4 Eye-Witness to Failure

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Of all the secrets buried deep within the labyrinth of the Soviet Union, few are so closely guarded as those concerning the status of workers. The ‘working class’ is constantly extolled in the controlled press and its ‘leading role’ in directing the society towards that elusive, shimmering mirage of pure communism is reiterated at frequent intervals.

The foreign correspondent assigned to Moscow produces meagre results, however, when he strikes out to explore the actual living and working conditions of individual workers. Although he is told over and over again about the important position of trade unions in the Soviet system, the foreigner rarely meets any of their officers. Visits to factories are rare; those finally agreed to are carefully controlled and managed like a Bolshoi Theatre production of Swan Lake. The visitors meet the factory manager and the secretary of the Communist Party. Occasionally, outstanding ‘shock’ workers are introduced, but ‘union’ officials are conspicuous by their absence. It is the party that speaks for the workers at such times with its select cadres setting the examples which others are expected to follow.

Of course, the party and government media proclaim daily the dogmas of Soviet life – the absence of unemployment, complete equality of the sexes and the regular achievements of individual workers and brigades in surpassing output quotas. What is missing is any suggestion that ordinary workers have any influence on the vital questions of their working conditions. Who determines wage rates, working hours, production quotas, safety and environmental standards? Who investigates grievances? Who speaks for the workers?

The answer to all the questions is that it is the party that resolves all conflicts, makes all plans and anticipates all problems through its ‘scientific’ approach to economic issues. When the official press discusses the role of the party, it emphasises that its ranks are made up of a majority of ‘workers’. The press fails to disclose that those described as
workers' are, more often than not, persons in authority far removed from the workbench.

Foreign correspondents are almost never allowed to talk with ranking Communist Party officials, but do occasionally meet with provincial officials or cadre leaders in factories or on farms. These people, however, are so highly disciplined and indoctrinated that they will rarely answer substantive questions about either their work or about the status of workers. In addition, the Soviet press rarely provides reliable information of the routine type concerning workers' problems. Only general 'average' figures are given for wages. Little is printed about workers' attitudes towards their jobs or working conditions.

What little is printed about factory operations concentrates on managerial bungling – the inevitable stories about raw materials left to rot in open storage areas, continued production of shoddy products and failure to maintain important machinery. Some such stories, the papers claim, result from workers' letters to the editor, a tacit admission that there is no alternative means of airing grievances. Workers are criticised for drinking too much and malingering. But any complaints they have about working conditions are channelled away from where outsiders might see them.

We know by gossip that there have been occasional strikes in Soviet factories, just as there have been riots over persistent shortages of meat. We know from former prisoners' testimony of the substantial contributions made to the economy by penal camp inmates, including the manufacture of souvenir 'Mischa' bear dolls designed for the 1980 Olympic Games tourists. But valid information about general working conditions is perhaps second only to military information on the list of secrets maintained by the Soviet Union.

When the workers do protest about some management decision which they do not like, the rare public revelation of the incident tells us a lot about the official position of wage-earners in relation to the vlast (authority). A recent example of this surfaced in January 1979 in the official Azerbaijan republican newspaper, Bakinsky rabochii.

The bus-drivers of Baku, the oil-producing capital city, resisted a decision made by the city party committee to change the way they collected passengers' fares. For years, the newspaper said, the bus system had not worked well and the authorities had made a proper decision to change the method of collecting fares. Also:

Preparatory work for the switch to the new system was, however, not carried out, and its introduction was accompanied by serious