# LETTING OFF STEAM: TRADE UNIONS AND RAILWAY WORKERS' DISCONTENT WITH THE KHRUSHCHEVIAN SOCIAL CONTRACT

by

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## Abstract

Following the death of Stalin on March 5 1953, railway workers in Soviet Kazakhstan were presented with a new model for Soviet society, the productivist social contract: an implicit agreement that in return for increased productivity the state would provide workers with an increased standard of living through the provision of welfare. The purpose of this paper is to examine how railway workers on Turksib, a group shaped by the experiences of Stalinist industrialisation, reacted to this social contract, and how trade unions acted as a venue where the social contract could be negotiated. Drawing on documents from the Turksib trade union from 1953 to 1963, this thesis reveals that workers' complaints seem to show that the productivist social contract created a catch 22, as on the one hand increased standards of living were dependent on productivity, and on the other workers' complaints about the shortcomings of the productivist social contract argued that they relied on these welfare provisions in order to work well and improve productivity. Workers blamed the shortcomings of the social contract on local management, as they were the most immediate representatives of the state on the ground and criticism of the central state was impossible. Management in turn was largely hamstrung in their ability to address these shortcomings by material limitations created by the central state and the command economy. The central state in turn encouraged this scapegoating as a method of redirecting workers' discontent, and trying to convince workers that it was "for them". Management were also frustrated in their attempts at combating the poor labour discipline that contributed to low productivity, a continued manifestation of workers' tactics of individualised control developed during

Stalinist industrialisation. Reforms during the Khrushchev period left management bereft of their traditional tools for disciplining the workforce, and they themselves would again be scapegoated for their own workers' poor discipline, as problems of discipline were portrayed as a failure of local officials to properly educate workers. The Khrushchev regime ultimately failed to persuade workers to acquiesce to the productivist social contract, creating a situation where workers were able to have their, albeit meager, cake and eat it too, continuing to use their tactics of individual control scot free and passing the blame for low productivity on to local management.

**Contents**

## Introduction

*"We have taken a lot of trouble over one half of the human being, but the other half is neglected. The result is that one half of the house is a slum. I remember that article of Gorky's I read long ago, while I was still at school; he said we needed our own Soviet humanism. The word has been forgotten, the task is still to be done. In those days it was only a presentiment, now it's time we tackled it."*[1]

These are the thoughts that go through the engineer Koroteyev's head as he considers the attacks made by his boss, Juravilov, against Sokolovsky, the head designer at their plant and an old party member. Juravilov had been slandering Sokolovsky as a trouble maker after he raised the question of housing at their Party meeting, which Juravilov perceived as an attack on him. This quote comes from Ehrenburg's novel *The Thaw*, the novel that would give its name to the Khrushchev period, and Koroteyev's evaluation of Juravilov is one that could also be used to describe the Soviet Union on the eve of 1953 and the Thaw. The Thaw period is often identified as a period of 'normalisation', or a 'return to normalcy', with Varga-Harris noting that "the restructuring of *byt*" was "a key signifier of the Thaw".[2] This was not only an, albeit delayed, postwar relaxation, as seen in many other countries following the Second World War, but also a shift away from the turbulent and violent years of the 1930s.[3] For a 'return to normalcy'

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[1] Ilya Ehrenburg, *The Thaw*, trans. Manya Harai (1954; repr., Harvill Press Limited, 1955), p.153.
[2] Christine Varga-Harris, *Stories of House and Home: Soviet Apartment Life during the Khrushchev Years* (Cornell University Press, 2015), p.213.
[3] Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Postwar Soviet Society: The 'Return to Normalcy', 1945-1953," in *The Impact of World War II on the Soviet Union*, ed. Susan J Linz (Rowman & Allanheld, 1985), p.151. Steven E Harris, *Communism on Tomorrow Street : Mass Housing and Everyday Life after Stalin* (Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2012), p.20.

to occur however, there must have been a model of ‘normalcy’ to return to. In this regard, Fitzpatrick notes that “the prewar Soviet Union did not provide a very satisfactory or complete model of ‘normalcy’ to which society could return after the war”, arguing that for peasants a ‘return to normalcy’ would be a return to the pre-collectivization village, whilst for urban dwellers the NEP period would probably be the model.[4] However it is hardly likely that citizens of Soviet Kazakhstan, and also doubtful whether citizens of the Soviet Union as a whole, shared these models of ‘normalcy’. Even before the 1920s and the arrival of Soviet power, the Kazakh steppe had witnessed massive changes, both demographically, with the arrival of peasant settlers, and economically, in the shift to a mixed economy.[5] In the 1920s pastoral nomadism would continue to be the predominant way of life, but even this period was “marked by turmoil, as Moscow struggled largely unsuccessfully to establish a foothold in the region”.[6] The onset of the famine forced not only the abandonment of “the economic practice of nomadism”, but also a sweeping transformation of culture and identity.[7] The result of this was not only the collapse of the traditional pastoral nomadic economy, but also urbanisation and an unprecedented increase in reliance on the party-state.[8] All this meant that for citizens of Soviet Kazakhstan the NEP and pre-collectivization years could hardly be used as a model for a ‘return to normalcy’ in 1953, as even the promotion of “roving animal husbandry” in the 1950s did not (and

[4] Fitzpatrick, “Postwar Soviet Society”, p.150.
[5] Sarah Cameron, *The Hungry Steppe: Famine, Violence, and the Making of Soviet Kazakhstan* (Cornell University Press, 2018), p.19.
[6] Ibid, pp.20, 45-48
[7] Ibid, p.2.
[8] Ibid, pp.171-2.

arguably could not) represent a return to the socio-economic world of pastoral nomadism.[9]

For railway workers in Soviet Kazakhstan, this lack of a pre-Stalinist model of 'normalcy' was further reinforced by the fact that these were a group of workers whose very existence was a product of Stalinist industrialisation. The Turkestan Siberian Railway (Turksib), construction of which began in the waning years of the NEP, was intended not only to integrate Kazakhstan into the large Soviet Union and hence to modernise it, but also as a way to create a native proletariat.[10] This construction project was initially manned by three highly stratified work cultures; peasant seasonal workers, established, older cadre workers , and "protected" workers primarily made up of Kazakhs.[11] The aim of the regime was to forge these disparate groups into a united proletariat, which they aimed to achieve through socialist competition and shockwork, redefining proletarian identity from "political activism to production prowess".[12] This categorisation allowed one to overcome an inconvenient, potentially colonial past, and transcended disparate work cultures by creating "common routines, work forms, and problems".[13] Thus, "an illiterate Kazakh peasant who had overfulfilled his plan had as much claim on the proletarian identity as a locomotive driver with impeccable proletarian credentials".[14] Many "embraced" the new industrial lifestyle, and with it the new proletarian identity, allowing the regime to shatter the old railway workers' cadres and create a new one in their

[9] Ibid, p.171.
[10] Matthew J Payne, *Stalin's Railroad: Turksib and the Building of Socialism* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), p.241.
[11] Ibid, p.67.
[12] Ibid, pp.68, 212.
[13] Ibid, pp.220, 225.
[14] Ibid, p.242.

ashes.[15] Many of these workers went on to rise to prestigious positions, staying on to operate the railway even after its completion and into the postwar years, for example Dzhumagali Omarov, an illiterate Kazakh shepherd who worked his way up from a simple navvy to the first Kazakh director of the railway.[16]

If the past provided no models of 'normalcy' for the railway workers of Soviet Kazakhstan, what models were they to rely on in the Thaw? Fitzpatrick notes that one of the reasons for the delaying of the 'return to normalcy' from 1945-1953 was the state's awareness of the "differences between their own definition of normalcy and that of the population", and as such "before any normalcy occurred…it was necessary to establish that the relevant norms were "Soviet"".[17] I argue that the definition of 'Soviet normalcy', or what we might term a 'new normal', proposed by the Khrushchev regime was epitomised by the Soviet social contract. Cook summarises this concept as follows: "the regime provided broad guarantees of full and secure employment, state-controlled and heavily subsidised prices for essential goods, fully socialised human services, and egalitarian wage policies. In exchange…Soviet workers consented to the party's extensive and monopolistic power, accepted state domination of the economy, and complied with authoritarian political norms".[18] This idea had antecedents in the pre-Khrushchev era, in Dunham's idea of Stalin's "Big Deal", whereby members of the professional class received domestic comforts in return for their contributions to the reconstruction goals of the regime.[19] However, according to Cook and Varga-Harris, it

[15] Ibid, p.241.
[16] Ibid, p.240.
[17] Fitzpatrick, "Postwar Soviet Society", p.151.
[18] Linda J Cook, *The Soviet Social Contract and Why It Failed: Welfare Policy and Workers' Politics from Brezhnev to Yeltsin* (Harvard University Press, 1993), pp.1-2.
[19] Varga-Harris, *Stories of House and Home*, p.13.

was under Khrushchev that this deal was crystallised and expanded to all members of the population.[20] In this way, the Soviet social contract inextricably tied up 'normalcy' with material conditions: "for ordinary citizens, normalcy meant adequate, dignified living conditions".[21] In doing so, the regime also tied its legitimacy to the fulfillment of this tacit contract, achievement of which "would signify both normalisation and the realisation of Communism".[22]

Clarke et al expand on this conception of the Soviet social contract as a simple exchange of political acquiescence for guaranteed living standards, arguing that in fact "the 'social contract' embedded in the system was not so much a trade-off between higher wages and political passivity, as a commitment to make every effort to raise productivity as the basis of rising living standards".[23] This essentially productivist model of the social contract was a tool for the Khrushchev regime to restore regime legitimacy and persuade workers they had a stake in the Soviet project, at a time when, due to the reduction of terror and political violence the Thaw is most known for, the regime had lost its most powerful levers of coercion when it came to controlling workers' behaviour in order to increase productivity.[24] Throughout the Stalin period, in the absence of real political representation, workers had instead "appropriated control over the one area left open to them: the individual labour process".[25] The basic problem facing the Khrushchev regime was how, in the absence of violent coercion, to persuade workers to

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[20] Cook, *The Soviet Social Contract and Why It Failed*, p.1. Varga-Harris, *Stories of House and Home*, p.13.
[21] Varga-Harris, *Stories of House and Home*, p.15.
[22] Ibid, pp.9, 14.
[23] Simon Clarke et al., *What about the Workers?* (Verso Books, 1993), p.65.
[24] Donald A Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and De-Stalinization: The Consolidation of the Modern System of Soviet Production Relations, 1953-1964* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp.19, 24.
[25] Ibid, p.4-5.

"surrender the various defensive devices they had developed during the Stalin period", in order to deal with the problem of stagnating productivity.[26] According to Filtzer, "the regime clearly saw an improvement in the standard of living and stronger material incentives as a large part of the answer".[27] This however led to what could be termed a productivist catch 22. On the one hand, high living standards were dependent on production, as "the level of welfare depended on the funds at the disposal of the enterprise, which depended on its ability to negotiate satisfactory targets with the Ministry, and then on its ability to meet and exceed its plan targets".[28] However, on the other hand, as we shall see, workers also linked the ability to work well and achieve targets with the fulfillment of the state's welfare obligations, such as the provision of housing, or access to stores and canteens.[29] In short, one could not be achieved without the other.

Soviet trade unions played an uniquely important role in the functioning of the Soviet social contract. By 1953, Soviet trade unions' role had crystallised into a "dual function": "the representation of the interests of individual workers at the base, through the provision of social and welfare services and the protection of their legal rights, and the imposition of the policies of the party state from above".[30] This 'dual function' makes trade unions a perfect lens through which to analyse the Khrushchevian productivist social contract, given that they were concerned with guaranteeing both ends of it. According to Ashwin and Clarke, trade unions were to "break up the collusive relations

[26] Ibid, p.5.
[27] Ibid, p.38.
[28] Clarke et al., *What about the Workers?*, p.70.
[29] Clarke et al., *What about the Workers?,* p.65. Varga-Harris, *Stories of House and Home,* p.48.
[30] Clarke et al., *What about the Workers?*, p.60.

which developed between workers and managers over plan fulfilment that were a barrier to the development of productivity and the improvement of the living and working conditions of the working class as a whole".[31] Clarke et al are at pains to note however that "the 'dual functions' of the trade unions were not expressed in a tension between the centre and the base, but were both exercised from above, through the Party and managerial apparatus. The interests of the working class were identified rhetorically with the policies of the party-state, and the role of the trade unions was to ensure the implementation of these policies at the level of the enterprise, nominally representing the interests of the workers in opposition to managerial neglect, incompetence, and corruption".[32] During the Khrushchev period, trade unions would begin to play a more important role "as the easing of repression in the 1950s made it necessary for the regime to pay closer attention to the workers' interests, and as it sought to use workers' aspirations as a lever to force reform on managers".[33] We can also add that this more prominent role would have been augmented by the Khrushchev regime's identification of a 'new normalcy' with these improved living standards, as trade unions were the organisations responsible for the provision of welfare such improved living standards relied on. In this period this role was reemphasised, and increasing economic growth meant that "unions, thus, were able to *do* more, *with* more".[34] This does not mean that trade unions became genuinely representative institutions, as "the interests of the workers were defined from above, by the Party as the representative of the working class as a whole", but rather that trade unions had to recognise "a need to be more

[31] Sarah Ashwin and Simon Clarke, *Russian Trade Unions and Industrial Relations in Transition* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p.21.
[32] Clarke et al., *What about the Workers?*, p.61.
[33] Ibid, p.63.
[34] Walter D Connor, *The Accidental Proletariat : Workers, Politics, and Crisis in Gorbachev's Russia.* (Princeton University Press, 1991), p.210.

responsive to members' welfare, and a need to be more active in negotiating and monitoring collective agreements at enterprise level and in challenging management's violations of workers' rights".[35]

In their 1961 article "USSR, Incorporated", Meyer compares the social system of the USSR to that of a company town.[36] Within such a framework, management at the level of the enterprise can be seen as the most immediate representatives of the state in workers' everyday lives. As noted by Harris, the state in the Khrushchev period "had many different voices - with sometimes conflicting agendas", and in the case of trade union documents the most obvious voice of the state was that of management.[37] I argue that the Kazakh railway's trade unions provided a venue for workers to confront the state with areas where the Khrushchev era Soviet social contract was seen to be failing. Such complaints were always made within the bounds of the social contract, never making claims to anything beyond it, and as such, the areas most frequently discussed included housing, supply, education, cultural and leisure provisions, as well as healthcare and working conditions. More revealing than the particular provisions of the social contract covered however were how such complaints were articulated, particularly when it came to justifying why the shortcomings needed to be addressed and who the shortcomings were the fault of. To aid in this analysis, this thesis will make use of Varga-Harris' analysis of housing petitions from the Leningrad area during the Thaw period. As will be further explained in chapter 2, we find striking similarities between the aspects of these complaints identified by Varga-Harris and the complaints

[35] Clarke et al., *What about the Workers?*, pp.63, 64-5.
[36] Alfred G Meyer, "USSR, Incorporated," *Slavic Review* 20, no. 3 (1961): 369–76. p.371.
[37] Harris, *Communism on Tomorrow Street*, p.305.

made in trade union documents about all aspects of state welfare provision. On the flipside, we will also see how areas where workers were failing to live up to their end of the productivist social contract were discussed, most notably the area of labour discipline, again with an eye to justification and blame. This comparison will also allow us to analyse how the aforementioned problem of the productivist catch 22 was addressed: was there a greater concern in increasing productivity in order to improve welfare, or was the concern instead for improving welfare in order to increase productivity? Our analysis will also allow us to see how far and in what ways railway workers in Soviet Kazakhstan adapted to the ‘new normal’ offered by the Thaw, and as such contribute to the debate on continuities and change in the post-Stalin period, as well as the growing body of literature on the experience of the Thaw from below.

## Chapter 1

*"'How far away the spring is', she thought; 'endless! And what will have become of me by the time it comes?"*[38]

This is what Lena, the wife of the factory director Juravilov, wonders in the midst of winter as she thinks about what will happen now that she has resolved to ask her husband for a divorce. Trade unionists must have wondered similar things throughout the first three decades of Soviet power, as the role of their organisations underwent radical changes in the new workers' state. The role of trade unions in this new society was not clear from the outset, but steadily crystallised over the course of the 1920s and 1930s as they shifted from organisations devoted to the defence of their members' interests against employers to little more than an appendage of management focusing on increasing productivity and administering state welfare. The story of this crystallisation is the subject of this chapter, and will show how trade unions came to function in the way they did during the Khrushchev period. Railway workers too underwent radical changes in this period, as they morphed from one of the most radical groups of workers during the Tsarist and revolutionary period into the group faced with some of the most stringent discipline measures by the outbreak of the Second World War.

[38] Ehrenburg, *The Thaw*, p.58.

From 1860 to 1905 the number of railway workers in the Tsarist Empire multiplied 67.7 times, and from 1895 to 1905 doubled, with 751,197 workers and employees by 1905.[39] This increase can be attributed to the fact that "railroad construction "was the essential condition of industrial development" in Tsarist Russia"", boosting trade, opening new markets, contributing to the growth of new industrial regions, and providing a domestic market for the nascent ferrous metal industry.[40] Railway workers benefited from numerous paternalistic policies organised by the government, including housing, public healthcare, and access to consumer cooperatives and cultural facilities.[41] However workers also suffered under an often petty railway management, and during the Turkish War were subject to "a quasi-military command structure".[42] Railway workers were also a highly differentiated group internally, with "a great variety of skills and incomes, socialisation of work, and geographic situation".[43] This internal division would make itself felt during the 1905 revolution.

The revolution of 1905 was a key moment in the birth of trade unionism in the Tsarist Empire, something that was also recognised in 1920 by A. Lozovsky, a member of the executive committee of the All-Russian Central Council of Trade Unions (Всесоюзный центральный совет профессиональных союзов or VTsSPS), who claimed that "the Russian trade union movement from moment of its birth bound itself up with the political labour movement".[44] Railway workers played a key role in the strike waves of 1905, with

[39] Henry Reichman, *Railwaymen and Revolution* (University of California Press, 1987), pp.16-7.
[40] Ibid, p.15
[41] Ibid, pp.29-30.
[42] Ibid, pp.26, 31-33.
[43] Ibid, p.6.
[44] A. Lozovsky, "Trade Unions in Soviet Russia: Their Development and Present Position," in *Trade Unions in Soviet Russia: A Collection of Russian Trade Union Documents* (Labour Research Department, the I.L.P. Information Committee, 1920), 5–47. p.7.

having the highest strike propensity of any industrial group, and the railway lines themselves serving as “the channels along which the strike epidemic spreads”.[45] As such the railway unions became essential organisers, the most important of which was the All-Russian Union of Railroad Employees and Workers, founded in April 1905.[46] This organisation was of particular importance in the October general strike, but also suffered from internal divisions, most notably between “proletarian socialists and middle-class liberals”.[47] Until October 1905, the organisation had been dominated by white-collar administrative employees, and upon its foundation its politics were “fundamentally trade unionist and liberal”.[48] However after this point “blue-collar and other rank-and-file railwaymen poured into the union’s ranks from below”.[49] Despite blue-collar workers being initially more concerned with economic issues, leaving political demands to white-collar workers, interchange did occur between these two groups, however “the kind of politics to which each group was in the end attracted differed considerably”.[50] By the end of 1905 these groups would diverge; one liberal-democratic professional-political oriented; the other blue-collar revolutionary-socialist class-oriented, and it was only “the violent eclipse of both in the aftermath of the unsuccessful December actions” that avoided any serious confrontation between the two.[51]

[45] Reichman, *Railwaymen and Revolution* pp.5-6.
[46] Ibid, p.159.
[47] Ibid, pp.159-60.
[48] Ibid, pp.160, 165.
[49] Ibid, p.162.
[50] Ibid, pp.307-8.
[51] Ibid, pp.162, 301-11.

The second outbreak of revolution in 1917 saw a rapid reemergence of trade union organisations, with the Third All-Russian Conference taking place in June 1917 and establishing the VTsSPS, which was initially dominated by Mensheviks.[52] The Mensheviks sought to defend trade union organisations' continued independence from factory committees, whose rapid growth had outpaced that of the trade union organisations, leading them to be legally recognised as the representatives of the workers in April 1917, and which in turn were dominated by the Bolsheviks.[53] In the first weeks of March 1917 hundreds of such committees sprung up across the country's railway network, and according to Rosenberg these committees initially proved capable of managing the railways efficiently.[54] However even at this early stage the seeds of future problems could be seen, as firstly such committees tended to display a "syndicalist mentality" of resisting outside authority, and secondly the most powerful central line committees tended to be dominated by the aforementioned white collar employees.[55] In order to address the former problem, the provisional government sought to "statise" workers' control, establishing an all-Russian railway union in April, to which all workers' committees were then subordinated.[56] Such efforts produced the opposite of the desired effect. While the railway union was granted apparent unique autonomy in certain areas in return for obedience to government directives, in reality "no substantial powers were actually granted to union leaders that other trade unions did not enjoy", while "special state responsibilities" implied that railroaders could not oppose

[52] Ashwin and Clarke, *Russian Trade Unions and Industrial Relations in Transition*, p.8. Isaac Deutscher, *Soviet Trade Unions* (1973; repr., Oxford University Press, 1950), p.8.
[53] Ashwin and Clarke, *Russian Trade Unions and Industrial Relations in Transition*, p.8.
[54] William G Rosenberg, "The Democratization of Russia's Railroads in 1917" *The American Historical Review* 86, no. 5 (1981): 983–1008. pp.989-90.
[55] Ibid, pp.991-3.
[56] Ibid, pp.995-6.

government policies"", leading many to see the trade union as little more than a government institution.[57] To add to this, the union's executive committee (*Vikzhel*) was dominated by the same administrative group who also continued to dominate the now technically subordinated committees, which in actual fact continued to bypass the authority of the union.[58] This alongside the animosity generated between different groups of workers caused by attempts at wage equalisation led to the proliferation of so called "ribbon unions", unions organised around individual professions rather than the railway as a whole.[59]

This led to a situation where from the outside, *Vikzhel* appeared to wield immense power, something which later historians continued to misinterpret, for example when Sorenson described *Vikzhel* as one of the "largest and most effectively organised" trade unions.[60] A large part of its perceived power lay in its apparent ability to paralyse the country's transport and communication networks, demonstrated by the key role it played in the defeat of Kornilov's attempted coup, when under orders from the trade union, workers diverted Kornilov's forces onto spur lines and away from Petrograd.[61] However Rosenberg contends that "*Vikzhel* remained powerless to implement any directives that were not specifically acceptable to the railroaders themselves".[62] This was a situation which the Bolsheviks were able to take advantage of as "by attacking union leaders for identifying with state interests, by castigating moderate central line committees for their

[57] Ibid, p.1001.
[58] Ibid, pp.986, 999-1000.
[59] Ibid, 999-1000
[60] Jay B Sorenson, *The Life and Death of Trade Unionism in the USSR* (1969; repr., AldineTransaction, 2010), pp.9-11, p.45.
[61] Ibid, p.45.
[62] Rosenberg, "The Democratization of Russia's Railroads in 1917", p.1007.

close relations with government officials and for their “usurpation” of local committee powers, and, above all, by supporting the particularistic interest of diverse railroad labour groups, the Bolsheviks fostered dissatisfaction among all the railroaders”.[63] The weakness of *Vikzhel* would prove to be of paramount importance following the Bolshevik seizure of power, as not hours after this seizure, at the Second Congress of Soviets, a representative announced that “*Vikzhel* - in view of the dubious legality of the Congress and in the absence of a central authority - “took a negative view of the seizure of power by a single political party” and felt that power ought to be “socialist, revolutionary, and representative””.[64] As such, *Vikzhel* stated its intention to assume total control of the railways, not permit their usage for troop movements, and respond to any potential repression against their members by cutting off Petrograd, aiming to bring the Bolsheviks to the negotiating table with the other socialist organisations, which they initially succeeded in.[65] However repeated negotiations broke down, culminating in an agreement on November 28 to form a coalition between the Bolsheviks and the Left SR’s, with a former member of *Vikzhel* being given the role of Commissar of Ways and Communications.[66] Soreson contends that with this agreement *Vikzhel* had handed the Bolsheviks a major victory, going from “the only power that had successfully forced the Bolsheviks into coalition talks” to “actually contributing to the preservation of Bolshevik rule”.[67] Sorenson sees this decision as resulting from a combination of factors; that the Bolsheviks had won the overwhelming support of the country’s industrial centres in the elections to the constituent assembly; that their control had been diluted by the

[63] Ibid, p.1006.
[64] Sorenson, *The Life and Death of Trade Unionism in the USSR*, p.46.
[65] Ibid, pp.46-7.
[66] Ibid, pp.48-50.
[67] Ibid, p.50.

presence of the Left SRs; that the inclusion of a former *Vikzhel* member gave them the appearance of some veto power; and finally that *Vikzhel* may have calculated that this would be the best deal they could get to avoid further socialist on socialist bloodshed.[68] However here it is important to add that *Vikzhel* may have been aware of how tentative their support amongst rank-and-file workers remained, and as such recognised the need to come to a negotiated settlement whilst they still could.

This experience with *Vikzhel* undoubtedly informed the Bolsheviks position that "the practical implication of independence [of the trade unions] was nonsupport of the system…politically this was seen as dangerous and counterrevolutionary, for the regime could not stand without labour support".[69] As such over the following year *Vikzhel* would be methodically undercut by concerted Bolshevik efforts. Not a month after the conclusion of their negotiations, the military revolutionary committee took control of the railway telegraph office and the Ministry of Railways, refusing entrance to members of *Vikzhel*.[70] Following *Vikzhel's* denunciation of the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, the Bolsheviks established a rival union *Vikzhedor*, which naturally received immediate recognition from the Council of People's Commissars and a member of which was made Minister of Communications.[71] At the same time the Bolshevik's struggled to establish a central body to operate the railways, due to the continued resistance of white collar employees.[72] Instead they resorted to workers' control through the previous established soviets, assisted where possible by those managers still

[68] Ibid, pp.50-1.
[69] Ibid, p.30.
[70] Ibid, p.51.
[71] Ibid, p.51.
[72] J. N Westwood, *A History of Russian Railways* (George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1964), p.185.

available and deemed trustworthy.[73] This however led to the problem that workers had "ideas about its rights and responsibilities more far-reaching that the Government's, leading to a syndicalist spirit the caused a deterioration of labour discipline, as over the following year disorganisation and demoralisation reigned on the railways, with workers engaging in theft, absenteeism, and work stoppages over issues of pay and political representation.[74] It was also at this time that local railway organisers began to take nationalisation, which the Bolsheviks had delayed due to fears of even greater disorganisation, into their own hands, for example when a committee of the workers building the Semirechensk railway deciding to expel management and nationalise the line, a move which was approved by the Soviet of People's Commissars of Turkestan.[75] The Bolsheviks put these discipline problems down to the selfishness of the workers, although Sorenson ventures that they "smack of political opposition as much as chaos of the workers' control and the selfishness of workers".[76]

Either way, the Bolsheviks had to bring the railway back into some semblance of order, which could at the same time facilitate the weakening of *Vikzhel*.[77] In February 1918, a decree "asserted the primacy of the People's Commissariat of Ways and Communications (NKPS)", and anyone who violated this primacy "would be treated as a 'wrecker'".[78] Local soviets could only elect a manager who was "both a capable railwayman and loyal to the Bolsheviks", with appointments approved by the NKPS.[79]

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[73] Ibid, p.185.
[74] Westwood, *A History of Russian Railways*, p.186. Sorenson, *The Life and Death of Trade Unionism in the USSR*, pp.52-3.
[75] Westwood, *A History of Russian Railways*, p.182.
[76] Sorenson, *The Life and Death of Trade Unionism in the USSR*, p.53.
[77] Ibid, p.53.
[78] Westwood, *A History of Russian Railways*, p.187.
[79] Ibid, p.187.

This had the effect of turning *Vikzhedor* against the government, as “many of the Bolshevik supporters had taken literally the earlier slogans about all power to the workers”.[80] To resolve this problem, the Bolshevik government introduced one-man management by appointing commissars to replace the “popular but often ineffective concept of collective leadership”, and workers committees were dissolved.[81] With the outbreak of civil war, the Bolshevik government was able to introduce martial law on the railways in November 1918, meaning that “all railwaymen were considered as having been called up for military service [and] were liable to court martial for failure to perform their duties properly”, while military commissars were appointed with overriding powers.[82] This would serve to crush any semblance of *Vikzhel*, or any organised labour on the railway, as a political force, with the executive committee of *Vikzhel* being replaced almost entirely by Bolsheviks by February 1919.[83] According to Sorenson, the case of *Vikzhel* became the modus operandi for the Bolsheviks when it came to dealing with unions: “the A.R.C.C.T.U. [sic] used its authority to set up a rival union to capture the union's machinery and to isolate the Menshevik leaders”.[84]

Despite the defeat of *Vikzhel*, the question still remained of what role were trade unions to play in the workers’ state. By the summer of 1918, trade unions’ future role was already visible, as they became responsible for encouraging the growth of productivity through piece-rates, norms, and enforcing labour discipline, managing soup kitchens

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[80] Ibid, p.187.
[81] Westwood, *A History of Russian Railways*, p.188. Sorenson, *The Life and Death of Trade Unionism in the USSR*, p.53.
[82] Westwood, *A History of Russian Railways*, p.188. Sorenson, *The Life and Death of Trade Unionism in the USSR*, pp.53-4.
[83] Sorenson, *The Life and Death of Trade Unionism in the USSR*, p.54.
[84] Ibid, p.57. By A.R.C.C.T.U the author is referring to the VTsSPS.

and labour exchanges, and even organising food procurement detachments to move out into the countryside.[85] Unions also "transformed themselves into organs of civil war", acting as a tool for the government to mobilise manpower, as well as calling up and arming 50% of their membership.[86] All of this was however somewhat haphazard, and some Bolsheviks feared the statisation of the trade unions was undermining their support amongst the workers, and as such continued to press for union independence.[87] In 1920 Lenin would first articulate what would become Soviet trade union policy: "On the one hand, the trade unions, which take in all industrial workers, are an organisation of the ruling, dominant, governing class, which has now set up a dictatorship and is exercising coercion through the state. But it is not a state organisation; nor is it designed for coercion, but for education. It is an organisation designed to draw in and to train; it is, in fact, a school: a school of administration, school of economic management, a school of communism".[88] Further, trade unions were both "a link between the vanguard and the masses" and a ""reservoir" of state power".[89] In the same year Lozovsky explained that trade unions were seen as "organs of socialist construction", whose main tasks lay in the organisation of labour and production, and therefore unions apparently recognised the need to subordinate their "narrow" interests to "the interests of national economic construction".[90] Continued calls for trade union independence were "based on the denial of the socialist character of our revolution", as Lozovsky explains "against whom will the proletarian trade union conduct class struggle? Against their own

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[85] Ashwin and Clarke, *Russian Trade Unions and Industrial Relations in Transition*, p.10
[86] Deutscher, *Soviet Trade Unions*, p.25.
[87] Ashwin and Clarke, *Russian Trade Unions and Industrial Relations in Transition*. 10.
[88] V.I. Lenin, "The Trade Unions, the Present Situation and Trotsky's Mistakes," https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/dec/30.htm.
[89] Ibid.
[90] A. Lozovsky, "Trade Unions in Soviet Russia", pp.26-7, 31.

proletarian government, against themselves?".[91] The following year at the 10th Party congress the practical role of trade unions were elaborated: trade unions needed to show "regular concern for all aspects of the life and everyday conditions of the worker, both inside and outside of the plant", serving "all aspects of the day-to-day life of the labouring masses, gradually enlisting the very broadest strata of the working people in the cause of state construction".[92] The importance of labour discipline was also frequently highlighted in these documents, with Lozovsky arguing that workers needed to subordinate their interests to the whole, and Lenin stating that workers not willing to make sacrifices for greater discipline were "selfish men and cowards".[93]

From these documents the contours of future Soviet trade union policy are clearly mapped out. The productivist focus of trade unions is already present, shown in the insistence that they focus on "economic construction", as "under socialism, or the transition to socialism, the interests of the working class are identified with and defined by the (socialist) state", and the Bolsheviks had identified this interest as an increase in production.[94] In this role trade unions were nominally "auxiliary organs of the state and distinct from the state, but [also] agencies working with the commissariats to implement policy", that were "neither equal with, superior to, nor directly subordinate to the commissariats".[95] However Sorenson argues that in reality they were "definitely inferior to the state commissariats, for it was the state policy which the unions, as transmission

[91] Ibid, pp.28-9.
[92] Soviet Communist Party Russia, "10th Congress -- on the Role and Tasks of Trade Unions," March 16, 1921, https://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/government/party-congress/10th/16d-abstract.htm.
[93] A. Lozovsky, "Trade Unions in Soviet Russia", p.46. V.I. Lenin, "Lenin's Speech at the Third Congress" in *Trade Unions in Soviet Russia: A Collection of Russian Trade Union Documents* (Labour Research Department, the I.L.P. Information Committee, 1920), 55-64. pp.63-4.
[94] Ashwin and Clarke, *Russian Trade Unions and Industrial Relations in Transition*, p.13-4.
[95] Sorenson, *The Life and Death of Trade Unionism in the USSR*, p.122.

belts, were to help implement".[96] Linked to this is the focus on labour discipline in order to achieve these economic goals.[97] We also see the confirmation of trade unions' welfare role in Lenin's emphasis on trade unions' need to organise all aspects of workers' lives. The final confirmation of this position was in fact brought to the fore by the railways, as "the cause celebre in this controversy [between different views of the future of trade unions] was the Tsektran or the Central Committee of Transport".[98] Following his appointment as Commissar of the NKPS in March 1920, Trotsky used this organisation to effect "a virtual militarization of the railways, appointing military men to key administrative posts", bringing the railways into a state of relative order.[99] However Trotsky's success led him to threaten similar actions against other "irresponsible agitators" in other trade unions.[100] Stepping into the conflict, the Bolshevik Central Committee backed Trotsky on the essential point: that the trade unions should focus on "economic issues not from the angle of distribution and consumption but from that of expanding production".[101] Whilst the Central Committee temporarily halted any further militarisation of trade union organisations, as envisioned by Trotsky, it all but solidified the essential characteristics of trade union policy.[102]

According to Deutscher, despite the introduction of progressive labour legislation and "relative liberalism in the Government's economic policy" under NEP, trade unions did not share in this liberalisation, and did not "regain real freedom of action".[103] The

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[96] Ibid, p.122.
[97] Ashwin and Clarke, *Russian Trade Unions and Industrial Relations in Transition*, p.14.
[98] Deutscher, *Soviet Trade Unions*, p.41.
[99] Westwood, *A History of Russian Railways*, p.188. Deutscher, *Soviet Trade Unions*, p.41.
[100] Deutscher, *Soviet Trade Unions*, p.41.
[101] Ibid, p.42.
[102] Ashwin and Clarke, *Russian Trade Unions and Industrial Relations in Transition*, pp.11-12.
[103] Deutscher, *Soviet Trade Unions*, p.69.

construction of Turksib, the first large scale railway in Soviet Kazakhstan, began in the waning years of NEP, but following the adoption of the First Five-Year Plan "Turksib, like all Soviet developmental projects, would be transformed by the very violent and highly disruptive campaigns - industrialisation, collectivisation, and class war - that came in the wake of these shocks".[104] Together with the party and Red directors, the trade unions made up the third line of the "so-called production triangle" on Turksib, however the aforementioned shocks would transform their role fundamentally, and reflected the wider transformation of trade unions in the country at large.[105] At the outset of the project, trade unions theoretically acted as "the most obvious check on managerial authority", and possessed powerful tools against management "through labour legislation, collective bargaining agreements, wage arbitration councils, safety inspection, and labour exchanges", and "such formal powers, even if not always used, made the trade union a formidable member of the production triangle".[106] However Payne points out that these powers remained "largely on paper"; trade unions were distant from workpoints, had little connection with workers, and their committees were inexperienced.[107] NEP era trade unions also found themselves in "an excruciatingly ambiguous position", torn between defending workers against employers' abuses and obeying and implementing party policy, which more often than not emphasised a productivist focus.[108] Trade unions were to solve disputes through arbitration, rather than resort to industrial action, as in the workers' state striking was "an act of sabotage"

[104] Payne, *Stalin's Railroad*, p.2.
[105] Ibid, p.40.
[106] Ibid, p.50.
[107] Ibid, p.52.
[108] Donald Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and Stalinist Industrialization: The Formation of Modern Soviet Production Relations, 1928-1941* (Pluto Press, 1986), p.22.

and scabbing “a means of fighting sabotage and counter revolution”.[109] This had the effect of absorbing “potential protest into bureaucratic channels of conciliation”, rather than bolstering “workers’ ability to act collectively as a combative force defending their class positions within society”.[110] Trade unions in the NEP period would often err towards siding with the state and the commissariats rather than workers, but this did not stop them from being “in almost constant conflict with everybody: the State, the economic administration, the party, and their own rank and file”.[111] According to Filtzer, this “servile role of the unions was catastrophic in terms of the part it played in preparing the way for Stalin’s eventual triumph”, as unions’ militancy was replaced with a restricted role tasked with the provision of state paternalism and increasing productivity.[112]

Soviet leaders feared that such “weak union organs could not act as a counterweight to managers”, and that this “encouraged unionists to collude with management”.[113] Equally, trade unions’ often servile position meant that workers did not hold them in high regards and remained largely aloof to their activities.[114] NEP era trade unions on Turksib were disorganised, held in contempt by managers, and distrusted by workers, all of which amounted to a relatively ineffectual plank of the production triangle.[115] As such by early 1929 the trade unions were ripe for criticism of “lack of proper paternalism”.[116] This was

[109] Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and Stalinist Industrialization*, p.23. A. Lozovsky, “Trade Unions in Soviet Russia”, p.18.
[110] Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and Stalinist Industrialization*, p.23.
[111] Deutscher, *Soviet Trade Unions*, p.70-1.
[112] Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and Stalinist Industrialization*. 23-4.
[113] Payne, *Stalin’s Railroad*, pp.52-3.
[114] Ibid, p.53.
[115] Ibid, p.53.
[116] Ibid, pp.162-3.

not helped by the restricted nature of union membership, which was dominated by established cadre workers, whilst Kazakhs were only "superficially integrated".[117] As such a 'Closer to the Masses' campaign was launched, which overnight turned the union from "a distant presence to a ubiquitous institution for rank-and-file workers".[118] This expansion of membership however did not spell the end of the unions' problems. The mass influx of new members led to complaints that "criminals and those deprived of civil rights as class enemies (*lishentsy*) had entered the union".[119] As such, a campaign to "unmask" these enemies was launched, leading to a subsequent mass expulsion campaign.[120] This occurred in the context of the victory of the adherents of rapid industrialisation in the trade union leadership, with Lazar Kaganovich being elected to the VTsSPS council and Mikhail Tomsky losing his reelection as chairman.[121] The Stalinist leadership demolished the trade union leadership, which they saw as a "fortress of the right", expelling the upper levels and launching reelections of lower level officials.[122] Union leadership on Turksib was also "shaken", as pro-Tomsky leaders were expelled under the pretence of an "inability to promote workers democracy" as well as a failure to address memberships needs.[123] According to Payne, "union democracy became the order of the day", and fresh union reelection campaigns were launched. This would however only be the precursor to the real purge that would begin some months later.

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[117] Ibid, p.82.
[118] Ibid, p.163.
[119] Ibid, p.163.
[120] Ibid, p.163.
[121] Deutscher, *Soviet Trade Unions*, p.80.
[122] Junbae Jo, "Soviet Trade Unions and the Great Terror, 1936-38," in *Stalin's Terror Revisited*, ed. Melanie Ilic (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). 86.
[123] Payne, *Stalin's Railroad*, p.164.

These campaigns did initially seem to have the desired effect, as the unions were "invigorated…with a new populism", and trade unionists became anxious to "defend their members interests noisily and to organise various kontrol' activities against management enthusiastically".[124] As such attendance at general meetings climbed, and the number of worker-activists ballooned.[125] This also had the desirable effect of directing "much of the workers' previously individual, untamed (*stihiinyi*) actions into channels more acceptable to the regime".[126] Despite this, Payne emphasises that this did not lead to "a sort of corporatist industrial relations".[127] The union simply inserted itself into the role of management and into production decisions whilst retaining the productivist orientation: "in other words, the union used various institutions of kontrol' more to wrest production authority from managers than to protect their constituents' interests".[128] This amounted to a "Faustian bargain", where the expansion of union powers was only gained through an assault on management, but by "embracing a managerial line, they would be powerless to resist the sacrifice of their members' interests on the altar".[129]

This Faustian bargain would come to fruition with the launch of the second and far more serious purge of Turksib's trade union apparatus. The extent to which the railway unions nationwide suffered was summed up by a party official who stated that they had been "cleaned out with sand, washed, thrashed, whacked, and scratched in seven waters".[130]

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[124] Ibid, p.164. By *'kontrol'* Payne is referring to "mobilized workers' vigilance". See p.156 for more details.
[125] Ibid, p.165.
[126] Ibid, p.165.
[127] Ibid, p.166.
[128] Ibid, p.166.
[129] Ibid, p.166.
[130] Ibid, p.261.

Turksib's unions did not escape this fate. A further reelection campaign was launched, in which many of those who had been elected a year earlier were "vilified as bureaucrats "whining in the rear with paperwork"".[131] Rank-and-file membership did not escape unscathed either, with many falling foul of the 'Face to Production' campaign, which in the productivist spirit "transformed the trade unions from defenders of workers' rights to the guarantors of production stability".[132] In the process new workers and cadres were promoted to leadership positions, making them strong supporters of the Stalinist regime that had facilitated their promotions.[133] Alongside the purging of membership, labour protections were "gutted", which no matter how imperfect, had at least "served as a brake on the worst managerial excesses": "Turksib's unions became mere adjuncts to managerial authority".[134] The unions did put up some resistance: "delaying purge meetings, not publicising them, holding them in the dead of night, and "losing" denunciations were common".[135] Unions also attempted to resist the imposition of shock work, but the party responded by staffing local union committees with shock workers.[136] This was a tactic repeated following the purge, as "the older, "defeatist" cadre of unionists" were replaced with newly minted shock workers who could be expected to adhere to the "purely productivist stance" the unions were now expected to take.[137] Whilst the trade unions may have formerly only inconsistently enforced the collective agreements and management obligations, by 1930 these were largely ignored.[138] This leads Payne to conclude that "the fall of the unions undercut the entire

[131] Ibid, p.261.
[132] Ibid, pp.260, 262.
[133] Jo, "Soviet Trade Unions and the Great Terror, p.86.
[134] Payne, *Stalin's Railroad*, p.260.
[135] Ibid, p.190.
[136] Ibid, p.216.
[137] Ibid, pp.262-3.
[138] Ibid, p.263.

system of industrial relations established during the NEP and ended all union autonomy within the production triangle".[139]

As on Turksib, so in the rest of the Soviet Union, after 1930 the productivist role and subordinate status of trade unions was consolidated. Unions' main task was 'socialist emulation', with the organisation of socialist competition and production conferences added to their responsibilities of promoting worker discipline.[140] Far from being auxiliary and distinct from the state, unions' would become "quasi-state organisations", mainly facilitated by their growing role as an agent of state paternalism through the provision of welfare.[141] From now on trade unions would be responsible for the administration of social insurance, the management of holiday resorts, sanatoria, and rest homes, protection of labour through technical inspections, control over the Workers' Supply Departments' (ORS or *отдел рабочего снабжения*), factory canteens and cooperative shops, the monitoring of the construction of housing for workers, as well as "a number of auxiliary functions designed to improve the workers standard of living within the limits set by the Plan".[142] As such testimony from railway workers from this period tend to focus on the impotence of the trade unions. One Ukrainian railway engineer reported that "the Labour union to which I belonged never helped me but tried to squeeze my last strength from me", and saw the welfare role of the organisation as hiding its true purpose as a tool to control workers, a sentiment echoed by another Ukrainian who worked as a navvy.[143] A Russian dispatcher and inspector was slightly more

[139] Ibid, p.263.
[140] Ashwin and Clarke, *Russian Trade Unions and Industrial Relations in Transition*, p.14.
[141] Ibid, pp.14-5.
[142] Deutscher, *Soviet Trade Unions*, pp.117-20.
[143] Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System. Schedule A, Vol. 34, Case 90 (NY) (interviewer J.F.). Widener Library, Harvard University. Page 12 (seq. 12). Accessed on 03/03/25.

sympathetic, saying that “it did not give you anything in particular but it made you appear to be active. It begins to open various roads for you”.[144] According to Filtzer, local trade union officials did continue to try to defend workers to the best of their ability, taking advantage of the fact that the union hierarchy “was often powerless to impose its will without at least some distortions from below”.[145] Examples of this include defending workers against norm raising or the extension of working hours, opposing the criminalisation of job switching, conducting trade union activities during working hours, harassing Stakhanovite workers, fighting attempts to rescind bonuses, illegally paying social insurance, and reinstating workers who had been fired by management, sometimes in collusion with them.[146]

However despite these noble attempts at defending their members, trade union activists were fighting a losing battle. According to Deutscher, trade unions became “strongholds of that [Stakhanovite] workers’ aristocracy.[147] This would culminate in the second round of trade union purges from 1936-38. This essentially repeated the pattern of the 1928-30 purges: the trade union leadership was demolished and replaced by loyalists and reelections of lower level officials were launched.[148] In the process new workers and cadres were promoted to leadership positions, making them strong supporters of the

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https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn-3:fhcl:981824?n=12 . Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System. Schedule A, Vol. 34, Case 148 (NY) (interviewer W.T.). Widener Library, Harvard University. Page 13 (seq. 13). Accessed on 03/03/25. https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn-3:fhcl:981822?n=13 .

[144] Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System. Schedule A, Vol. 12, Case 156 (NY) (interviewer J.R.). Widener Library, Harvard University. Page 11 (seq. 11). Accessed on 03/03/25. https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn-3:fhcl:949031?n=11 .

[145] Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and Stalinist Industrialization*, p.24.

[146] Ibid, pp.71, 109, 172, 201-2, 214, 236, 241.

[147] Deutscher, *Soviet Trade Unions*, p.114.

[148] Jo, “Soviet Trade Unions and the Great Terror, 1936-38”, p.86.

Stalinist regime that had facilitated their promotions.[149] The fact that the Stalinist leadership intervened to play an active role in these purges indicates how seriously they took the role of trade unions and hence the need for them to be staffed by politically reliable cadres.[150] The extent of these second purges was such that it was announced in March 1939 that "the composition of the Trade Union committees in factories and other establishments was changed to the extent of 70-80 per cent and of the central committees to the extent of 96 per cent".[151]

The situation on the railways during the 1930s saw a parallel ramping up of state control. Rees points to an increased militarisation of railway workers in this period, with medals and uniforms on the one hand, and military style discipline on the other, with cases of workers who caused accidents facing the death penalty.[152] The period also saw the emergence of the Krivonosite movement, the railway's incarnation of the Stakhanovite movement.[153] Railway workers who took part in this movement apparently earned more and worked less, being most present in locomotive crews and repair depots.[154] In 1935 repression of railway workers was somewhat checked by the appointment of Kaganovich as Commissar of the NKPS, and the effort to increase efficiency was limited to "the campaign against the 'limiters', the extension of the Stakhanovite movement and the drive to promote workers and young engineers".[155] However by February 1937 Kaganovich "had fully committed himself to the purge", and

[149] Ibid, p.86.
[150] Ibid, p.85.
[151] Deutscher, *Soviet Trade Unions*, p.116.
[152] E. A Rees, *Stalinism and Soviet Rail Transport, 1928–41*, ed. R. W Davies and E. A Rees (Macmillan Press, 1995)., pp.1, 7, 44-5, 80-1, 92-3, 97-8.
[153] Ibid, pp.123, 142.
[154] Ibid, pp.126, 130.
[155] Ibid, p.223.

as early as 1936 ordinary workers were being mobilised to establish “control from below”.[156] As in the trade unions, so on the railways, Krivonisite workers were promoted to replace the purged higher ups, and by the end of the purges, official numbers suggested that 63% of railway workers identified themselves as Stakhanovites.[157] This did initially actually allow workers to “vent their frustrations against their superiors who in the early 1930s had imposed such a stringent regime on the rank-and-file”, however by 1938 “the anti-managerial and anti-specialist aspects of the Stakhanovite movement were checked” and by the end of the year “severe measures were instituted to tighten labour discipline”.[158]

After 1933 the Kazakh Republic’s role “as a resource-base for the industrial enterprises of Siberia, the Urals, and the Soviet Union’s European territories” had been solidified.[159] Railways were key to this integration. With the outbreak of the Second World War however, around 484,000 refugees and more than 150 factories, workshops, production cooperatives, and industrial combines would be evacuated from the western Soviet Union to Kazakhstan, well beyond the reach of the advancing Wehrmacht and Luftwaffe bombers.[160] Undoubtedly the republic’s railway workers would have played a quintessential role in this evacuation, as well as in transporting the military hardware produced by these industries to the frontline. As such, railway workers were nominally protected from conscription by the Commissariat of Defense (NKO), however local enterprise directors would still often find themselves fighting to retain essential

[156] Ibid, p.223.
[157] Ibid, pp.184-5, 207.
[158] Ibid, p.224.
[159] Roberto J Carmack, *Kazakhstan in World War II : Mobilization and Ethnicity in the Soviet Empire* (University Press of Kansas, 2019), p.65.
[160] Ibid, p.80.

personnel.[161] The Railways were also further militarised during the war, with “a state of war” being declared on transport in April and May 1943, with those who abandoned their jobs facing the same punishment as a military deserter, namely being sent to a labour camp for three to ten years or worse if the absence caused an accident.[162] This state of affairs would continue until March 1948, in the wake of which 111,380 prisoners were released from internment, which goes some ways to suggest the number of workers who fell foul of this stringent discipline regime.[163]

By the end of the Second World War the railways had become “far and away the largest employer in the country”.[164] Filtzer describes the Ministry of Railways (MPS) as a “virtual empire”, with its own complex of industrial, construction, and repair enterprises, a network of schools and hospitals, and a staff of over 3 million, nearly one sixth of whom were employed in auxiliary services such as trade and distribution, agriculture, healthcare, or education.[165] Filtzer emphasises however that these workers were not concentrated, as due to the breathtakingly extensive nature of the Soviet railway system they were scattered around the country, meaning that “a very large proportion of railway workers and clerical employees lived not in large cities but in small, isolated communities”.[166] These more isolated employees were disproportionately affected by the ration cuts of 1946, for example in one settlement on the Tomsk railway where residents were reduced to begging passing locomotive crew to give them water from

[161] Ibid, pp.76-7.
[162] Donald Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and Late Stalinism : Labour and the Restoration of the Stalinist System after World War II* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp .17, 162.
[163] Ibid, pp.17, 164.
[164] Ibid, p.16.
[165] Ibid, p.7.
[166] Ibid, p.18.

their engines, whilst “worst affected of all were the low-paid, who, without their ration cards, sank into such extreme poverty that some families could not even afford to bury their children”.[167] However it would be the shift to commercial accounting and the resulting late payment of wages in the first months of 1948 that would lead to “a wave of wildcat strikes”.[168] Railway workers, direly short of both food from ration cards and money from their wages, started refusing to show up for work.[169] These were not limited to one locale, but were spread across multiple Republics and lines.[170] The MPS was initially unperturbed, reiterating in May that strict financial discipline had to be maintained, chastising unions who failed to help “managers to balance their books”.[171] However by the end of the month the MPS had folded, providing loans to cover wage arrears and guarantee wages for the next month, and as such reports of unrest ceased.[172]

Filtzer highlights the uniqueness of this case for a few reasons; firstly, the MPS “dealt with the situation very carefully”, refusing to label the events “industrial action” in railway procuracy documents and appearing not to have resorted to coercion to resolve the situation.[173] This Filtzer puts down to the fact that the railways were not only of vital strategic importance, but also because of the dissipated nature of the strikes, which would’ve proven difficult to put down in one fell swoop.[174] Secondly, there is the fact that the MPS “chose to ignore them [workers’ demands] for so long before the persistence of

[167] Ibid, pp.46-7, 57.
[168] Ibid, p.84.
[169] Ibid, p.85-6.
[170] Ibid, pp.86-7.
[171] Ibid, p.87.
[172] Ibid, p.87.
[173] Ibid, p.87-8.
[174] Ibid, pp.87-8.

the workers' actions convinced them to make a policy U-turn".[175] Finally, there is the fact that railway workers were actually able to act collectively to win concessions for the entire workforce.[176] This is counter to the tactics of most other workers facing similar conditions, whose responses were "highly individualised" and mainly amounted to fleeing their jobs.[177] All the more interesting in this regard is the fact that illegal flight from their job was extremely low on the railways, despite the fact that conditions were not any better than in other comparable industries.[178] It is also worth noting that the wildcat strikes emerged not out of a demand for improved conditions, but rather as a protest against the deterioration of workers' current conditions. This is a phenomenon also noted by Connor, who observes that during the Brezhnev period "stoppages and strikes most typically broke out over worsening working conditions or over their long-standing and unacted-upon deterioration".[179] Poor conditions would continue to plague the railways throughout the late Stalinist period, with the railways receiving only two-thirds of its planned allocation of food supplies in 1952, and housing construction remaining chronically under fulfilled with many being abandoned before their completion.[180] However Filtzer does add that the lack of illegal flight did not mean that discipline was not a problem on the railway, even ignoring the wildcat strikes of 1948. According to Filtzer the railways "had a truly baroque system of disciplinary penalties", and that the number of workers penalised was quite high, with nearly 16% facing some form of disciplinary punishment in 1946, with the most important occupations being

[175] Ibid, p.88.
[176] Ibid, p.88.
[177] Ibid, p.88.
[178] Ibid, p.88.
[179] Connor, *The Accidental Proletariat*, p.220.
[180] Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and Late Stalinism*, pp.89, 98.

disproportionately affected; 54% of engine drivers; 38% of stokers, 60% of dispatchers; 47% of station chiefs; and 43% of station duty officers.[181]

Despite the thorough shift to a productivist role the trade unions underwent in the 1930s, Filtzer does contend that in the immediate post-war period trade unions did at times try to exercise some power in defense of their members, although Filtzer emphasises that these "were no doubt the exception and not the rule".[182] Such actions included scathing reports on workers' conditions by inspectors, and even sometimes threats of and the actual closing of production facilities.[183] For Filtzer these exceptions are still noteworthy as they not only amounted to trade unions "encroaching on the prerogatives of management", but also by doing so "they were endangering the process of accumulation", the very foundation upon which workers prosperity was supposedly based.[184] In these defenses trade unions "on occasion went beyond merely beseeching the higher authorities for some special dispensation, and displayed some degree of militancy", although this was "certainly muted and occurred within definite boundaries…directed against management and the ministries in charge of their enterprises…and never against the Party or the Stalinist leadership".[185] The actions of the railway trade unions during the 1948 wildcat strikes is illustrative, where they made an "overt or implicit defense of the work stoppages against wage arrears", and "constantly pestered and harassed the Railways Ministry" over workers' conditions.[186] For Filtzer this suggests that "the unions saw the ministry not as a partner in the race for

[181] Ibid, pp.199-200
[182] Ibid, p.254.
[183] Ibid, p.254.
[184] Ibid, p.254.
[185] Ibid, p.255.
[186] Ibid, p.255.

plan fulfillment, but in terms of 'them' versus 'us', as an employer with which the unions were frequently in conflict".[187] Filtzer emphasises that this does not mean that the image of "Soviet trade unions as corporatist entities which were mere appendages of management" is a false one, rather "what was out of kilter" was "the behaviour of some of the trade unions themselves".[188] What is significant here is that unions were mounting these defenses at a time when they "had already been tamed and 'Stalinised' during the course of the 1930s", defenses which were supported in some cases by "middle and upper echelons of the union bureaucracy".[189] This may have been encouraged by the convening of the Tenth Trade Union Congress in 1949, called for the first time in seventeen years, as well as the revival of collective agreements and the establishment of local trade union councils in 1948, which Deutscher contends amounted to "some degree of democratisation", but hardly affected "the functions and character of the organisation as a whole".[190]

On the eve of Stalin's death, the official position of trade unions in Soviet industrial relations had been solidified. Railway trade unions in particular had largely had their initial militancy neutered, through both their continued subordination to the needs of economic productivity and the regular purging of their apparatus. Although the case of the 1948 wildcat strikes illustrates that they were still able to at least try to come to the defense of their members, it is doubtful that the strikes success was anything to do with this, and likely more to do with the state's need to reassert order over strategically vital

[187] Ibid, p.255.
[188] Ibid, pp.255-6.
[189] Ibid, p.256.
[190] Deutscher, *Soviet Trade Unions*, p.132.

infrastructure. The reasons for the strike are also revealing in the fact that workers' were now more concerned with holding on to what little they had, rather than fighting for something more. By the end of the Stalin period, "workers had less fear of direct repression and were less desperate about their actual material survival than during the first four or five postwar-years, but their actions were curbed by a realistic assessment of their political powerlessness".[191] Vis-a-vis trade unions, this amounted to an apathy towards these organisations, as these organisations had become "fully integrated at every level back into the bureaucratic structure".[192] This was a challenge for the Khrushchev regimes' goal of improving productivity, as trade unions were envisioned as being key to the stimulating of this productivity, a challenge the state would try to overcome by "democratising" trade union organisations.[193]

[191] Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and Late Stalinism*, p.260.
[192] Ibid, p.260.
[193] Ashwin and Clarke, *Russian Trade Unions and Industrial Relations in Transition*, p.20. Clarke et al., *What about the Workers?*, pp.64-5.

## Chapter 2

*"'I'm finished. They're counting up how many people have been left homeless, how many have suffered damage, how much wood and iron will be required, and I, Ivan Juravliov, statistically a unit, I, an honest Soviet man who has given all his life to the service of the State, I am wrecked, the storm has wrecked me, and no one cares'".*[194]

These are the thoughts that run through Juravilov's head as he rushes to respond to a calamitous storm that destroyed the poorly built housing used to house his factory's workers. We can imagine that similar feelings were felt by other local managers when faced with criticism regarding the shoddy provision of workers' welfare they were responsible for. As we shall see in the following chapter, local managers, the representatives of the USSR Incorporated on the frontline of production, were often scapegoated for the failure of the state as a whole to live up to its end of the Khrushchevian productivist social contract. This was despite the fact that, much like Juravilov, who had no control over the storm in *The Thaw*, local managers also had little control over their ability to fulfill these obligations, hamstrung as they were by inability of the command economy and the central state to provide them with the means to meet these obligations. We shall also see how workers and trade union representatives, often one and the same, sought to persuade the state to honour its obligations by demonstrating how they relied on such welfare provisions to fulfil their end of the bargain.

[194] Ehrenburg, *The Thaw,* p.185.

Before examining the complaints discussed in trade union documents, it is worth briefly discussing who the types of people who were most likely to have their words recorded in these documents. It will become clear to the reader that most of the names given in the following discussion are distinctly Slavic. This phenomenon is distinctly illustrated by the details of participants at the 1958 railway trade union conference in Almaty, which lists 44 Russians, 28 Kazakhs, 10 Ukranians, 3 Tatars, 1 Kirgiz, and 7 listed as "other".[195] 80 of the delegates were men, and the majority were over the age of 35, with none younger than 25.[196] Also revealing is the fact that 71 of the delegates were party members or candidates, and of the 18 categorised as "workers", all but one were "leading workers".[197] What conclusions can we draw from this information? Firstly, it would seem that railway work was a profession dominated by non-titular nationalities, particularly Slavs. Sacks and Lubin find similar results in their research on Central Asia in the 1980s, with Sacks showing that, on average, the titular ethnic groups of Soviet Central Asia make up just shy of half of transport and communication workers, while Lubin notes a drastic underrepresentation of Uzbeks and a corresponding overrepresentation of Russians in application figures for the Tashkent railway academy.[198] Secondly, it appears that those chosen to represent workers at the trade union level were particularly politically active workers, as either party members or "leading workers". Clarke et al come to a similar conclusion, noting that "unions always sought to recruit the more active workers into the ranks of their administration, with the idea being that the formal structure of union representation would coincide with the

[195] TsGA RK, f.239, op.2dop, d.50, pp.14-5.
[196] Ibid, pp.14-5.
[197] Ibid, pp.16-7.
[198] Michael Paul Sacks, "Work Force Composition, Patriarchy, and Social Change," in *Geographic Perspectives on Soviet Central Asia*, ed. Robert A Lewis (Routledge, 1992), p.196. Nancy Lubin, *Labour and Nationality in Soviet Central Asia: An Uneasy Compromise* (The Macmillan Press, 1984), pp.121-6.

informal structure of the primary work group".[199] Such energetic workers may have initially "genuinely and persistently pressed the demands of their fellow workers", but upon finding themselves making little headway "responded to the experience by seeking higher office, only to be absorbed into the bureaucracy" or "dropped out in frustration".[200] As such complaints raised did not represent those of the most disenfranchised of workers, who, like the interviewees mentioned in chapter 1, would presumably have little interest in participating in an organisation they saw as little more than a tool of state control. These were the complaints of workers who, at least on the surface, had a degree of investment and belief in the Soviet system, and seem to have genuinely believed in the state's welfare promises.

As Juravilov experiences in *The Thaw*, one of the most common failures of the Soviet social contract highlighted by workers was the housing situation. The analysis of these complaints also provides an archetypal framework for the analysis of other areas of the social contract. During the Khrushchev period, the state launched an immense house building programme, constructing a total of 38,284,000 apartments and individual homes between 1953 and 1970, housing 140,900,000 people.[201] 1956 would be the turning point however, with 145 million square meters of living space added from 1956-1960 alone, more than was built in the entire period 1918-1946, and this does come through in the reports of the trade union.[202] That being said, the provision of mass housing as an element of the Soviet social contract was nothing new, but what marked

[199] Clarke et al., *What about the Workers?*, p.74.
[200] Ibid, p.74.
[201] Harris, *Communism on Tomorrow Street*, p.5.
[202] Varga-Harris, *Stories of House and Home*, p.2.

this renewed attempt apart was not only its scale, but also, as Harris puts it, the fact that "Khrushchev's regime embarked on the mass housing campaign to finish two incomplete projects of the Russian Revolution - resolving the housing question and constructing communism - but without mass violence and terror".[203]

Before 1957, complaints point to a perennial lack of suitable housing, with old stock dilapidated and unsafe due to a lack of and poorly carried out repairs, and new stock insufficient in numbers as well as plagued by problems such as remaining without water.[204] Although Soviet Kazakhstan had not suffered the same level of destruction as those parts of the Soviet Union that had been under Nazi occupation, it still would have suffered from a lack of maintenance and the added pressure of accommodating wartime evacuees.[205] This problem was exacerbated even further in the 1950s by the massive influx of Virgin Landers, 300,000 of whom passed through the region of northern Kazakhstan, and for whom housing remained a problem until the end of the 1950s.[206] Housing construction on the railway was failing to meet the collective agreement in 1955, and even though the trade union's monitoring of the quality of housing construction had improved, deadlines were still not being met.[207] At the 1954 trade union conference at Alma-Ata, Comrade Bogomolov from the 12th distance (дистанция, a division of a railway department) provided multiple individual examples of the effects these problems could have, including the cases of "the best rationaliser on

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[203] Harris, *Communism on Tomorrow Street*, p.10.
[204] TsGA RK, f.239, op.2dop, d.19, pp.104-6, 114. TsGA RK, f.239, op.2dop, d.31, p.63-4.
[205] Fitzpatrick, "Postwar Soviet Society", p.137.
[206] Michaela Pohl, "The 'Planet of One Hundred Languages': Ethnic Relations and Soviet Identity in the Virgin Lands," in *Peopling the Russian Periphery: Borderland Colonization in Eurasian History*, ed. Nicholas Breyfogle, Abby Schrader, and Willard Sunderland (Routledge, 2007). pp.242, 253.
[207] TsGA RK, f.239, op.2dop, d.23, p.43.

the railway" Comrade Akhulkov, who lived with a family of six in eight square metres of living space, the telegraph operator Khylanova, who fell ill after having to live in an unheated room, and the war invalid Comrade Mazharov, who also fell ill due to inadequate accommodation.[208] An equally illustrative example was given in 1956 by Comrade Meleshko, the head of housing construction control at Alma-Ata station, who claimed that about 100 families were living in uninsulated railway carriages.[209]

The framing of such complaints was strikingly similar to the findings of Varga-Harris in her study of housing petitions in Leningrad during the Thaw. A key aspect of these complaints was that petitioners "drew from personal experience of dreadful material circumstances, as well as invoked official pronouncements about socialist development or the process of postwar reconstruction".[210] After his discussion of poor living conditions at the Rubtsovsk branch, Comrade Volkodav concluded by stating that "the workers of Rubtsovsk are making fair complaints that their voices are not being listened to and measures are not being taken to improve conditions".[211] Meanwhile Comrade Meleshko explicitly linked the problem of workers' families living in carriages with the completion of the Sixth Five-Year Plan and "the fundamental vital interests of our people, [and] the thoughts and aspirations of millions of Soviet people".[212] Such pronouncements are akin to Kotkin's idea of "speaking Bolshevik", essentially using the language of official ideology to achieve individual aims, a language which during the

[208] TsGA RK, f.239, op.2dop, d.19, pp.137-9. Alma-Ata (modern day Almaty) was the capital of the Kazakh SSR, located in the south of the Republic. See appendix 1 for more details.
[209] TsGA RK, f.239, op.2dop, d.31, p. 63.
[210] Varga-Harris, *Stories of House and Home*, p.149.
[211] TsGA RK, f.239, op.2dop, d.19, p.106. The Rubtsovsk branch was located in the far north east of the Republic, and connected the Kazakh network to the Trans Siberian Railway at Barnaul. See appendix 1 for more details.
[212] TsGA RK, f.239, op.2dop, d.31, p.63.

Stalin period became “the obligatory language for self-identification and as such, the barometer of one's political allegiance to the cause”.[213] For those who could effectively “speak Bolshevik”, expressing dissatisfaction became safer, as these expressions were couched in the ideological language of the regime, and indicated at the very least a “clever manipulation” of official narratives, if not a genuine faith in them.[214] The individual cases exposed by Comrade Bogomolov attest to another aspect identified by Varga-Harris, that of “the particulars of *how*” petitioners lived becoming “subsumed by the details of *who*” a petitioner was.[215] Similarly, Kotkin also identifies this phenomenon during the Stalin period, when “reporting on one’s work history became an important ritual in defining oneself before others”.[216] As such Comrade Bogomolov highlights not just poor living conditions, but also biographical details, namely “the best rationaliser on the railway” and “war invalid”. By highlighting such details, petitioners didn’t merely “manipulate the complex system of privileged social categories and multiple housing queues that existed in the Soviet period”, they also illustrated, consciously or otherwise, that whilst they had fulfilled their end of the social contract, either by working productively or fighting to defend the country, the state had failed to live up to its own.[217] Additionally, such “depictions of duty served” could suggest a “sense of belonging to the Soviet social body”.[218]

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[213]Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (University of California Press, 1995), p.220.
[214] Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, p. 220. Varga-Harris, *Stories of House and Home*, p.149.
[215] Varga-Harris, *Stories of House and Home*, p.172.
[216] Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, pp. 215-7.
[217] Varga-Harris, *Stories of House and Home*, pp.172-3.
[218] Ibid. p.173.

Following the 1957 decree on housing, reports from the same year already begin to show signs of improvement. This decree, issued on July 31 1957, ordered “an immediate increase of 100 per cent in the volume of new housing to be built during the current five-year plan period”, as well as a shift to using “new industrialised techniques” to achieve this.[219] On the Kazakh railway network, there were claims that the housing construction plan had actually been overfulfilled in one branch, and that despite shortcomings in some localities, housing construction had been improving since 1951.[220] The following year, a track worker from Ayaguz celebrated the expansion of living space by 2,400 square meters for 89 “satisfied” families.[221] Four years later, the housing situation had continued to improve, with the report on the implementation of the collective agreement at the Semipalatinsk branch claiming that obligations for housing construction had actually been overfulfilled, as well as noting the completion of the construction of a club at Charsk station and the expansion of the school at Ayaguz station.[222] To add to this, repair plans were also overfulfilled, leading to the overhaul of 39 residential buildings as well as some schools and a clinic.[223] However despite these herculean efforts, Varga-Harris notes that for many “daily life remained virtually unchanged by mass construction”, with many stuck in long waiting lists for new apartments or finding their highly coveted new home to be poorly constructed and already falling into disrepair, and records from the trade union seem to confirm this.[224]

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[219] Leon M Herman, “Urbanization and New Housing Construction in the Soviet Union,” *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 30, no. 2 (1971): 203–19. pp.204-5.
[220] TsGA RK, f.239, o.2dop, d.42, p.44.
[221] TsGA RK f.239, o.2dop, d.50, pp.87-9.
[222] TsGA RK f.239, o.3, d.112, p.69. Both Ayaguz (modern day Ayagoz) and Charsk are located in the far east of the Republic, on the line in between Semipalatinsk (modern day Semey) and the eastern tip of lake Balkhash. See appendix 1 for more details.
[223] Ibid, p.71.
[224] Varga-Harris, *Stories of House and Home*, p.137.

Reports from the 1958 conference from the Dzhambul branch claim that 750 people still lacked apartments and a further 459 needed an increase in living space, while current rates of construction would not satisfy their needs for another 12 years.[225] Additionally, those that had been built were not connected by roads, leaving transport to and from "drowning in mud".[226] At the Ayaguz branch the plight of workers living by sidings was highlighted, where housing was poorly maintained and in the winter family members were left without "normal living conditions".[227] Buildings where track workers lived were also dilapidated, with many dating from the late 20s and 30s.[228] Even those new residences that had been constructed at Ayaguz suffered from poor construction, with leaks, holes in floors and windows, doors not closing properly, and cracked stoves.[229] Even by 1962, the issue of housing shortages remained acute, with severe shortages persisting at Semipalatinsk, Zhana-Semey*,* Ayaguz*,* and Zhangiz-Tobe stations, and the following year despite improvements in trade union and local committees' control over construction, repairs, and housing operation, progress in the former two areas remained slow and of low quality.[230]

A noticeable and noteworthy shift also took place in the framing of housing problems following 1957. In presenting these issues, trade unionists began to highlight how they were having a negative impact on productivity. In 1957, the chief conductor of the Rubtsovsk branch claimed that poor housing conditions were causing workers to leave,

[225] TsGA RK f.239, o.2dop, d.50, p.83. Dzhambul (modern day Taraz) is located in the far south of the Republic. See appendix 1 for more details.
[226] Ibid. 85.
[227] Ibid. 88-9.
[228] Ibid. 90.
[229] Ibid. 87-9.
[230] TsGA RK f.239, o.3, d.112, pp.69, 18-9. Both Zhana-Semey and Zhangiz-Tobe are located just south of modern day Semey. See appendix 1 for more details.

a sentiment echoed the following year by the representative of the Dzhambul branch who noted the fact that poor living conditions resulted in high turnover, particularly of conductors, switchmen, and stokers.[231] In the 1963 report on the fulfilment of the collective agreement at the Alma-Ata branch, the case of Comrade Dobrosotsky, "our home-grown ratesetter", was highlighted, who was transferred to the Alma-Ata locomotive depot from Matay following his exemplary work.[232] However he was unable to find an apartment, leading his wife to become "indignant" and insist on his returning to Matay.[233] Such cases were far from unusual, as in both the post-war and throughout the Khrushchev period poor housing and living conditions remained the primary driver for labour turnover.[234] Whilst the case of Comrade Dobrosotsky is similar to pre-1957 complaints in that it attempts to highlight ways in which those requiring housing had fulfilled their part of the social contract, what marks the above cases as different is that rather than making claims due to what workers *had done*, they are instead highlighting what they had the *potential to do*. The fact that the state had failed to live up to its end of the social contract in the realm of housing meant that workers were unable to live up to theirs. This shrewdly served the purpose of pointing out that the fulfillment of the social contract was not only beneficial to workers but also the state, and tacitly placed their interests as contingent. This also represents a privileging of the welfare end of the productivist social contract, something which should not be surprising given the fact that

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[231] TsGA RK, f.239, o.2dop, d.42, p. 163. TsGA RK f.239, o.2dop, d.50, p.83.
[232] TsGA RK, f.239, o.3, d.112, p.6. Matay is located just south of lake Balkhash in the south east of the Republic. See appendix 1 for more details.
[233] Idib, p.6.
[234] Donald Filtzer, "Labour," in *Khrushchev and Khrushchevism*, ed. Martin McCauley (The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1987), p.123. Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and De-Stalinization*, p.67. Fitzpatrick, "Postwar Soviet Society", p.141.

many of those making these criticisms would themselves be suffering from similar housing problems.

However an aspect of reports on housing issues that remained consistent throughout the period was the assignment of blame. In all the complaints examined, it was railway management that received the brunt of the blame for the state's failure to deliver sufficient housing. The most common accusation in this vein was of management intransigence or passivity. Management were accused of believing the problem to be solved, dithering in their responses to petitions, failing to properly monitor or "fight the low quality of work", or simply not paying sufficient attention to the problem.[235] However accusations could stray further than simple neglect into the realm of illegality, whether that be green lighting the construction of apartments in order to create the appearance of fulfilling the collective agreement whilst these stood unfinished, lowering requirements for accepting housing, ignoring the decisions of trade union organisations and therefore their role as "schools of communism", or even unevenly and illegally distributing living space to "those who are close to management".[236] These accusations are again similar to a phenomenon discovered by Varga-Harris, when they note that "...blame for the elusiveness of dignified housing was placed on one single antagonist - the local bureaucrat, whether affiliated with a government, Party, housing or some other organisation connected in any way with the allocation of living space".[237]

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[235] TsGA RK f.239, o.2dop, d.19, pp.104-6, 137-9. TsGA RK f.239, o.2dop, d.23, p.44. TsGA RK f.239, o.3, d.112, p.19. TsGA RK f.239, o.2dop, d.31, p.64. TsGA RK f.239, o.2dop, d.42, pp.45-6. TsGA RK f.239. TsGA RK f.239, o.2dop, d.50, p.91.
[236] TsGA RK f.239, o.2dop, d.23, pp.43-4. TsGA RK f.239, o.2dop, d.19, pp.113-4, 137. TsGA RK f.239, o.3, d.112, p.20.
[237] Varga-Harris, *Stories of House and Home*, p.196.

According to Varga-Harris, this tendency to blame local officials rather than higher powers was a result of "the fact that local authorities were the ones immediately responsible for providing consumer goods and services (including living space) - even though, ultimately, the investment and distribution priorities that led to adverse conditions were determined from the centre".[238] Whilst the examples of outright illegality mentioned above posed "the most egregious manifestation of disregard for government and Party mandate to provide housing for the masses, and lack of concern for the person", less explicitly illegal failures were just as important.[239] Such failures of these local authorities were linked with "a broader transgression: hindering the fulfillment of socialist policy".[240] By "offering a reasonable, justifiable claim to better housing, petitioners characterised officialdom as undermining the social contract and failing to take care of people".[241] Through the targeting of local officials, rather than the central state, they affirmed that they believed that the state was seeking to honour its end of the bargain, instead putting down failures to distortions made by local officials. It is also worth bearing in mind that workers could not "legitimately challenge" the policies of the central state, only "challenge the interpretation or implementation of these rules".[242] As they were the organs tasked with the implementation of these policies, criticism of local management could be seen as a surrogate for criticising the central state, which of course was not possible. Connor notes that as the Soviet state was "their employer and welfare-provider", "the economic demands workers express at the factory level are, at the same time, "demands on the central political apparatus"".[243] According to Connor,

[238] Ibid, p.196.
[239] Ibid, p.200.
[240] Ibid, p.199.
[241] Ibid, p.206.
[242] Clarke et al., *What about the Workers?*, p.74,
[243] Connor, *The Accidental Proletariat*, p.221.

whilst workers may have seen “themselves as standing up against violations of a just social contract”, they were in fact inadvertently making a challenge to the legitimacy of the system.[244] Directing this criticism against local officials acted as a safety valve for workers’ dissatisfaction, with Varga-Harris noting that “some scholars have interpreted this as a deliberate strategy of the Soviet regime for containing discontent”.[245] This was not a new tactic, as both Payne and Rees note the Party and trade union both attempted to use workers’ frustrations as a way to weaken managerial authority in the 1930s.[246] However its use in the Khrushchev period was particularly encouraged after the 1957 trade union reforms, which aimed to not only devolve power and strengthen union influence on the shop floor, but also to encourage local committees to address workers’ complaints and conflicts directly, as well as raise the possibility of using disciplinary measures against managers who failed to implement the collective agreement.[247] Trade unions were thereby encouraged to criticise management at all levels, and were empowered to do so, as the regime also aimed to use “workers’ aspirations as a lever to force reform on managers”.[248]

This safety valve was all the more important as, examples of outright illegality notwithstanding, these transgressions were often not the fault of local officials: “ultimately, it was defects in the central command economic system that obfuscated the altruistic nature of socialism…lower level officials simply were not able to satisfy the

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[244] Ibid, p.221.
[245] Varga-Harris, *Stories of House and Home,* p.202.
[246] Payne, *Stalin’s Railroad*, p.156. E. A Rees, *Stalinism and Soviet Rail Transport*, p.224.
[247] Junbae Jo, “Dismantling Stalin’s Fortress: Soviet Trade Unions in the Khrushchev Era,” in *Soviet State and Society under Nikita Khrushchev*, ed. Melanie Ilic and Jeremy Smith (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2009), 122–41. pp.126, 128-9.
[248] Jo, “Dismantling Stalin’s Fortress”, p.127. Clarke et al., *What about the Workers?*, p.63.

unceasing urge of requests for housing exchanges directed at them".[249] In fact, there are some, albeit rare, examples of a tacit acknowledgement of this in some reports, with two noting that construction was held back by a lack of building materials, with the first noting a shortage of timber and bricks, and the second a failure to make proper use of locally available materials.[250] However even these admissions were caveated with an attack on management, with both claiming management were unconcerned and inattentive to these shortages, and neglecting to connect them to wider issues with the command economy.[251]

In their study of Leningrad residential meetings in 1953 and 1954, Harris argues that attacks on architects at these meetings "reflected the punitive tendencies and scapegoating of Khrushchev's populism that threatened, like housing deficiencies themselves, to become a permanent fixture in the communist way of life instead of being discarded as part of the Stalinist past".[252] These architects "had little control over the underlying problems of mass housing…but as the only authority figures at these meetings, they became the target of residents' discontent".[253] We can make a similar conclusion about attacks on management found in the trade union documents. Management were largely reliant on the central state to provide them with the material support necessary to fulfill the social contract, but as workers lacked the ability or maybe even the inclination to openly blame the central state for this, they instead resorted to the same tactics they had in previous decades, attacking the states'

[249] Varga-Harris, *Stories of House and Home*, p.209.
[250] TsGA RK f.239, o.2dop, d.31, pp.63-4. TsGA RK f.239, o.2dop, d.42, pp.45-6.
[251] TsGA RK f.239, o.2dop, d.31, pp.63-4. TsGA RK f.239, o.2dop, d.42, pp.45-6.
[252] Harris, *Communism on Tomorrow Street*, p.269.
[253] Ibid, p.269.

representatives on the ground, with the encouragement of the central state. Ashwin and Clarke come to a similar conclusion, noting that an attack on local management "did not throw the system into question, but was addressed by an appeal to higher authorities, the 'good Tsar', and was resolved by assigning personal responsibility for failure", whilst Connor argues that such protests constituted a ""populist legitimism": protest which, while accepting the established political *order* (the system), appeals to highest authority against abuses systemic in their roots but attributed to lesser, local authority".[254] As noted by Kozlov and Gilburd, this scapegoating tendency can be seen as a continuation between the Stalin and Khrushchev years, however it is worth acknowledging that although this represented the continued use of a certain tactic, the context it was being used in had changed.[255] According to Filtzer, the state's aim in allowing and even encouraging such attacks on management and trade unions was to "give workers a feeling that the regime was 'for them'", essentially portraying the central state as being on the workers side and turning frustration with the very real failures of the state against local scapegoats.[256] To add to this it is worth remembering that repercussions for local management, and for workers themselves, were much lessened, something which may have further encouraged such criticism. That is not to say that the state had completely released its hold over measures of coercive control, and as Harris concludes "an alternative form of politics that could challenge the Soviet system's foundations as a one-party state running a command economy" did not emerge from the "politics of

[254] Ashwin and Clarke, *Russian Trade Unions and Industrial Relations in Transition*, p.25. Connor, *The Accidental Proletariat*, p.232.
[255] Denis Kozlov and Eleonory Gilburd, "The Thaw as an Event in Russian History" in *The Thaw: Soviet Society and Culture during the 1950s and 1960s*, ed. Denis Kozlov and Eleonory Gilburd (University of Toronto Press, 2013), p.25.
[256] Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and De-Stalinization,* pp.43, 45-6.

complaint".[257] By their very nature, complaints made through the trade union could not constitute a civil society in its most orthodox terms as something outside of the state. Rather what they tend to demonstrate is a desire for the state to become more involved, "to finish what it had started", whether by correcting wayward management practices or providing greater resources.[258] In this way then it seems that the state succeeded in convincing workers that it was "for them", or workers at least shrewdly adopted such a framework.

An area of the social contract of equal importance to housing in workers' everyday lives was the provision of supplies. Of particular importance in this regard were canteens and cooperative stores run by the ORS. The work of these had been under the control of trade unions since 1933, and therefore "the chairman of any factory committee (that is, the chief trade union organiser on the spot) [was] personally responsible for any malpractices in the co-operatives and food supply centres".[259] That these remained well supplied was particularly important given the fact that "a very large proportion of railway workers and clerical employees lived not in large cities but in small, isolated communities", something which as we have seen had "enormous consequences during the food shortages of 1946-8".[260] For many workers such facilities were the only place they could get a hot meal, although food was often of poor quality and long queues ate into work time.[261] Reports from 1956 show that, whilst the supply situation had undoubtedly improved since a decade earlier, it was far from enviable. One report noted

[257] Ibid. 307.
[258] Ibid. 307.
[259] Deutscher, *Soviet Trade Unions*, pp.119-20.
[260] Fitlzer, *Soviet Workers and Late Stalinism*, p.18.
[261] Fitzpatrick, "Postwar Soviet Society", p.138. Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and De-Stalinization*, p.33.

cases of workers being served incomplete dishes and underfilled drinks, as well as a lack of tableware and cutlery, which meant that workers were wasting time waiting for their lunches.[262] At the Ayaguz branch, the food being served was described as "monotonous", "tasteless", and "of low quality", and locomotive crews at Matay depot complained of oversalted food, sour bread, and tasteless borsch lacking potatoes, while crews at Shemonaikha lacked even tomatoes in theirs.[263] Meanwhile in retail stores there was an absence of consumer goods such as oil, tobacco, and toilet paper.[264] At the 1958 trade union conference, complaints about supplies were repeated, with Comrade Chabatayev, a switchman at Chilbastau station, complaining that the railway department did not provide the station with stalls for sale of industrial or food products.[265] By 1962, the report on the implementation of the collective agreement for the Semipalatinsk branch showed that improvements had been made. The plan for trade was fulfilled, the store and canteen network was expanded, and the quality of food improved.[266] Again however there were still shortcomings, with access to some goods still remaining limited.[267]

This was a situation that was not helped by the conditions of ORS facilities. In the 1956 reports, stores were said to be in poor condition, some built pre-war, and many falling into disrepair, whilst storage rooms had caved in roofs, and dining rooms were threatening to collapse, as well as lacking seats for hungry workers, refrigeration, and

[262] TsGA RK f.239, o.2dop, d.37, p.3.
[263] Ibid, pp.13, 14, 25. Shemonaikha is located in the far north east of the Republic on the line in between Semey and Oskemen. See appendix 1 for more details.
[264] Ibid. 5.
[265] TsGA RK f.239, o.2dop, d.50, p.127. Chilbastau is located in the south of the Republic, just east of Almaty. See appendix 1 for more details.
[266] TsGA RK f.239, o.3, d.112, pp.73-5.
[267] Ibid, p.75-6.

water supply.[268] 90% of stores lacked window displays, and many also lacked cash registers.[269] To add to this, all schools at the Ayaguz branch lacked facilities to serve students hot meals.[270] At the Pishpek depot, canteen no. 1 had been closed for so long that food was being sold outside, which the report claimed was leading to the spread of gastrointestinal and other infectious diseases.[271] The report also highlighted that, following an inspection of the public catering enterprises of the Ayaguz branch, capacity was still low and poor organisation made waiting times even longer.[272]

According to Filtzer the state of public catering epitomized “all that was wrong with public services in the USSR”, not only due to the fact that “the amount of work time lost simply in waiting for meals was incalculable”, but also due to the fact that the obvious discrepancies between what public catering was supposed to offer versus what it actually did alienated workers from ideologically identifying with the regime.[273] However, documents show that, as with housing complaints, these shortcomings were often at least portrayed as a failure of management to live up to their obligations under the social contract, rather than proof of the hollowness of the regime's ideological pronouncements. This was an accusation levelled at both higher up and local management. The leadership of the ORS were accused of failing to sufficiently monitor work, to adjust their work “in accordance with the guidelines of the 20th session of the CPSU and the Resolution of the CC CPSU and the Council of Ministers”, or failing to

[268] TsGA RK f.239, o.2dop, d.37, pp.3, 6. TsGA RK f.239, o.2dop, d.36, pp.23-4.
[269] TsGA RK f.239, o.2dop, d.37, p.6.
[270] TsGA RK f.239, o.2dop, d.36, p.24.
[271] TsGA RK f.239, o.2dop, d.37, p.3. Pishpek does not refer to the capital of the Kyrgyz SSR, at this time called Frunze, but rather a small settlement just to the east of Frunze. See appendix 1 for more details.
[272] Ibid, p.13.
[273] Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and De-Stalinization*, p.34.

restructure “the work of public nutrition in the light of the historical decisions of the 20th Party Congress and the requirements of the resolution of the CPSU Central Committee and the Council of Ministers”.[274] Meanwhile local management were accused of ignoring workers’ complaints, treating them with “obvious disregard”, and failing to give “correct answers” to those they even responded to.[275] Some were even accused of violations of Soviet trade, with the manager of store 59, Comrade Khorev, accused of hiding clothes and material under the counter, whilst the head of store 11, Broyaninov, sold two out of the three record players straight from the warehouse to “a narrow circle of people”.[276] There is at least one tacit admittance that the problems faced by the ORS could be a result of funding shortfalls, as the report noted that repairs could not be carried out as these funds had been spent on refrigeration equipment.[277] However, even this is framed as being more of a failure on behalf of the ORS to correctly plan the distribution of funds, rather than a failure of the central state to provide sufficient resources for both.

As with housing complaints then, the failure of the state to fulfill the social contract was blamed on either management incompetence or violations of the law. Whether or not these were genuine or shrewd examples of “speaking Bolshevik”, references to the decisions of the 20th Party Congress in these critiques at least on the surface affirm their support of the central government and its ideology, framing these shortcomings as distortions of official policy that undermined their aims. An interesting addendum to one report provides evidence of an attempt to justify these complaints by evidencing

[274] TsGA RK f.239, o.2dop, d.37, pp.2, 9.
[275] Ibid, pp.6, 9,
[276] Ibid, p.4.
[277] Ibid, p.6.

workers' own contributions to the social contract. This addendum includes a letter that was produced by a locomotive crew from the Shemonaikha depot who conducted an inspection of their depot's canteen. After listing their grievances, the letter concludes "when the brigades are sent on a trip, they have absolutely nothing to eat in the canteen, despite the fact that they have hard physical labour, they need enhanced nutrition, and there is none in the depot canteen".[278] Here the locomotive crew were not only demonstrating their fulfillment of their social obligations, "hard physical labour", but also arguing that they need the state to fulfill its obligations as a prerequisite for them fulfilling theirs: "they need enhanced nutrition". This productivist justification was enhanced by the fact that the state must have been aware that time wasted in insufficient dining facilities mentioned in reports frequently ate into work time.

The soviet social contract was not just limited to the most basic bread and butter issues of housing and supply. Documents show that there was also concern for the educational provisions available for workers' children. At the 1954 Alma-Ata conference, Comrade Stratchikov criticised the childrens' facilities available to workers, claiming to have discovered teachers lacking suitable qualifications, including some who were apparently illiterate.[279] Stratchikov even made the claim that some of these teachers had been teaching children "non-Soviet songs".[280] Stratchikov's complaints are also similar to the ones made about housing, as he claims that these shortcomings were a result of the fact that "the departmental managers do not take into account the decisions of the trade

[278] Ibid, p.25.
[279] TsGA RK f.239, o.2dop, d.19, p.114.
[280] Ibid. p.114.

union organisations, and not only do they not count them, but they ignore them".[281] This is not only another clear example of management scapegoating, but also of equating material failures with ideological ones, namely when Stratchikov thought it necessary to place the fact that teachers were underqualified on the same level as the fact that they had been teaching children "non-Soviet songs". This again suggests some level of identification with official ideology, or at least a shrewd manipulation of it.

Other complaints around education were much more focused on the physical facilities available. The 1955 trade union protocols noted an almost complete lack of trade union control over the construction of childrens' institutions, as well as a failure to meet the repair plans for kindergartens.[282] At the 1958 trade union conference, the chairman of the Pishpek branch claimed that 190 children were without school places, with a waiting list of 7 years.[283] Later in the same conference, a representative from the Dzhambul branch also noted that kindergartens there were full, and an expected increase in school children in the following year was not being appropriately planned for.[284] The chairman of the Pishpek branch, comrade Sidorov, went on to say that he had been criticised for this state of affairs by the prosecutor, who asked him if he knew the constitution.[285] To this Sidorov replied that of course he knew the constitution well, but not how to place 190 children.[286] Sidorov's defense is interesting as it tacitly reveals the bind local management found themselves in. Sidorov indicates that he is aware of his obligations under the social contract, but is unable to fulfill them due to material

[281] Ibid. pp.113-4.
[282] TsGA RK f.239, o.2dop, d.32, p.44.
[283] TsGA RK f.239, o.2dop, d.50, pp.73-4.
[284] Ibid. pp.84, 86.
[285] Ibid. 74.
[286] Ibid. 75.

constraints. Sidorov relates that he had raised this issue with higher authorities, but had been told that the construction of additional childrens' facilities could not be started until construction was finished on a hospital, as the funds were simply not available.[287] However, rather than pressing for more funding, Sidorov simply suggests that this problem could be solved by paying more attention to the issue, or better accounting for the costs in the plan. This is a similar line of reasoning to that seen in the 1955 protocols, where shortcomings are seen as a result of poor managerial practice, rather than a larger issue related to the availability of funds.

Before turning to our discussion of poor labour discipline, it is worth examining another area of the social contract that was also sometimes linked with labour discipline**,** that being the provision of healthcare. Here we are able to make a comparison with conditions in the 1930s, drawing from the record of an interview with a woman who worked for the railway medical department in a village outside of Alma-Ata.[288] The respondent described not only long unforgiving working conditions that led her to decide "either to commit suicide or to go away", but also endemic cases of trachoma, syphilis, and malaria, as well as a lack of dressings, iodine, and medicines.[289] Reports from the trade union in the 1950s tended to instead focus on the poor state of medical facilities. At the 1954 Alma-Ata trade union conference Comrade Bogomolov singled out the hospital servicing the 12th distance, which despite being built only 3 years ago, leaked so badly that staff had to drag patients from place to place to stop them getting wet.[290]

[287] Ibid. 75.
[288] Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System. Schedule B, Vol. 22, Case 1379 (NY) (interviewer M.F.). Widener Library, Harvard University. Page 8 (seq. 8). Accessed on 03/03/25. https://nrs.lib.harvard.edu/urn-3:fhcl:981576?n=8
[289] Ibid. pp.10-11.
[290] TsGA RK f.239, o.2dop, d.19, p.140.

The following year, the protocols of the trade union plenum noted that repair plans for hospitals had not been met.[291] The same report notes that in 1954 an "increase in morbidity was allowed", which it claimed was a result of trade union organisations' "weakening of control over the work of hospital clinics and the provision of assistance to sick people at home".[292] The report goes on to lament the fact that such an increase in morbidity led to an overspending of government funds to the tune of 973.3 thousand rubles, with the Rubtsovsk department again being singled out for being "especially unsatisfactory", overspending by 349.0 thousand rubles.[293] This linking of increased morbidity with financial overspending seems to represent a very explicit acknowledgement that the failure to properly fulfil the social contract had negative repercussions for the state as well as workers.

As mentioned, this was an issue that was often related to labour discipline through its linking with the state of labour protection and safety, which the same report lamented "continues to remain alarming".[294] The report noted that industrial injuries had remained the same as in 1953, and in the Matay, Alma-Ata, and Rubtsovsk departments had even increased.[295] The implementation of safety measures such as the installation of better lighting and ventilation had also not been completed.[296] At the 1958 union conference, Comrade Sidorov, chairman of the Pishpek branch of the union, admitted that there had been no improvement in the fight against injuries at his department, claiming that

[291] TsGA RK f.239, o.2dop, d.23, p.44.
[292] Ibid, p. 42.
[293] Ibid, p.42.
[294] Ibid, p.40.
[295] Ibid, p.40.
[296] Ibid, p.41.

numbers had in fact increased from the previous year.[297] Sidorov even claimed that there was an accident on the 18th track where a trolley apparently ran into a rock, leaving 3 people seriously injured, however upon investigation it was discovered that there were 14 more cases of injuries that had not been reported (raising the question of how accurately we can treat data on injuries in general).[298] In 1959 in the protocols from the Akmolinsk trade union plenum, the head of the technical department, Fishbein, stated that labour protection and safety was so bad that their department ranked last on the line.[299] The protocols of the trade union plenum blame these deficiencies on "the unsatisfactory work of trade union organisations in carrying out extensive educational work among workers and employees", as well as the fact that management proved "powerless to force their subordinates to comply with the rules of the collective agreement".[300] Sidorov meanwhile claims that his department had not been receiving enough support from management to combat injuries.[301] Sidorov goes on to illustrate his point by referring to the case on the 18th track. Following this accident, it was decided to remove the head of the section, Comrade Korchaga, from his post.[302] Following this Comrade Korchaga raised a complaint with railway management that he had been unfairly dismissed, a complaint that management seemed to have supported.[303]

[297] TsGA RK f.239, o.2dop, d.50, p.77.
[298] Ibid. 77.
[299] TsGA RK f.239, o.3, d.14, p.5. Akmolinsk (modern day Astana) is located in the central north of the Republic. In pre March 1961 documents it is referred to as Akmolinsk, however post March 1961 it is referred to as Tselinograd. See appendix 1 for more details.
[300] TsGA RK f.239, o.2dop, d.23, pp.40-1.
[301] TsGA RK f.239, o.2dop, d.50, p.77.
[302] Ibid, p.77.
[303] Ibid, pp.77-8.

According to Filtzer, “most safety violations were attributed to the dereliction of duty of individual managers, but it was the planning system itself that was primarily to blame - either because it put pressure on managers to sacrifice safety to the driver for plan fulfillment and the need to meet targets, or because of the underproduction of necessary safety equipment”.[304] This is the exact same tendency identified in other areas of the social contract, with local management taking the blame for failures in the planning system, and one that we see born out in the records from the trade union. Asides from highlighting the legal questionability of management's actions, Sidorov’s reference to the underreporting of injuries also hints at this need to sacrifice safety for plan fulfillment, as Clarke et al outline “Soviet enterprises could not meet their plan targets…without flouting health and safety regulations”.[305] Whilst Sidorov is clearly aiming this attack at Comrade Korchaga, Clarke et al note that it was not uncommon for workers and management's goals of fulfilling the plan to be aligned, as both would benefit from meeting or exceeding targets.[306] As such rule breaches might be accepted if they were in aid of this, “and so we would expect those who wished to pursue a case to come under informal pressure from fellow workers, as well as from union and management, not to pursue disruptive complaints”, suggesting that such underreporting of injuries may have been endemic.[307]

By the early 1960s, as in other areas, it seemed that the situation of labour safety had begun to improve when compared with earlier documents (although again this could be

[304] Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and De-Stalinization,* p.44.
[305] Clarke et al., *What about the Workers?*, p.75.
[306] Ibid, p.76.
[307] Ibid, p.76.

an issue with reporting). The 1962 report on the implementation of the collective agreement at the Semipalatinsk branch noted that significant investments had been made in implementing safety equipment, including ventilation, lighting, and safety markers.[308] This apparently led to a somewhat modest reduction in the number of injuries by 9 and in lost labour days by 413.[309] That being said, one would expect such a marked decrease in the amount of lost labour days would be accompanied by a similar marked decrease in the number of injuries. The discrepancy between these numbers could suggest that, although injury rates had indeed gone down, previously they were being underreported. However in some areas, injury rates remained high, particularly the Charsk, Semipalatinsk, and Ayaguz locomotive depots.[310] In order to resolve these issues, both the Semipalatinsk and Ayaguz sections “took upon themselves the responsibility of making their enterprises one of the best”, aiming to improve labour culture.[311] Mass training courses were organised, including lectures and “safety corners and classrooms”, as well as providing literature on the topic.[312] The same report for the Alma-Ata branch in 1963 noted a reduction in injury rates by 34% compared to 1962, down from 209 cases resulting in 3000 missed work days to 139 cases resulting in 2881 missed work days.[313] This reduction was credited to increased demands for technical inspections in the areas of labour protection and safety on the heads of enterprises and the management of the railway.[314] As a result of inspections, 10 facilities were even temporarily shut down as malfunctions were identified which posed a threat to life.[315]

[308] TsGA RK f.239, o.3, d.112, p.65.
[309] Ibid, p.65.
[310] Ibid, p.65.
[311] Ibid, p.66.
[312] Ibid, p.66.
[313] TsGA RK f.239, o.3, d.112, p.15.
[314] Ibid, p.16.
[315] Ibid, pp.16-7.

Special courses were also conducted, for which workers received special certificates excusing them from production work.[316] These approaches to the improvement of safety continue the same logic as in other areas of the social contract, essentially arguing that the way to solve these problems was to increase state involvement and oversight.

Criticism of shortcomings of the welfare area of the Khrushchevian productivist social contract then seem to represent a continuity from the Stalin period, namely the tendency to scapegoat local officials. That being said, the fact that complaints often referred to workers' past and potential future service seems to be in line with Varga-Harris' finding that petitioners during the Thaw often blurred the lines between Fitzpatrick's ideas of 'supplicants' and 'citizens', who "sought justice *and* invoked rights".[317] Writers portrayed themselves as subjects of the Soviet state who "had fulfilled various requisites of citizenship (sacrifice, labour, loyalty)", and who therefore were qualified to seek justice from the state, much like the railway workers' complaints.[318] Similarly, how these shortcomings were framed seems to present a symbiosis of both continuity and change. As we have seen, the productivist nature of trade unions had been crystallised in the three and a half decades since 1918, and arguments for a greater focus on workers welfare were made within that same productivist framework. What seems to have changed in the Thaw period however is that workers now seemed to take these promises seriously and as such seriously expected them to be fulfilled. There is of course the question of how genuine these complaints and their framings

[316] Ibid, pp.16-7.
[317] Christine Varga-Harris, "Forging Citizenship on the Home Front: Reviving the Socialist Contract and Constructing Soviet Identity during the Thaw," in *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinization: Negotiating Cultural and Social Change in the Khrushchev Era* , ed. Polly Jones (Routledge, 2005), p.111.
[318] Ibid, p.111.

were. As mentioned above the Khrushchevian state encouraged such criticism as a way to make workers feel the regime was ‘for them’ and to vent frustrations with very real failures of the system against local actors. As Filtzer argues, the central state hoped that this illusory liberalisation would give workers the feeling of having a stake in the system and the welfare it provided without having to make genuine political concessions, and as such workers would be motivated to increase their productivity.[319] As we shall see in the next chapter, and unfortunately for the Khrushchevian state, workers don’t seem to have bought it, but that did not stop them from taking advantage of the greater latitude this created.

[319] Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and De-Stalinization*, p.3.

## Chapter 3

*"Those children know how we live and why: they have grown up here, worked here, and they have been through many sorrows, joys and hopes…Even if you spent time here, if you looked how I work and how my comrades work, and saw what makes us happy or indignant, you would still understand nothing. It is a different world, it is altogether different!".*[320]

These are words from a letter that Sokolovsky plans to send to his daughter, now called Mary, who left the Soviet Union with her mother to live in Belgium. Mary had written to Sokolovsky that she was planning to visit Moscow with her Belgian husband, and it was in this response that Sokolovsky tried to explain to Mary how, despite the Soviet Union being the place of her birth, she could not hope to understand it. Ultimately, Sokolovsky scraps this letter, thinking "how could I explain anything to her". Whilst Mary may have not understood how Sokolovsky and his comrades work due to the fact that she lived in Belgium, the following chapter reveals that the central state seemed unable to understand either. As previously discussed, throughout the Stalin period workers built up a series of tactics to exercise what little control they could over their individualised work processes', most often manifesting itself in what the state termed poor labour discipline. In the Stalinist period, such poor discipline could theoretically be very harshly punished, but during the Thaw these coercive levers were abandoned. As we shall see, workers did not respond to this by abandoning their tactics of individualised control, instead continuing to use the same tactics in a different environment. We shall also see

[320] Ehrenburg, *The Thaw,* pp.211-2.

how management, acting as they did as the frontline of the state in the area of production, were essentially left without any ammunition to continue to wage this battle. The “many different voices - with sometimes conflicting agendas” of the Khrushchevian state came into stark relief in the discussion of labour discipline.[321] Khrushchevian labour reforms left management bereft of their traditional levers of control, as the central state’s desire to separate itself from the Stalinist past meant that it was reluctant to criticise workers’ continued poor labour discipline, leaving its local representatives in an impossible bind.

The most general manifestation of poor labour discipline reported in trade union documents was violations of the PTE, referring to the “rules for the technical operation of the railway”.[322] Such violations seem to have been constantly increasing throughout the period, and were often associated with “defects” and accidents. In 1957, Comrade Eremeev from the Zashita department reported that there had been an increase in the number of safety defects by 45%, including two crashes, whilst the following year Comrade Branko from the Dzhambul branch reported one derailment and 204 defects in shunting work.[323] In 1962, a report on the progress of the implementation of the collective agreement at the Semipalatinsk branch noted that the total number of penalties for violations of labour regulations remained the same in 1961 as in 1960, particularly in the locomotive and traffic departments, which the report noted with alarm were those most connected with the movement of trains.[324] Of the 1003 penalties issued

[321] Harris, *Communism on Tomorrow Street*, p.305.
[322] правила технической эксплуатации железных дорог
[323] TsGA RK, f.239, o.2dop, d.42, p.158. TsGA RK, f.239, o.2dop, d.50, p.82. Zashita is a rail yard located just east of modern day Oskemen. See appendix 1 for more details.
[324] TsGA RK, f.239, o.3, d.113, p.74.

in 1961, 596 were for violations of the PTE and defects in work, while out of the 1488 disciplinary penalties reported by the Tselinograd branch, 833 were for violations of PTE and defects in work.[325] The poor state of labour discipline was connected by the report with the safety of train traffic, noting 195 cases of defects in train and shunting work in 1961, including one crash.[326] The following year, the Semipalatinsk branch again reported that "labour discipline still remains at a low level", with 927 penalties imposed on workers for official misconduct and other violations, including 596 for violations of the PTE.[327] The report went on to note that the low level of labour discipline was the main reason for accidents and injuries, as well as a failure to comply with "the elementary requirements of safety regulations".[328] A report from the 7th branch in the same year contained similar concerns about poor labour discipline among workers on the line, whilst at Alma-Ata in the first half of 1963 there were 660 violations of labour discipline, out of a total of 14,780 employees.[329]

There were two particular forms of poor labour discipline that many reports singled out as especially troublesome, the first of these being the problem of drunkenness, for example in 1957 Comrade Krasikov, an engineer from the Rubtsovsk branch, claimed that there were multiple cases of locomotive drivers driving in a "drunken state".[330] In 1963 at the Semipalatinsk branch it was noted with alarm that there had been 163 cases of labour violations involving alcohol in the first 6 months of 1963, including

[325] Ibid, pp. 6, 74. See footnote 293 and appendix 1 for more details on location of Tselinograd.
[326] Ibid, p.75.
[327] TsGA RK, f.239, o.3, d.112, p.63.
[328] Ibid, p.68.
[329] Ibid, pp.13, 98. Although not noted on the map, the 7th branch seems to encompass a large part of the eastern section of the railway network.
[330] TsGA RK, f.239, o.2dop, d.42, p.187

drinking parties organised by engine drivers at the depot, whilst at the 7th branch penalties for coming to work in a drunken state increased by 25 to 163, with violations relating to drunk driving increasing two and a half times.[331] Meanwhile at the Kokchetav branch the chairman of a local trade union committee had apparently violated work standards by getting drunk, and at the Alma-Ata branch there were 63 cases of workers coming to work in a drunken state in the first half of 1963 alone.[332]

Reports also tended to highlight the problem of absenteeism and general loss of work time, for example in 1957 when Comrade Eremeev reported that upon visiting the office of one division he had found everyone standing around and either playing or watching billiards, or Comrade Skvortsov, chief conductor of the Rubtsovsk branch, adding that the small team of conductors they had were very undisciplined, and wouldn't work on Sundays.[333] In 1960 similar complaints were made by Fedotov, the Akmolinsk raion department's dispatcher, who criticised the fact that workers in the marshalling yard only began to work an hour into their shift.[334] Reports in 1962 & 1963 on the implementation of the collective agreement from various branches all went out of their way to highlight how many of the penalties given for violations of the PTE were as a result of absenteeism, with 214 out of 1003 at Semipalatinsk, 398 out of 1488 at Tselinograd, and 86 out of 660 at Alma-Ata.[335] As in the discussion of safety in the previous chapter, with all of this data it is of course worth bearing in mind that trade union documents only

[331] TsGA RK, f.239, o.3, d.112, pp.63, 98-9.
[332] TsGA RK, f.239, o.3, d.107, pp.2-3. TsGA RK, f.239, o.3, d.112, p.13. Kokchetav (modern day Kokshetau) is located in the central northern area of the Republic, just to the north of Tselinograd. See appendix 1 for more details.
[333] TsGA RK, f.239, o.2dop, d.42, pp.161, 163.
[334] TsGA RK, f.239, o.3, d.37, p.6.
[335] TsGA RK, f.239, o.3, d.113, pp.6, 74. TsGA RK, f.239, o.3, d.112, p.13.

showed cases of poor labour discipline that had been reported, and it is easy to imagine that the actual numbers may have been much higher, and that apparent increases or reductions may have been the result of changes in the level of reporting.

Unlike complaints about the failure to fulfill the social contract raised by workers, discussions of labour discipline did not need to explicitly state why this problem should be addressed. Whilst Eremeev was uniquely tacit when he stated that disruptions caused by poor labour discipline "brought colossal losses to the state", repeated references to how violations of the PTE led to "defects" and crashes illustrated the same point.[336] Poor labour discipline had massive economic ramifications, particularly in the area of the railway where crashes could create bottlenecks and have massive knock on effects to other industries. Enforcement of labour discipline would become even more important for trade unions with the launching of the Seven-Year plan in 1959, as their role underwent a shift from their primary focus of workers' welfare to mobilising workers for production.[337] This is visible in the far greater focus on labour discipline in trade union documents from this date, as trade union organisations were encouraged to promote fulfillment and over-fillment of the plan, and whilst welfare was certainly to remain on their agenda, by October 1961 this had been confirmed as coming second in their strive for higher productivity.[338]

In their study of "workplace cheating" in oil-shale mines in north-eastern Soviet Estonia from the 1950s to 1980s, Kesküla also found similar cases of violations of safety

[336] TsGA RK, f.239, o.2dop, d.42, pp. 159-60.
[337] Jo, "Dismantling Stalin's Fortress: Soviet Trade Unions in the Khrushchev Era", p.130.
[338] Ibid, p.131.

regulations, absenteeism, and problems related to alcohol to be endemic.[339] Kesküla found that violating safety regulations was seen as necessary, as following them to the letter would have seriously slowed down miners' work, and thus threaten the fulfillment of the plan and the receipt of bonuses.[340] The discussion on the underreporting of accidents in chapter two seems to confirm that violations of PTE on the Kazakh railways had a similar logic. Kesküla also found that the problems of absenteeism and alcoholism were actually linked, as hungover miners would simply not show up to work so as not to slow down their colleagues, and as such "most cases of absenteeism in the mining region seemed to be caused by heavy drinking".[341] The drinking itself however was apparently due to the fact that, firstly, "the work was so hard and boring that one had to drink to stay sane", and secondly, because drinking became a "moral norm".[342] A similar conclusion is reached by Murphy et al in their analysis of post-Soviet Ukrainian railway workers' drinking culture, where they found that drinking was seen "as a necessary, and in one case even 'integral', element of any social occasion", and had been established as a "normative behaviour, perhaps as a means of expressing solidarity between co-workers, thus creating an occupation subculture which encourages regular, and often excessive, alcohol consumption".[343] The authors argue that this may be "borne out of a tradition of reliance on work-related informal networks that remains as a legacy of the Soviet Union".[344] We could reasonably expect then that absenteeism and alcohol consumption on the Kazakh railways had similar causes,

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[339] Eeva Kesküla, "Fiddling, Drinking and Stealing: Moral Code in the Soviet Estonian Mining Industry," *European Review of History* 20, no. 2 (2013): 237–53. p.240.
[340] Ibid, p.244.
[341] Ibid, p.245.
[342] Ibid, p.245-7.
[343] Adrianna Murphy et al., "One for All: Workplace Social Context and Drinking among Railway Workers in Ukraine," *Global Public Health* 10, no. 3 (2015): 391–409. pp.399, 402.
[344] Ibid, p.403.

illustrated by the above mentioned example of worker organised drinking parties. The idea that workers drank due to poor conditions was actually raised at at the 1956 trade union conference by Comrade Sidorov when he came to the defense of conductors accused of drinking on the job by arguing that they were not drunkards but rather “good people”, who had no other way to keep themselves warm when travelling distances of up to 180 km in unheated carriages, claiming that “we, comrades, need to create conditions for these workers”.[345]

According to Filtzer, poor labour discipline was the most clear manifestation of workers’ “partial control over the individual labour process” inherited from the Stalinist period, when ill disciplined workers could leverage perennial labour shortages to retain their positions despite harsh official repressive measures aimed to combat them.[346] Even if the repressive repercussions that such behaviour had risked, ranging from public humiliation to sacking to loss of rations and housing, had been inconsistently applied, during the Thaw these had been all but removed.[347] Furthermore, Kesküla points out that the conditions that allowed such examples of poor discipline were in fact created by the Soviet political economy, particularly full employment which “allowed drinking, stealing and absenteeism”, making poor labour discipline akin to a byproduct of the social contract.[348] Continued manifestations of poor labour discipline would seem to confirm Filtzer’s thesis that workers had not been persuaded by the Khrushchevian regime to give up their individualised control.[349] Here we are presented with another

[345] TsGA RK, f.239, o.2dop, d.31, p.55.
[346] Fitlzer, *Soviet Workers and De-Stalinization*, p.5. Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and Stalinist Industrialization*, p.62.
[347] Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and Stalinist Industrialization*, pp. 88, 98-9, 108-10, 117-9.
[348] Kesküla, “Fiddling, Drinking and Stealing”, p.249.
[349] Fitlzer, *Soviet Workers and De-Stalinization*, pp.7-8.

example of continuity and change seemingly manifesting in the same phenomena. While the removal of the most coercive levers of discipline certainly represents one of the most fundamental changes of the Thaw, this refusal on the part of workers to relinquish their "partial control over the individual labour process" seems to represent a continuation from the Stalinist years, as workers continued to act as they had done for the past two decades.

Further evidence that workers were continuing to use the same tactics as previous years is revealed by the discussion of the Movement for Communist Labour. This was a system whereby workers could be awarded honours and even cash bonuses by successfully competing with other workers, brigades, or enterprises by "improving output, developing improvements in the organisation of labour, or campaigning to raise discipline among their workmates".[350] However such competitions were "frequently bogus", as the cash rewards incentivised workers to falsify their results.[351] Similarly, Kesküla also notes that "production propaganda, as well as socialist competitions that were supposed to motivate an increase in productivity, encouraged fiddling with statistics".[352] This was something that the state seemed to be aware of, as shown in 1963 reports from Semipalatinsk and Kokchetav. The report from Semipalatinsk noted that there were cases of workers being awarded the title of "shock workers of communist labour" who had repeatedly violated labour regulations, even going so far as to claim that "this is a general, wholesale approach to awarding the honorary title of

[350] Ibid, p.42.
[351] Ibid, p.42.
[352] Kesküla, "Fiddling, Drinking and Stealing", p.249.

shock worker of communist labour.[353] The report from the Kokchetav branch provided an example of this in the case of the shift led by a Korkudin, which was disbanded and lost the “right to be called communist”, following Korkudin being punished for violating labour discipline.[354] Here again the Soviet political economy encouraged the very behaviour that the state wanted to avoid.

What options were available for management and trade unions to enforce discipline? As mentioned above disciplinary penalties, albeit ones far less harsher than during the Stalin years, were still one potential response. Trade union documents also often noted how many of these penalties were translated into court reprimands or dismissals. For example, of the 1003 penalties issued at the Semipalatinsk branch in 1961, 236 were considered by courts, and 184 of these led to dismissals, whilst at Tselinograd 179 out of 833 violations were translated into court reprimands.[355] The following year continued violations at Semipalatinsk actually led to some high profile dismissals, including a depot’s chief and deputy chief as well as a traffic auditor.[356] However management were severely limited in the disciplinary measures they could mete out, as aside from the ideological commitment to full employment, as part of the Khrushchevian social contract labour reforms had made it more difficult for workers to be fired except for the most serious violations, and for absenteeism or drunkenness only as a last resort after “all other social and disciplinary measures” had been attempted.[357] To add to this, following a 1958 reform trade unions were given veto power over management in all

[353] TsGA RK, f.239, o.3, d.112, pp.99-100.
[354] TsGA RK, f.239, o.3, d.107, pp.2-3.
[355] TsGA RK, f.239, o.3, d.113, pp.6, 74.
[356] TsGA RK, f.239, o.3, d.112, p.63.
[357] Fitlzer, *Soviet Workers and De-Stalinization*, pp. 35, 39.

dismissals.[358] In 1959 this led Smirnov, head of the Akmolinsk carriage department, to accuse the trade union of standing up for the defense of “defective workers and violators of discipline”.[359] Filtzer argues that such a reluctance to officially sanction violators of labour discipline led to a reinforcement of “workers’ relative independence on the shop floor and their limited control over the labour process”, further weakening one of management's most effective levers for increasing productivity.[360]

However one alternative to legal courts was offered in the form of the comrades courts. Although having their origins in the pre-Khrushchev years, Kharkhordin argues that comrades courts “came into full bloom in the 1950s”.[361] Comrades courts were set up by election, or sometimes union appointment, and would present the decision of a group of workers’ discussion of a case.[362] According to Kharkhordin, these courts effectively constituted a procedure of collective shaming, as their aim was not to impose criminal convictions, but rather “their aim was training the new citizen” through “social censure”, the extraction of confessions, or the imposition of financial penalties.[363] These were apparently envisioned as being “the extreme measure of social influence against violators of labour discipline”, and according to Brown “to workers, this public discussion of their behaviour is said to be the worst possible punishment”, and as such was considered to be “extremely effective, both in the individual case and for the general

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[358] Ibid, p.39.
[359] TsGA RK, f.239, o.3, d.14, p.6.
[360] Fitlzer, *Soviet Workers and De-Stalinization*, p.40.
[361] Oleg Kharkhordin, “The Collective in Mature Soviet Society” in *The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study of Practices* (University of California Press, 1999), 279–328. p.282.
[362] Emily Clark Brown, *Soviet Trade Unions and Labour Relations* (Harvard University Press, 1966), p.162.
[363] Kharkhordin, “The Collective in Mature Soviet Society”, pp.282-3.

education of workers".[364] As with normal courts however, trade union documents similarly lament the underutilisation of comrades courts. After attacking trade unions for unjustly defending workers, Smirnov noted that materials on "defective workers and truants" were not being transferred to the comrades courts, while his colleague Romanov claimed they did not work enough.[365] 1963 reports seem to show that this issue was still unresolved. On the 7th branch it was stated that "the role of the comrades courts is still weak", at the Semipalatinsk branch the amount of cases being referred decreased from 196 in 1961 to 139 in 1962, whilst at the Alma-Ata branch a similar decrease led the report to criticise local management for imposing their own sanctions instead of referring to the comrades courts, complaining that out of 660 sanctions given only 149 were passed over for the consideration of the comrades courts.[366]

The cases of both legal and comrades court also show continuity and change within the same phenomenon. Whilst during the Stalinist period courts were meant to harshly deal with truants, job changers, and other poorly disciplined workers, courts and management were often reluctant to hand out harsh punishments, and it was only the extension of repression to these groups that began encouraging them to do so.[367] The rolling back of such a draconian approach during the Thaw certainly represents a change from the Stalinist period, but the fact that these tools were continually underutilized a continuation. The key difference however was that under the Stalin

[364] Brown, *Soviet Trade Unions and Labour Relations*, p.162.
[365] TsGA RK, f.239, o.3, d.14, pp. 6-7.
[366] TsGA RK, f.239, o.3, d.112, pp.15, 64, 100,
[367] Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and Stalinist Industrialization*, pp.134-5, 235-6.

regime these tools were underutilised due to the fact that management could not afford to risk losing workers by sanctioning them, whereas during the Khrushchev period, although such a reliance on a labour reserve may not have disappeared, management did not have the option to use these tools even if they had wanted to. The central state's decision to weaken managements' unilateral powers to punish and fire workers essentially had the effect of leaving their representatives on the labour front without the necessary tools to enforce the labour discipline they so desperately desired.

Without the ability to resort to the traditional disciplinary methods, how else could the Khrushchev regime encourage workers to relinquish their methods of individual control and participate fully in the productivist social contract? One answer may be found in the constant linking of poor labour discipline with cultural and educational work, namely the apparent failure of cultural clubs and related trade union organisations to imbue workers with a sufficient work ethic. In their study of similar clubs in Kyrgyzstan in the 1920s and 1930s, Igmen notes that whilst the clubs were designed as a place where people could spend their leisure time, "they were primarily intended as venues for revolutionary education", with Nadezhda Krupskaia identifying their essential functions as "improving amateur talents, teaching Marxist ideology, and collectivizing the institutions".[368] The shortcomings in both these leisure and ideological components of club activities were often criticised in trade union documents. A 1958 report highlighted the fact that clubs lacked sports equipment, instruments, facilities, qualified staff, as well as funding in

[368] Ali Igmen, *Speaking Soviet with an Accent : Culture and Power in Kyrgyzstan* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), pp.3, 22.

general, which at the club at Aktyubinsk junction was 25-30% short of requirements.[369] In 1959 reports, asides from a lack of facilities, amateur artistic activities were reportedly poor, films were received late and were of low quality, and multiple clubs were unable to acquire the resources necessary to publish their own newspapers.[370] By 1961 the situation seemed to have improved little. Amateur activity was still weak and being carried out with “no ideological direction”, the plan for the screening of films was under fulfilled, concerts were rarely held and tickets distributed poorly, libraries were under resourced, dance evenings were “boring”, and in general clubs were seen as failing to have conducted “a series of political, technical, and cultural events”.[371]

In the conclusion to their study, Igmen notes that “during the Khrushchev years, because financial constraints remained unchanged, the clubs failed to increase their influence in Kyrgyzstan”.[372] Whilst it is likely that clubs in Kazakhstan faced similar financial constraints, as might be expected, it was again the management of both the railway and the trade union, not a lack of state funding, that were portrayed as the main reason for these shortcomings. Leadership was accused of paying little attention to the issues raised, being characterised by one participant as being made up of “schemers”, whilst this was illustrated for the pensioner Chernikov by the fact that only one member of railway management attended the cultural club’s conference.[373] One dissenting voice was heard at the Dzhambul station’s club, when an Onishchenko argued that the poor

[369] TsGA RK f.239, o.3, d.5, pp.1, 5, 32, 38-9. Aktyubinsk (modern day Aktobe) is located in the north west of the Republic. See appendix 1 for more details.
[370] TsGA RK f.239, o.3, d.18, pp.1-2, 4-8, 40, 79.
[371] TsGA RK f.239, o.3, d.75, pp.157-9, 181
[372] Igmen, *Speaking Soviet with an Accent*, p.145.
[373] TsGA RK f.239, o.3, d.5, pp.31-2. TsGA RK f.239, o.3, d.18, pp.1-2. TsGA RK f.239, o.3, d.75, pp.158, 181.

organisation of the club's work was down to the fact that "the club is chasing money, and not culture", going on to say that "we need to work together and not blame each other and the trade union".[374] Others highlighted the fact that other activities were interfering with the work of the clubs, most notably work obligations. Altukhov, chairman of the Matay station club, complained that participants did not have enough time to prepare for productions, and Cherepanov, chairman of the Charsk club, claimed that participants were not being released from work in order to partake, which they argued disrupted not only the staging of concerts but also the work of the propaganda team.[375] Smakova, the director of the Semipalatinsk cultural centre made a similar complaint, saying that carelessly drawn up plans resulted in disruptions.[376] Such interferences were not just limited to work however. Club premises were apparently often being used to hold other meetings, and at one club the chairman was accused of being more concerned with his work as a part time instructor in the Party.[377]

What is most important in the discussion of cultural clubs however were the justifications cultural workers gave as to why the state should be concerned about such a state of affairs. Some simply saw it as important that workers grow culturally for its own sake. A Neznamova argued that "because we are moving towards communism, we ourselves need to grow culturally, then we will see more good around us".[378] These sentiments were echoed by a Usikov, who waxed lyrical about how in the 1930s "young people were active at that time, taking part in all events…now the youth's activity has

[374] TsGA RK f.239, o.3, d.5, p.6.
[375] TsGA RK f.239, o.3, d.18, p.6.
[376] Ibid, p.7.
[377] TsGA RK f.239, o.3, d.75, pp.157, 181.
[378] TsGA RK f.239, o.3, d.5, p.5.

decreased, clubs have become worse…according to the Soviet Union, cultural institutes are organised at clubs, where working young people raise their cultural level…we must create such a cultural institute at our club".[379] Much like the above complaints that club activities had "no ideological direction", or that they were failing to go beyond simple entertainment and provide "a series of political, technical, and cultural events", Neznamova and Usikov's arguments illustrated their commitment to official ideology, and presaged a fear that cultural clubs were losing this ideological aspect, a fear that Igmen shows they were eventually confirmed in.[380] Most importantly however, and as with other areas of the social contract, the shortcomings in cultural provisions were also linked to the ability of workers to fulfill their own social obligations. This was most starkly illustrated by the fact that poor labour discipline and lack of education were often connected, for example in the 1962 report from the Gur'ev branch that claimed that cases of violations of labour regulations indicated that "the educational work with personnel is poorly carried out", while the following year the report on the implementation of the collective agreement from the 7th branch explicitly linked poor labour discipline to the fact that "political, mass, and educational work is still weak".[381] Club meetings also constantly alluded to the importance of linking their work with production. At the 1959 meeting of the cultural workers of the Ayaguz branch, the chairman of the regional trade union, Mustambaev, emphasised the role of the cultural club in conducting propaganda work in support of the economic plan.[382] He highlighted the fact that cultural institutions needed to "have close ties with production and provide

[379] Ibid, p.6.
[380] Igmen, *Speaking Soviet with an Accent*, p.145.
[381] TsGA RK, f.239, o.3, d.113, pp.36-7. TsGA RK, f.239, o.3, d.112, p.100. Gur'ev (modern day Atyrau) is located in the far west of the Republic, at the mouth of the Ural river on the Caspian Sea. See Appendix 1 for more details.
[382] TsGA RK, f.239, o.3, d.18, p.8.

assistance to enterprises and institutions in establishing labour discipline, and should also provide assistance to grassroots trade unions in conducting political-educational and cultural-mass work among workers and members of their families".[383] This was a sentiment echoed at the conference of the Pishpek station club, where Silorov, a member of the club's board, bemoaned the fact that "the club is still little connected with production", while at others conferences the lack of visible propaganda during dances was criticised, as well as a general failure to connect the work of the club with production.[384] This was of particular concern in relation to young people, for example when comrade Yakunin, the head of the railway police department, linked these failures to convictions of hooliganism of some workers at a depot, whilst Comrade Sidorov complained that the failure to conduct cultural work among youth was affecting work discipline, leading to "absenteeism in production due to drunkenness, or without any good reason at all".[385]

This laying of the problem of work discipline at the feet of cultural clubs was in many ways similar to the way that the problems of housing, supply, and other issues were laid at the feet of management. In both cases, it was middle managers and local trade union officials that were to blame, as just as they failed to provide workers with the high standard of living stipulated by the social contract, so they also failed to inoculate workers with the correct attitude to work through their failure to provide cultural education. In both cases, the seemingly real cause of the problem was obfuscated, whether it be the failure of the command economy in the former case, or the simple

[383] Ibid, p.8.
[384] Ibid, p.79.
[385] TsGA RK f.239, o.3, d.75, pp.182, 234.

reluctance of workers to relinquish their individualised methods of control in the latter. Filtzer notes that during the Khrushchev period “the press was extremely reluctant to criticise industrial workers, almost certainly to contrast the Khrushchev regime’s alleged championing of workers’ interest with the attitude during the Stalin period, when the regime repeatedly blamed its own failures on ‘self-seekers’ and ‘malicious disorganisers of production’”.[386] The above discussion seems to be another manifestation of this tendency, where the poor conduct of workers is blamed not on them directly but by the failure of other organisations to properly educate them. Here we see an example of both continuity and change between the Stalin and Khrushchev periods. On the one hand, local officials continue to be used as scapegoats for regime failures, however on the other hand, workers now seem to be getting away with using the same tactics they had under Stalin relatively scot free.

In this regard it is worth also noting that the materials from meetings of cultural clubs are replete with examples of workers’ poor behaviour hindering their work. The most basic examples of this were complaints that the technicians and service staff at the clubs were poorly disciplined, without elaboration as to what is meant by this.[387] Far more detailed though were cases of drunkenness. This ranged from such figures as the head of a string orchestral circle, who would apparently only perform drunk, to film projectionists, who at the Pishpek club responded to criticism by replying “it is none of your business”.[388] Club workers were also accused of being more concerned with making a bit of extra cash than providing cultural-educational events, as articulated in

[386] Filtzer, “Labour”, p.125.
[387] TsGA RK, f.239, o.3, d.18, pp.4, 9.
[388] TsGA RK, f.239, o.3, d.75, p.157. TsGA RK, f.239, o.3, d.18, p.39.

the previous chapter by Onishchenko, when he argued that “the club is chasing money, and not culture”.[389] Another revealing but less explicitly stated example of this was the case of the Agadyr club’s brass band, who were accused of preferring to play funerals rather than club concerts, as at funerals they were able to pocket the money earned rather than contributing it to the club’s finances.[390] To this a member of the brass band, Razumkov, responded that their instruments had been purchased in 1952, and that they have been trying to maintain them without repairs.[391] He went on to say that the brass band had been playing for free at all ceremonies and events for 8 years, and if they were invited to play at a funeral they would not do it for free, since they would have to miss work, and in the winter they would be playing in the cold.[392] Razumkov resolved that the brass band would no longer play funerals, stating “there will be no reproaches on this issue”.[393] Such criticisms of workers behaviour at cultural clubs does at first seem to suggest that there was at least some admittance that there could be other reasons for the poor work of the cultural clubs. However this again leads to another catch 22 situation. Were workers causing the work of the club to be poor due to their poor discipline, or was it the poor work of the club that was causing the workers low discipline? Further, if the job of a well functioning club was to promote labour discipline, how were they to promote discipline among their own workers?

An interesting and equally illustrative area of poor discipline was amongst ORS workers. A 1956 report provides a detailed description of this, disclosing that out of 170 inspected

[389] TsGA RK f.239, o.3, d.5, p.6.
[390] TsGA RK, f.239, o.3, d.18, p.86. Agadyr is located in the centre of the Republic, just to the south of Karaganda. See appendix 1 for more details.
[391] Ibid, p.86.
[392] Ibid, p.86.
[393] Ibid, p.86.

enterprises, 39 were selling goods at incorrect prices, with most being sold at an inflated price, and that ORS workers “continue to violate Soviet trade”, with the inspection also discovering general violations in 76 out of 97 trade enterprises and in 32 out of 52 public catering enterprises.[394] The report also noted numerous specific incidents of store workers putting certain products aside, either for themselves or to be sold later to others.[395] There were also cases of violations of the rules for weighing devices, including unadjusted scales, weights without labels, and even inaccurate weights, which presumably could be used to allow a store worker to pocket the difference.[396] Violations resulted in the firing of 110 people for embezzlement and theft, with 18 of them being then brought to trial.[397] Despite this, the report notes that the situation had not improved since 1955, claiming that the amount of money embezzled had actually gone up.[398] In 1959 the head of the Akmolinsk ORS department first justified any shortcomings by claiming that their department had received less funding for products such as butter, vegetable oil, sausages, and confectionery than the previous year, but then argued that this was compounded by individual workers allowing violations of the rules of Soviet trade, such as in measurement.[399] In 1963, the report on the implementation of the collective agreement accused not only individual counter workers, but even store managers of “underestimation, short-weighing, and deception of buyers”.[400] ORS workers were also apparently repeatedly drunk, with one example given of a drunken worker being dragged out of his home to force him to open the store, where they found

[394] TsGA RK, f.239, o.2dop, d.37, pp.2, 4.
[395] Ibid, pp.4-5.
[396] Ibid, p.5.
[397] Ibid, p.8.
[398] Ibid, p.8.
[399] TsGA RK, f.239, o.3, d.14, p.8.
[400] TsGA RK, f.239, o.3, d.112, p.107.

"70 boxes of vodka and other alcoholic beverages instead of essential products".[401] A similar situation was reported at the Alma-Ata branch, the report from which despaired at the continuation of violations of Soviet trade, noting not only cases of underweighing and cheating of customers, but also embezzlement, shortages, and thefts of profits, with there being a shortage of 11 thousand rubles for the first 7 months of 1963.[402]

However even here trade union documents show that such blatant violations continued to be blamed on local officials. A mechanic from Atbasar blamed such violations on the fact that "workers' control works poorly and does not monitor the correctness of trade in stores and canteens", and as such not enough was being done to "preserve state property".[403] At the same meeting the head of the local ORS blamed the poor conduct of their workers on public controllers, accusing them of failing to report such violations to the ORS, instead reporting to the trade inspectorate.[404] The above mentioned example of the ORS worker with a large supply of vodka was followed up in the report by a note that despite these violations, management kept this worker in his place, which, alongside other similar cases, led the report and others in the same year to criticise management for neither reacting to "signals and warnings", nor taking appropriate measures against violators, going on to "strictly condemn" management for preventing workers' control.[405] Here again we see the Khrushchev regime's reluctance to criticise rank-and-file workers, essentially handing over the blame for their actions onto local management bodies.

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[401] Ibid, p.108.
[402] Ibid, pp.20-2.
[403] TsGA RK, f.239, o.3, d.14, p.7. Atbasar is located in the north central part of the Republic, just to the west of Tselinograd. See appendix 1 for more details.
[404] TsGA RK, f.239, o.3, d.14, p.8.
[405] TsGA RK, f.239, o.3, d.112, pp.22, 108-9.

This chapter has aimed to demonstrate that whilst workers continued to use the same tactics of individualised control they had during the Stalin years, during the Thaw they were able to get away with these much more easily. Asides from the fact that repercussions for poor discipline were undoubtedly far less dangerous, even those that remained were rarely employed. Faced with a central state that was reluctant to criticise workers as well as actively encouraging the scapegoating of local officials, management and trade union organisations faced with combatting this poor discipline were left in the lurch, and instead turned on each other. Management sought to lay poor discipline at the feet of trade unions for failing to provide workers with the cultural education that would imbue them with the necessary work ethic, whilst trade union organisations rightly pointed out that they were hindered in doing this by the lack of resources available to them, which they in turn blamed on management. Even if we accept the argument that if workers had better access to cultural education they would have understood the need to relinquish their tactics, both arguments do not, or could not, recognise that the root of these problems lay with the central planning system and its failure to adequately fund these organisations. In this way the central state was able to not only redirect workers' frustration against local state representatives, but also turn these representatives against each other.

## Conclusion

*"'Well, for instance, you are feeling terrible, and then suddenly you are all right, everything is changed; I mean everything is the same - the town and people and things - and everything is different. Do you understand?'".*[406]

This is how Orlova consoles her lover Volodya, whose father's health is ailing, as they take a stroll through the park as spring begins to break through. Here Ehrenburg seems to perfectly sum up how the workers of Turksib reacted to their own Thaw. Faced with the new normalcy offered by the Khrushchevian productivist social contract, workers instead opted to retain the tactics and behaviours that they had developed during the Stalin years. We see this firstly in their appeals to the state to fulfil its end of the social contract. Workers continued to frame their complaints in a productivist manner, focusing on how the provision of welfare would help them to achieve the state's production goals. Secondly, they continued to use their methods of individualised control in the workplace, manifesting in the form of poor labour discipline. For local management and trade union officials however the situation was somewhat different. Encouraged by the central state, they continued to be scapegoated for the failures of the command economy and the continued poor work discipline of workers. To add to this, they lost the traditional levers of coercion they could have used to compel workers to improve their discipline, leaving them twisting in the wind and under attack by both the central state and workers. In this regard then we could posit that the Thaw gave workers the opportunity to have their cake and eat it too, even though this cake may have been very meager.

[406] Ehrenburg, *The Thaw*, pp.222-3.

Why was it that workers were not persuaded to adapt their behaviour to the new normal, especially when official pronouncements made it clear that by adapting their behaviour and driving up productivity they had the chance to improve their standards of living? One explanation could be that the welfare provisions promised by the state, although undoubtedly improving in this period, failed to materialise to the workers satisfaction. As such it is perfectly understandable why workers would not adapt to the new conditions: even if workers genuinely believed in official ideology, if the state was failing to live up to its end of the agreement, why would they live up to theirs? Alongside this, workers may simply have not bought into the state's illusory democratization the ability to voice their criticisms of the terms of the social contract offered, recognising it to be little more than the safety valve to direct criticism away from the central state that it ultimately was. As such we might conclude that the examples of "speaking Bolshevik" found throughout workers' complaints were largely cynical, or were only genuinely believed in by those particularly active workers taking part in trade union activities. Workers simply did not believe that they could get a better cake.

An alternative explanation could be that workers had in fact come to terms with what meager social benefits they had received during the Stalin period. Evidence for this could be found in the fact that, even during the 1948 wildcat strikes, workers demands on the state were never for anything beyond what the social contract was supposed to provide. The 1948 wildcat strikes were ultimately a protest against the deterioration of workers' already paltry conditions, and complaints raised through the trade union were always demands related to the fulfilment of the social contract as defined by the state.

In their article “De-Stalinization and the Failure of Soviet Identity Building in Kazakhstan”, Wojnowski argues that “the momentous changes of 1956 evoked little controversy among inhabitants of Soviet Kazakhstan”, and that de-Stalinization remained largely a phenomenon of the republic's higher level party officials and intelligentsia.[407] Wojnowski sees this as partially resulting from the fact that at the time Kazakhs were “risk averse”, wary of reforms that could upset established social relationships in the wake of the devastation of the early Soviet years.[408] Wojnowski focuses on the political phenomenon of de-Stalinization, defined by Kozlov and Gilburd as “phenomenon directly related to Stalin’s figure and imagery”, however his analysis could also be applied to the Thaw in general.[409] Railway workers, conditioned as they were by the years of military discipline, had become risk averse, and did not seek to push for anything beyond what was supposedly guaranteed by the social contract. Even when presented with the apparent opportunity to improve their lot by working well and improving productivity, railway workers acted much like the peasants in Scott’s peasant moral economy. Scott notes how peasant households “living close to the subsistence margin and subject to the vagaries of weather and the claims of outsiders” have “little scope for the profit maximization calculus of traditional neoclassical economics”, meaning that they seek “to avoid the failure that will ruin him rather than attempting a big, but risky, killing”.[410] Just as Scott’s peasants avoided risky farming practices, so too did railway workers avoid risky behaviour that could endanger their already meager lot. Similarly, Scott notes how “it is when a worsening balance of exchange menaces crucial

[407] Zbigniew Wojnowski, “De-Stalinization and the Failure of Soviet Identity Building in Kazakhstan,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 52, no. 4 (2017): 999–1021. pp.999, 1019.
[408] Ibid, p.1009.
[409] Kozlov and Eleonory Gilburd, “The Thaw as an Event in Russian History”, p.30.
[410] James C Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (Yale University Press, 1976). p.4.

elements of subsistence routines, when it stretches existing subsistence patterns to the breaking point, that we may expect explosions of rage and anger".[411] Such a description seems to apply perfectly well to the 1948 wildcat strikes, breaking out as they did only when workers' conditions deteriorated to a point where subsistence became impossible. They did not want to risk losing what cake they already had.

A complementary explanation for the continuation of railway workers behaviour could be found in the fact that these workers had no other models of industrial relations and behaviour than those they had grown accustomed to during the Stalin period. In their discussion of the continuity and change model of the Thaw, Kozlov and Gilburd note that "the people of the 1950s and 1960s carried a baggage of traditions and conventions dating back decades and sometimes centuries", and as such we should not be surprised to find continuities.[412] For the citizens of Soviet Kazakhstan during the Thaw however the traditions and conventions of the pre-Stalinist era were of little use in the drastically transformed world that the previous three and a half decades had created. The only ones that could be of any use or relevance were those that they had learned during the Stalinist period, and as such it should be unsurprising that their behaviours did not immediately transform to accommodate Khrushchev's new normalcy. It should also come as little surprise then that when the state seemingly failed to live up to its end of the productivist social contract it posited as the new normalcy these workers had little inclination to make an effort to change these behaviours. This all

[411] Ibid, p.177.
[412] Kozlov and Eleonory Gilburd, "The Thaw as an Event in Russian History", p.29.

created a vicious circle whereby one part of the productivist social contract could not be completed without the other.

In this regard it is also worth drawing a comparison with the riots at Temirtau in August 1959. These rioters were made up of young people from different regions of the Soviet Union who had come to help in the construction of the Karaganda Metal Works.[413] These young workers faced months of deprivation and deteriorating conditions, and "local leadership not only did not want to or did not know how to improve working and living conditions, but even refused to listen to workers' grievances".[414] This led to the eruption of a riot sparked by a shortage of water on August 1 1959, which left 11 rioters killed and 32 wounded.[415] The differences between these workers and railway workers are worth highlighting. Firstly, they were young and came from disparate parts of the Soviet Union, meaning that they did not have the same workplace conditioning that railway workers had experienced. Secondly, local officials refused to even hear their complaints, something which we have seen was not the case for railway workers. Finally, they had been pushed to a point where subsistence was becoming impossible, meaning that returning from work one day to find that once again there was no water became the straw that broke the camel's back.

In the early 1980s labour collective councils (STKs), reestablished by the 1977 Soviet Constitution, would become the "centre-piece of the reform strategy", a strategy aimed

[413] Vladimir A Kozlov, "Mastering New Territories in Kazakhstan and Siberia: The Crisis of Modernization and the Heritage of the Gulag in the 1950s," in *Mass Uprisings in the USSR: Protest and Rebellion in the Post-Stalin Years*, ed. and trans. Elaine McCarnand MacKinnon (Routledge, 2015), 23–43. p.32.
[414] Ibid, p.32.
[415] Ibid, pp.33, 39.

at stimulating productivity.[416] According to Ashwin and Clarke "underlying the reform was an unstated, but clearly implicit, assumption that the trade unions had significantly failed in their duty of harnessing the productive energies of the working class, and that they were structurally incapable of doing so".[417] More significant an indicator of trade unions' impotence than this though was the fact that the dramatic strike waves of 1989 and 1991 "by-passed the trade union structures".[418] These strikes were sometimes even "harnessed by management and local authorities to press their own demands for resources on central state bodies", whilst the trade unions were "at best marginalised and at worst opposed by their own striking members".[419] Trade unions were "made the scapegoat for having failed to articulate workers' legitimate demands through the appropriate channels".[420] The revenge of management? That being said, the railways under Gorbachev were "fairly quiet", despite Gorbachev's concern that strikes could spill out onto the railways en masse.[421] Whilst strikes did occur on the railways in this period, unlike the miners' strikes these were "sporadic and disorganized", and much like the wildcat strikes of 1948, were largely focused on combating a perceived deterioration of conditions.[422] Interestingly, these were apparently "led by line-level trade union leaders", suggesting that the lower level trade unions were somehow more responsive than their upper apparatus.[423] Davis argues that this relative quiescence was due to the fact that, in general, railway workers had a relatively good lot, with good access to housing and access to scarce goods, something that was facilitated by a tight and dependent

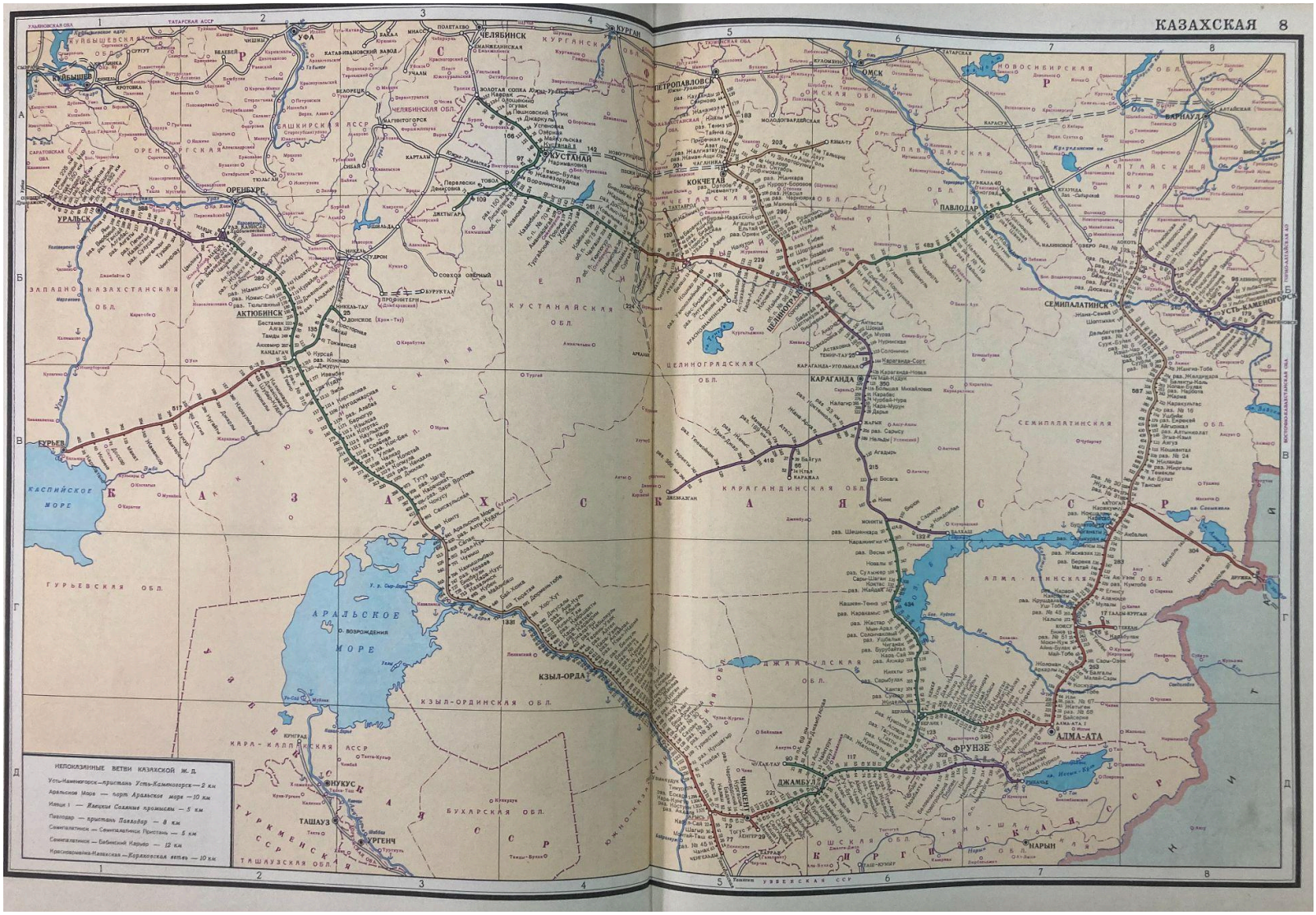
[416] Ashwin and Clarke, *Russian Trade Unions and Industrial Relations in Transition*, p.27.
[417] Ibid, p.27.
[418] Ibid, p.30.
[419] Ibid, p.30.
[420] Ibid, p.30.
[421] Sue Davis, *Trade Unions in Russia and Ukraine, 1985-95* (Palgrave, 2001), pp.71, 80.
[422] Ibid, pp.51, 76.
[423] Ibid, p.76.

relationship on the railway ministry.[424] To add to this, workers were highly mobile and, as in 1917, internally stratified, making coming together over shared grievances more unlikely.[425] All this is to suggest that whilst the productivist social contract first offered by Khrushchev may not have enticed railway workers to adapt their behaviours and improve productivity, it was enough to guarantee their political quiescence.

[424] Ibid, pp.64, 130.
[425] Ibid, p.70.

**Appendix 1: Map of the railway network of the Kazakh SSR 1962**

USSR Ministry of Transport Construction . *Railway Atlas of the USSR*. Moscow, 1962, p. 8. Accessed at the Central Museum of Railway Transport of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 28/06/24.



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