the outset, however, there was evidence that Gorbachev had something different in mind; policy changes in favor of those "underpaid" (from the incumbents' point of view) nonmanual and service-sector occupations, which are expected to increase as a percentage of the labor force when manufacturing de-stocks unneeded workers. In the words of the economist Oleg Bogomolov in late 1985,

fundamental changes may be expected in systems of wage rates and in the differentials between pay of particular categories of workers. For example, the Soviet Union... intend(s) to raise the salaries of engineers and technicians, scientists, designers, teachers, and medical staff...31

These early signals were more than borne out, as wage policy became clearer in 1986 and 1987. The Gorbachev program, echoing the increasing calls of so many economists for less egalitarianism in reward between different levels of skill in
the working class, and in the relationship of workers and college-educated professionals' pay, thus represented a radical departure from the ouvrieriste policies of the Brezhnev era. As one Western student put it, Gorbachev was risking conflict (as Brezhnev had not) via a policy of "squeezing the traditional working class," in pursuit of a social policy which implied "a markedly different set of prospective winners and losers than obtained under the rule of his predecessors." Zaslavskaia, in a January interview with the Hungarian daily Nepszabadsag, had been scarcely less pointed: "If we want... radical changes... there will be a relative change in the situation of classes, groups and strata of society, with "advantage for some... disadvantage for others." 

A virtual chorus of voices arose criticizing muddled thinking which had grown over the years to identify "social justice" with equality of distribution, with "levelling," with "padding" the pay of those with low wage rates to bring them up to some "satisfactory" level. November 1986 saw strongly differentiated (by Soviet standards) guidelines for pay increases: 20-25 percent, on the average, for workers in production; 30-35 percent for the various categories of ("white-collar") engineering and technical personnel (ITR), and 40-45 percent for "leading categories of specialists," such as designers, technologists and foremen. Perennially underpaid professionals in education, medicine and other non-
goods-producing services were to receive raises ca. 30 percent—some corrective to that contrast so typical of the Soviet system, between skilled steelworker and rank and file M.D., wherein he earns much more than she.

Inequality within blue-collar ranks was furthered by a proviso that, on the typical 6-grade Soviet wage schedule for a given industry or branch, workers at level III and above—but not those less-skilled below—would be eligible for 12-14 percent bonuses for high-quality output. One of the aims, as L.A. Kostin, first deputy chairman of the State Committee on Labor and Social Problems, put it, was the move from a situation where the "spread" on a six-grade schedule had declined to 1:1.58 from a more differentiated 1:1.8.  

But such raises, for workers at least, were not to be automatic. They were tied to plant output and "profits," and therefore conditional on material and labor-saving. "More and better" output could finance raises; so could savings that might be made by de-stocking unneeded workers and taking advantage of wage-fund recapture. (Less specific in the announcement of increases tied to result was the logical corollary—that if a more demanding measure of defining "results" were imposed, wage decreases might be in the offing. Such was, as we shall see, to befall some elements of the working class in 1987.)

Thus, the threat of the displacement of the worker in Soviet social policy assumed a certain reality it had, per-
haps, lacked in prior discussions. To announce a range of wage increases that so clearly dealt less generously with the blue-collar core of Soviet society was to suggest that the worker himself was a major problem in the economy, and that he might be dealt with in a manner at once economically harsher and socially and politically more critical than any in the past.

GOSPRIEMKA AND THE "WAGE BITE"

For years, most Soviet workers experienced the protective effects of a weak link between the quality of their finished products and the acceptability of those products. No "market" disciplined the line worker. In the "weak-consumer" Soviet economy, the end-user of the substandard products could not easily reject them, and the producers had already been paid. Within the producing factory, inspection tended to laxness; inspectors, after all, worked for the same factory management as did the workers. All three groups had a stake, in wage/bonus terms, in assuring that the volume plan was "fulfilled." Avoidance of a situation where a rejection of output sufficient to imperil plan-fulfillment bonuses occurred had become one of the bases of the monthly wage-packet. Such expectations were built into the "social relations of production": part of the relatively easy,
predictable, secure rhythm of the workplace, and the psychological security of the anticipated wage-plus-bonus.

If poor-quality output had been a perennial complaint in the economic press (we speak here of decades, not mere years), the very persistence of patterns gave workers little reason to anticipate change. Change, however, was to come with Gorbachev. As the rhetoric of perestroika grew louder in his second year, a party-state resolution in July, 198639 authorized a new form of inspection/quality control, via the "state acceptance commission" (gospriemka) which would place representatives in factories—representatives unobehden to factory management, but working under the aegis of the State Committee on Standards (Gosstandart). Introduced on January 1, 1987, these promised, at least a new departure.

At a Central Committee conference on November 14, Gorbachev delivered a "pep talk" on gospriemka, asserting that its emphasis on quality of output was quite compatible with a speed-up in the economy, with the acceleration (uskorenie) he had been calling for.40 A few days later, I.I. Isaev, the deputy chairman of Gosstandart, reviewed some of what was to be expected on Moscow TV.41 In all, 1500 industrial enterprises would come under gospriemka in 1987. Inspectors were being selected, often from the factories over whose product quality they were to mount guard—but the nominations factory directors had made were frequently ignored for those of higher-up party organizations.
That an experiment with *gospriemka* was taking place before January 1, 1987, and that worker reactions were likely to be anything but positive, became clear with reports of a strike in the giant "KamAZ" truck plant on the Kama river—a showpiece of the imported industrial technology of the 1970s—when disgruntled workers found that tighter, independent quality control had cut into expected bonuses, via lowered plan-fulfillment figures. Neither price rises, nor a local output-norm rise were at issue here. At issue were national policies soon to affect a large number of enterprises: late in December, the chairman of *Gosstandart*, had good warrant in expressing the belief that the new system would cause financial problems in some factories.

1987 opened the era of *gospriemka* as policy and practice, and the shakedown cruise was anything but smooth. Two weeks on, the daily *Sovetskaia Rossiia* reported that *gospriemka* was bringing wage cuts in some plants. At a large farm machinery plant in Tiumen' oblast, average pay suffered a 33 percent cut in January as inspectors found the quality of output wanting. Reportedly, fully 60 percent of the 1500 plants under the new system failed to meet the January plan targets due to tougher inspection. Generally, reports indicated shop-floor tension, with workers angered over the unfamiliar discipline. Still, that the intrusion wrought "havoc" with production, may be somewhat in doubt. *Gospriemka*’s total January-March operation, according to one report,
rejected the equivalent of one percent of national industrial output. In January 1987, enterprises under gospriemka saw 83.9 percent of their output passed by the inspectors—numbers not striking in themselves, but whose wage impact is much magnified in their effect on bonuses for plan fulfillment.

The new system, evidently, puts both workers and managers in an unfamiliar situation. A major element appears to be the difficulty of convincing these parties that, after many years of second-level priority, output quality is now a major focus of state attention and concern. Not only workers and managers, but the local party officials who bear final responsibility for the performance of enterprises in their purview, were reluctant to "get aboard." With six months' experience, the first deputy chairman of Gosstandart reported resistance on the part of party officials in three oblasts in the trade-union daily Trud. Tension between old notions of plan fulfillment—that the plan was fulfilled when it was said to be fulfilled—versus the new, inspection-based system was evident in the reported accusation aired by the obkom secretary in Karaganda at the head of the gospriemka operation in a local machinery plant—that he was "not concerned with plan fulfillment."

Patterns of evasion have been common in managerial behavior since Stalin's time, and managers have had time, over the Brezhnev years, to hone some of their techniques to an
edge sufficiently sharp to counteract new forces, at least in some cases. A needle-fabricating complex in the Moscow area, faced with the new inspection system, managed to get its technical specifications lowered to a level it could meet, making an "end run" around gospriemka. The same organization, faced with the inability of one of its plants to come even close to standards, hived it off into independence and thus out of the orbit of the 1500 enterprises where the gospriemka writ ran! 52

For workers, there was much evidence that the combination of "negative controls" that had worked in the past, and the worker-management collusion that had guaranteed the expected vyvodilovka—the adequate, justified wage no matter what the real output—no longer met the purpose. One reader of Trud complained that gospriemka created extra work—should it not, then, mean raises in pay? The answer was, predictably, negative. 53 The experience of wage cuts exacerbated factory conflicts. In a ceramic fixtures plant, a worker characterized the gospriemka inspectors as "parasites" and "useless people"—even one who had been employed at the plant before the new system. 54

Worker feelings that they, particularly, were "targeted" by the new system, that their "social right" not to work hard, rather than directors' rights to collect high salaries, was the specific object of the January 1987 changes, were pronounced. Even before its introduction, other "pay by
result" schemes, linking wage-plus-bonus totals to accepted, or marketable output, generated complaint: in one of his "walk-around"s during a visit to Vladivostok in July, a worker complained to Gorbachev that while he and his fellow workers were on "pay by result," the management was not. The General Secretary responded that all, including management, would be.\textsuperscript{55} Over a year later, on a TV call-in show, Ivan Gladkii, chairman of the State Committee on Labor and Social Problems, answered a complaint from a worker: in his plant, blue collar pay cuts averaged 50-80 rubles per month under the new conditions, but management seemed to be getting bonuses! Gladkii replied that this contravened the whole rationale of the system, that managerial bonuses, just as workers', were tied to production, and invited the worker to call again with the name of the enterprise involved.\textsuperscript{56}

WORKPLACE MANAGEMENT: FROM "NEGATIVE CONTROL" TO RESPONSIBILITY?

If policies on wages and quality control, prices, and the more rational deployment of labor resources all seemed, in their own way, threats to social compact benefits especially relevant to the blue-collar worker, another policy line offered ostensible movement in a different direction. In January 1987, at a Central Committee plenum, Gorbachev
made more explicit earlier hints, and in line with the developing emphasis on participation,\textsuperscript{57} called for worker participation in the election of enterprise managers. In mid-1987, the new Law on State Enterprises\textsuperscript{58} specified several points designed to provide what seemed a greater "empowerment" of line workers as a whole than they had ever enjoyed in the past, and to move workers from their (understood-but-seldom-specified) "negative control" of the rhythm and results of work in their own shops or sections to a broader, more responsible role in enterprise control.

Two points were particularly important. The new law enshrined the election of all managerial staff, from directors to brigade leaders, thus turning what had been a well-publicized "experiment" in certain areas\textsuperscript{59} into policy nationwide. It also provided for a "council of the labor collective" in each enterprise with authority over a variety of activities within the plant—a body to be elected (2-3 year terms) by balloting at general meetings of the plant workforce.

The state taketh away, the state giveth...? Perhaps, but to interpret these new provisions as an organizational revolution which, in the face of introducing more economic uncertainty into workers lives, recognizes their higher level of "consciousness" by ceding to them more ability to cope—or fail to cope—with a less certain environment, would be to go too far. Such a radical path would be risky—and Soviet
management, whether directly political or economic, has been nothing if not risk-averse. The potential conflict between a new participation and the democratic-centralist and one-man management principles enshrined in the Soviet factory could not be a welcome matter.

In fact, the new law yields predictably less than the promise of a revolution in labor relations, a move toward management, or even institutionalized veto power, for workers. Directorial elections will, no doubt, take place—but he who is elected must be confirmed by the plant's superior "organ." This means ministry approval—and despite the evident seriousness with which Gorbachev is paring the personnel in economic ministries (a 50 percent projected cut in their numbers in Moscow), there will be sufficient bureaucrats to manipulate candidacies, accept or reject those named. Directors, in turn, must approve those elected to lower supervisory posts. Thus a strong version of edinonachalie will be preserved.

The labor collective councils, meanwhile, enjoy a mandate which has less to do with workers' control than with control and mobilization of workers: labor discipline, productivity even monitoring of pay to see that it has been "earned." There is more here in common with the designation, decades ago, of the trade unions as "schools of communism," than with any substantively new departure aimed at workers' power to press their claims.
Indeed, in the provisions and, just as importantly, the surrounding rhetoric, there is no evidence of intention to promote "the interests and rights of workers as a distinct group," as one Western analyst recently put it. Persons "running" for director have not appealed to shop-floor "interests" as opposed to others. The councils may include professionals, engineers, managers and union officials as well as line workers. Rights to "participate" are spread broadly within a context emphasizing a community of interest in production and efficiency, rather than division of interest based on place in the work process, or on the setting or distribution of rewards.

Still, the Soviet managerial strata have no reason to welcome these changes—and this may be a key to their rationale. Enterprise directors--bad ones, "typical" ones, traditional ones--evoke no special love or solitude in Gorbachev's part. Yet if large-scale perestroika works, managers will have more autonomy vis-a-vis weakened mid-level ministerial controls. How, then, to guarantee the quality of their work, how to control them? To some degree, a procedure where ministries will "vet" candidates, pre- and/or post-election, but where those candidates must be electable, should yield the promise of less incompetence, and a better utilization of the "human factor." The (very) moderate control capacity the labor collective councils possess, and the now-non-controversial powers of unions to defend workers'
legal rights suggest the desire to maintain and promote some degree of control-from-below on managers. Khrushchev-era encouragement of trade-union intervention at the plant level aimed at narrowing of managerial prerogatives and abuses, as much as at the defense of workers per se. Such a rationale makes sense as well in the new Gorbachev line. In both cases, the role to be played by plant-level party organizations in directing the work of the organs of participation and "self-management" is a large and clear one. Which aspects of managerial performance are to be monitored from below, and how? The balance to be struck between management's representation of the ministerial oversight in the plant, and worker-union "participatory" representation of broader policy priorities, will not be matters of "local option." Workers constitute only one category of "players" in this game, and not a category recognized as possessing legitimate interests distinguishing them from other categories. No room has been made for the working class here.

PRICES: THE KNOT UNTIED?

Workers, along with other Soviet citizens, have been the ostensible beneficiaries of artificially low, heavily-subsidized prices on basic foods, rents and utilities. They have also suffered from high prices resulting from a multi-
plicity of (hidden) "turnover taxes" on many durables and "luxury" items.

Political resolve has, it seems, finally prevailed over practice. "Price reform" is scheduled for the early 1990s, and is a topic of frequent discussion in the specialized and general press. Soviet citizens may expect (1) rising prices for long-subsidized food items and, perhaps, rents as well; (2) less emphatically, price cuts on a number of items now well beyond a "reasonable" mark-up, and (3) redistribution of the state subsidies now to be "saved" (ca. 70-plus billion rubles per year) in wage, salary, and benefit adjustments, with an emphasis on pensioners, single-parent households, and other low-paid categories.

Who benefited most from the old arrangements? If low bread/milk/meat prices and low rents are "options" exercised for the "common man," it need be noted, as some Soviet critics have, that the well-off, paying the same retail prices and able to buy much more, are also beneficiaries, and are obviously the ones better able to pay the prices for luxury items. Some workers are well-off; some are not. Many members of workers' families, as we have seen, are not so well off in relation to other individuals as a highly-skilled blue-collar earner's place in the wage hierarchy might suggest. For workers—or anyone else—to herald the sort of price reform that seems in the offing would seem to require a number of convictions to be widely-diffused among them:
- that prices to be raised are absurdly low, and that their increase will prompt an expansion of supply, variety, and quality
- that prices to be cut on various durables will be accompanied by an increase in the supply of those as well, thus barring shortage-driven bribes and other additions to lower retail prices
- that "returns" to the public of subsidies now saved be, in their distribution by groups and their overall magnitude, seen to be "fair"

This is a tall order, all in all. Food prices are low in comparison to the cost of production, on the subsidized items, but not, in people's perceptions, in relation to their incomes: here the USSR still shows itself as a relatively poor society. Nor are people likely to welcome higher prices as a spur to "more and better." We have no evidence to suggest that on the whole people connect shortages to artificially low prices, so grasp of the reciprocal seems unlikely. Balancing cuts on durable prices vs. increases on food items is a delicate matter--one shops more frequently for the latter than the former. One cannot take advantage of all possible price cuts on "big ticket" items, since one will not want all of them, and some prices will remain, even cut, beyond majority grasp.

To some degree, the selling of price increases as policy has been a matter of pointing to the fact that Soviet
economic life has had "inflationary" components all along. Those who patronize kolkhoz markets understand this. The gaps between their market-set prices for meat, and the fixed state-store prices (where there often is, however, no meat) have been widening over the years. Economists, too, have focused on this issue. In May of 1987, the vice chairman of the State Committee on Prices observed that state subsidies could not endure forever, and noted that the Central Statistical Administration's retail price index was wrong.\textsuperscript{65} Later that year, Oleg Bogomolov asserted that, since the end of the 1950's, consumer prices had risen 75-100 percent (whereas the statistical administration's annual for 1985 had cited a 1960-85 rise of eight percent).\textsuperscript{66}

Whether this "news" will make workers, or others, feel better is questionable. Meanwhile, though the 1987 policy consensus surely is that the time for price increases has come, the timing of the increases has been pushed two or three years into the future. In the interim, the management of perceptions of policy is important: hence the emphasis on subsidy costs, which become "savings" as subsidies are cut, savings to be distributed to cushion the impact. The chairman of Goskomtsen (the price committee) advocates "radical" price changes, to be balanced by higher incomes and pensions.\textsuperscript{67} Abalkin asserted that meat costs would double, but emphasized that people's psychological preparation for this necessary move was critical, and that a solution to the
problems of those with low incomes, including pensioners and students, would have to be found. In this as in other areas, the workers should prove a hard audience to convince.

FUTURE PROSPECT: PERESTROIKA AND THE WORKERS

There is much to justify the view that the Gorbachev policies, to the degree they are implemented, will amount to a confrontation with working-class habits and expectations. In political terms, this (1) implies that decisive policy implementation will generate social strains which themselves will present a "problem" for policy, or, conversely (2) that worries over the necessity of "so much" reform will moderate perestroika's implementation, and hence its impact on the working class.

Do workers represent a constituency for reform, for perestroika, for glasnost'? This is a complicated question, but the burden of the proof lies on those who would answer "yes." If Gorbachev has courted a component of Soviet society, it has been the intelligentsia—the producers and consumers of knowledge, culture, information; glasnost' and demokratizatsiia have been the suitor's offerings. Intellectuals and professionals are heavier consumers of these than are workers. The fruits they offer are rather poor compensation for the blue-collar majority which faces the new
economic strictures of perestroika, without any marked increase in material living standards, three years into the Gorbachev era.

If the political reform implied loosely by glasnost' is not of prime interest to the workers, how will it, or its abandonment, affect the process of economic reform and its reception by the workers? First, political reform, while it may "disorient" the workers to a degree, can also place in their hands expanded possibilities to resist aspects of economic reform they find threatening.

"Disorient," of course, in the sense that workers' political demands are, by comparison with elements of the intelligentsia, quite modest. To the degree that, either due to political experience and socialization (older workers) or inexperience and unfamiliarity (younger workers), the past concerns them little, workers are not likely to "take heart" from reexaminations of Soviet history, the logic and relevance of NEP, the terrorism and (distorted) institution-building of Stalin. To the degree that glasnost' and demokratizatsiia seem politics for the intelligentsia while the economics of perestroika seem anti-worker, selling new policies on the factory floor will be all the harder.

But if a loosening of political controls on organization and communication is consolidated at some level, there is no reason to think that defense of worker "anti-reform" interests cannot find a place in this new milieu. Glasnost'
itself legitimizes the public expression of opinions more divergent than those permitted in past practice. Under its aegis, advocates of perestroika "with social justice" for the worker, the rank-and-file citizen, can argue for the moderation of wage and prices policies, stressing the essential role of full employment in welfare, Soviet style. None of this, to underscore the point, need seem anti-Gorbachev, or aimed at perestroika. It will simply be a contribution to a policy discussion, an offering of refinements, quite legitimate under the new dispensation of glasnost'. Yet to the degree that it strikes responsive chords among elements of high to middle level leadership, it is a spur to the bureaucratic politicking and resistance that have been effective blocks to innovation in the past. While the Gorbachev line seems to be that economic restructuring is impossible without democratization, it may well be that the expansion of channels of discussion, and perhaps influence under the latter will prove an obstacle to the former. There remains, for the public, a reserve of legitimacy in appeals for the welfare of "the workers"--it is risky for a leader, or a program, to be perceived to be against workers' welfare.

These would be broad perceptions as well--selling a program on the basis of its benefit to "good" workers, its justified negative impact on "bad," will be difficult when the evidence is that it is primarily certain industries, plants, and products that are targeted for contraction or
discontinuation, and that workers' fates are tied to these rather than to their personal qualities or effort. Mounting a traditional defense of "workers' interests," even under perestroika, may be a simpler matter than defending its differentiated effects on diverse categories within blue-collar ranks.

Under what circumstances is working-class support for Gorbachev's policies most likely? Simply enough, under those in which perestroika is seen to produce clear "payoffs" for the common man, without creating too-palpable inequalities, or under those wherein a majority of workers are perceived to benefit (and thus a minority of workers, only, remain as "losers" to be labelled as the lazy, drunken, etc.).

How such circumstances might be created is a big question. It will be more difficult than was the creation of pro-reform public opinion in Hungary in the early years of the NEM--and there, segments of the working class were always among those with reservations about the cui bono aspect of the reform. "Luck"—in the sense of good weather for agriculture and construction, and in less clear areas where certain disciplinary and organizational measures in industry might generate positive results sooner, rather than later, without the outcome being readily explicable—will play a major short- to medium-term role here. Through early 1988, however, Gorbachev had had little luck on the domestic scene.

Hungary, after all, had a certain amount of "slack" in
1968—pre-NEM economic policy and practice since the early 1960's had not been overly wasteful by socialist standards. Also, a stronger consensus in favor of a rather detailed reform program was in place for 2-3 years before the NEM came into effect. Allowing for all the pitfalls of comparison between Hungary and the USSR, Gorbachev is not so fortunate twenty years later. The economic problems have piled up. Critically, agricultural output seems as far as ever from satisfying the demands of the population. Gorbachev, thus, has had to call for increasing the volume of production simultaneously with the implementation of perestroika aimed at quality and efficiency of production. Pursuit of both goals at the same time requires harder work from blue-collar citizens while the familiar elements of wage and job security, subsidized prices and near-free services, are "restructured." How worker support would emerge in this situation is difficult to see. What factors, what scenarios, create the greatest likelihood, then, of worker resistance and revolt? The continued application of the "stick" implied in perestroika, in the all-too-possible absence of the various carrots promised to the general public, will provide ground for discontent, even allowing for a heavy legacy of blue-collar patriotism and political conformity. If, at the margins, private enterprises and those working in new cooperative ventures grow affluent—or are perceived to grow affluent—beyond the bounds to which workers might normally
aspire, this too will strain convictions that perestroika promises social justice. Moral condemnation combined with envy, a feeling of rules long relied upon being violated to the detriment of those who have worked in and relied upon state-sector employment, could be a volatile mix indeed.

Strike activity more widespread, if not more organized than usual, could be one result. In such a case, those who oppose Gorbachev and/or perestroika would be given a pretext to move against one or both. To the public, the rationale for a government change and modification of policy would be that it did not "work" as socialism; that important "lessons" had been forgotten, that the "irreversibility" of certain core aspects of Soviet welfarism had, in fact, been put into question. Within leadership circles (even though the new glasnost' could render secrecy somewhat more difficult) the rationale would be the preservation of a threatened order, the need to "put the lid back on," via a pullback on policies, plus repression where needed. Blame, surely would be attached to Gorbachev. The rejection of his policies wholesale is, however, unlikely. Consensus that the economy needs restructuring seems broadly shared, even among those who might dispute matters of pace and particular components of reform. It will be hard, under any circumstances, to restore the regime-worker relationship of the Brezhnev years. The "accidental proletariat," if not a class in the active political sense, has more class characteristics than at any
time since the end of the 1920s. It has the potential, a mix of militancy and foot-dragging, to disrupt and to delay, especially if leadership counsel is divided over critical issues of economic and social change.

None of this, however, is meant to attribute a "veto power" to the workers over policies pressed forward by decisive implementation. The state has been strong, "society" weak through much of Russian-Soviet history. Overall, it has been more critical to citizens what the state thought of them, than to the state what citizens thought of it. The move away from mass terror, from autocracy to oligarchy in the period since 1953 has not yet fundamentally altered this element of state-society relations.

Thus, the state--and its leader--have critical assets in hand, and can deploy them. Workers disgruntled over higher prices, more "contingent" wages, and with earning the latter on an inconvenient shift, may complain, foot-drag, etc. But this is not a revolt. Strikes may occur in individual plants; these can be handled as in the past, with various "reserves" of food and goods at the ready (even if such interventions contravene the logic of the reform). Or, more harsh measures can be used. Order can be restored by the threat of punishment, with added appeals to workers to understand that adjustment to new production and pay disciplines is necessary; that the state is seeking to root out corrupt and inefficient bosses; that there is a rationale for
discipline and austerity now, rewards later. If order be seen as a problem, it can be maintained by some mix of these measures. But maintenance of order by itself will not solve economic problems.

In pursuing order against such worker resistance, authorities may "trim" here and there—but such is the case with any reform. The key question is whether the trimming will, ultimately, cut into the substance of the reform: a question perhaps premature, since the full policy substance of reform is not yet clear. The risk is less one of disorder, than that a combination of factors (leadership disagreement about how much reform is desirable, perceptions of the impact of various price-wage-employment measures on the workers, their morale and propensities to use their "negative control" versus innovation) will "trim" reform measures to the point where what follows in the late 1990's will threaten to reproduce in somewhat altered form the Brezhnev-era economic and social malaise that bespoke the need for reform in the first place. This is not a simple case of deja vu: the workers, if their perceived or expressed discontent with the "stick" part of reform blunts its use, will not necessarily be resigned to the absence of the "carrots" reform promises. This, perhaps, is the essence of the "new worker" Zaslavskaiia and others describe. He/she is not as resourceless as the worker of the 1930s. While the resources may not be sufficient to alter the system, and are
not likely to be deployed in any attempt to overthrow it, they can guarantee an ongoing and uncomfortable stalemate. In this context, social order will be preserved, but the political line to be taken from the top will become a more controversial matter. Leadership politics in the 1990s may witness a fight between alternatives, farther apart than those most specialists perceived as testing leadership unity in the late 1980s. Gorbachev's perestroika, accompanied and to some degree driven by glasnost' and a broad demokratizatsiia in the political sphere, lies on one side. On the other, a harder, narrower line, attributed to Ligachev and some others, would back the economic thrust, but press to accomplish its results without much loosening of political controls or expansion of public controversy. Neither may "work." It is possible that, in retrospect, neither may seem benign in comparison with what the end of the century might bring in a USSR which fails to bring off the economic reform and the requisite social transformations which are the aim of perestroika.


15. See RL 318/86.

16. See RL 101/86 (Aaron Trehub, "Gorbachev's Speech to the Twenty-Seventh Party Congress: Social Issues"), Feb. 27, 1986, pp. 1-2, for the General Secretary's comments on employment issues.


20. See n. 8.


27. RL 294/87, p. 6 (citing Newsweek, July 20, 1987).


30. At the 1986 CPSU Congress, Prime Minister Ryzhkov even noted that "elements of wage-levelling ... have intensified recently." Pravda and Izvestiia, Mar. 4, 1986 (CDSP, April 23, 1986).


33. Ibid., p. 71.
38. Ibid.
43. RL 476/86, p. 18 (citing TASS, Dec. 29, 1986).
47. Andreas Tenson, "State Acceptance Commissions," (RL 113/87; March 24, 1987) gives a good account of the early gospriemka experience.
51. Ibid.


59. The number of areas was, obviously, limited.


62. Ibid., pp. 84-85.

63. See RL 389/87, and sources cited therein.


67. See RL 347/87, p. 5.