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Underground waterlines

Explaining political quiescence of Ukrainian labor unions

Denys Gorbach

Abstract: In order to explore factors conditioning the political quietude of Ukrainian labor, this article analyzes ethnographic data collected at two large enterprises: the Kyiv Metro and the privatized electricity supplier Kyivenergo. Focusing on a recent labor conflict, I unpack various contexts condensed in it. I analyze the hegemonic configuration developed in the early 1990s, at the workplace and at the macro level, and follow its later erosion. This configuration has been based on labor hoarding, distribution of nonwage resources, and patronage networks, featuring the foreman as the nodal figure. On the macro scale, it relied on the mediation by unions, supported by resources accumulated during the Soviet era and the economic boom of the 2000s. The depletion of these resources has spelled the ongoing crisis of this configuration.

Keywords: accumulation regimes, labor militancy, labor unions, post-socialism, Ukraine, workplace hegemony

The largest mobilization event in Ukraine's modern history, the 2013–2014 Maidan protests, which led to the ousting of President Viktor Yanukovich, started as a preparation for a general strike. However, the strike never happened, and the labor agenda was quickly sidelined, despite economic grievances being the background of the protests, and a million-strong trade union, the Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Ukraine (KVPU), formally participating in them. Its competitor, the Federation of Trade Unions of Ukraine (FPU), boasting more than eight million members, has traditionally been even more cautious, despite possessing massive organizational resources and often-favorable structure of political opportunity.

Why does the unions' passivist attitude allow non-class-based agendas to monopolize political discourse? In order to uncover the puzzle of the political quietude of Ukraine's organized labor, one must examine the historical conjuncture that conditions and frames it, as well as the critical junctions ensuring dynamic interaction between the shop floor, the enterprise, and the state. The key to understanding labor's passivity in Ukraine—and likely other post-Soviet countries—lies in the peculiar development of hegemonic relations on these three levels. On the shop floor, the legitimate voice of the workers is the foreman rather than the formal union representative. On the enterprise level, the union is just an auxiliary wing of the management,



having little real connection to the upper layers of union bureaucracy. The latter is an important element of the national corporatist hegemonic pact ensuring social peace, but it cannot really pull out and initiate serious political mobilization. On all these levels, patronage networks prevail over the logic of mass mobilization.

These relations can be interpreted as hegemonic not only because they are built on a set of shared “common sense” values and norms but also because these principles and standards of behavior are imposed by a “historical bloc” of dominant and dominated social collective actors. In this article, I argue that this historical bloc is currently being dismantled on all levels in the course of a general conjunctural crisis, which began about a decade ago. The coming conjuncture seems to rely on a greater bureaucratic control on the shop floor, the elimination of the union at the enterprise level, and the prevalence of clientelist populist politics over bureaucratic inertia on the macro scale. First, I will give a brief literature overview and present my theoretical frameworks and field sites. Then, I will trace the dynamics of the post-Soviet Ukrainian peak-level hegemonic pact. Next, I will tell the story of an industrial conflict and describe the grounded realities of sustaining hegemony at the post-Soviet workplace. Finally, I will discuss some new trends observed in the field. These findings will be summed up and put into a wider context in the conclusion.

Reacting to the debate on Taylorist labor deskilling (Braverman [1974] 1998), Michael Burawoy (1979) offered less linear and determinist optics by “taking Gramsci to the workplace” and conceptualizing “hegemonic” versus “despotic” factory regimes. This article seeks to build on this general approach to the analysis of “relations in and of production.” It was also Burawoy who gave a thorough treatment to post-socialist power relations and conventions (Burawoy and Krotov 1993; Burawoy et al. 2000). He and Katherine Verdery (1999) set up the stage for anthropology of labor in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), a field laden with conflicting approaches. Thus, Verdery’s (1996) institutionalist approach

to political economy of (post-)socialism rhymes well with the work of Hillel Ticktin (1992) on Stalinist social contract at and beyond the workplace, viewing it as a product of the contradictions of Soviet political economy, characterized by chronic shortage, lack of profit drive, and prevalence of covert “perverted class struggle” (S. Clarke 1993a; Filtzer 1992). This approach can be discussed with “corporatist” interpretations of CEE “labor weakness” (Crowley 1997, 2004; Ost 2000) and political institutions (Kubicek 2004; Way 2015), which often employ historical institutionalist optics.

However, the neo-institutionalist tendency toward compartmentalization and static macro analysis should be balanced by “political economy of personhood” (Kalb 2014) and critical junctions approach, inspired by Gramscian categories of class and hegemony (Kalb and Tak 2006). Don Kalb (2002) uses these optics to make an important point about diverging strategies of neoliberal labor shedding in the Eastern EU and continuing labor hoarding in the former USSR. Both areas have been traditionally associated with “labor weakness,” but the latest literature on Eastern EU questions this diagnosis.

Adam Mrozowicki (2014) shows how skilled workers of the automotive sector across the region managed to overcome the often-cited structural difficulties and build impressive organizing capacity. In the Polish case, union revitalization began in late 2000s, signifying the end of the “transition”-era weakness (Bernaciak and Lis 2017). Similar dynamics are observed among Romanian autoworkers (Adăscăliței and Guga 2017). This revival is associated with the advent and stabilization of “real capitalism,” which is yet to happen in post-Soviet countries like Ukraine and Russia, where workers are demobilized, but also partially protected, by quasi-corporatist social pacts (Ashwin and Clarke 2003; Mandel 2004; Varga 2014). This work will contribute to a better understanding of the current dynamics in this second realm.

To conceptualize these dynamics, I will summon yet another part of Gramscian theoretical

legacy, namely conjunctural analysis (J. Clarke 2014), which allows me to interpret hegemonic configurations observed at different levels as parts of one conjuncture and to historicize the latter, shedding light on its current crisis and sketching the contours of the conjuncture to come. My ethnographic data were collected during a round of fieldwork conducted in Kyiv, Ukraine, from January to March 2017. I conducted 24 semi-structured and unstructured in-depth interviews with workers and union activists of two large companies: the Kyiv Metro and the privatized energy supplier Kyivenergo. These field sites were chosen for their big size and structural position, which would allow hypothetical strikers there to control important infrastructural bottlenecks in Kyiv, thus influencing wider sociopolitical agenda. Metro is a municipal enterprise, while Kyivenergo was privatized several years ago; this difference could help clarify the role of ownership structure in the development of a factory regime and workers' militancy. I also interviewed regional and national leaders, as well as clerical employees, of unions and employer groups.

The making of post-Soviet unions

The basic institutions relevant to our topic were spawned by the Stalinist productivity drives aimed at raising the rate of exploitation. These efforts were sabotaged by the informal coalition of factory directors and workers. The primary interest of the former lay in fulfilling the plan, which required hoarding resources (including workforce)—maximizing officially required inputs and minimizing negotiated output benchmarks—but also ensuring collaboration on the part of the workers. Taylorist methods of production were never completely introduced at Soviet factories, and skilled workers maintained autonomous “negative” control over production process. To prevent sabotage, management had to make significant informal concessions to workers, in return expecting extra efforts under pressing circumstances. This “plan-fulfillment

pact” tied the foreman's legitimacy to his readiness to disregard official rules. Conversely, line managers covered up workers who break formal rules but penalized those who transgress informal norms. The two sides have built relations where mutual trust and informal conventions were more important than official norms.

Trade unions, preoccupied with legal rules, were an alien element in this configuration. They provided legal advice and protection to individual workers and became responsible for distributing material goods and social services among workers. As part of the “bosses” team, they commanded very little trust from workers. The Soviet hegemonic factory regime, then, was the product of the “historical bloc” between the management and the (skilled male) workforce, where the former shaped its own hegemonic agenda by incorporating into it the interests of the latter. The workers believe the bosses, who represent them up above, deliver as much as is objectively possible, but they will not tolerate a deterioration of their living standards. The class conflict was thus displaced onto an upper level, reshaped as a dispute between bureaucracy factions over the distribution of resources via networks of patronage and dependence. Importantly, the factory director came to personify the ideological fiction of the “labor collective,” using it as his own political leverage.

In post-Soviet Ukraine, this conjuncture was renegotiated in 1993, when coal miners went on strike. The movement was headed by the director of a leading mine, who negotiated on the workers' behalf with the government and then joined it as the first vice prime minister (Borisov and Clarke 1994). This strike was the formative event establishing the historical bloc between industrial bureaucracy (“red directors”) and the industrial working class, embodied in the figure of the director-cum-president Leonid Kuchma (Kubicek 2000). Its hegemonic ideology was built around the double quest to avoid a “social explosion” in the course of the transition and protect the economy from foreign competitors (Bojcun 2015; cf. “Czech capitalism” in Myant 2007).

Meanwhile, in Russia, 1993 marked a transition to a new, neoliberal conjuncture: there, the “red directors” were defeated by the liberal elite faction centered on President Boris Yeltsin. The Russian successor union body had bet on the wrong horse and was politically sidelined in the following years (Mandel 2004). It was eventually integrated in the new power bloc under Putin. In countries like Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland, successor unions were stripped of the bulk of their property and suffered severe losses in membership because of compulsory reregistration campaigns. In Ukraine, the local successor union, the FPU was part of the emerging historical bloc from the very beginning: President Leonid Kravchuk successfully insisted on making his former adviser the head of the new structure in 1992. The FPU consistently discouraged strike action in the name of social stability and maintained its privileged position in the scheme of distribution of social insurance funds (Davis 2001).

The issue of the FPU’s property was left unsolved, its ownership rights becoming conditional on the good will of the government. This makes the FPU’s positions fragile today, since membership fees constitute only half its budget, the other half being income from the vast real-estate institutional legacy. Thus, while primary unions do not depend on the central bureaucracy in any way besides access to union spas and resorts, the latter can be granted only as long as the central bureaucracy cooperates with the state. In exchange for this dependency, the FPU gets a say in the “social dialogue.” Its head takes part in government sessions and can block draft legislation. The FPU can effectively influence policies in institutions of education, health care, and other sectors where wages are annually defined in the state budget. They also have a say in determining wages and labor conditions at fully or partly state-owned companies, since their financial plans require government approval. Neither field requires any grassroots activities on the FPU’s part.

Just as in Russia, “social partnership” here is part of something bigger, namely “a social con-

tract not between trade unions and employers, but between the government and the people, with the trade unions serving as the government-anointed representatives of the people” (Ashwin and Clarke 2003: 177). In other words, the FPU’s legitimacy lays not so much in the defense of labor’s interests as in the representation of “the people” on the symbolic plane, important for the integrity of the post-Soviet hegemonic configuration. Meanwhile, at private enterprises, everything depends on the local union and its relations with the owner. Upper levels of union bureaucracy feel unwelcome and somehow illegitimate, even if the local union is their member organization. The FPU’s lack of militancy is proverbial. Its website features news about folk choir competitions under the category “Our Struggle” (see Figure 1). “If you keep fighting with your wife, eventually you will divorce. But if you agree on some things—labor division, family budget allocation—you will live together until old age,” explains Oksana,¹ an FPU clerk. Despite this obvious preference for peaceful lobbying, all the FPU functionaries were offended to hear “political quietude” applied to them: people’s defenders should be radical.

The KVPU, the second largest union federation, has built its image on perceived radicalism. In practice, its strategy is based on skillful use of patronage networks rather than mobilizing for open conflicts. From 2002 to 2012, KVPU Chairman Mykhailo Volynets was an MP on an opposition party’s list. Today, he is widely believed to have developed clientelist relations with the oligarch Rinat Akhmetov. In 2016, the KVPU officially built an alliance with the neo-Nazi regiment Azov, co-opting one of its fighters as the deputy head of the federation (Chernomorskaya Teleradiokompaniya 2016). In a system that hinges on the leader’s personal leverage, much attention is paid to accumulating social and media capital. Volynets talks a lot about his connections with the International Labor Organization and about his own media appearances—topics completely irrelevant to the FPU informants. Volynets frankly acknowl-



FIGURE 1: “Our Struggle”: screenshot from the FPU’s website (© Denys Gorbach)

edges that the KVPU is not built like union federations in other countries, where leadership changes regularly. He says his retirement will mean the end of the whole organization.

The FPU works differently on the inside, but lately it has been looking for an outside patron. In 2016, this normally apolitical organization established close relations with a second-tier populist politician, Serhiy Kaplin, whose “Party of Simple People” has been rebranded as Social Democratic. The FPU made him the unions’ representative in the parliament and organizes May Day rallies under his leadership. The failure of the FPU’s traditional legitimation mechanisms indicates the wider crisis of the hegemonic conjuncture in which they worked.

Metro and beyond: Hegemony on a micro level

The following ethnographic account of a small-scale workplace conflict illuminates the factory regime at a large Ukrainian enterprise. On a Sunday afternoon, Yegor, a married father of two in his thirties and a section foreman in one of the Kyiv Metro’s services, received a phone

call from a sick worker who could not go on the night shift. Yegor called another worker and asked him to cover this shift. Later, it transpired that the hospital had issued the sick worker’s medical leave starting on Monday, not covering the four Sunday hours. Yegor’s boss told him to mark that worker as absent during these hours, but Yegor felt it would be unjust. He decided to change the work schedule retroactively, which is a common, if not exactly legal, departmental practice. This time, however, Yegor’s boss emphatically refused to sign the edited schedule, citing the laws. Chyvo kunya, the head of the service, ordered Yegor, facing insubordination, to write a voluntary request for demotion from the foreman’s position, which also he refused to do. In the next weeks, his team was showered with various checkups and inspections, which stripped Yegor of two monthly bonuses and a service record for one month.

Yegor found he commanded grassroots support, but “the bosses” were united against him. He was elected the new leader of the union cell, and its former leader, Oleg, helped him write an official request to reconsider the reprimand. Workers from Yegor’s team also wrote a collective plea in his defense. These efforts did not

help: a top-level meeting reaffirmed the punishment, while a new inspection resulted in another reprimand for Yegor and bonus cuts for the plea signatories. Oleg helped Yegor write a well-grounded request to summon the Labor Disputes Commission (KTS). This was unprecedented: Yegor's case opened the commission's journal. Normally, nobody questions reprimands. Luckily for him, the KTS had to also invite the head of the smaller independent union, whom Yegor described as "a big loud man to whom everybody listens." After the case was described, he asked: "So what? What did he do wrong?" The reprimand was canceled, but the blame was put on a "technical mistake" of the records office rather than on the maliciousness of the service head. This decision was not the end of the story. Yegor's immediate boss said Chyvokunya insisted on further punishments, and asked him to leave the foreman position voluntarily. This time, Yegor agreed to the "politely formulated request from a reasonable person." He also let his wife and coworkers talk him out of continuing the struggle for personal justice.

Shall I rob my mother? Hegemonic informality

According to Igor, a young worker and Yegor's loyal team member, the conflict began earlier, when Chyvokunya was not elected as the team's delegate to the general union conference. The event, which should have confirmed his legitimacy as the recently appointed service head, actually undermined it in front of the workers and bosses. Chyvokunya blamed it on Yegor, promising to "calm him down." Igor explained what really went wrong: "Once, before that, we had a meeting of our local union cell, and Chyvokunya, being the service head, did not even show up. This is disrespect!" The workers felt the new manager owed them some respect and attention beyond what is prescribed officially. When they did not get it, they deprived him of their (also informal) trust, symbolically denying his legitimacy. Unlike Chyvokunya,

Yegor was an undoubtedly legitimate boss in his workers' eyes. As a foreman, he felt a personal responsibility for the dozen people he oversaw. When a worker makes a mistake, the foreman must cover it up in front of the bosses. The cost of refusing to play by these rules is lack of trust and cooperation; conversely, "team-oriented" behavior pays back in the workers' commitment.

This is a universal expectation. According to Maria, a Kyivenergo employee:

A former boss used to scold his subordinates publicly in front of the administration; I think this was not a right thing to do. Another boss screamed at the managers that his workers cannot ever be wrong, but later he privately came up to the worker and reprimanded him informally. I consider this the golden rule of a leader: to solve everything inside the collective.

Maria arrived in Kyiv from Russia to work as a geologist in the late 1970s; she raised a son on her own, sharing a studio with him in a working-class suburb. She has been working at Kyivenergo since the early 2000s, despite passing her retirement age. She gave her interview on her only day off, voluntarily working late evenings and Saturdays with no overtime compensation. Her department at the head office consists of seven women, including the boss. Currently, two are seriously ill; earlier, the boss had volunteered to take a slightly larger amount of work for the department, so now five people must do the job of eight. According to Maria, everyone considers this "normal," perceiving it as mutual help in the tightly knit collective of friends rather than surrendering free time and energy to an employer without compensation: "We don't have this when you're done with your work and don't care for the rest. We don't actually have the concept of 'your work.'" For her, this is not a doom but a blessing: "Despite all the hardships, I really want to go to work every morning precisely because of the collective."

Yegor admits that the system of informal requests and obligations, spanning the workplace

beneath the visible official regulations, is what makes the whole mechanism function:

My daughter was born sooner than expected, so I asked to shift my vacation, and they said no problem. When someone fucks up their work, he can ask me, I will cover him up and say, “You owe me a cognac.” From the legal point of view, these relations are not perfect, but they ensure good atmosphere—something Americans call team building.

The function of these informal ties and commitments gets even clearer in the following story. Andreich, a retired foreman of a rail track maintenance team, remembers that in the 1980s they regularly marked off old wooden railway sleepers, and employees were allowed to take them for their personal needs. The Metro’s chief accountant once approached him and asked for 60 sleepers for her summerhouse construction site:

Obviously, she wanted brand new ones, and I arranged it for her. She was very grateful, brought me a bottle of cognac. The story repeated later with someone else from the bosses. The service head eventually noticed this, summoned me, and demanded explanations. I told him: “Don’t you see? I am not giving the sleepers to some random fitter; it’s all between us!”

Six months later, Andreich himself needed 90 sleepers to build a summerhouse for his parents. He loaded brand-new sleepers into an empty truck, but the service head (“a first-class thief himself,” according to Andreich) saw and started yelling at him. Andreich yelled back: “I’m giving good sleepers to the chief accountant and to everyone else, but I have to send crap to my own mother?!” The conflict was resolved in his favor.

Informal relations thus not only help ensure the smoothness of the production process but also help construct hierarchies and exclusions. Andreich was accommodating his bosses to

reap the privileges he had created for them in the first place. He also regularly used his informal leverage to lobby in favor of his workers, which was always more efficient than an explicit collective campaign. Yegor’s conflicting attitude, on the other hand, fell out of tune. Yegor’s story exemplifies the heterogeneity of the workforce. He was helped by the leader of the free union—a smaller “independent” organization of the KVPU whose membership consists of train drivers. Constituting around 10 percent of the Metro’s workforce, they are widely considered its elite section: their wages are the highest, and their independent union is tolerated. Those staying in the “official” union also benefit from their unique structural force, being the main driver behind every grassroots initiative: According to Luda, a station manager, “If they don’t drive, we might as well not work at all.”

Unsurprisingly, the feminized workforce performing “auxiliary” tasks is much less privileged, often organized around Taylorist principles. Employees of D services (station operators, cleaners, station managers), and K (cashiers) are almost always women, the most numerous, the least paid, and the most heavily controlled. The smallest mistake in keeping the station log or an insignificant breach of protocol (e.g., failing to spend 10 minutes between train arrivals on the platform in freezing temperatures) is punishable by fines and reprimands. By Yegor’s estimate, the density of informal relations is about 10 times lower among “the girls” than among his colleagues. Employees of D services must undergo regular checkups in their free time; to get there in time, the young station operator Vera must leave home at 6:30 a.m. She returns home around 1 p.m. and leaves again at 6 p.m. for her night shift. Yegor conceptualizes the difference in terms of gender stereotypes: “If the distance head asked us to come on a holiday, many people would simply say no. But women have [a] different way of thinking; they are more loyal. Their main tool is resignation: If you bugger me too much, I will quit.”

Mid-hierarchy employees have other strategies. Most live in villages and suburbs, bene-

fitting from lower living costs. They often own small land plots and have other sources of income like moonlighting: according to Vera's husband, Vova, a signaling engineer, every third male employee under 40 also works elsewhere:

They do all kinds of stuff: someone assists instructors in a business school, helping them prepare for lectures; someone draws low amperage circuits at a design institute; someone works as electrician at a library; two people build furniture; two people are software engineers; another one is an electrician at a gas station; yet another one is a wireman at a factory. Someone works as an inspector at a chain of hardware stores. A male station operator goes to a warehouse and packs boxes after a night shift in the Metro. One guy had to become a part-time electrician in a kindergarten just to be able to send his kid there.

Their schedule allows for extra work, but it's not an option for "the girls": they must choose between loyalty and exit. The strategy of the less Taylorized male workforce is situated between loyalty and voice, relying on the hegemonic factory regime's undercover negotiations and unspoken agreements. Just as in the classic examples, such regime "manufactures consent" among key factions of the workforce, preventing outbursts of protest. In the post-Soviet case, it rests on the hegemonic informality and legitimacy norms shared by the workers and the management, without any significant role of the union.

Crammed tram: Welfare distribution

The union, on the other hand, plays an important role at the enterprise level. Here, it is a powerful fix helping maintain apparent loyalty. Distribution of welfare goods and services is the union's primary task for Yegor, Oleg, and every other informant. Luda, who spent all her life working for the Metro, praises the union

highly because it gave her the chance to travel and send her son to the seaside and even abroad to Bulgaria and Hungary. Employees in less prominent positions complain they are sidelined: only bosses can actually go to Hungary. The least privileged criticize the union because they receive no material benefits from their membership. Ultimately, the union is evaluated according to its welfare distribution capacities. Its second most important function is to satisfy requests related to the organization of work: installing water boilers, buying better overalls, designating a smoking area. Hardly anyone associates the union with the struggle for collective workers' interests.

This perception is so strong that the free union, facing mounting demands from members, had to reluctantly start providing social services as well. Just as with successor unions, these activities leave no political space for militancy. During my fieldwork, about one hundred train drivers participated in a pressure group demanding a wage raise. Yet, the free union shirked the initiative, fearing the administration would sue and take away its spa resort. A union leader should avoid open conflicts but be a cunning master of intrigue. Vasiliy, the union official at Kyivenergo, explains his usual strategy: "Whenever I notice unrest brewing, I approach the management saying: 'We are about to receive a collective statement signed by two hundred to four hundred people; what are we going to do? My task is to make the general director come to the people and give a personal promise. The 5-10-15 percent raise will not save anyone, but what is important is the process itself.' Once, the general director could not promise anything and told Vasiliy to come up with something. He went up and announced that wages will be raised on 1 April. When asked, 'What if they will not?'" he said, "Then I quit the job on 1 April." This was met with applause, but the general director was shocked. Upon establishing that Vasiliy was not bluffing, he did his utmost to raise wages. Yegor uses similar Machiavellian tactics.

These tactics work well in "Polanyian" industrial culture. According to a recent survey,

guarantee of employment is by far the most important value for the Ukrainian working class. The fear of being fired or transferred to part-time employment is a more powerful driver than desire for better working conditions or higher wages (Petrushina 2016: 70–72). The two most contentious issues mobilizing workers in Ukraine—wage arrears and factory closures (Dutchak 2016: 95)—are defensive: workers are trying to protect the existing social contract rather than renegotiate it in their own favor. The union acts as a safety stop, preventing management from making steps that will be perceived as an attack on the hegemonic social contract. When the new Kyiv mayor appointed his fellow banker to head the Metro in the late 2000s, he tried to cut annual vacation from 31 to 24 days, the legal minimum. The union, normally quite complacent, did not allow this to happen. At Kyivenergo, despite the privatization, the length of Maria's vacation is 32 days. The union there organizes cheap tours and provides presents for kids, tickets to concerts, material aid to sick workers, cheap loans.

Guarantee of continuing employment is also a part of this hegemonic set of claims. Maria says: “Kyivenergo has always been like a crammed tram: it is hard to get into it, but once you're in, it's impossible to get out.” In the Metro, rumors abound of the coming automation of cash desks. Yet, most of my informants do not think of it as a threat to cashiers' employment: they will gradually drop out naturally because of high turnover, and the most loyal will be offered other positions. The same happened before, when the management outsourced cleaning at some stations to a private company: no cleaners were fired; they were all transferred to other stations. The hegemonic social contract at such enterprises thus acknowledged workers' rights to jobs and nonwage benefits. In exchange for that, workers have been expected to abstain from disrupting social peace and production process and implicitly solidarize with the management. The union mediates these relations, acting as their guarantor. This peculiar enterprise-level pact directly correlates

with the “survivalist” conservative hegemonic macro configuration struck in the 1990s. However, things do change.

Floating along the waterline: New trends

Trying to explain the dynamic equilibrium of workplace hegemony in the Metro, Vova used a metaphor from high school physics: “According to Archimedes' principle, the buoyant force pushes an object upward, and the gravitational force pushes it downward. They interact constantly, and so we are floating along the waterline, on the same level.” But the level of pressure from either direction is not a fixed value, and the system is not isolated from all kinds of external factors. What are the challenges to the hegemonic equilibrium?

The netherworld

Andreich's career is a good personal scale to which we can relate the evolution of the Soviet and post-Soviet workplace hegemony in Ukraine. A 22-year-old alumnus of a vocational college for railway workers in Moscow, he arrived in Kyiv in 1977, when Brezhnev's social contract was in its prime, to find and marry the girl he had met on vacation, and spent next three decades working in the railway maintenance service of the Kyiv Metro. During these decades, he became an organic part of the post-Stalinist workplace hegemony, masterfully using the tools it gave him for personal survival and ensuring the optimal efficiency of the work process. In the 1990s, at the nadir of economic crisis, he had to leave the job and take temporary work at a construction site in Moscow. But later he returned and continued working until he was 55. As an underground worker on night shifts, he had the right to retire at this age, but also the opportunity to continue working, receiving both wage and pension at the same time. His bosses begged him to stay, but he resolutely refused, making his birthday the last day at work. What conditioned his choice?

According to Andreich and his friend Ira, working conditions started changing drastically in late 2000s—right before Andreich reached his retirement age. The main difference, they describe, lies precisely in the level of autonomy of the production process and “negative control.” Starting in 2009 to 2010, workers have had to deal with an increasing burden of formal responsibility for every small aspect of the work process; they are required to sign papers for every little thing. Modern equipment, coupled with bureaucratic mechanisms of control, raised the efficiency of disciplinary functions to unseen levels. These measures are contested in the Metro, but they go relatively unchecked within private companies. A recent survey (Dutchak and Gladun 2017) shows no cases of full automation of production process; contrary to popular beliefs, workers are not afraid of robot-induced redundancy. Automation of control is a much more powerful and feared trend: CCTVs, turnstiles, e-cards, breathalyzers, and fingerprint scanners cost less than investing in production-related innovations. The authors of the survey noted a growing unarticulated conflict over this new machinery.

In the Metro, the multiplicity of often-contradictory instructions introduces another mode of informal control. “The first question always goes, which of the rules were you following? No, you had to use the other one,” says Sasha, Vera’s colleague. Vova adds to this: “Sometimes, you see that something doesn’t work right, you repair it, but then you are reprimanded because you did not act according to the instructions.” Yegor’s story, after all, is also about bureaucratic control encroaching on the traditional informal hegemonic configuration. In several workspaces in the Metro, I have come across a drawing of a man sitting and happily watching a bonfire made of various reprimands, fines, bills, and summons (see Figure 2). Yegor first brought it in, and his colleagues liked it so much, they copied it for themselves.

Understaffing is a powerful factor behind the new pressures. Station operators are entitled

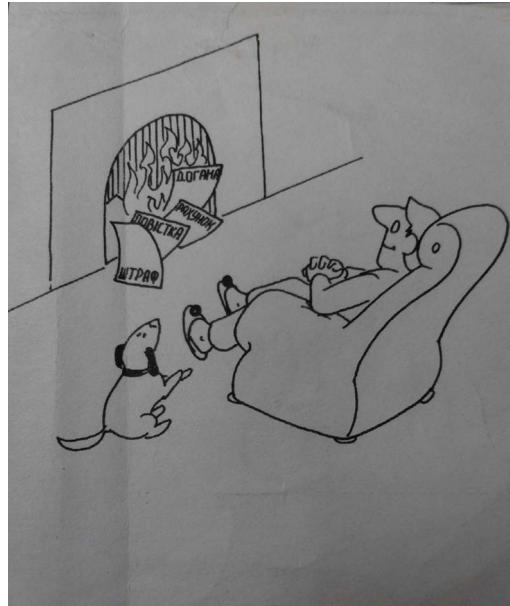


FIGURE 2: The bonfire of reprimands: a drawing from the Metro workspaces (© Denys Gorbach)

to two days off annually for medical screening, but Vera must take unpaid leave: her boss simply does not countersign her requests because there are not enough workers to substitute her. Luda, the station manager, canceled her talk with me because she had to shovel snow around the station by herself that day. This is not her task formally, but she has only one cleaner at her disposal, and she is personally responsible for ensuring the station’s smooth functioning with the resources available. Management does not seem to care about staff shortage or other objective obstacles: “If we don’t have enough people for four shifts, then we’ll work three shifts.” In the 1990s, this was hardly imaginable. This approach revives the Stalinist quest for “hidden productivity reserves” in a new environment of underinvestment and austerity. In the railway maintenance service, workers must confirm the acceptance of materials by their signature. The actual materials may be of a lower quality or quantity than is written in the documents, but they have no choice but to take responsibility as if everything is in order. Andreich recalls: “Ear-

lier, you could steal as much as you want, and still you knew that there would be enough resources for production needs. Now, there is not much to steal in the first place.”

My informants are quick to indicate the reason for all these transformations: austerity policies, both on the macro level and on the enterprise level. The lack of resources, caused by macro processes, undermines the hegemonic configuration on the very lowest level of the post-Soviet workplace, introducing disciplinary and bureaucratic pressure on workers. The factory regime is shifting toward the despotic ideal type, or, rather, the management unilaterally renegotiates the informal hegemonic setup in its own favor.

The enterprise

Decreasing interest in preserving the “labor collective” in the Metro, even despite understaffing, is the first sign of trends that have developed more fully at private companies. At Kyivenergo, the era of labor hoarding ended in the 2000s. It once employed 16,000 people, but today only 10,000 are left, and the workforce will be further cut to 8,000. The union has no say in this gradual dismantling of classic quasi-feudal post-Soviet enterprise. In Marxist terms, the “labor collectives” insured against firings and layoffs were a major obstacle to creating marketable abstract labor, and the enterprises thus were stuck in a noncapitalist form (Ticktin 2002: 20). Now, we are witnessing capitalist “normalization,” and it is only natural that profit-oriented private companies introduce it sooner than publicly owned and subsidized ones.

Austerity and “marketization” undermines the union’s hegemonic role of a provider of non-wage benefits. The union’s other role—that of a mediator between workers and administration—is also challenged by the parallel structures introduced by the management. Kyivenergo’s administration advertises a telephone hotline for workers having a conflict or an unresolved issue; the union has nothing to do with it. These

processes, which Sarah Ashwin and Simon Clarke (2003: 274) call “Japanization” of industrial relations, are yet more signs of a crisis of the post-Soviet “transitory” hegemonic conjuncture. The owners believe they can ensure social peace at their companies without the help of the unions.

Conclusion: Where next?

Looking back at the experience of Maidan mobilization and considering the regime evolution in neighboring Russia, Hungary, and Poland, one could tentatively contemplate two possible scenarios for the nearest decade: gradual consolidation of an austerity-minded populist regime or continuing slow socioeconomic breakdown. In the early 1990s, Ukrainian enterprises switched to the post-Soviet system of relations of and in production that relied on workers’ “negative control” over production process and the foreman as a key figure on the lowest level; on the “plan-fulfillment pact” based on the collusion of interests between workers and factory management and mediated by the union at the enterprise level; and on attempts by the state to use union bureaucracy in ensuring social peace and legitimizing its own rule at the top level. While, elsewhere in CEE, labor force was massively shed and “inefficient” companies went bankrupt, Ukrainian enterprises and the state had the opposite policy, trying to preserve “labor collectives” where possible.

This hegemonic conjuncture was conceived by a historical bloc between industrial bureaucracy (“red directors”) and labor aristocracy; its ideological imperative was survival in the face of cataclysmic transition, in the name of which the reign of the law of value was restrained. Privatization and the emergence of oligarchy spelled the political death of “red directors.” Yet, the new owners were willing to continue these policies in the new conjuncture, marked by populist “oligarchic democracy.” Just as their predecessors, they also used “labor collective” patronage.

Enjoying windfall profits on the global markets during the commodities boom of the 2000s, they could afford corporate and nationwide welfare programs. Profitability was extraordinarily high due to the parasitic character of the owning class: having purchased their assets cheaply from the state through insider deals, they did not feel obliged to reinvest into amortization and modernization of capital.

Feasting on the resources left by the previous socioeconomic formation and on the profits generated by the global commodity boom, the ruling class did not mind sharing them with the workers, thereby reinforcing and maintaining the post-Soviet hegemonic expectations from the factory, union, and state. This social contract implied several unspoken mutual commitments, under which workers were to maintain social peace and loyalty to the enterprise, while the owner of the enterprise guaranteed preserving jobs, a lax attitude, and certain levels of monetary and nonmonetary income. Yet, this hegemonic configuration cannot stay forever. Depletion of Soviet resources was aggravated by the crisis of 2008 and the long recession, which began in 2012 and culminated in the drastic fall of living standards in 2014. The post-Soviet corporatist hegemony is slowly eroding on all levels: the micro level of relations between the foreman and workers, the union-administration nexus, and the macro stage featuring the state and union bureaucracy.

The global scale is important in two contexts here. First, it was the arena of the spatial fix performed by the new owners of industrial enterprises. Unlike the more high-tech post-Soviet companies, factories producing intermediate products for industry were able to find demand on the global markets and benefit from the 1997–2012 upward commodity cycle while it lasted. Second, the Ukrainian economy's ability to isolate itself from the penetration of international capital and to be equally active on both the EU and Russian markets has also been an important resource underpinning the post-Soviet hegemonic pact.

After Maidan, the dismal state of the investment-hungry economy and physical infrastructure actually gave hope for a colonization of Ukraine by EU capital, which could benefit from big demand for investments and high profit rate, repeating the Czech, Slovak, and Polish scenarios. But civil conflict and war with Russia, retrenchment of national oligarchic elites, and lack of political will in the EU and the IMF to finance a "Marshall Plan for Ukraine" made these hopes unrealistic. On the other hand, repeating the Russian path of controlled dismantling of the transitional conjuncture and neoliberalization under the auspices of a strong state apparatus is impossible because of the endemic state weakness, among other reasons. Instead of benefiting from the global crisis of profitability, the Ukrainian economy is now set to find itself on the losing side, whereby destruction of obsolete and inefficient industrial assets should help raise the profit rate for (foreign) survivors.

It is unlikely we will see any rapid measures to raise labor intensity and renegotiate the terms of social contract in the favor of the class of owners anytime soon. Rather, the traditional post-Soviet hegemonic configuration will keep transforming itself slowly, as it has been doing for the past decade, in the direction of a more despotic factory regime on lower levels and a populist regime committed to fiscal discipline on the top level. What does this conjunctural crisis imply for working-class protest culture and militant unionism? Macroeconomic context of protracted economic slump never bodes well for grassroots militancy. Shrinking employment options force workers to agree on worsening labor conditions rather than protest, as the example of Metro workers proves so well. This combination channels implicit class conflicts along unorthodox routes: continuing traditions of the "perverted class struggle," inventing new atomized survival strategies, and/or joining populist movements that tend to work with wider constructed identities, be they ethnic, linguistic or "civilizational." The latest develop-

ments at the top level of union bureaucracy seem to indicate precisely this possibility.

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Note

1. All informants' names are pseudonyms.

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