

CZECHOSLOVAK NEWSLETTER

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WORKING CONDITIONS AND LABOR LAWS IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA, 1970-1978 (Conclusion)

The last issue of Czechoslovak Newsletter published the first part of an essay on working conditions and the labor laws in Czechoslovakia, written by a recent émigré with first-hand experience both as a trained economist and as a menial worker. The conclusion of this essay by Antonín Rusek appears below.

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The ROH statute defines the role and aims of the national Revolutionary Trade-Union Movement, which is the central organ for all the labor unions within the social and economic structure of the communist state. No independent unaffiliated unions are allowed.

The preamble of the statute states that the ROH is an independent, voluntary organization designed to defend the interests of working people in the economic sphere. It further states that in Czechoslovakia all means of production are the property of the state, which is a workers' state led by the communist party, and that therefore no contradiction exists between the unions' interests and those of the state. The unions fully recognize the leading role of the party and see their main function to be the organization of working people so that they may fulfill the tasks determined by the communist party. The preamble thus makes it clear that the main burden of the individual unions is to subordinate their membership to communist policy and interests. This policy, it falsely claims, is the best expression of every worker's "objective interests."

The organizational structure of the ROH and its horizontal branches are subordinated to these goals. The most important function of each ROH local is its general membership meeting that elects representatives for the district (okres) union council, which in turn elects representatives for the regional (kraj) union council. The general membership meeting also elects the shop committee and its chairman, and once in a while delegates to the district union conference. The latter elects delegates to the regional conference, which then elects delegates to the national ROH congress. It is the congress that elects the central organs (central committee and presidium) of the ROH for terms of five years. Known as democratic centralism, such a structure is a classic example of the communist concept of "democracy." Rank-and-file members have no power in practice to elect those who represent them in the higher reaches of the ROH where the important decisions are taken, because their direct voting stops at the district level. The higher organs do not answer to members for their voting or decision-making.

The chairmanship of the shop committee and membership of the higher organs are partly or fully paid jobs. Their occupants are not paid directly by the union membership but indirectly by the central organs out of funds received from the state. The occupants of these offices are therefore organizationally and financially motivated to defend the interests of the employer, that is, the state, and its totalitarian economic structure rather than the interests of the union members.

Even such a totalitarian structure proved vulnerable in 1968-69, however, when union members were determined to elect delegates who would defend their own interests. In 1970 the union leadership and the communist party came to an agreement that the leading role of the party would not apply only generally but also specifically at every level of organization. This means in practice that every enterprise party committee nominates its candidates for election as shop committee chairman, district union council members and delegates to the district union conferences. They are the only candidates who stand and are therefore "elected." The shop committee chairman is also a member of the enterprise party committee and so has to adhere strictly to the party line.

Such a structure completely disproves the independent nature of the workers' organizations, and since the decisive influence in the enterprise party committee is that of the enterprise manager (who is usually a protégé or member of a higher party body), the shop committee chairman usually finds himself obliged to defend the employer's interest over that of his members. This antiworker, antiemployee situation is generally reinforced by appointing the shop committee chairman a member of the enterprise manager's consultative group together with the party committee chairman and the assistant manager for cadre affairs (politruk). The consultative group cooperates on all matters that are not directly controlled by the party or of purely professional interest. Similar horizontal ties exist at all the higher union levels, too. The unions therefore have no interest in any of the problems that are the *raison d'être* of independent unions.

The pay rates spelled out in the JKPO and TKK are usually settled by agreement between the communist party leadership and the communists appointed by the leadership of the ROH. The same applies to working hours, vacations, etc. All

decisions in these areas are an intrinsic part of the totalitarian five-year plan and as a matter of principle are not subject to approval by the ROH membership. The ROH, on the other hand, shares responsibility for fulfilling the totalitarian central plans.

In considerations of working conditions or labor safety, the ROH gives preference to fulfillment of plans and often labels justified complaints "antisocial."

The ROH, party officials and the SSM work jointly to organize the "Socialist Work Brigades" (BSP), groups of workers in factories or offices who "voluntarily" pledge to fulfill their targets precisely on schedule and to do voluntary unpaid work. Brigade members pledge to live and work "collectively" and to help each other, and as a reward are promised bonuses, work and better job classifications.

The BSP are in fact an instrument of the communist totalitarian system. The number of their members is used for propaganda purposes as evidence of the "support of the people." For enterprises they are a handy means of increasing productivity without increasing pay, that is, of lowering real wages. The norms "voluntarily" adopted by the BSP are used to pressure regular workers. Their principles of collectivism and mutual assistance boil down to brigade members spying and informing on each other and interfering in each other's private lives. Corruption is widespread because bonuses are paid to the BSP collectively. This situation not only has the approval of union officers but is directly abetted by them, since they receive a rake-off from the BSP.

One of the more important activities of the unions is the management of a large number of resorts and recreational facilities, including some in Bulgaria, East Germany, Hungary, Rumania, and Yugoslavia, and the assignment of vacation visits to them. The chief criterion for selection is "political commitment," followed closely by bribes: the higher the bribe, the better the vacation is the rule.

About 95 percent of Czechoslovakia's work force is organized in unions, membership in which is virtually automatic. The only workers not in the unions are those who have expressly declined membership and those expelled for their actively anticommunist posture. Membership, however, hardly makes a difference for ordinary workers because of the peculiar nature of unions in a totalitarian communist state. The unions are merely another means of coercion. From the purely economic point of view, it makes no difference to the slave driver whether a slave is or is not a member of a slave organization.

Strikes are not officially forbidden in Czechoslovakia, but they must be approved by the ROH. The ROH, however, is bound by its statute to subordinate workers' interests to state economic policy and the leading role of the communist party in the state, which is the sole owner of the means of production and the only employer. Whatever the grievance therefore, it is impossible for a union to give its blessing to a strike because it would always be automatically directed against the communist regime. In practice, then, all strikes become illegal and are ruthlessly suppressed either as deliberate disruptions of the economy or as subversion.

Officially there is no unemployment compensation, but in fact it does exist.

Benefits are very low with a monthly maximum of 600 crowns (about \$100). An unemployed person must register at a labor office and accept immediately whatever work is offered. Unemployment in Czechoslovakia is thus of a very peculiar type and generally of very brief duration. The national unemployment rate ranges around 0.5% to 0.8%.

During the ruthless purges of the years 1969-1971 in the early days of the Husák regime, more than one million persons were fired from their jobs for political reasons, that is, about 12.5% of the national work force. A large proportion of these have been unable to find stable employment since then. They take seasonal and temporary jobs, and are often dismissed at the end of their trial periods without stated reason or for "loss of trust." Official statistics, however, show them as employed. If their families are taken into account with them, then the real unemployment rate in Czechoslovakia would be about 10%. The unions, of course, have no interest in this situation.

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A couple of specific cases will illustrate how the regime, its functionaries, and the managers the state appoints violate the labor laws, which already resemble a system of slavery. Both the following instances and numerous others like them occurred with the tacit, or even active, assistance of the trade unions.

A. In 1976 there was a massive explosion at a plant manufacturing synthetic alcohol in Záluží u Mostu, North Bohemia. The official report recorded a death toll of 14, but an engineering officer who took part in the rescue operation estimated unofficially that the number of dead was at least 150. The explosion was caused by repair work on a pipeline. The proper procedure was to empty the section under repair of its highly flammable contents, but this would have meant closing down the entire plant for 24 hours. Not to fall behind his plan target, the deputy plant manager offered a fat bonus to whoever would tackle the repairs without stopping operation of the factory. A commission of inquiry laid the blame on the worker who had offered to weld the line during operation and had died in the explosion. The deputy plant manager was found guilty simply of a gross error of judgment and was "punished" by being transferred to another factory in the same capacity of deputy manager.

B. The author was fired from jobs three times for political reasons. In 1972 he was dismissed from the Čechofracht freight enterprise after only three days of his trial period and was told by Comrade Čechová, head of the cadre department, that the reason was that his father was under arrest and investigation for supposed antistate activities, even though his father had been neither tried nor sentenced. In 1977, after signing Charter 77, he was dismissed from the Montované stavby construction enterprise in Prague for "loss of trust," although the firm did not insist on his immediate departure because it was short of hands. Comrade Krylová, the cadre officer, pressed for his immediate dismissal, however, because "there is no place in the socialist economy for those who openly oppose the regime," he was told. The third dismissal was on December 23, 1977, when he was fired as a post office parcel loader because he was overqualified for the job. He is a research economist and was told he could certainly find a position if he would support the communist regime.

SERIOUS ECONOMIC PROBLEMS ADMITTED

Gustáv Husák, President of Czechoslovakia and secretary general of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, may have expressed official optimism and made rosy predictions in his New Year's address to the nation, but recent meetings of top party and government leaders have given a much less reassuring picture. Bright spots there may be, but there are also too many difficult situations. The shortcomings most frequently cited are inefficient utilization of scarce raw materials and energy resources, delays in meeting production targets, low technical standards, poor workmanship, low labor productivity and discipline, bureaucratic and ineffectual management, and inadequate control by party organs.

The twelfth session of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, the most important of these recent meetings on economic matters, was held in Prague on December 4 and 5, 1978. Later in December there were special sessions of the Federal Parliament and of the two state parliaments to consider their respective budgets for 1979.

The principal report to the Central Committee was presented on behalf of the Central Committee presidium by Václav Hůla. This top economic expert is not only a presidium member but also federal deputy prime minister and chairman of the State Planning Commission. His unusually frank and critical report was followed by those of 19 other prominent specialists, each dealing with a specific problem or individual sector of the national economy. Husák gave the closing address.

Entitled "On the Principal Tasks for the Development of the National Economy in 1979," Hůla's nearly 10,000-word report dealt with fulfillment of the state economic plans in 1978, third year of Czechoslovakia's sixth five-year plan (1976-1980). Targets for 1979 and directives for preparing the 1980 plan were also his topics. After paying necessary homage to the superiority of the communist system, Hůla turned briefly to the positive achievements of the year. Among them he emphasized rising per capita income of about 4% a year and personal consumption, which has gone up 8% in the last three years. Average monthly wages reached 2,517 crowns, an increase of less than 3% since 1976. New construction work had added 158,000 places for children in kindergarten and some 130,000 dwelling units accommodating some 400,000 people in 1978.

These achievements are in fact rather modest. An annual 2.8% increase in wages would hardly please French and American workers and it is a well-known fact that workmanship in new apartments is shoddy. Despite impressive-sounding statistics, newlyweds still have to wait several years for a place of their own.

In his general summary of shortcomings, Hůla pointed out that that there were not only "external conditions," that is, world economic problems over which Prague has no control, but also many "internal conditions," over which it does have control and that ought not to exist. Targets for exports had not been met, he reported, and export products were often of poor quality and not up to competitors' technological standards. Despite considerable increases in the production of coal and natural gas, "the requirements of the national economy can be met only under conditions of constant

stress." Notwithstanding the year's record harvest, agricultural imports, particularly of meat, continued to rise in 1978.

The key objectives for 1979 and 1980, Hůla declared, were the "mobilizing of all internal reserves for production, the strengthening of our export capacities, a substantial reduction of our imports, and the raising of our technological levels and production quality." These, he said, were the preconditions "for maintaining and further improving our standard of living."

Priority in the plan had to be given to "putting into effect more quickly the changes in the structure of our production that are sorely needed as a precondition to adjusting it systematically to the requirements of foreign markets and increasing our export potential, as well as achieving maximum savings on imports." Another important aim of the plan was to "reduce the consumption [of raw materials and energy] on industrial production and hence the demands on imports and investment." In the allocation of funds for new investments, priority would be given to modernization, more efficient production, saving raw materials, and improving technological levels and product quality.

Elsewhere in his report, Hůla broached problems in certain key sectors of the economy — energy, heavy machinery, consumer goods, the chemical industry, transportation, and food and agriculture. Power resources clearly continue to hold the center of the regime's attention. Ever since the Soviet Union cut its deliveries of oil and gas in the early 1970s, Czechoslovakia has had to rely increasingly on its own resources, predominantly brown coal. Production of the latter was up by 13 million tons over 1973 and had reached its target, according to Hůla. But it was imperative, he added, that production should reach about 96 million tons in 1979 and 98.5 million tons in 1980. These are very high targets, and it is doubtful that they can be reached in the wake of the disruptions caused by last month's heavy snowfalls and extremely low temperatures. Hůla criticized the inefficient use of electricity and deficiencies in the transport of coal from mines to the thermal power stations.

As Hůla dealt with different industries, recurrent themes were the poor quality of products, inadequate quality controls, delays in deliveries not only to domestic customers but also to foreign customers, shortages of spare parts, poor servicing, and inattention to the technological improvements that would secure future orders. In reference to the manufacture of synthetic fibers, he commented: "We still have not mastered the production technology necessary for a modern textile industry." He condemned the uneven delivery of locomotives and rolling stock to the national rail system, and their inefficient utilization and maintenance. An "unreasonably high percentage" of them was always in the repair and maintenance depots, he reported.

In the food and agriculture sector, he said the plan was directed at "the basic and most important goal for the whole national economy — increasing self-sufficiency in producing foodstuffs and reducing the need for imports." The key problem, he said, was "to achieve adequate output of fodder for the production of meat, milk, poultry, and other foods of animal origin." Hůla also criticized "unreasonably high losses in bringing in the harvest."

A very interesting and highly critical section of his report dealt with the poor planning and execution of investments. He described in detail several large

projects that were completed after delays of several years at costs two or more times as high as the original estimates. He cited the case of the university hospital in Košice, East Slovakia, that was planned for completion in 1978 over the unusually long term of twelve years, and yet would take at least five more years to finish. The original 1966 estimate of its cost was 426 million crowns, but more than one billion crowns had already been spent on it and "the investing authority is now drafting a proposal for a further substantial increase in funding for it." Such situations were intolerable, Hůla declared. "There are too many such examples. This is a very serious problem, especially in view of the fact that the target dates for completion envisaged in the plans are already far too long."

In closing, Hůla called on local, district and regional party and government authorities to pay much closer attention to meeting plan targets. He believed "more intensive ideological work and economic propaganda" were called for. He decried "expressions of egalitarianism in wage policies" and demanded "assurances that good work will always be adequately compensated and poor performance penalized."

Husák underlined the need for criticism and self-criticism in his closing remarks. Criticism, he said, was invariably justified whenever "one criticizes shortcomings, disorganization and unfulfilled tasks, and shows the way they may be overcome." He pointed the finger at "certain comrades who have become used to old, well-tried methods and procedures." They must come to the realization, he said, that "today they cannot make the grade with methods and standards that were satisfactory ten years ago or more. Our domestic needs and especially the international competition that our products must face in the world do not permit us to be satisfied with results that are only average or worse."

I.L.O. CHARGES CZECHOSLOVAKIA WITH WORKER DISCRIMINATION

The governing body of the International Labor Organization has taken action on a complaint by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions that Czechoslovakia has failed to abide by the Discrimination Convention No. 111 that it ratified in 1964. By a vote of 38 to four, with nine abstentions, it rejected the Czechoslovak reply that the complaint was "wholly unfounded." It resolved in consequence to publish the complaint that Czechoslovakia had acted discriminatorily in the employment of those who signed or promoted the Charter 77 human rights manifesto.

C.L.C. ACTS IN SUPPORT OF CHARTER 77

The Canadian Labour Congress (C.L.C.) joined other affiliates in the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions in lodging the complaint against worker discrimination in Czechoslovakia with the International Labor Organization. In the

wake of Czechoslovakia's campaign against Charter 77, the C.L.C. has advised the Canadian government and workers' organizations that no C.L.C. delegation will visit Czechoslovakia so long as the campaign continues.

The Council of Free Czechoslovakia has sent a letter to Mr. Dennis McDermott, president of the C.L.C., expressing its appreciation for C.L.C.'s stand on the issue of the suppression of human rights in Czechoslovakia.

LETTER TO THE NORWEGIAN LUTHERAN CHURCH

The Council of Free Czechoslovakia has sent a letter to the Norwegian Lutheran Church in acknowledgment of its stand on the question of the violation of religious and human rights in Eastern Europe. The Norwegian church criticized the World Council of Churches for its ambivalent attitude in condemning the violation of human rights in the West and the Third World but remaining silent on the much more extensive violation of religious freedom in Eastern Europe. In its letter to the Norwegian church, the Council of Free Czechoslovakia pointed to the suppression of religious life in Czechoslovakia detailed in the documents of Charter 77 and recalled that some time ago it had appealed to the World Council of Churches and the Lutheran World Federation to take up the cause of the persecuted churches in Czechoslovakia by asking the Czechoslovak regime to honor its commitments under the Helsinki Declarations.