2 Drastic Changes in the Soviet Social Contract
Janet G. Chapman

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Gorbachev’s reforms are breaking what for the past three decades or so has been the social contract between the Soviet leaders and the people, and he is attempting to develop and sell a new social contract more suitable to the current situation.

The old social contract, as Jan Adam’s chapter points out, provided for job security, protection in old age and illness, free education and health services, a rather egalitarian distribution of income, low and stable prices of food and rent and an increasing, even if at times slowly, standard of living. In return, the people were to stay out of politics, show up for work, obey their superiors and maintain discipline. This worked well for years but more recently had obviously begun to unravel. Docility turned into apathy; drunkenness, absenteeism and other forms of indiscipline were increasing. The saying attributed to Soviet workers: ‘As long as the bosses pretend they are paying us a decent wage, we will pretend that we are working’ sums up the situation and implies that the workers understood that there was – or at least had been – an underlying social contract.

The new contract takes away some of the old economic rights; so far, in particular, the guaranteed job and the egalitarian distribution of wages. It is argued, following Marx, that socialist justice requires that each contribute according to his ability and be paid according to his contribution. Paying slackers as much as effective workers is unjust.

A number of other questions of socialist justice are being raised. For instance, each ruble earned should have the same value so special privileges should be eliminated and price subsidies should go. The end of subsidised food and rent is in the offing but the leadership is treading hesitantly here.

While job security has been reduced, the safety net for those who cannot work or who lose their jobs will be improved.
With increased emphasis on payment according to contribution, some argue that justice requires greater equality of opportunity for people, especially children, to develop their abilities. Benefits provided by the state should be more equally distributed. Some propose that only the minimum benefits that society can afford to provide to all should be provided free. Additional benefits or services could be paid for by those whose income permits.

The new contract introduces some political rights and opportunities to participate in economic and political life. We hear talk of a 'civil state' and of the rule of law. Provision has been made for greater worker participation in enterprise decisions. This and some new forms of the organisation of labour, such as private and cooperative enterprise and leasing arrangements, are expected to give the workers a sense of proprietorship. Considerable power is shifting from the centre to enterprises and to republican and local governments. Elections now provide some choice of candidates. The new legislature – Congress of People's Deputies and its standing body, the Supreme Soviet – appears to have some real power.

By improving incentives, giving workers more political rights, and trying to inculcate a sense of proprietorship, Gorbachev hopes to 'activate the human factor'. He has acknowledged (for instance, in his speech to the Central Committee in early February, *The New York Times*, 9 February 1990) that neglect of human rights means the USSR has seriously lagged. He wants to turn people around, give them more incentive to put out, tap their creativity and give and demand more responsibility. In Marx’s terms, Gorbachev wants to see work changed from a mere means of life to the prime necessity of life. This is considered crucial to improved efficiency and technological progress.

I will discuss the end of the guaranteed job, the new policy of increasing wage differentials, job-related rights, improvements in social security and the war on poverty and housing. Specifics on other aspects of the social contract are covered elsewhere in the volume. In the next to last section, some issues and trends are appraised and the last section examines prospects for the new social contract and the reforms.

2.2 THE END OF THE GUARANTEED JOB

The Soviet constitution guarantees everyone the right to an appropriate job and makes it a duty for everyone to hold a job. This has been