“I Will Not Let the Experience Be Taken Away from Me”

Forms of Workers' Self-Organization in the 1989–1990 Revolutionary Transition in the GDR

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One could suppose that especially within the field of the history of labour and labour movements, the interaction between revolutions and changes in labour relations would be a focus for research. There have certainly been important times when the study of revolutions has flourished, often connected with the study of mass movements as part of a historiography with a left-wing political orientation. At the same time, socio-historical research on labour movements has also paid a great deal of attention to processes that took place inside factories. However, these two historiographical developments have remained somewhat separated from each other. Descriptions of the history of revolutions mostly discuss their topics as political events; dealing with political procedures and different phases of revolution, and examining the ideas of the protagonists.¹ Taking a look at the 1917 Russian revolution allows us to recognize this tendency, as discussions concerning labour relations during times of revolution have been made subordinate to discussions about political events.² Of course, a Marxist historiography would “know” that it is not the thinkers and party or trade union leaders themselves who made the

- 1 A good example is the discussion about the role of the factory councils in the Russian Revolution of 1917. These councils, founded after the February Revolution, are assumed to have opened up anti-capitalist perspectives within this form of labour representation. Such evaluations, however, are only based on programmes, statutes or statements from the revolutionary councils, in which the protagonists explicitly formulate their intentions and goals. To determine the character of the workers' councils either in Russia or other countries, it would be necessary to distinguish between the self-identification of the revolutionaries and their real practice, and to comprehend them as part of the revolutionary upheaval of old labour relations. Such analysis has not been carried out to date.
- 2 For a criticism of this approach, see Renate Hürtgen, “Lesarten des roten Oktober”, <http://marx200.org/blog/perspektiven-auf-den-roten-oktober> [19 May 2018].

revolutions, yet they have nonetheless always remained the focus of interest.³ Even if attention is paid to the demonstrating or striking revolutionary masses, they often appear as a mere abstraction, or are remembered as political participants, leaders of strikes or members of a revolutionary council. They are hardly ever described in their own living and working environment, where the whole contradictory character of their thoughts and actions first manifests itself.⁴

In a totally different way, while focusing on the everyday life of workers, their culture and their lifestyle, many sociological and cultural history approaches to labour history detach the research agenda from the question of the relationship between labour relations and revolution.⁵ Their field of interest is not limited to the revolutionary consciousness of workers, to the political parties they belong to and to their attitude in the class struggle; attention is paid to the precise relations between the main protagonists within the company. However, in this approach, the importance of class struggle and of power disappear simultaneously. Labour relations are not described as relations of rule, but are replaced by “persistent” reciprocal power relations.⁶ My analysis of the factory processes of the 1989 democratic revolution in the GDR that follows should be read as a passionate plea to unite these two directions of labour history: not to consider the changes in political power separately from the fights against the ruling labour regime, and to put the changes in factory power relations, their causes, and the nature and goals of the protagonists into the overall context of social development. In other words, the aim should be to observe the developments in factories, the learning processes that workers themselves went through, and their particular experiences and behaviour, without losing sight of the overall social context of power, class struggle and exploitation.

3 This approach reduces the revolutionary changes of labour relations to legal contexts. Contrast this with the tendency apparent in some articles from the conference “Gewerkschaften in revolutionären Zeiten – Europa 1917 bis 1923” on 11–12 October 2018, held in Berlin by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

4 Minutes of Russian meetings that recorded the exact work of these boards were recently published in German for the first time. Anita Friedetzky and Rainer Thomann, *Aufstieg und Fall der Arbeitermacht in Russland* (Berlin: Die Buchmacherei, 2017), 509–634. This is mandatory reading for anyone examining the role of councils in the Russian revolution.

5 Cf. Peter Hübner, Christoph Kleßmann and Klaus Tenfelde, ed., *Arbeiter im Staatssozialismus. Ideologischer Anspruch und soziale Wirklichkeit* (Cologne, Weimar and Vienna: Böhlau, 2005).

6 Cf. Peter Hübner, *Arbeiter und Technik in der DDR 1971 bis 1989. Zwischen Fordismus und digitaler Revolution* (Bonn: Böhlau, 2014).

1 The Factory Movements of 1989: An Unknown Side of the Revolution

The memory of the democratic revolution in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) is a prime example of concentrating on political results and ignoring what happened in companies, in particular the grassroots democratic processes.⁷ The prevailing official interpretation reduces the revolution to the fall of the Honecker regime, the mass demonstrations and, first of all, to the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989. The majority of the population – sometimes against their better knowledge – accepts this. As a result, 9 November is celebrated as the peak and the end of the revolution, which then brought about the unification of Germany. Although thousands of GDR citizens witnessed the boom of autonomous employees' initiatives on a scale never seen before, their experience has been given limited space in the narrative of 1989–1990. A large section of researchers investigating civil rights activists and opposition to the GDR regime have found the main topic for their analyses in the attack on the Ministry of State Security; the events in the factories of the GDR seem of little interest, even today. The same can be said about the flood of publications concerning the history of the revolution in the GDR written by both East and West German historians, who since 1990 have preferred to deal with the old and the new elite, as well as the collapse of social structures, the role of the party, the state security apparatus and other institutions of power.

When grassroots actions are examined, this usually remains limited to the mass demonstrations in the streets and squares.⁸ That does not mean developments at the factory level that contributed to the fall of the GDR have remained completely unstudied. In fact, economic and business historians have been very interested in the structural and personal changes in company management, and therefore have also dealt with events in the factories during the revolution. This strand of literature, however, does not regard labour relations as relations of rule, and the perspective is very different from that of the workers who were destroying the prevailing structures. Consequently, this research did not and does not offer much towards an understanding of the

7 Bernd Gehrke and Renate Hürtgen, ed. *Der betriebliche Aufbruch im Herbst 1989. Die unbekannte Seite der DDR-Revolution* (Berlin: Bildungswerk Berlin der Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2001²). This book presents texts by eye witnesses and more than 120 original documents about the transition in the factories. These form the main sources of information for the current chapter. A second resource for original documents is <http://www.ddr89.de/> [5 June 2019].

8 Jürgen Kädtler and Gisela Kottwitz, *Betriebsräte zwischen Wende und Ende in der DDR* (Berlin: Zentralinstitut für Sozialwissenschaftliche Forschung der Freien Universität Berlin, 1990).

role of workers and employees in the events of 1989.⁹ Some economic historians from the former GDR have justifiably criticized the historically unique process of the destruction of the East German economy. However, their focus has been on the needs and concerns of the former managers of factories and industrial complexes, who saw themselves as being suppressed by the Western elite. Since they consider the factory as a place of power only in the West, and therefore not in the GDR, no revolutionary meaning is attached to the initiatives of the workforce, which in the autumn of 1989 turned against the factory leadership, directors of industrial complexes and trade union executives in the GDR.¹⁰

Although for very different reasons, many leftists from the West – together with some German researchers of trade unions – have shared this somewhat distrustful view of the grassroots movements in the factories in the fall of the Berlin Wall. The former overlooked the anti-capitalist tendencies among the GDR workforce and did not examine the demands for radical change that went beyond immediate reforms. For the Western leftists who came into contact with the East German factory committees in the autumn of 1989, the GDR workers somehow resembled strangers, who were not expected to be revolutionary at all. The election results of March 1990 seemed to confirm this attitude. An evaluation of the GDR revolution as a revolution for “free time and consumption” that was widespread in early literature, contributed to losing sight of the sphere of production.¹¹ No relevant revisions have been made to this evaluation. The trade unions in the West also mostly failed to consider the spontaneous movements in the factories in the GDR. They first showed interest in grassroots participation in the summer of 1990, when partners were needed for the first staff committees and factory council elections, as well as for trade union units to be set up.¹² Not all the trade union representatives tried to find “unencumbered” people at the grassroots level; only those who did not

9 André Steiner, *Von Plan zu Plan: Eine Wirtschaftsgeschichte der DDR* (München: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2004). Cf. Karin Lohr, “Management und Belegschaft im wirtschaftlichen Wandel – Brüche und Kontinuitäten”, in *Krisen, Kader, Kombinate. Kontinuität und Wandel in ostdeutschen Betrieben*, ed. Martin Heidenreich (Berlin: Sigma, 1992), 159–172.

10 Jörg Roesler and Dagmar Semmelmann, *Vom Kombinat zur Aktiengesellschaft. Ostdeutsche Energiewirtschaft im Umbruch in den 1980er und 1990er Jahren* (Bonn: Karl Dietz Verlag, 2005).

11 Kädtler and Kottwitz, *Betriebsräte*.

12 Rainer Weinert and Franz-Otto Gilles, *Der Zusammenbruch des Freien Deutschen Gewerkschaftsbundes (FDGB). Zunehmender Entscheidungsdruck, institutionalisierte Handlungsschwächung und Zerfall der hierarchischen Organisationsstruktur* (Wiesbaden: vs Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 1999).

want to return to recruiting from the old GDR leadership and functionary team (FDGB).

These attitudes rapidly reaffirmed the teleological notion that any demands for the direct participation of labourers in management made during the revolution of 1989 had been destined to fail from the start.¹³ This “teleologic realism” not only took hold among those dealing with the revolutionary upheavals in labour relations at the beginning of the 1990s, but very soon became extended to all attempts to take a slightly more social perspective on the future of the GDR, which were decried as utopian.¹⁴

As a result of this combination of different perspectives, the role of the workforce ended up as a marginal issue in study of the 1989 revolution. However, this seems to have been changing to some extent in recent times. Contemporary historians have rediscovered oppositional tendencies in the Eastern Germany of the early 1990s, and have started to show an interest in the resistance of workers against the Trust agency (*Treuhandanstalt*) and government policy.¹⁵ Trade unions have also started to look more critically at their history of unification and their less glamorous role in the construction of the new labour relations in East Germany.¹⁶ The foundational meeting of the “Initiative of the East German Staff Committees, Factory Councils and Shop Stewards” against the mass dismissals of the Trust agency in Berlin in 1992 is one of the points of interest.¹⁷ The current chapter aims to contribute to this turn by examining events in the factories of the GDR between September 1989 and February 1990, especially with regard to the process of factories’ transition. It also looks at the main protagonists who allowed the old power structure in the factories to collapse, and at the demands for new forms of labour relations that emerged in the process. The questions raised here include

13 Manfred Scharrer, *Der Aufbau einer freien Gewerkschaft in der DDR 1989/90. ÖTV und FDGB-Gewerkschaften im deutschen Einigungsprozess* (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2011), preface, 47–50.

14 Martin Jander, *Formierung und Krise der DDR-Opposition: Die “Initiative für unabhängige Gewerkschaften” – Dissidenten zwischen Demokratie und Romantik* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1996).

15 The Trust agency was established by the GDR government. Originally it should save workers’ rights to the factories but after the elections in March it was used to privatize the East German enterprises.

16 Detlev Brunner, Michaela Kuhnhenne and Hartmut Simon, ed., *Gewerkschaften im deutschen Einheitsprozess: Möglichkeiten und Grenzen in Zeiten der Transformation* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018).

17 <https://geschichtevonuntenostwest.wordpress.com/soziale-kaempfe-in-ostdeutschland-nach-1990/dokumentation-der-initiative-ostdeutscher-und-berliner-betriebsraete/> [19 May 2018].

who these workers were and what motivated their activities. The chapter also looks at interactions between the revolutionary events on the “street” and those in the factories, at the ideas that were current among the grassroots activists and at the question of why this phase of the transformation only lasted for a few weeks. Lastly, it addresses the question of the connection between the revolution and the changes in labour relations that took place in the GDR after the *Wende* (the ‘turning point’, meaning the period between the Peaceful Revolution in autumn 1989 and the elections for a democratic parliament in March 1990).

2 The Crisis of the Political and Factory Power Structures

The pictures showing thousands of refugees from the GDR during the late summer of 1989 circulated around the world. Reports about the mass demonstrations – not only in Leipzig, Dresden and Berlin, but also in numerous small towns – leading to the downfall of both the central and the local state party, appeared in the mass media. The dissatisfaction with the regime (that had been building up for decades) was articulated in open protest. When the Hungarian government started to pull down the border fence to Austria in May 1989, many GDR citizens tried to leave the country via this route. During the summer, they used the embassies or consulates of the Federal Republic in Hungary, Prague, Warsaw and East Berlin for their flight. In the first half of the year, nearly 50,000 people left the GDR in this way. By the end of 1989, the numbers had risen to 230,000. One reason why the refugee movement continued during the winter was that many citizens feared the border would be closed again at some point. Even at the time of the elections in March 1990, many people were still afraid that the old power structure might be re-established. On the other hand, unlike the situation in June 1953, the protestors in 1989 were aware that the Soviet Army was not expected to suppress the uprising. The developments in the Soviet Union under Gorbachev might have had a decisive influence on the protests by GDR citizens in the early spring of 1989. Ignoring the “hardliners” within their own government, and in spite of the unpredictable danger of a massive military blow against the demonstrators, the feeling grew that the risks were worth taking. Within the space of just a few weeks, the party and state structures fell apart. What looked like an implosion would never have been successful without the pressure from the mass movements, although the workers’ uprising in the autumn of 1989 was undoubtedly different from that in June 1953 in the GDR. As a rule, the workers from the local factories went onto the streets after closing time, demonstrating in their capacity as citizens. The

first demonstrations often took place in a semi-public room of a church and expanded from there into the city.

The developments of the 1970s can help us to understand the events at the factories in the GDR in 1989, in particular the situation there in the summer and autumn. Since the 1970s, the industrial landscape of the GDR was characterized by huge factory units, with more than 200 industrial complexes, some of them with over 20,000 employees. It was only at this stage that the GDR assumed the form of a "workers' society". The factory was at the centre, where overall, some eight million "employees" worked nine hours a day, from Monday to Friday. Following the unsuccessful decentralization of the economy, the power of middle management over the economy once again increased, in the process also strengthening the position of the one-party state in the spheres of production and distribution. This had complicated effects on the workforce. On the one hand, through Honecker's "Unity of Economic and Social Policy", the role of the factories became enhanced.¹⁸ On the other hand, the functions of the party – as well as of the state security apparatus – were reinforced. In fact, after the end of the 1960s, basically only the members of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) could hold positions in the factory leadership, including the post of foreman. This produced a factory management consistently loyal to the state and subject to party discipline. It deeply influenced the atmosphere in the factory, and produced a gap between the "top" and "bottom", called the "card line", analogous to the "collar line".¹⁹ The factory was among the most thoroughly controlled places in the GDR, through the factory combat groups; a paramilitary organization that had been set up following the workers' uprising in 1953, with the aid of the local SED members in the factories and through state security.²⁰

The industrial landscape of the GDR in its final decade was characterized by two contradictory developments, which in 1989 contributed significantly to the course of events. First, the misguided economic policy led to a situation of decline and disorganization. The complaints lodged with the party, the state

18 The concept of "Unity of Economic and Social Policy", which ended with the SED's eighth party congress in 1971, was related to the era of Erich Honecker as leader of the party and state president. He introduced a policy in which the consumer goods industry was meant to have a more significant role than before.

19 The "collar line" distinguished blue-collar workers from the white-collar management. In the GDR, this distinction went together with belonging to the all-defining SED. People carrying a party membership card belonged to the "top".

20 In the 1960s, the state security paid attention to the economy and the factories, and organized their labour structures according to the so-called production principle.

leadership and the FDGB show a disastrous picture of collapsed factory roofs, malfunctioning heating and broken furniture.²¹ A lack of tools together with irregularities in the supply of raw materials made it impossible to maintain continuity of the work flow. The machinery became outdated to the extent that the proportion of obsolete equipment that was still operating had risen to over 50 per cent in some sectors by 1988.²² It was not without good reason that employees claimed the ruling economic and labour regime was responsible for this misery. The maxim was to fulfil the plan at any costs, even through false figures and reports. The factory leadership, consisting of the secretary of the SED, the state commissioner and the leadership of the trade union, subordinated the factory interests to party politics, and the employees had to bear the consequences of this mismanagement.

Notwithstanding the problems described above, the GDR nevertheless became a modern industrialized country with a qualified workforce. As a result of an extensive qualification programme, particularly for women, the factories in the GDR had a higher proportion of skilled workers, technicians and engineers than comparable factories in the West.²³ The number of people without qualifications was reduced to a negligibly low number, and while the title “skilled worker” could often not compete with the traditional degrees of engineers, the self-confidence of the GDR employees grew because of their qualifications. At the same time, the gap was growing between their knowledge and capabilities on the one hand, and on the other, the opportunities to make use of them. In the GDR of the 1980s, this resulted in the common phenomenon of over-qualification in the workplace. Technicians and engineers complained that they were just “sitting around”, not being able to use their knowledge, and that they were excluded from factory decisions. One of the engineers explained in an interview that the head of the quality control department had sent her to the junkyard to check if she could find a missing spare part there: “It was then that I realized that it was all over with the GDR”, she recalled. Another employee with a mechanical engineering

21 Peter Becker and Alf Lüdtke, ed., *Akten. Eingaben. Schaufenster. Die DDR und ihre Texte: Erkundungen zu Herrschaft und Alltag* (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 2015).

22 Renate Hürtgen, “Entwicklung in der Stagnation? Oder: Was ist so spannend am Betriebsalltag der 1970er und 1980er Jahre in der DDR?” in *Der Schein der Stabilität. DDR-Betriebsalltag in der Ära Honecker*, ed. Renate Hürtgen and Thomas Reichel (Berlin: Metropolis, 2001), 28.

23 Ingrid Drexel and Barbara Giessmann, ed., *Berufsgruppen im Transformationsprozess. Ostdeutschlands Ingenieure, Meister, Techniker und Ökonomen zwischen Gestern und Übermorgen* (Frankfurt and New York: Campus, 1997).

qualification had sat around in his office without any work assignments for years.²⁴

The gap between the increasing demands for high living and working standards, and the lack of the possibility to achieve them led to growing dissatisfaction. Skilled workers suffered a loss of dignity due to the fact they were not able to do real work, and that their knowledge and ability remained unused, while the work they did do was not even adequately rewarded.²⁵

3 Labour Relations as Power Relations

The eruption of protests in the GDR in 1989 was not only driven by the constant shortage of goods and services and the lack of freedom to travel. The flood of petitions and complaints beginning in the autumn of 1989 was soon joined by the creation of grassroots groups of employees putting forward their demands, which shows unmistakably that anger was also focussed on the prevailing power relations in the factories.²⁶

In order to recognize the character of labour relations in the final days of the GDR, we have to take a brief look at the situation of the workers' movement. After the East German mass strike and workers' protests of 17 June 1953 had been subdued, no other similar actions took place for thirty-six years.²⁷ The suppression of this workers' uprising also marked the downfall of autonomous movements. From that time onwards, strikes, the right of association and other forms of organizing in the interests of workers were forbidden in practice. The right to go on strike finally disappeared from the new constitution of the GDR in 1968, whereas it had previously remained formally recognized.²⁸ The representation of the workers' interests against the state (that is, against state companies) became the sole prerogative of state trade unions under the auspices of the FDGB. These trade unions did not fight for higher wages and

24 Renate Hürtgen, *Angestellt im VEB. Loyalitäten, Machtressourcen und soziale Lagen der Industrieangestellten in der DDR* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2009), 145–147.

25 Renate Hürtgen, "Von der Würde der Arbeiter im 'Arbeiterstaat' DDR oder Wo ist die Arbeiterbewegung geblieben?" in *Solidarität im Wandel der Zeiten. 150 Jahre Gewerkschaften*, ed. Willy Buschak (Essen: Klartext, 2016), 303–330.

26 Renate Hürtgen, *Ausreise per Antrag: Der lange Weg nach drüben. Eine Studie über Herrschaft und Alltag in der DDR-Provinz* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014).

27 Heidi Roth, *Der 17. Juni 1953 in Sachsen* (Köln: Ch. Links Verlag, 1999).

28 Renate Hürtgen, "Vom Streik zur individuellen Arbeitsverweigerung", in *Zwischen Disziplinierung und Partizipation. Vertrauensleute des FDGB im DDR-Betrieb*, ed. Renate Hürtgen (Köln, Weimar and Wien: Böhlau, 2005), 255–270.

better working conditions; their main task was to make sure that economic plans were implemented and production was increased. Those who grew up in the GDR and started working in the 1960s therefore did not know any collective demonstrations, strikes, meetings or open discussion forums without the participation of a representative of the state or a functionary of the party (SED). When the revolutionary transition in the GDR reached the first factories in the early autumn of 1989, the workers not only lacked any experience of an independent collective movement, but also the facilities and media to build up a counter-hegemonic public sphere. The attempt of the GDR workers and employees to build up an autonomous grassroots representation should be appreciated even more in light of the long years of suppressed organizing culture, and the lack of any personal experience in this regard.

The revolutionary initiatives in the factories started slightly later than the protests in the streets. The demonstrators did not generally carry banners with demands, and only in exceptional cases played a major role in the manifestations.²⁹ One such exception was the speech by Heiner Müller at the Alexanderplatz in Berlin on 4 November 1989.³⁰ Müller called for the formation of the Initiative for an Independent Trade Union Movement (IUG). The speech began with a challenge to the FDGB for not siding with the workers. At the end of the speech, he called on those present not to wait for renewal from “the top down”, but to take matters into their own hands by organizing the representation of their own interests.³¹ This spirit of grassroots initiative embraced the whole of East German society in the autumn of 1989. However, while the speakers at the Alexanderplatz on 4 November focused on the unity of all the citizens, the call for the IUG expressed an idea that seemed to have little place in the general euphoria of the transition. In fact, the call stressed that employees in the GDR would have to continue the fight for their rights after the downfall of the party state. It argued that the following years would be no “bed of roses”. Considering the desolate state of the economy, it was to be expected that the workers would bear the burden of the transition.

The speech by Heiner Müller was received without much enthusiasm by the functionaries of the FDGB, and with some surprise by most of the workers

29 Bernd Lindner, *Die demokratische Revolution in der DDR 1989/90* (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2001), 79, 87, 112–113.

30 Renate Hürtgen, “Wie Heiner Müller am 4. November 1989 zu seiner Rede auf dem Berliner Alexanderplatz kam”, in *Der betriebliche Aufbruch*, ed. Gehrke and Hürtgen, 165–166.

31 Aufruf der Initiative für unabhängige Gewerkschaften, <http://www.ddr89.de/iug/aufruf.html> [9 July 2019]. Also see the translation in the appendix.

and employees from the factories in Berlin. However, similar calls for the establishment of independent representation within the factories and trade unions were made very early, and not only in Berlin. On 16 October 1989, one appeal read:

Knowing that the Free German Trade Union League does not safeguard the interests of the majority of the employees of the GDR, and that instead of them, it acknowledges the SED as allied partner, we, the workers of VEB Geräte und Reglerwerke "Wilhelm Pieck" Teltow have decided to resign from the FDGB and to establish the Independent Factory Trade Union "Reform".³²

According to the meticulous records of the state security, similar activities and calls were made elsewhere that October, for example at the three state-owned factories (VEB) in Erfurt.³³ Only few of these calls were made at public demonstrations. Speaking in front of the Church of the Cross in Dresden on 17 October 1989, a member of the group of young workers from the Radebeul shoe and leather factory introduced among other matters the proposal that "the factory leadership will be elected".³⁴ All of these initiatives took place without the participants knowing of each other's existence, except for the few instances that reached West German radio or television. The media were still state – and therefore SED – owned and controlled at the time, which made communicating and disseminating information about grassroots actions in the factories extremely difficult. At the demonstrations, the question of factory organization remained a marginal topic. Demands for the freedom of assembly, freedom of the press and freedom to travel dominated the movement.

Of all the forms of resistance against the prevailing labour relations, the mass exits from the FDGB involved numerically the most people. The trade unions experienced a rapid decrease in their membership, as trade union members resigned individually or in groups, and formulated calls for withdrawal to the factory trade union bodies. These calls were often connected with criticisms against the FDGB: "A trade union that allows such great social injustice in this state is not our trade union. As a young man, one already fears

32 Call by the independent trade union "Reform", <http://www.ddr89.de/betriebe/GRW7.html> [9 July 2019].

33 Reports about special actions in the district of Erfurt, SAPMO BArch DY 34/13268, BV des FDGB, Abteilung Organisation.

34 "Call in Front of the Cross Church, 17 October 1989", in *Der betriebliche Aufbruch*, ed. Gehrke and Hürtgen, 349.

to become a pensioner. The pension increase is a joke”.³⁵ In October 1989, numerous “open letters” were sent to “Dear Colleague Harry Tisch” – the leader of the FDGB at the time – with requests to express his opinion about the situation in the country, and to finally start a dialogue with the members. The privileges given to functionaries of the FDGB (which became widely known in November 1989) led to a new wave of resignations, and on 2 November, Harry Tisch resigned. The national board of the FDGB refused to play any role in the transition from then on; remaining just as the leaders of the individual trade unions. The whole trade union apparatus was shocked, unable to operate without orders coming “from the top”. The changes in labour relations that took place in 1989–1990 were exclusively driven by protagonists within the factories. There was active participation by shop stewards, and in exceptional cases also by functionaries of the trade union branches and members of the SED. However, in general, key roles were played by workers and employees with no party affiliation and outside managerial positions.

4 The End of the Old Labour Relations

The transition in the GDR factories accelerated after the street protests had succeeded in destabilizing the political structure. On 5 November, only a day after the large demonstration in Berlin, the whole politburo of the SED resigned; a move that was mirrored by party and state functionaries in provincial towns.³⁶ In the meantime, a social democratic party (SDP) and various civil rights organizations were formed, among them “New Forum”, and fought for official approval.³⁷ The opening of the border on 9 November put an end to the demonstrators’ week-long fight to change the travel law. It was only the successful demonstrations in October 1989, the opening of the border on 9 November, and above all, the protection the new organizations and parties provided that encouraged the emergence of demands at the factory level. This delay was not without good cause. As described above, the factories in the GDR

35 “Notice of withdrawal”, in *Der betriebliche Aufbruch*, ed. Gehrke and Hürtgen, 331.

36 Renate Hürtgen, “Das Wunder von Halberstadt. Die demokratische Revolution in der Provinz”, in *Herbst 1989 in der DDR-Provinz. Fallbeispiele: Pritzwalk, Halberstadt und Gotha*, ed. Hele Panke e.V. (Berlin: Helle Panke e.V. – Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Berlin, 2015), 32–49.

37 Christel Degen, *Politikvorstellung und Biografie: Die Bürgerbewegung Neues Forum auf der Suche nach der kommunikativen Demokratie* (Opladen: Leske & Budrich, 2000).

were tightly controlled places. Those people who stood up to the factory management in public lacked the type of protection provided by the anonymity of the street. Significantly, the pioneers of the transition in the factories often included people who joined a new opposition group in October or November and then also attempted to found, for example, a "New Forum" group in their own factory. This provided them with political protection, made paper and the use of a copying machine accessible to them and enabled them to build up an alternative information structure that could be used for the factory actions.³⁸

The lack of the means of communication and of public spaces in which to organize constituted further problems for those who wanted to transfer the "spirit of the street" into the factory. Different later accounts recall how activists had made use of the bulletin boards or the blackboards in factory corridors to post a piece of paper with their own message, often to be quickly removed by the party secretary.³⁹ The "fight around the bulletin board" was symbolic of the fight for publicity within the factories during the autumn of 1989. The trade union meetings organized independently by members and union representatives were also an example of this. The new, previously totally unknown feeling of power was expressed in demands to the factory management to publicly account for the state of the factory, and to introduce *Glasnost* and *Perestroika* in the workplaces.

The crucial demands, which directly questioned the prevailing power relations, were aimed at disbanding the factory combat teams and the SED structures, as well as their so-called mass organizations. The slogans were: "Party and state security, out of the factories! Break the combat teams! Stop socialist competition!" The latter demand above all delegitimized the trade unions at the factories; the same unions that in the past had organized performance competitions in order to increase production. In some of the factories, workers or their representatives organized explicit votes to withdraw their trust from these bodies. The "explanation" sent early November 1989 by the employees of VEB Rationalisierungsmittelbau Zwickau to the factory director and the

38 "Factory groups" were founded within the New Forum and United Left. With regard to the connection between the new civil rights movement and the factory activists in 1989–1990, see Wilfried Wilkens-Friedrich, *Die Beziehungen zwischen Neuem Forum und Gewerkschaften am Beispiel Berlins. Eine Fallstudie zum Spannungsverhältnis von neuen und alten sozialen Bewegungen* (Berlin: Zentralinstitut für Sozialwissenschaftliche Forschung der Freien Universität Berlin, 1994); Bernd Gehrke, "Demokratiebewegung und Betrieb in der 'Wende' 1989. Plädoyer für einen längst fälligen Perspektivwechsel", in *Der betriebliche Aufbruch*, ed. Gehrke and Hürtgen, 204–246.

39 "Also, die Hauptunruhen im Hauptwerk waren Wandzeitungen", News from the TV-electronics factory in Berlin, in *Der Betriebliche Aufbruch*, ed. Gehrke and Hürtgen, 68.

management of the complex included a demand for the text to be published in the company newsletter, which at that time was still firmly controlled by the party. A group of co-workers set up a grassroots group of the “New Forum” in their factory and with great self-assurance made suggestions for production, and even made their demands complete with a precise schedule containing deadlines to be complied with. In the event of failure to comply, they threatened a warning strike.⁴⁰

However, neither the fall of Erich Honecker in October nor the resignation of his successor Egon Krenz in December 1989 could fully eliminate the old power relations, and by January 1990, the SED appeared even stronger. In many of the factories, the old managers continued their activities without interruption, and the Ministry of State Security was not disbanded, but instead turned into the Office for National Security by the Modrow government. A strike wave organized independently from the state-led trade unions swept the country between October 1989 and January 1990, in which the industrialized south of the GDR played a notable role.⁴¹ Employees partly returned to the old traditions of the workers’ movement, and partly used uncommon forms of action such as the occupation of factories, hunger strikes or road blockades. Demands for eliminating the old work regime and the existing political power structure went hand in hand.

Changes in the balance of power within the factories started to take place. The factory combat groups disintegrated, and the structures of the SED, the Free German Youth (FDJ) and the German Soviet Friendship disappeared. Their former offices remained empty or were closed. In some of the factories, the workers’ representatives even dismissed the factory directors. Cadres, party secretaries and other members of the management left their positions; sometimes silently, sometimes under protest. For the workforce of the GDR, this process gave rise to forms of self-empowerment only typical at times of revolutions. When the protagonists of the factory transition met a decade after the autumn of 1989, they referred to that time – apart from the realistic evaluation that in the end they could not accomplish all their revolutionary objectives – as the time of “walking upright”, and as a determining moment in their lives. There was unfortunately not much time left for the GDR workers for this kind of experience, as Gerd S., at the time a turner at the company Rationalisierungsbau Karl-Marx-Stadt and a founding member of the Basisforum

40 “Statement of the New Forum at the Rationalisationsbau works, in manuscript, no date (early November 1989)”, in *Der betriebliche Aufbruch*, ed. Gehrke and Hürtgen, 358.

41 Lindner, *Die demokratische Revolution*, 92.

Rationalisierungsbau of the New Forum, remembers: "That was a short time when we had relatively a lot, yes, a lot of power. Very different from today".⁴²

The newly founded workers' organizations were surprised that the company management often accepted negotiations with them so readily. One explanation was that "this turmoil itself paralysed them in a way".⁴³ Nevertheless, there were old – as well as new – directors in a number of factories who seized the opportunities to adapt to market conditions. A joint-venture agreement released by the Modrow government provided the legal basis for negotiations with Western companies, and the first wave of staff dismissals soon started. On 22 December 1989, the director of the Elektroapparate Werke Treptow Company announced the closure of complete factory departments. An announcement at the company VEB Bergmann-Borsig highlighted the risky situation that new grassroots initiatives faced:

On 17 and 18 January there will be negotiations with Western partners about a joint venture, holding or other forms of cooperation. Chief executive D. and his deputy A. have stubbornly remained silent about their plans and intentions so far. We need to act immediately. It may happen that entire units of our factory *will be closed down or liquidated*.⁴⁴

5 Towards New Representative Structures?

Only after new groups and initiatives had been established inside and outside the factories, and "round tables" had been set up everywhere, did a lively discussion erupt about the aims and strategy for the transition. For a few weeks, thousands of citizens were involved in considering a democratically constituted GDR, in the process advancing the most varied collection of approaches.⁴⁵

42 "Minutes of the conference of the Bildungswerk Berlin of the Heinrich Böll Foundation, 27 November 1999", in *Der betrieblicher Aufbruch*, ed. Gehrke and Hürtgen, 52.

43 "Minutes of the conference of the Bildungswerk Berlin of the Heinrich Böll Foundation, 27 November 1999", in *Der betrieblicher Aufbruch*, ed. Gehrke and Hürtgen, 48.

44 "Proclamation to found a provisory factory council at the VEB Bergmann-Borsig", in *Der betriebliche Aufbruch*, ed. Gehrke and Hürtgen, 420. Bold type and anonymization in the original.

45 The draft of a new work constitution, which was presented in the last Volkskammer (people's chamber) of the GDR in February 1990, made an especially far-reaching contribution. Stiftung Haus der Demokratie und Menschenrechte, ed., "*Verfassungsentwurf des Runden Tisches, 1990*": *The result of the political self-determination in the GDR from the autumn of 1989 till the election on 18 March 1990* (2nd edition, Berlin: Haus der Demokratie, 2014).

A wider learning curve began, because “nobody had any idea about democracy, not in the factory anyway”, as Ewald S. summed up the situation in retrospect.⁴⁶ An active minority became engaged in changing the power relations in the factories, and only a segment of them became members of the new political, economic and trade union elites after the transitional period.⁴⁷

In order to ensure their legitimacy, the mostly small groups of four or five colleagues who took the initiative to accept the challenge – and in order to be authorized to act – collected signatures for their petitions or called for elections. Others established themselves simply as a “workers’ council”, “factory council”, “institution council”, “independent trade union group”, “working committee” or “basis group”, in advance of the organization of proper elections. Terms such as “provisory factory council” describe the temporary nature of these boards. In addition, the founding of “round tables” in the factories testified to the existing power vacuum. As of December 1989, such round tables existed in Berlin, where delegates of the SED and other parties, the FDGB and the church could meet members of the newly founded civil rights groups.⁴⁸

In addition to such initiatives, which were independent of the FDGB, new elections for the factory trade union organizations started at the end of November. In many cases, the chair of the union branch was removed; in some of the factories they resigned of their own volition. The initiators were often whole trade union groups and – surprisingly – the shop stewards. The latter is remarkable, because during the GDR era, shop stewards were not strongly connected with fighting for workers’ rights.⁴⁹ The activity of the shop stewards,

46 “Minutes of the conference of the Bildungswerk Berlin of the Heinrich Böll Foundation, 27 November 1999”, in *Der betriebliche Aufbruch*, ed. Gehrke and Hürtgen, 36.

47 There is no extensive examination of who from the Eastern trade unions, and to what extent, took over any positions in the Western trade unions and if they were functionaries in the FDGB. Some biographical reports show that former functionaries were primarily involved, but less so the participants from the period of the grassroots upheaval. Cf. Detlev Brunner and Christian Hall, *Revolution, Umbruch, Neuaufbau. Erinnerungen gewerkschaftlicher Zeitzeugen der DDR* (Berlin-Brandenburg: Bebra Verlag, 2014); Larissa Klinzing, “Zwischen Anpassung und Öffnung. Gewerkschaftsstrukturen im beigetretenen Teil Deutschlands”, in *Politische Strukturen im Umbruch*, ed. Hiltrud Naßmacher et al. (Berlin, 1994), 155–180; Joerg Roesler and Dagmar Semmelmann, *Vom Kombinat zur Aktiengesellschaft: Ostdeutsche Energiewirtschaft im Umbruch in den 1980er und 1990er Jahren* (Bonn: Karl Dietz Verlag, 2005).

48 Uwe Thaysen, *Der Runde Tisch. Oder: Wo blieb das Volk? Der Weg der DDR in die Demokratie* (Opladen: vs Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 1990).

49 Renate Hürtgen, “Vertrauensleute des FDGB in den siebziger und achtziger Jahren. Funktionslos im großen Funktionärsstaat DDR?” in *Vom Funktionieren der Funktionäre. Politische Interessenvertretung und gesellschaftliche Integration in Deutschland nach 1933*, ed. Till Kössler and Helke Stadtland (Essen: Klartext, 2004), 157–178.

without any orders from the FDGB or the individual trade union branch officials, should not be confused with the reform movements within the FDGB.

No research has been carried out to date that can give a more complete view of the profile of the main protagonists in the factory movement. According to my own impressions as an eyewitness, which are supported by the fragmented literature that exists, the key players were employees with technical or economic qualifications, but who did not hold management positions. The documents also show the presence of skilled manual workers among the initiators. It seems that the latter were more strongly represented in the initiatives aimed at the renewal of trade unions, whereas the participation of the former group was greater in the foundation of factory councils.

It is almost impossible to find a common structure in the movement as it took shape in different factories. In some, a newly elected factory trade union leadership, a factory council and an independent trade union group operated side by side for a few weeks.⁵⁰ However, by November 1989 it had already become clear that despite the differences in their names, many of these initiatives reflected similar demands for workers' involvement in running the factories. For example, the announcement made by a trade union called "Reform" included the demand for "the participation of trade unions in factory management".⁵¹

A more far-reaching programme for changing the form of workers' representation was put forward by the IUG,⁵² which worked out a statute at the end of December.⁵³ It left open the question of whether the independent trade union should be organized on a sectoral, company or professional basis. However, the draft statute clearly outlined the demand to remove the full-time trade union bureaucracy and to replace it with elected shop stewards. Ideas put forward by the IUG about reducing the number of full-time functionaries, direct election of workers' representatives, transparency, the right to strike and the

50 "E.g. at the company Berliner Werk für Fernsehelektronik (WF)", in *Der betriebliche Aufbruch*, ed. Gehrke and Hürtgen, 64.

51 "Call for the Independent Trade Union 'Reform' in VEB Geräte- und Reglerwerk (GRW) Teltow for the Foundation of Independent Trade Unions, 16 October 1989", in *Der betriebliche Aufbruch*, ed. Gehrke and Hürtgen, 342.

52 "Tasks and rights of works councils, basis for discussion of the content of a works constitution law, on the occasion of the 1st works council conference of the GDR, 31 January 1989", in *Der betriebliche Aufbruch*, ed. Gehrke and Hürtgen, 518.

53 "Statute draft (1990)", in "Now there are initiative people and one should invite them all to the same table", *Die Initiative für unabhängige Gewerkschaften (IUG) 1989 bis 1990, Darstellung und Dokumente*, ed. Leonore Ansorg and Renate Hürtgen (Berlin: FU Berlin, 1990), 79–83.

right of association were included in the programmes of other independent trade unions.⁵⁴ The unpopularity of the old FDGB gave a decisive impetus for these initiatives, because nobody had any trust in its renewal, and the preparations for an extraordinary FDGB congress at the end of January were similarly viewed with mistrust.

6 Beyond 1989

By the beginning of 1990, much had changed for the grassroots movements in the factories. The trend to form new advocacy groups had been replaced by attempts to build factory councils comparable with similar representative bodies in Western companies. Groups that had called themselves “independent trade unions” back in October and November 1989, changed their names to “provisory factory councils”. There were attempts to build inter-company networks out of the hundreds of grassroots initiatives in individual factories. On 31 January 1990, a national meeting of Independent Trade Union Initiatives and – on the same day – a meeting of factory councils took place, with over 80 factories represented in each of these meetings. In December 1989 there had already been a proposal to create a “Council of Employees”. None of these proposals were successful.⁵⁵ It is true that even in January 1990, state security attempted to hinder such networking. However, this is not sufficient to explain the failure to build a national movement out of the individual factory initiatives.

For an explanation, it is necessary to look at the character of the revolutionary transition in the GDR, which – as mentioned before – was neither a workers’ uprising nor something that started in the factories. The contribution of the factory movement remained focused on disrupting the party dictatorship’s monopolistic structures in the factories themselves, and through this, the destruction of the old work regime. A more ambitious programme was never on the agenda. The character of the new citizens’ movements of the autumn of 1989 also contributed to this. Factory or trade union issues were never a prime concern for the New Forum,⁵⁶ which also never had the aim of

54 “Open letter of the brigade Maintenance-Tiefbau”, in *Der betriebliche Aufbruch*, ed. Gehrke and Hürtgen, 350–354.

55 A representative of the United Leftists (vL) summarized in 1999, that the demand for “workers’ control was not included in the agenda of the people concerned”, in *Der betriebliche Aufbruch*, ed. Gehrke and Hürtgen, 110.

56 This is confirmed by the absence of such issues in the founding call for New Forum, <https://www.hdg.de/lemo/bestand/objekt/dokument-aufbruch-89.html> [10 July 2019].

uniting the demands of the factories and those of the "street" by means of a general strike.⁵⁷ Lastly, the popularity of the West German model was also a reason to aim for more limited forms of factory representation. From the GDR employees' point of view, West German labour relations provided a solid and extremely effective basis for the improvement of the quality of work and life.

Despite this, however, the factory grassroots initiatives did not simply prove to be replicas of the Work Constitutional Act that regulated workers' representation in West German factories. They demanded more far-reaching rights related to factory management, as can be established from the documents relating to these initiatives. They included demands for co-determination "concerning any issues of factory development", "in any structural questions" and "in any ownership question", as the programme of the factory council of Funkwerk Köpenick stated.⁵⁸ The Council of the Employees in Karl-Marx-Stadt demanded "involvement in every issue concerning cadre politics", as well as "in the production planning, the execution of production, investment, sales, furthermore the fields of research and development".⁵⁹ Other boards claimed veto rights over personnel issues and matters of corporate strategy, or gave a future factory council far-reaching rights regarding the appointment of managers.⁶⁰ Even many groups that did not describe their prerogatives in similarly far-reaching terms took it for granted that factory councils should have a say in the organization of factory production and the distribution of profits. How indignant they were when a few months later they learned what strict limits the Federal German Work Constitution Act would impose on the factory councils.

The focus on workers' participation in management functions from the outset involved the risk that trying to work in the best interests of the employees could turn into an aspiration to become part of the management. Some of the demands for participation were indeed not based on the vision of a trade unionist, conflict-oriented type of representation of the employees in the leadership of the enterprise. This was the case for instance with the "institute council" at the centre of the scientific equipment engineering company (Zentrum

57 Bernd Gehrke, "Die 'Wende'-Streiks: A first draft", in *Der betriebliche Aufbruch*, ed. Gehrke and Hürtgen, 247–270.

58 "Work programme of the company VEB Funkwerk Köpenick, factory unit Dubendorf, o. D. (January 1990)", in *Der betriebliche Aufbruch*, ed. Gehrke and Hürtgen, 432–433. See the annex.

59 "Responsibilities and structures of the 'Council of the Employees' in Karl-Marx-Stadt, 22 December 1989", in *Der betriebliche Aufbruch*, 397, ed. Gehrke and Hürtgen, <http://www.ddr89.de/betriebe/RDW3.html> [10 July 2019].

60 "First Factory in the GDR on the works council's activities of VEB Schwertransport Leipzig, 29 December 1989", in *Der betriebliche Aufbruch*, ed. Gehrke and Hürtgen, 402.

für wissenschaftlichen Gerätebau, ZWG) in Berlin. The activists involved there presented themselves in a self-confident manner as partners with equal rights, who could not be left out of the decision-making in the highest echelons of management.⁶¹ East German protagonists who identified with such an interpretation of workers' participation, and who considered it their prime responsibility to foster the "well-being of the enterprise" resembled representatives of West German factory councils, and their thinking came close to the so-called *Standortdenken*; that is, the vision that the major task was to ensure the viability of the enterprise in the given location and context.

West German trade unions sidestepped these grassroots initiatives, and made every effort to extend West German practices of workers' representation to the GDR.⁶² They emphasized the elections of factory and staff committees, but not the election of shop stewards. The consequences of the uncritical replication of the West German factory council model would become clear by the early 1990s, when trade unions proved unable to fight the privatization wave that followed German unification.⁶³

Many employees very quickly began to familiarize themselves with the West German industrial relations law (*Betriebsverfassungsgesetz*). Among them were some who for months – more or less gloomily – had been trying to build up a basis for independent representation in the factories, at the latest after the elections to the East German Parliament in March 1990. The functionaries "flown in" from the West told them: "Get rid of all of the stuff you have prepared here. It will not earn you anything. Get prepared for the Industrial Relations Law".⁶⁴ Gerd S. adds that they themselves did not want to accept this for a long time, but the situation was becoming more and more precarious.

61 "The foundation of an institute council at the Centre of Scientific Instruments' Work, AdW", in *Der betriebliche Aufbruch*, ed. Gehrke and Hürtgen, 384–386.

62 Michael Fichter and Stefan Lutz, *Gewerkschaftsaufbau in den neuen Bundesländern: Eine Chronik der Ereignisse 1989–1991* (Berlin: Zentralinstitut für Sozialwissenschaftliche Forschung der Freien Universität Berlin, 1991).

63 Ulla Plenert, ed., *Die Treuhand – der Widerstand in den Betrieben der DDR – die Gewerkschaften (1990–1994)* (Berlin: Nora, 2011).

64 "Minutes of the conference of the Bildungswerk Berlin of the Heinrich Böll Foundation, 27 November 1999", in *Der betriebliche Aufbruch*, ed. Gehrke and Hürtgen, 57. Dieter W., at that time a member of the autonomously founded factory council at Stahl- und Walzwerk Hennigsdorf, says that the trade unions – here the IG Metall – did not ask what new forms of representations there were, or how they were organized. "Not at all. They came, took us over, and that was all, and they pushed through their structures", Detlev Brunner and Christian Hall, *Revolution, Umbruch, Neubeginn. Erinnerungen gewerkschaftlicher Zeitzeugen der DDR* (Berlin-Brandenburg: Bebra Verlag, 2014), 97.

As a matter of fact, the phenomenon described by contemporary witnesses as the “survival fight” of the companies had already begun in 1990. As there were no alternatives, the offer by the DGB trade unions to provide stable and powerful representation of interests in the factories appeared very attractive. Up to the beginning of 1991, almost all of the major enterprises had elected factory councils and staff committees, in which the trade unions were able to position “their own men”. The GDR employees went through their first real pay disputes and trade union-facilitated strikes. The numerous new ideas and grassroots impulses for the design of labour relations that had sprung up in the autumn of 1989 gave way to the preparation and facilitation of elections. The historical moment of the revolutionary transition was over, and the discussions about what the “real” representation of workers’ interests within companies should look like were replaced by the study of the Federal German Industrial Relations Law. For the time being, labour relations in East Germany acquired – with the East German workforce actively contributing to the process – their definite shape. The momentum aimed at the generation of a “somewhat more leftist trade union” that had developed back in autumn 1989 did not – as Karin K., an activist of the company transformation process, and later involved with the IG-Metall, put it – manage to inject itself into this process. Yet at the same time, Karin K. underlines that the experience of “walking upright” did live on, and continued to make a difference, which cannot be disputed:

However, I want to say something, again, about the major outcome for myself. The rock band R.E.M. has a good song with the title ‘Walk Unafraid’. Having learnt how to march fearlessly, this walking upright, to have learned this and to stick to it, this embodies the development of my political emancipation in those days, and I wish to retain it for myself.⁶⁵

7 Conclusion

There was no workers’ uprising in the GDR in the autumn of 1989; instead, a democratic grassroots revolution took place against the ruling dictatorial regime. The goals of the protagonists were somewhat like those of the political and social movements that had emerged in Western Europe after 1968. The movements that emerged in the factories resembled far more the factory

65 “Minutes of the conference of the Bildungswerk Berlin of the Heinrich Böll Foundation, 27 November 1999”, in *Der betriebliche Aufbruch*, ed. Gehrke and Hürtgen, 158.

struggles of 1968 and the following years in Western Europe than the Russian revolution of 1917, the German revolution of November 1918 or even the workers' uprising that had taken place in the GDR in 1953. In 1989 and 1990, the fight of the workers and employees in the GDR was aimed at the improvement of working and living conditions, higher wages, less overtime and the acknowledgement of qualifications, with high expectations of an economy not subordinated to central party control. Workers were concerned with the recreation of an independent labour movement, and their historic contribution was to question and destroy the labour relations that had been dominant in GDR factories. The democratic transition in the autumn of 1989 was therefore also expressed in claims for labour participation in the management of and decision-making in the factories.

The revolution of 1989 started an exciting learning process about the content and structures of autonomous factory representation, and opened up a small historic "time window", in which workers in the GDR were able to investigate their own forms of action after decades of repression. This period did not end immediately after the adoption of the Federal German regulation of labour relations. Completely ignored by the historiography – including that about the trade unions – East German employees started a struggle, unprecedented in the history of Germany, against the privatization and closing down of the GDR factories. This was accomplished mainly through the organization of the Trust agency, which entailed the elimination of more than half of all the industrial workplaces within four years. Between 1990 and 1994, East Germany saw the eruption of a wave of strikes and protests against the de-industrialization policy. Due to the lack of trade union leadership, the majority of these actions were organized and carried out autonomously by workers and factory councils. What did not happen in 1989, but did take place in 1993, was that the factory councils and staff committees united into a supra-regional alliance, and also organized protests directed against the government. As many as 200 protests, strikes, factory occupations or blockades were recorded during the period from 1990 to 1994, many of them initiated by workers without the support of trade union leadership.⁶⁶

Such labour disputes did not fit into the self-image of the Federal German trade unions, whose aim was to resign to the long-established methods in this historically unprecedented situation, and to continue their policy of establishing

66 Related research will soon be accessible on the page of the working group of the history of social movements East-West, <https://geschichtevonuntenostwest.wordpress.com/> [13 November 2019].

co-management structures. To question the prevailing Federal German labour relations, to politicize strikes and other disputes, to amend the regional economic policy or to demand more rights for the trade union representatives was not included in their agenda. This is how they became part of an accelerating neoliberal development, which was not expected to comprise a challenge to the existing labour relations.

Annex: Two Examples of Factory Documents for the Movement of 1989–1990

Colleagues,

What has the FDGB done for us during these 40 years?

Has it negotiated the reduction of working hours, our constant demand, with the factory management? Why has it failed to fight together with us for the 40-hour week?

Has it made sure that our wages will be adjusted to creeping inflation? Why have they always failed to bargain about collective pay rises?

Where are the functionaries of the FDGB when new production standards are introduced in our factory?

Are they by our side? Do they block the standards until it is guaranteed that we will be paid accordingly?

How can the FDGB allow, as an alleged advocate, that we have on average 10 days shorter holidays than our colleagues in the West?

Has the FDGB made any efforts to lower the retirement age?

Have we ever experienced that the leadership of the factory trade union refused to accept the state plan in order to protect our interests? Have we ever experienced that the trade union took any actions for us at all in opposition to the state and the party?

40 years without representation of our own interests is enough!

We cannot let ourselves be organized any more, not even by the “new people” – we must organize by ourselves. The years to come will be no cakewalk for us. The thumbscrews will be tightened. The prices will rise, but hardly the wages. When subsidies fail, that will hit us, above all. The state demands production, soon it will threaten us with dismissals. We have to push the caravan from the mud!

If we do not want to let our living standards sink considerably, we will need our own representation.

- Call for general assemblies, and demand accountability from the leadership of the factory trade unions
- Appoint speakers from among our colleagues

- Let these colleagues place your demands with the factory management
- If difficulties arise, stand by these colleagues
- Publish the results immediately as a protection against repression
- Try to contact colleagues from other factories

Go ahead with the foundation of independent trade unions!

Contact office: "Initiative for Independent Trade Unions" in Club Conrad-Blenkle-Straße 1, Berlin 1055, Tel., from 15/11, Wednesday 17.00 - 19.00 and on Monday 19.00 - 21.00.

Source: Private archive of the author

To all the co-workers of HO Industry!

Call for Unity and the Establishment of Independent Trade Unions

What was and still is the FDGB?

Has it served as the representation of employees?

It has been and it remains a federation that wants to carry on fobbing us off with travel payments and makes ridiculous demands, such as for example only two extra days of paid vacation. Do not let them fool you with benefits *not specified in the collective agreement*. We want all HO-co-workers to be in a financial position that allows them to choose their holiday destination themselves, and pay for it head held high in a travel agency. It means among other things:

- *Wage rises specified in the collective agreement with regard to the rising cost of living*
- *Modern and decent workplaces*
- *Reduction of the daily and weekly working hours as well as the retirement age*
- *Freedom from party constraints*
- *Unity of all co-workers of HO-Industry*

We want to get these demands across to the management of the industrial complex as well as other state leaders.

We must take action now, before they take action against us!

There is no need to wait for gifts. We must take our future into our own hands. That is why you should join us!

Appoint speakers at the branches and departments to draw up a programme together with us.

Advise us of the names and addresses as well as the branch address of everybody who wants to join us.

Send it to

Jens P. 1071 Berlin, Isländische Str. 13

Thomas E. 1142 Berlin, Brodower Ring 24

You can directly talk to us on the first and third Thursday every month at the address of Thomas E., from 19.30 till 21.00 in the club room (ground floor). The first dates are: 18 January and 1 February.

Do not forget: Nothing good ever happens unless you do it yourself!

Source: Private archive of the author

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