SOVIET WORK ATTITUDES

THE ISSUE OF PARTICIPATION IN MANAGEMENT

EDITED BY MURRAY YANOWITCH

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M. E. SHARPE, INC.
WHITE PLAINS, NEW YORK

MARTIN ROBERTSON
OXFORD

Translated by Michel Vale.

Published simultaneously as Vol. VIII, no. 4 of
International Journal of Sociology

Published in the United Kingdom by
Martin Robertson & Co. Ltd., 108 Cowley Road, Oxford 0X4 1JF

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 79-4871
International Standard Book Number: 0-87332-147-2 (U.S. edition)
International Standard Book Number: 0-85520-322-6 (U.K. edition)

Printed in the United States of America

Introduction

Murray Yanowitch

When a distinct sociological literature began to emerge in the Soviet Union in the early 1960s, there were good reasons for some of the Soviet scholars in this area to turn their attention to the study of work attitudes. What could be more appropriate in a society that proclaimed as one of its goals the transformation of labor into "a prime living need" rather than merely "a means to subsistence"? And it seemed natural to ask: How much progress had been made toward developing a distinctive "communist attitude toward work"? What were the behavioral correlates of such an attitude.

Quite apart from the Marxian ideological heritage and its expectation of changed work attitudes, however, there were more immediate and "practical" justifications for the serious study of attitudes toward work. Even a cursory acquaintance with the Soviet literature on labor problems provides abundant evidence of chronic difficulties with excessive labor turnover, poor work discipline, faulty work organization, and disappointing productivity performance. While some of these problems could be initially regarded as the normal accompaniment of the rapid and disruptive transformation of a predominantly peasant population into an industrial work force, they did not disappear when this work force began to be recruited largely from nonpeasant

sources in the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, in some respects the problem of mobilizing disciplined and sustained work effort became more serious as educational levels — and along with them, job expectations — increased and success in meeting production goals became increasingly dependent on advances in productivity rather than on large annual increments in the size of the work force. These were the circumstances in which pragmatic concerns with the sources of work discontent began to replace — or, at the very least, to supplement — the traditional rhetoric of "glory to communist labor."

The selections on work attitudes that appear in this volume are a small sample of the considerable Soviet literature from recent years that is directed to studying the experience of work. The first article, by V. A. Iadov, draws on a pioneering study of young Leningrad workers' job attitudes in the mid-1960s which has served as a model for later Soviet efforts in this area.[1] Perhaps the principal finding of this study, reproduced in Iadov's article, was that the "richness of content of work," the "creative opportunities" offered by the job, was the single most important factor determining the attitude of the worker toward his position in the labor process. Without negating the importance of "material incentives," i.e., wage differentials, Iadov stresses that if the issue is the relative importance of money wages versus job content, the answer is unambiguous. Differences in the degree of work satisfaction experienced by workers in low-skilled manual jobs and in skilled, "high-content" jobs are substantially greater than differences in the average wage levels of these groups.

But the importance of work content as a determinant of work satisfaction was precisely the problem. Even in the early 1960s, Iadov claims, the proportion of workers with relatively high educational and cultural levels exceeded the proportion of "high-content," creative jobs. Moreover, the "disproportion" between the relatively small number of satisfying jobs and the work aspirations created by rising educational levels could be expected to increase. In short, the problem of work discontent would become even more serious unless measures were taken to "com-

pensate" workers for the gap between limited work content and the job aspirations fostered by extended schooling. Iadov's proposals for meeting this problem include job rotation, the provision of opportunities for "meaningful leisure" (presumably to offset limited opportunities for "meaningful work"), and the "development of various forms of participation of workers in the management of production." Although stated in rather general terms, these proposals illustrate the "practical" orientation of Soviet studies of work attitudes and an explicit recognition that solutions to the problems of poor work morale require more than properly designed systems of material incentives.

Like most American studies of work attitudes, Soviet examinations of this area have found that only a minority of workers voice explicit dissatisfaction with their job situation. But it is also clear that the frequency of job discontent varies markedly with workers' age, sex, and education. The evidence offered in the selection by N. A. Aitov suggests that work dissatisfaction reaches significant proportions among the young, the better educated, and women. For Aitov the measures required to reduce work dissatisfaction lie in the area of technology design. Unless technological policy is explicitly adapted to the task of eliminating the "contradiction" between job content and the educational level of workers, he suggests, a further deterioration in work attitudes will ensue.

A new direction in Soviet studies of work attitudes emerges in the last of the three articles on this theme (by V. A. Iadov and A. A. Kissel'). Contrary to the implicit assumption of most of these studies, Iadov and Kissel' argue that the level of job satisfaction is not systematically related to the actual performance of workers in production (their "productivity, conscientiousness, responsibility on the job"). High (or low) levels of work satisfaction are compatible with both poor and satisfactory work performance. The reason is that "the degree of work satisfaction provides merely an indication of the degree of a worker's adaptability to a particular organization and nothing more," where adaptability signifies the worker's assimilation of the demands made on him in the work process. Thus the

measurement of work satisfaction as such is less important than study of the kinds of demands that the economic organization makes on workers and how these demands interact with the workers' own "dispositional structures" (their orientation toward "creativity and initiative," on the one hand, or toward the simple "execution of orders," on the other). This approach rejects the simplistic identification of work satisfaction as an invariably desirable state of affairs so characteristic of earlier Soviet literature on work attitudes. It implies that the more interesting question is: If workers exhibit a high degree of work satisfaction, what is it about their jobs that satisfies them — the opportunity the jobs provide for "creativity and initiative" or for the routine "execution of orders"? Hence the relative insignificance of the level of job satisfaction viewed in isolation from the whole work environment.

There is obviously a connection between some of the issues raised in these studies and another theme that has emerged in Soviet public discourse since the 1960s: the need to extend opportunities for "worker participation in management." We are not referring here to the constant, ritualistic celebration of officially designated channels of "participation" (production conferences, the trade union, the enterprise Party organization, "socialist emulation" campaigns) but to serious efforts to pose the issue of changing the distribution of managerial authority and providing opportunities for genuine forms of worker initiative in plant-level decision-making. Some of the principal ways in which the idea of worker participation — in its real rather than fictitious sense — has been expressed in recent years appear in the articles by Ia. S. Kapeliush, N. I. Alekseev, and A. V. Tikhonov.

It may be difficult, at first glance, to take seriously Kapeliush's discussion of the advisability of introducing "elections" of managerial personnel. Indeed, what meaning could be attached to elections of either lower managerial staffs or plant directors by a working population long unaccustomed to freely choosing its leadership at any level of economic or political organization? Could such elections be anything but a façade

behind which the plant's Party organization would make its selections? Although the answers to these questions seem all too obvious, we must ask what the proposal to experiment with "elections" of managers signifies. To dismiss the proposal as simply meaningless in the Soviet context would be to miss what the discussion surrounding it reveals.

Kapeliush's report on a "public opinion survey" was only one of several discussions of this issue reported in Soviet publications in the late 1960s.[2] The survey was conducted under the aegis of the Soviet Sociological Association and appears to have been based on a carefully designed poll drawing its respondents from a variety of geographic locales and seven socio-occupational groupings, ranging from ordinary workers to top-level managers. At the very least, the fact that the issue of elections of managers was posed is evidence of a serious concern with providing some semblance — if not the reality — of more participatory forms of economic organization. The very idea of delegating authority from "below," of introducing the accountability of managers to the managed, was certainly a marked departure from the prevailing theory and practice of Soviet management.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Kapeliush's study, as well as of others reported at that time, was not that the issue of elections was raised but that the markedly differing reactions of distinct social groups to the proposal were publicly acknowledged. Kapeliush reports that among ordinary workers and engineers, opponents of the idea of elections did not exceed 5-7 percent; as we move up the managerial ladder from foremen to shop superintendents to plant directors, the proportion opposed to elections increases from one quarter to one third to one half, respectively. To admit that such groups saw themselves as having conflicting interests in the resolution of an issue like the source of managerial authority and accountability was not a common event in Soviet discussions of social and economic issues. The social divisions exposed in the course of this discussion during the late 1960s may help explain why the subject of elections became dormant in the first half of the 1970s. All the more significant, therefore, that it has reemerged more

recently. In 1977 the author of the Soviet Sociological Association's 1969 study reviewed his earlier findings, appealed for "an extensive experimental verification of the idea of elections in production," and acknowledged the continuing widespread opposition to the proposal among managers.[3] That the proposal has not been implemented, and is not likely to be in the near future — even in the "safe" form of Soviet-style elections — seems less important than the fact that the proposal has reemerged. The need to create a sense of worker involvement in plant-level decisions has obviously not disappeared.

Other illustrations of the participatory current in Soviet sociological and management literature appear in the articles by Alekseev and Tikhonov. Although couched in the form of studies of work attitudes, both articles are essentially vehicles for posing the issue of worker participation. Alekseev seeks to establish an empirical relationship between the degree of work satisfaction and opportunities for ordinary workers to participate in managerial functions, with the latter implicity defined as decisions bearing on the organization of the production process, the distribution of premiums, and the maintenance of work discipline. Not surprisingly, he finds a positive relationship between satisfaction in work and each of these participatory variables.

Tikhonov points to the limitations of earlier Soviet studies of the labor process, which relied on an excessively narrow approach to the problem of raising the content of work and increasing its "scope for creativity." In earlier studies the stress was typically placed on enriching work by substituting machinery for burdensome manual labor and raising the share of mental or intellectual functions in the total labor process. But the enrichment of work in this view was seen as proceeding exclusively along a horizontal dimension — as a redistribution of functions between man and machine. The vertical component of the labor process, i.e., the distribution of functions between the labor of management and supervision, on the one hand, and the labor of "execution" of work, on the other, was likely to be ignored. The "scope for creativity" in work, however, depends

as much on this vertical or social aspect of work-place organization as it does on the relationship between man and machine. More specifically, Tikhonov argues, the enrichment of the work process must be seen as significantly dependent on the "production independence" (or "on-the-job independence") of the worker, the degree to which the functions of planning, organization, and control of the work process are directly delegated to the ordinary worker.

Tikhonov's own findings clearly point to an unduly low managerial component in the worker's overall activity. Fully two thirds of the workers he investigated in the oil industry exhibited "low" to "medium" opportunities for "production independence." Rarely were work tasks planned and distributed by the workers themselves. Not only was the work experience impoverished thereby, but enormous and unnecessarily detailed burdens of administration were imposed on managerial staffs. Some prevailing forms of worker participation in management — and here Tikhonov obviously means fictitious forms like socialist emulation campaigns, attendance at production conferences, "volunteer" (na obshchestvennykh nachalakh) activity to improve productive performance — merely served as "compensation for the social costs of strictly regulated work involving routine execution of directives." Overcoming fragmentation in the work process requires that "the functions of performing work and managing work be combined in the labor process of the direct producer."

In one very important sense these efforts to pose the issue of creating more participatory forms of economic organization in the Soviet Union have failed thus far. None of the findings or proposals included in the studies collected here (or in any other studies that I am aware of) have been translated into institutional changes that would redistribute managerial authority and reduce the enduring barriers between those who plan and control the enterprise's operations and those who execute its work assignments. But these studies do provide a small sample of the available evidence which suggests that pressures for the reform of the work place have not been absent in the Soviet

Union. Indeed, it is likely that pressures for the democratization of work are a more important feature of Soviet life than pressures for political democratization. The former have a "practical" meaning for Soviet authorities — the possibility of improved work performance — which explains why serious studies of work attitudes and arguments for the democratization of management occasionally receive a hearing. An optimist would hold that these studies and arguments represent only the initial stage of a participatory current in Soviet social and economic thought.

Notes

1. A. G. Zdravomyslov, V. P. Rozhin, and V. A. Iadov, Chelovek i ego rabota, Moscow, 1967. A translation of this volume by Stephen P. Dunn has appeared as Man and His Work, White Plains, International Arts and Science Press, 1970.

2. For other examples see F. M. Rudich, O sochetanii gosudarstvennykh i obshchestvennykh nachal v upravlenii proizvodstvom, Kiev, 1969, p. 76; Ia. E. Stul' and I. O. Tishchenko, "Sociopsychological Principles of Management," in V. G. Afanas'ev, ed., Nauchnoe upravlenie obshchestvom, 1970, no. 4, p. 275.

3. Ia. S. Kapeliush, "In Favor of the Experiment," Literaturnaia gazeta, 1977, no. 35.

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1 ORIENTATION — CREATIVE WORK

V. A. Iadov

Definitions of man that stressed his difference from other living beings have existed since time immemorial. For example, "man is a thinking animal," or "man is a political animal." As Marx said, you can distinguish man from animals in any way you wish, but he himself begins to differentiate himself from nature through his labor, by virtue of the fact that he adapts the world around him to his needs, transforming it in the process. The development of the productive forces of human society provides the foundations for social progress, for the historical succession of social formations, and for the development of the individual personality. But this process also contains the basic contradiction responsible for the diversity of people's attitudes toward work.

Indeed, the primitive tools of production with which our remote ancestors procured the means for their existence already presupposed some rudimentary division of labor. For example, in a hunting tribe some men performed the role of beaters, while others actually overtook and killed the prey. But all were hunters and freely switched roles; none ever specialized in any one function. The first real division of labor with social

From G. M. Gusev, B. T. Grigorian, I. S. Kon, and L. N. Mitrokhin, eds., Obshchestvo i molodezh', Moscow, 1968, pp. 128-144. Translated by Michel Vale.

underpinnings, namely, the division between male and female labor, has remained with us down to this very day. The further development of the division of social labor led to the formation of classes, some of which possessed the means of production and hence occupied a position of command or authority within the social structure, while others were in the position of slaves, serfs, or proletarians. The progress of mankind has been achieved at the very high cost of the alienation of the individual laborer from the products of his activity, and labor has come to be a forced activity, an externally imposed necessity.

The socialist revolution has abolished the greatest social injustice, namely, the division of society into ruling and exploited classes. But it has not eliminated in one magic stroke the existing division of labor into simple and complex, monotonous and varied, routine and creative, mechanical and organizational, attractive and unattractive. The social division of labor and narrow professionalization are the hallmarks of the world in which we live and in which each of us must find his place.

Scientific socialism differs from magnanimous utopian socialism in that it takes into account the real objective laws and trends of social progress rather than basing itself on good intentions and notions about justice and humanism "in general." "In general" it would be just and humane to maintain an organization of labor in which workers would carry out complex, highly skilled work in alternation with simple work requiring a low level of skill, so that all would be equal in status as working people.

It would also be "just" from the point of view of abstract humanism (and indeed, from the point of view of the narrow conception of equality that identifies it with the leveling out of wages) to limit the opportunities of administrative workers to maintain a large staff responsible for preparing information, seeing to it that decisions are acted upon, and other "bureaucratic red tape."

However, modern production or scientific work is impossible without a clear-cut functional division of labor between differ-