4 The Administration of the Protective Labour Laws

The revolutionary year of 1917 greatly enhanced the priority of labour protection in Russia, and particularly for women. From February 1917 the Provisional Government initiated attempts to investigate and improve the poor conditions of work which existed for millions of workers in factories and mines. The earlier debates on the regulation of night work by women were taken up again in this period. The Provisional Government established its own Ministry of Labour to look into questions of labour protection and the Ministry sought to mitigate some of the harsh conditions of work in factories and mines for women and young workers. A number of the wartime initiatives which had allowed for the unregulated expansion of the industrial labour force were retracted. The Provisional Government also established a number of commissions to investigate a range of labour issues but these were largely ineffective.¹

The Provisional Government attempted to reorganise the Factory Inspectorate and to redefine its work and functions. A conference was held in Moscow in June 1917 at which factory inspectors debated their future constitution, powers and responsibilities.² However, the efforts of the Provisional Government to establish a professionally based organisation for the inspection of factories and the implementation of labour protection measures met with a hostile response and an organised offensive by industrialists and employers. For their part, the Soviets objected to Provisional Government plans to appoint factory inspectors from the existing ranks of technical experts and university graduates rather than for them to be elected by the workers themselves.³

From October 1917 the Bolsheviks introduced more substantive and far-reaching changes in the content and coverage of the labour protection measures, in the administrative
framework for the oversight and implementation of protective labour legislation and in the constitution and terms of reference of the labour inspectorate. As part of the process which determined the legal framework for the protection of labour under the Soviet regime, particular attention was paid to the conditions of work for women in industry and a range of other employments as well as to the regulation of female labour in general. The basic principles which were set out in these early months of Bolshevik rule formed the foundation for Soviet protective labour laws for many decades. The administrative changes which took place with regard to the specific provision of maternity benefits and general maternal welfare issues during the Soviet period were complex and extend beyond the scope of this study.4

One of the earliest legislative initiatives of the Bolsheviks was to introduce regulations on working hours and the structure of the working day. The decree introduced a maximum eight-hour day and 48-hour working week for all adult workers. A shorter working day was established for industrial workers in especially difficult jobs, for those employed in unfavourable working environments (in especially high temperatures, for example) and in underground work. The decree also stated that workers should be allowed regular breaks from work for rest and to eat. In respect to female labour, the decree prohibited night work, between the hours of nine o'clock in the evening and five o'clock in the morning, to women and banned their employment in overtime work.5

From October 1917 the Bolsheviks assigned the oversight of labour policy to its newly established People's Commissariat of Labour (Narkomtrud RSFSR), which was headed initially by A. Shlyapnikov. The staff also included the prominent women's campaigner Alexandra Kollontai, who, for a short time, was partly responsible for labour protection issues.6 A separate Department of Labour Protection was set up within Narkomtrud RSFSR in July 1918. By the end of 1918 Narkomtrud had also established a number of local bureaux for labour protection in industrial centres where the numbers of hired workers exceeded 20,000.7 These local bureaux were to meet regularly, at least once a week, and were given responsibility for overseeing labour regulations in