

## **Labor Militancy and Working Class Consciousness in Communist Societies: A Comparison of Socio-political and Organizational Factors in the Soviet Union and Poland\***

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**- Abstract -**

This article explains different modes of working class formation in communist societies by comparing socio-political and organizational factors of labor militancy in the Soviet Union and Poland. The main arguments of the study are as follows. First, the party and the official trade unions relatively successfully incorporated the Soviet workers in the Brezhnev era. By contrast, the Polish regime and trade unions failed to co-opt and control the workers. Second, the conventional “civil society” argument fails to explain the “cyclical pattern” of the Polish workers’ massive strikes. Evidence shows that the role of dissident intelligentsia and the Church was ambiguous or limited. Third, the cyclical breakdown of the tacit “social contract” was the main catalyst for working class mobilization in Poland. Therefore, in addressing Polish exceptionalism, we need to be careful not to make a jump from shop-floor to civil society. Instead, the author argues, more attention should be paid to the complex nexus of shop-floor politics as the micro-foundation of class consciousness, macro-economic cycles of investment and real income, and class alliances related with the politics of economic reform.

**Key words:** Soviet Union, Poland, Labor Strike, Trade Union, “Social Contract”

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## 1. Introduction

This article is a study on different modes of working class formation in the Soviet Union and Poland. It is very well known that class formation varies across capitalist economies. It differed across communist countries as well. The Soviet Union and Poland represented contrasting cases of labor militancy in communist countries. In the Soviet Union, workers' collective protests were not only very few in number but also easily controlled and localized when such an event did occur. In communist Poland massive labor protests repeatedly occurred and led to changes in top leadership.

I myself argued in a previously published paper that the quiescence of the Soviet workers could be explained mainly by the regime's stable economic performance and welfare provisions; by contrast, the government's repeated failure in economic management and fluctuations in workers' real consumption led to higher levels of labor militancy in Poland, more so than in any other communist countries. I still believe this observation explains well the "cyclical pattern" of Polish workers' militancy and the contrasting docility of the Soviet workers.<sup>1)</sup>

However, experiences in capitalist societies show that economic factors do not fully account for labor activism. Socio-political and organizational processes in which economic conditions are translated into workers' collective actions do matter as well. Strike studies focusing on the organizational and political factors found that the capacity of inclusion/control mechanisms of labor, for example, centralized unions and leftist parties, have significant effects on the rates of strikes. Another conventional story is that "civil society" played a decisive role in the creation of the *Solidarność* in Poland. This paper examines how much those factors really mattered in the Soviet Union and Poland. Below I examine the capacity of official trade unions and the role of Church and intelligentsia in accounting for contrasting levels of

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1) Kyung Hoon Leem (2018) "Labor Strike in Communist Society: A Comparison of the Soviet Union and Poland," *Russian Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 3, pp. 293-320.

labor militancy between the two countries. Then I review the implications of this study for the broader question of the formation of working class consciousness in communist societies.

## 2. Effects of Trade Union Capacity

In this sections I compare the capacity of trade unions to co-opt and control workers in the two countries. A preparatory comment is in order before making the comparison. In communist societies labor strikes were virtually all “wildcat” strikes because trade unions did not use strikes as an adversary measure against management. Therefore, an occurrence of strike confirmed *a posteriori* breakdown of the union’s capacity. In this respect, in the case of Poland, the failure of trade unions to control workers has been well proved. But in the case of the Soviet Union, it is still ambiguous whether the trade unions incorporated and controlled the workers well enough to preempt strikes. Some studies argue that the Soviet trade unions successfully incorporated workers; but others take the view that the unions were no more than a tool of management.<sup>2)</sup> These studies, regardless of their contrasting conclusions, have a common weakness. Their focuses were placed on the question of whether the Soviet trade unions were “genuine” institutions representing workers’ interests, compared only with trade unions in capitalist societies. Accordingly, what was missing in these studies was an endeavor to compare unions’ capacity across communist countries.<sup>3)</sup> A brief comparison

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2) For the former view, see David Lane and Felicity O’Dell (1978) *The Soviet Industrial Worker*, London: Martin Robertson, especially Chapter III, “The ‘Alienated’ or the ‘Incorporated’ Worker?” pp. 40-52. For the latter view, see Joseph Godson (1981) “The Role of the Trade Union,” in Leonard B. Schapiro and Joseph Godson (eds.) *The Soviet Worker*, New York: St. Martin’s Press, pp. 106-129.

3) One example of a comprehensive book on trade unions in communist societies is Alex Pravda and Blair A. Ruble (eds.) (1986) *Trade Unions in Communist States*,

presented below will not only clarify the causes of strikes in the Soviet Union and Poland but also help us understand the role of Soviet trade unions.

Trade unions in communist societies were sharply different from that of capitalist societies in their functions and organization.<sup>4)</sup> First, the role of trade unions in communist societies was defined on the basis of the Leninist “dual functioning” model, which was derived from a notion of unity between workers’ and state’s interest. According to this notion, on the one hand, trade unions were expected to perform a managerial role to increase production; on the other hand, they would protect workers’ interests against individual manager’s harsh treatment. Second, the communist trade unions were organized by industry. In other words, all employees in a given industry, regardless of professions and positions, belonged to the same union (the “production principle”). At the same time, unions were highly centralized and subjected to the communist party’s control (the “principle of democratic centralism”), which was insured by the *nomenklatura* system. In short, trade unions were defined as “transmission belts” from the party to the workers, and they were engaged in, rather than confrontation, collaboration with management and the party. Because of these functional and organizational characteristics, the role of communist trade unions were discredited by most Western scholars. However, it should be noted that the capacity and effectiveness of trade unions to incorporate and control workers differed sharply across communist countries, particularly between the Soviet Union and Poland.

## 2.1 Soviet Union

In the Soviet Union the Brezhnev regime strengthened the involvement of trade unions in managerial process while at the same time discouraged direct

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London: Allen & Unwin. However, each chapter in this edited book deals with only one country without making comparison across communist states.

4) For these principles of trade unions in communist society, see Alex Pravda and Blair A. Ruble (1986) “Communist Trade Unions: Varieties of Dualism,” in Alex Pravda and Blair A. Ruble (eds.), pp. 1-6.

worker participation in management. Greater autonomy was granted to trade unions as an institution, and more authority to union officials. As a consequence, during the Brezhnev era, trade unions expanded their interest articulation function and administered a wide range of social, cultural, and welfare activities. Unions consulted with managers and ministries, advised party and state officials, participated in the centralized planning process, and opposed some specific managerial actions. Thus, the capacity of trade unions to incorporate and control workers was increasingly enhanced. The exclusionary form of corporatism in the Soviet Union, as Ruble argued, developed into inclusive state corporatism.<sup>5)</sup>

Soviet trade unions seemed to be relatively effective in defending workers' interests in several important issue areas. First, they arbitrated industrial disputes between workers and management while defending the legal and social rights of workers. This defensive role of unions can be seen to a certain degree through a significant number of reinstatements of unduly dismissed workers and dismissal of managers at the unions' requests.<sup>6)</sup>

More importantly, trade unions exerted influence in the shaping of policies.<sup>7)</sup>

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5) Blair A. Ruble (1983) "The Applicability of Corporatist Models to the Study of Soviet Politics: The Case of the Trade Unions," *The Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies*, paper No. 303, Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh, pp. 24-28; Blair A. Ruble (1986) "Industrial Trade Unions in the USSR," in Alex Pravda and Blair A. Ruble (eds.), p. 28, and pp. 34-35. For another study that applied the state corporatism model to the Brezhnev regime, see Valerie Bunce (1983) "The Political Economy of the Brezhnev Era: The Rise and Fall of Corporatism," *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 13, No. 2, pp. 129-158.

6) Here we see a mixed picture. In theory, workers could not be dismissed without union approval. But in practice, union officials colluded with managers in many cases. However, the dismissed workers could plead to the people's court and had good prospects in the arbitration. Karl W. Ryavec (1975) *Implementation of Soviet Economic Reforms: Political, Organizational and Social Processes*, New York: Praeger Publishers, pp. 198-200; Blair A. Ruble (1981) *Soviet Trade Unions*, London: Cambridge Univ. Press, pp. 65-67.

7) Jerry F. Hough (1979) "Policy-Making and the Worker," in Arcadius Kahan and Blair A. Ruble (eds.) *Industrial Labor in the USSR*, New York: Pergamon Press,

Each decision on wages and labor norms had to be approved by the appropriate trade union at both the local and national levels. Factory union committees participated in drawing up the collective agreements on issues such as levels of output and distribution of bonuses. Union approval was required for managerial actions in some seventy administrative matters. The Central Trade Union Council was deeply involved in the policy-making process related with labor and wage issues. For example, the State Committee for Labor and Social Questions had to secure agreement of the Central Council when making decisions on wage rates. Soviet trade unions consistently and effectively supported the policy of the reducing wage differentials and increasing minimum average monthly wages. And, on the issue of labor discipline, trade unions supported the “human relations” approach to labor relations, stressing the need to increase labor productivity through the promotion of a “healthy socio-psychological climate” and “safe working conditions” on the shop-floor, policies which were adopted by the Brezhnev leadership.

Thanks to the functional effectiveness allowed by the Brezhnev regime’s official recognition, trade unions could promote their status not only vis-à-vis management but also their worker constituencies. The Soviet workers widely used official channels such as “critical letters” to *Trud* (the trade unions’ daily newspaper) after local unions failed to adequately address workers’ complaints.<sup>8)</sup> Even the group of workers who led independent union movements first tried to approach the trade union and utilize its official channel.<sup>9)</sup>

However, this does not mean that Soviet trade unions fully co-opted the workers. There were structural constraints inherent in communist society: centralized decision on workers’ incomes, the persistence of the *nomenklatura* system in the selection and advancement of union officials, exclusion of

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pp. 367-392.

8) Alex Pravda (1979) “Spontaneous Workers’ Activities,” in Arcadius Kahan and Blair A. Ruble (eds.), pp. 342-348.

9) For a discussion on this group for workers led by Vladimir Klebanov in 1978, see Ludmilla Alexeyeva (1985) *Soviet Dissent*, Middletown: Wesleyan Univ. Press, pp. 406-408.

workers' direct participation in the managerial process and production-oriented union activities. Due to these critical constraints, trade unions in the Soviet Union could not entirely succeed in preempting workers' spontaneous protests. Eventually official institutions could not control coal miners' spontaneous strikes at all although the trade union's role was upgraded during the *perestroika* period.<sup>10</sup> The waves of coal miners' strikes clearly attested to the limitations of trade unions' role and corporatist mechanisms in the Soviet Union.

## 2.2 Poland

The organizational and functional principles of Polish trade unions were copied from the Soviet model. As in the Soviet Union, in addition to the general production responsibilities, Polish trade unions administered a wide range of social, cultural and welfare activities. Despite these formal similarities, in its capacity to defend and represent workers' interests, the Polish trade unions were far less effective than their counterparts in the Soviet Union and other Eastern European countries. Even worse, the capacity of the Polish trade unions declined over time whereas workers' expectations increased.<sup>11</sup> The Polish workers' expectations of trade unions were increased by the changes in industrial organization. Industrial integration and concentration into multi-plants (WOGs) began in the 1960s. As a result, important managerial decisions were made at the corporate level away from the control of constituent plant management and the workforce. And in 1970s managerial

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10) Theodore H. Fridgut and Lewis H. Siegelbaum (1990) *The Soviet Miners' Strike, July 1989: Perestroika from Below*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Center for Russian and East European Studies, pp. 8-9.

11) Jean Woodall (1982) *The Socialist Corporation and Technocratic Power: The Polish United Workers' Party, Industrial Organization and Workforce Control, 1958-80*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press; Alex Pravda (1986) "Poland in the 1970s: Dual Functioning Trade Unionism under Pressure," in Alex Pravda and Blair A. Ruble (eds.), p. 135; Alex Pravda (1983) "The Workers," in Abraham Brumberg (ed.) *Poland: Genesis of a Revolution*, New York: Random House, p. 76.

power vis-à-vis workers was reinforced, and managers of the new generation were, on average, more authoritarian. Industrial disputes on the shop-floor became more frequent along with the increased managerial power in administration of material incentives and the emergence of younger and well-educated generation of industrial workers. The Polish unions failed to adequately incorporate these workers into their official channels.

The “weakness” of the Polish trade unions can be examined in functional and organizational aspects. First, Polish trade unions were functionally ineffective in articulating workers’ interests. In its arbitration of labor disputes, particularly in cases of laborer dismissal, unions defended workers’ interests timidly. And, factory union councils could not negotiate collective agreements directly with management on work norms and wage distribution, tasks which most of Eastern European trade unions performed.<sup>12)</sup> This was partly because industrial centralization shifted the decision making from the factory level to the combines and associational level. What was more fatal to the status of Polish trade unions was their impotence in the policy-making process. In contrast with the Soviet Union, the top officers of unions and government in Poland reportedly began annual meetings to discuss key social issues only after 1976; before then such contact was sporadic.<sup>13)</sup> Official trade unions could not give any significant inputs in the making of price policies. As is well known, in 1970 and 1976 massive protests occurred immediately after the government announced price increases without any consultation with trade unions. As for the question of labor discipline, the Polish trade unions similarly failed to make their voice heard in the making of the Labor Code of 1974. The new law tightened labor discipline and gave managers wide-reaching powers vis-à-vis workers, particularly in the area of dismissal. The regime itself used trade unions only as a one-way hierarchical channel of consultation while the workers used it only as a welfare agency and bypassed it in defending their interests.

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12) Alex Pravda (1986), 131, 137-138.

13) Alex Pravda (1986), 142.

Secondly, the Polish trade unions saw a steady decline in their organizational capacity to control workers. The decline was caused not only by challenges from autonomous workers' organizations but also by the regime's attempts to incorporate workers through channels other than trade unions. The status of official trade unions were threatened by periodic upsurges of workers' spontaneous self-management organizations such as the factory councils of 1945, the workers' councils of 1956, and the workers' commissions of 1970. As Kolankiewicz observed, spontaneous formation of these autonomous organizations outstripped the movement for democratization within the trade unions.<sup>14)</sup> The official trade unions had to compete with these organizations for the workers' confidence. This tendency was typically revealed by the history of Workers' Councils (RR).<sup>15)</sup>

Of the above spontaneous organizations, only the RR survived at least nominally for a relatively long time. The RR originally participated directly in the appointment and dismissal of the director of the enterprises and distribution of profits. It promoted independence of enterprises from the ministries and some directors used the RR as an ally against party apparatchiks. There were internal disputes within the RR over the division of profits between unskilled workers and an alliance of skilled workers and technicians. Taking advantage of these disputes, Gomulka soon returned to the "production principle" in 1958, a move supported by the Central Council of the Trade Union. The Workers' Councils were co-opted into the Conferences of Workers' Self-Management (KSR) by Gomulka and then gradually emasculated.

The KSR, controlled by white-collar workers and directors, had only an advisory role and had no representation in wage and employment policy-making processes. Another distinctive feature of the KSR was its

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14) George Kolankiewicz (1973a) "The Polish Industrial Manual Working Class," in David Lane and George Kolankiewicz (eds.) *Social Groups in Polish Society*, London: The Macmillan Press, p. 102.

15) George Kolankiewicz (1973a), 103-120; George Kolankiewicz (1982) "Employee Self-Management and Socialist Trade Unionism," in Jean Woodall (ed.) *Policy and Politics in Contemporary Poland*, New York: St. Martin Press, pp. 129-137.

organizational composition; it included a chief director as well as a party committee, trade union factory council, workers' council, youth and other organizations in an enterprise. As a result, the KSR made Workers' Councils no more than only one organization among many. At the same time, however, the establishment of the KSR created an unintended result; it weakened trade union factory councils. Within the KSR, trade unions had to compete with Workers' Councils for the workers' confidence.

The impotence of trade unions as an official institution representing workers' interests led to a more assertive role of the party at the enterprise level. For instance, in 1970s the party first secretary of the enterprise took the role of the Chairman of KSR. But, the party similarly failed to incorporate workers, only undermining the status of trade unions. From the beginning of industrialization, the party tried to attract the core workers such as skilled workers, foremen, and technicians.<sup>16)</sup> Especially, in 1970s Gierek adopted a policy of "selective incorporation" of "large industrial workers," mainly skilled workers and foremen in 164 key enterprises. He gave party organizations in these large industries direct access to the Central Committee apparatus. In addition, in the 1970s the regime implemented direct face-to-face consultation between top party leaders and the workers in large industrial plants, from which trade unions were excluded.<sup>17)</sup>

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16) According to Woodall, it was the foremen who were often true representatives of the workers' interests. They earned less than many skilled workers and were burdened with responsibilities about which they could do very little; so, the foremen were at the center of strikes either as the champion of workforce or as the butt of worker discontent with management. They were targets of party recruitment, but many of those who the party recruited were passive members or regarded the party as an instrument in their career advancement. The 1970-71 crisis clearly showed party activists' failures in controlling the workers on the shop-floor. See Jean Woodall (1982: 144) and George Kolankiewicz (1973b) "The Technical Intelligentsia," in David Lane and George Kolankiewicz (eds.), p. 231.

17) Jan B. De Weydenthal (1981) "Poland: Workers and Politics," in F. Triska and Charles Gati (eds.) *Blue-Collar Workers in Eastern Europe*, London: George Allen & Unwin, pp. 187-208.

Despite the party's intervention to co-opt workers, the rank-and-file party members could not exercise influence in the policy-making process. The party frustrated worker activists by blocking their interest articulation. Disillusioned with the privileged access to personal advancement and unresponsiveness of the party, the number of resignations of worker-party activists increased.<sup>18)</sup> In a nutshell, neither the trade unions nor the party functioned as an effective mechanism for incorporating the working class.

A system including a dual power structure and informal forms of interest representation on the shop-floor emerged. Skilled workers usually utilized informal collective measures, but younger workers, who were of a relatively well-educated generation and in a weak economic position, were still outside these informal channels.<sup>19)</sup> A particular type of factory activist led the informal shop-floor collective activities. Most of them were formally members or ex-members of the party and union organizations, but were beyond the control of their formal organizations. They did not identify with the official organizations such as the trade union and/or party, identifying instead with factory departments or sections. The existence of these activities explains much of the rapid mobilization of workers in 1970-71.<sup>20)</sup> The radical leaders of strikes frequently came from these shop-floor activists.

The above comparisons lead to the following conclusions. First, the capacity of trade unions to control the workers was higher in the Soviet Union than in Poland both in terms of function and organization; and it was steadily enhanced in the Soviet Union whereas it dwindled over time in Poland. Second, in the case of Poland the failures of unions to incorporate workers had significant impacts on strikes in that rank-and-file members of official organizations turned out to be radical strikers. Third, in the case of the Soviet Union, however, trade unions' capacity to control workers displayed a

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18) In the mid-1970s sixty percent of those who were dismissed from the party were workers. Jean Woodall (1982), 198.

19) Alex Pravda (1981) "Political Attitudes and Activity," in Jan F. Triska and Charles Gati (eds.), pp. 43-69.

20) George Kolankiewicz (1973a), 149.

mixed picture; the unions' capacity was enhanced during the Brezhnev regime and contributed to keep industrial peace, but they could not completely preempt workers' spontaneous protests caused by downfalls in consumption. In this regard, the capacity of trade union remains secondary to the factor of fluctuations in the workers' real consumption as I have argued before.<sup>21)</sup>

### 3. Role of Church and Intelligentsia

It has long been assumed that workers cannot develop mature "political" consciousness beyond economic trade unionism, effective tactics of class struggle, and organizational capabilities unless workers' "spontaneous" activities including labor strikes are "guided" by advanced social forces, particularly by the intelligentsia. This assumption has also been tacitly accepted by many studies on the *Solidarność* in Poland.

Undeniably, Poland had a relatively strong tradition of autonomous social forces outside party control i.e. the Church and intelligentsia. In the Soviet Union, not only was the significance of the Orthodox Church's and intellectuals' human rights movements negligible, but also they were dissociated from workers.<sup>22)</sup> Such a striking difference between Poland and other communist societies led many scholars to assume that the Church and intelligentsia played a decisive role in the development of the working class movement in Poland.

Did the Church and intelligentsia then indeed "guide" the working class

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21) Kyung Hoon Leem (2018).

22) The case of Klebanov's free trade union group (see footnote no. 8) well represented the distance between intelligentsia and workers in the Soviet Union. The group emphasized that they "had nothing common with dissidents" and their goal was "to help in the successful construction of communism and to combat bureaucracy and red tape." According to another report, when Klebanov approached leading human rights activists for support, he was disgusted by their haughty attitude to the problems of the workers. Elizabeth Teague (1988) *Solidarity and the Soviet Workers*, London: Croom Helm, p. 45; Ludmilla Alexeyeva (1985), 406.

movement in Poland? Could the labor quiescence in the Soviet Union be attributed to the near absence of civil society represented by those social forces? This section addresses these questions by focusing on the role of the Church and intelligentsia in Poland.

### 3.1 Catholic Church

Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Catholic Church has functioned as the carrier of Polish “civil religion” while representing the Polish nation as co-suffering with Christ. As a civil religion, one of its major functions was to delegitimize alien political rules.<sup>23)</sup>

But, in its relation with the working class movement, the Church played a relatively passive and ambivalent role. The Church never encouraged labor protests although it defended the human rights of arrested workers after strikes ended. And the relationship between the party and the Church was not always confrontational.<sup>24)</sup> During crises caused mainly by labor protests, the Church shared a common interest with the party in political stability for its own survival and protection of the nation from the Soviet intervention. Therefore, at critical moments in 1956 and 1970, the Church accepted the party’s appeal for help and normalized its relationship with the party; and in the case of 1970 and 1980 Cardinal Wyszynski appealed to the workers to go back to work and preserve social peace. After the end of the 1976 crisis and particularly after the election of Cracow Cardinal Karol Wojtyła as the new Pope in 1978, the Church’s policy increasingly aimed at reconciliation with the party rather than confrontation. Moreover, the influence of the Church on the workers turned out to be limited when it attempted to moderate the situation in 1980.<sup>25)</sup> The appeals of Cardinal Wyszynski to the

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23) Ewa Morawska (1984) “Civil Religion vs. State Power in Poland,” *Society*, Vol. 22, No. 4, p. 29.

24) Jan Jerschina (1990) “The Catholic Church, the Communist State and the Polish People,” in Stanislaw Gomulka and Antony Polonsky (eds.) *The Polish Paradoxes*, London: Routledge, pp. 76-96.

workers had no effect in the “hot summer” of 1980.

So the role of the Church can be best characterized as that of “mediator” between the workers and the party while moderating workers’ militancy and favoring early settlements. Even after the creation of Solidarność, as Ost observed, the Church played the role of “neutral observer” or “potential arbiter.”<sup>26)</sup> Although the Polish workers widely used religious symbols in the mobilization process,<sup>27)</sup> the Church itself did not raise workers’ militancy and its influence on workers was indirect and limited.

### 3.2 Intelligentsia

The social category of “intelligentsia” was ambiguous in communist societies. Broadly it meant “non-manual workers”; but in its narrower sense it indicates the “critical” professionals or dissident intellectuals. When we talk about the influence of intelligentsia on the working class movement in Poland, we conventionally use the term intelligentsia in its narrower sense. However, since the popular belief in the “guiding” role of dissident intelligentsia was deeply rooted in the hope of “class alliance” between workers and intelligentsia, it is necessary to briefly discuss the role of the intelligentsia at large in communist societies before examining the relationship between workers and dissident intelligentsia in Poland.

In its wider sense, the category of intelligentsia includes heterogeneous

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25) Stanislaw Starski (1982) *Class Struggle in Classless Poland*, Boston: South End Press, p. 224; Jadwiga Staniszki (1984) *Poland's Self-Limiting Revolution*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 92.

26) David Ost (1990) *Solidarity and the Politics of Anti-Politics: Opposition and Reform in Poland since 1968*, Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, p. 207.

27) The mobilization of national and religious symbols comprised one of key elements in the success of Solidarność. See Roman Lava (1991) *The Roots of Solidarity*, Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, Chapter 7; Christine M. Sadowski (1988) “Resource Mobilization in a Marxist-Leninist Society: The Case of Poland’s Solidarity Movement,” *The Journal of Communist Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 185-186.

groups from cultural professionals and academicians to administrative technocrats and scientists. Because the intelligentsia exercised managerial control over means of production both in capitalist and socialist societies, they were considered to comprise a new dominant class in modern society.<sup>28)</sup> In this vein, intelligentsia seem to have interests which are potentially in conflict with those of the workers.

This perspective was elaborated upon and applied to communist societies by Konrad and Szelenyi.<sup>29)</sup> According to them, in communist societies where private ownership and the market mechanism of expropriation of surplus were replaced by centralized planning and redistribution of surplus, the intelligentsia who shared common interests with bureaucrats in the maximization of the redistributive power comprised a dominant class. Accordingly, they argue, antagonism lied between intelligentsia and workers (producers) rather than intelligentsia and bureaucrats in communist societies. Their argument may be an overstatement because the intelligentsia, in addition to their lack of class consciousness, were too heterogeneous to act as a class. But, it is hard to deny the existence of barriers to the formation of a class alliance by workers and intelligentsia against the bureaucrats and party apparatchiks. In fact, in communist societies there had been ceaseless struggles between two principles: intelligentsia's meritocracy and workers' egalitarianism.<sup>30)</sup> The intelligentsia's reform proposals aimed at "efficiency" and "rationality" were often obstructed by workers' egalitarianism, which was also exploited by the conservative bureaucrats.<sup>31)</sup> For this reason, in defending their respective interests, workers

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28) A. Gouldner (1979) *The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class*, New York: Seabury Press.

29) George Konrad and Ivan Szelenyi (1979) *The Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power*, New York: Harcourt Brace Janovich Inc.; Ivan Szelenyi (1983) "The Intelligentsia in the State Socialist Societies," in Michael Buroway and Theda Skocpol (eds.) *Marxist Inquiries: Studies of Labor, Class and States: Supplement to American Journal of Sociology Volume 88*, Chicago: Univ of Chicago Press, pp. 287-326.

30) Michalina Vaughan (1986) "Socialist Stratification and Sociological Survival," *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 37, No. 2, pp. 159-179.

and intelligentsia had protested separately against the regime in communist societies.

The Polish intelligentsia, even the dissident intelligentsia, did not diverge much from the above general pattern of communist societies. Poland saw the “bureaucratization of the intelligentsia” and the “professionalization of bureaucracy” after World War II, particularly in the era of Gierek’s rule.<sup>32)</sup> In 1956, workers’ protests at Poznan and the intelligentsia’s rebellion occurred separately in June and in October. In the spring of 1968, workers were apathetic toward the student and intelligentsia demonstrations. Also, in 1970 the workers’ appeal for a common worker-intelligentsia front was unanswered after the latter had been brutally crushed in 1968 through repression. It is clear that the Polish workers did not receive assistance from dissident intelligentsia until the end of labor protests in Radom-Ursus and the establishment of Worker’s Defense Committee (KOR) in 1976.

However, beginning in 1976, the dissident intelligentsia attempted to join the workers. Thus, the role of intelligentsia after 1976 became a focal point of debates surrounding the birth of Solidarity.<sup>33)</sup> Many scholars argued that after 1976 a “great convergence” among the Church, intelligentsia and workers developed, and KOR’s dissident intelligentsia played an “essential” role in the creation of Solidarność.<sup>34)</sup> To support their arguments these

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31) For the variations of class alliance related with economic reforms in Eastern Europe, see Charles F. Sable and David Stark (1982) “Planning, Politics, and Shop-Floor Power: Hidden Forms of Bargaining in Soviet-Imposed State-Socialist Societies,” *Politics and Society*, Vol. 11, No. 4, pp. 466-473.

32) Maria Hirszowicz (1990) “The Polish Intelligentsia in a Crisis-ridden Society,” in Stanislaw Gomulka and Antony Polonsky (eds.), p. 140.

33) The dissident intelligentsia came mainly from the party members or those who had been loyal to the regime. They were largely revisionists: “They believed that it was still possible to believe both in the system’s ability to change and in the willingness of at least some members of the party to undertake a democratic reform.” But, the 1968 repression signified the demise of revisionism. David Ost (1990), 49-53.

34) Timothy Garton Ash (1983) *The Polish Revolution: Solidarity 1980-82*, London:

scholars point to the political, organizational, and tactical maturity of the *Solidarność*, which might be alleged to go beyond working class “spontaneity” and narrow “economistic trade unionism” and therefore must have been transmitted from the intelligentsia.

But, as Lava shows, ample counter-evidences refute this claim. First, the Polish workers had already developed a high level of political consciousness even before the establishment of KOR. Without support of the intelligentsia, workers raised “political demands” such as “self-management” as early as 1956. More importantly, the *Solidarność*’s core “political” demands, that is, the demands for “equality” and “independent trade union,” already appeared during the strikes in 1970.<sup>35</sup> In fact, even Jacek Kuron, the leader of the dissident intellectuals, initially believed that the demands of workers were “impossible.” Furthermore, manual workers displayed higher levels of political consciousness than white collar workers; the latter were more concerned with economic gains such as pay-increases. In addition, the workers in Lublin region under KOR’s influence lagged behind the workers in Gdansk.

Second, regarding the question of organizational development, in 1970 the Polish workers rediscovered the effectiveness of the “sit-down strike” and “inter-factory strike committee” and used those skills again in 1980. Third, the tactical maturity shown by *Solidarność* was derived from the workers themselves as much as from the intelligentsia’s advice. Having learned lessons from previous protests, the *Solidarność* workers cautiously avoided violent confrontations with the regime. In short, the influence of the intelligentsia seemed to be a relatively secondary one even after 1976.

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Jonathan Cape Ltd., pp. 17-28; for the critique of this argument, see Roman Lava (1991), Chapter 1.

35) For a comparison of the workers’ demands in 1970 and 1980, see Roman Lava (1991), 68, 157, 168, 172; Jadwiga Staniszkis (1984), 43-45.

#### 4. Working Class Consciousness in Communist Societies

How can we explain the fact that Polish workers, without the alleged “guiding” role of the dissident intelligentsia, “spontaneously” reached a relatively high level of “class consciousness” beyond narrow “economistic trade unionism”? On this question I would agree with Lava and Touraine, who argue that the communist regime’s economic failures were inherently very political. In centrally planned economies the responsibilities and failure of the state to deliver economic welfare became more apparent to the workers. Therefore economic failures were immediately transformed into political failures signaling the breakdown of the “social contract” and the legitimacy of the regime.<sup>36)</sup> Due to this spill-over effect, the Polish workers could relatively quickly acquire a higher level of “consciousness” through repeated “spontaneous” strikes.

Buroway also points to the transparency of state socialism’s failures when he addresses the questions of working class consciousness in Hungary. But he does it in a different context, that is, at the shop-floor level. He stresses that in state socialism workers could not but realize on a daily basis that they were *not building but painting* socialism.

Painting over the sordid realities of socialism is simultaneously the painting of an appearance of brightness, efficiency, and justice. Socialism becomes an elaborate game of pretense that everyone sees through but that everyone is compelled to play. It is an intermingling of a desultory reality and fabricated appearance in which the appearance takes on a reality of its own. The pretense becomes a basis against which to assess reality. If we have to paint a world of efficiency and equality – as we do in our production meetings, our brigade competitions, our elections – we become more sensitive to and outraged by inefficiency and inequality.<sup>37)</sup>

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36) Alain Touraine *et al.* (1983) *Solidarity: the Analysis of a Social Movement, Poland 1980-1981*, London: Cambridge Univ. Press, p. 26. For the application of Max Weber’s concept of “state transparency,” see Roman Lava (1991), 179-180; Also see Kyung Hoon Leem (2018), 312-313.

37) Michael Buroway (1989) “Reflections on the Class Consciousness of Hungarian Steelworkers,” *Politics & Society*, Vol. 17, No. 1, p. 16.

Thus, brilliantly capturing the micro-foundations of the class consciousness, Buroway argues that, compared with capitalism, state socialism was more vulnerable to a worker rebellion.

<...> the production regimes of state socialism engender dissent. Like the consent organized under capitalism, dissent toward state socialism is not simply a mental orientation; it is embedded in distinctive and compulsory rituals of everyday life. Moreover, under certain conditions, dissent leads workers to struggle for the transformation of state socialism toward democratic socialism. This negative class consciousness produced by the state socialist regime of production provides the raw material for a positive class consciousness, a vision of an alternative order that can be forged only in class mobilization.<sup>38)</sup>

In Buroway's view, the Polish and the Hungarian workers shared the common lived experience of production at the shop-floor; but the relaxation of the command economy and the growth of a second economy made individualized "exit" options available to Hungarian workers; by contrast, those options were made unavailable to Polish workers. In short, he judges that absence of channels for individual mobility on the one hand and the existence of a relatively open civil society on the other made a big difference, eventually leading to the development of a working class movement in Poland. What he did not stress enough was the repeated economic crisis and fluctuations of workers' real consumption.

But, individual mobility and "exit" options were similarly limited in the Soviet Union and other East European communist countries as well. So, in my view, the macro-economic failures were the most critical factor that distinguished Poland from the Soviet Union and other East European communist countries. This does not mean that the repeated fluctuations of workers' real consumption alone caused the workers' collective action and the birth of *Solidarność*. To put it differently, the "social contract" perspective alone, as a variant of relative deprivation theory, cannot fully account for the

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38) Michael Buroway (1989), 3.

complex process of workers' collective action. As social movement literature reminds us, many variables such as framing and the mobilization process, available resources and movement organization, and shifts in the political opportunity structure jointly work in the emergence, expansion and decline of collective actions and social movements. We certainly need to incorporate these factors in the analysis of the *Solidarność* movement. What I want to highlight here is the fact that Polish workers developed "political demands" on their own and accumulated collective memories and movement repertoires well before the dissident intelligentsia and the Church intervened in the emerging stage of *Solidarność*. The historical experience of Polish workers as such indeed mandates the need to readdress the issue of "spontaneity" in the formation of working class consciousness in communist societies.

## 5. Conclusion

The present study evaluates the organizational and socio-political factors of labor militancy in the Soviet Union and Poland, and thereby readdressed the question of formation of working class consciousness. First, it found that the party and the official trade unions relatively successfully co-opted and incorporated the Soviet workers in the Brezhnev era. By contrast, the Polish regime and trade unions failed to incorporate and control the workers. During each crisis the Polish regime made concessions to workers, giving priority to the defense and representation of workers' interests, but after the crisis abated it returned to tight party control and production priorities. The relatively autonomous organizations were co-opted but eventually emasculated after the end of each crisis. Thus, we saw in Poland a vicious cycle of government concessions, failure to reform the economy, decline in economic performance, and fluctuations in the standard of living.

The political and institutional success of the Soviet regime went hand in hand with maintaining the so-called "social contract" between the regime and

the workers, which was made possible by maintaining stability and steady growth of the population's real consumption. However, even the Soviet Union could no longer take the industrial peace for granted as the "social contract" broke down in the 1980s.

Second, the conventional "civil society" argument fails to explain the "cyclical pattern" of the Polish workers' massive strikes, and the existence of a relatively autonomous civil society was not a precondition for the development of a working class movement although it contributed to the development of Solidarność as a social movement. The working class movement and civil society converged after the Polish workers already achieved "positive" class consciousness through the accumulation of spontaneous class mobilization. Before that happened, as we saw above, the role of dissident intelligentsia and the Church was ambiguous.

Third, we cannot overemphasize the cyclical breakdown of the tacit "social contract," which was the main catalyst for class mobilization. In other words, we need to be careful not to make a jump from the shop-floor to civil society in addressing Polish exceptionalism. The Polish workers' "negative" class consciousness acquired through their lived experience was transformed into a movement due to the regime's repeated macro-economic failures, not thanks to guidance from the intelligentsia or the Church. In this regard, as Sable and Stark endeavored, we should capture the complex nexus of shop-floor politics as the micro-foundations of class consciousness, macro-economic cycles of investment and real income, and class alliances related with the politics of economic reform.<sup>39)</sup>

Finally, my arguments also point to the irony that the conventional perception emphasizing the role of the intelligentsia and the Church in Poland implicitly brought V. I. Lenin back in understanding the working class struggle against the Leninist state. Indeed, it was Lenin that first extensively dealt with the question of how to understand the relationship between workers' spontaneity and the intelligentsia's leadership. On the one hand,

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39) Charles F. Sable and David Stark (1982), 439-475.

Lenin's "What Is To Be Done?" stresses the leading role of vanguard of the party. But, on the other hand, his intention was not to underestimate the "spontaneity" of the workers but to criticize the intelligentsia for lagging behind the workers' "spontaneity."<sup>40</sup> In state socialism, the working class could awaken civil society rather than the other way round.

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40) V. I. Lenin (1977) "What Is To be Done?" *Selected Works in Three Volumes*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, pp. 92-241.

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## 개요

공산주의 사회에서의 노동계급의 전투성과 계급의식 형성:  
소련과 폴란드에서의 정치사회적 및 조직적 요인 비교

임 경 훈\*

이 논문은 소련과 폴란드에서 서로 다른 노동계급 형성 양식이 나타나게 된 이유를 설명한다. 그러기 위해 이 논문은 노동계급의 전투성에 영향을 미치는 것으로 알려져 있는 정치사회적, 조직적 변수들 (공식 노동조합의 역량과 교회 및 인텔리겐치아의 역할)을 비교하고 공산주의사회에서의 노동자들의 계급의식 형성이라는 보다 더 큰 문제에 접근한다. 이 연구의 주장은 다음과 같다. 첫째, 브레즈네프 시기 소련에서는 당과 공식 노조가 노동자들을 비교적 성공적으로 포섭한데 반해, 폴란드에서는 그렇지 못하였다. 둘째, 솔리다르노시치 운동의 발전에 카톨릭 교회와 인텔리겐치아가 기여한 것은 사실이지만, 그 이전 단계의 노동계급 운동의 형성 및 발전 과정에서 이들의 역할은 애매하거나 제한적이었다, 셋째, 필자가 이미 다른 논문에서 주장했듯이, 폴란드에서 노동계급의 전투성이 유독 높아졌던 원인은 정권의 경제 실패로 인해 노동계급의 실질 소비 및 생활수준이 급격히 저하되는 일이 반복되었기 때문이다. 즉, 정권과 인민들 사이의 ‘사회계약’이 반복적으로 붕괴된 것이야말로 노동자들이 노동현장에서 습득한 ‘소극적’ 계급의식을 집단적 동원으로 전화시킨 기폭제였다고 할 수 있다. 이런 점에서 폴란드에서의 노동계급 운동의 발전과 솔리다르노시치 운동의 형성을 설명하면서 일상적 노동현장의 차원으로부터 시민사회라는 차원으로 비약하는 주장에 대해서는 경계할 필요가 있다. 특히, 시민사회를 일깨운 것이 오히려 노동계급이었다는 점에서 공산주의 사회에서의 노동계급의 ‘자연발생성(spontaneity)’이 지니는 중요성이 과소평가되어서는 안 될 것이다.

주 제 어: 소련, 폴란드, 파업, 노조, ‘사회계약’

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