Conclusion

As a worker in the Bolshevik leadership, with experience of having participated in Western-European socialist parties and trade unions, Shlyapnikov promoted meaningful participation from below in governing and economic management. His proposals had democratic potential, even though they were too narrowly class-based. He tolerated political differences among workers and demonstrated compassion towards workers’ suffering, but he was too easily convinced, as a young man, that workers’ rights could only be ensured by the political repression of the propertied classes. Among workers he was a natural leader. Many liked and admired him as a comrade committed to bettering their lives at the local level and on a grander scale, who had risen far in party and union ranks and who had proven himself professionally through developing his skills as a metalworker in the most demanding industrial jobs not only in Russia, but also in the most advanced factories of Western Europe. He sought to elevate talented proletarians to positions in the party, trade unions, economic administration and government. Moreover, he possessed sufficient self-confidence, reinforced by an ironic sense of humour, to speak and act autonomously in circles of the party intelligentsia. His charm, work ethic and intelligence won the friendship and respect of many European socialists – not only radicals but moderates as well. He became a high-ranking party official, trade-union leader and economic administrator, accumulating layers of identity throughout his life, yet the perspective he acquired early on as an industrial worker never completely left him.

Shlyapnikov’s character and principles began to form in a youth of poverty; his mother raised him, since his father had died young, and the culture of the Old Belief shaped his early impressions of the Russian Orthodox Church and the tsarist authorities as capricious and oppressive. As a youth, Shlyapnikov was an eager and talented student, who continued to study after his formal schooling ended. His interests included the humanities as well as technical subjects. Lacking the opportunity to achieve a higher education, he regarded skilled factory work as a worthy career goal and his proletarian ‘credentials’ were unimpeachable. He began metals factory work at the age of 13, quickly became a skilled fitter, turner and draftsman and practised his craft for 17 years in Russian and Western-European metalworking factories. Shlyapnikov’s experience as a factory worker shaped both his understanding of Bolshevism and his vision of the role of workers in the socialist state.

Having abandoned his childhood religious beliefs as he read more widely and entered the orbit of older workers who were atheists, he soon came under
the sway of Social-Democratic political philosophy. Belief in the victory of the working class over capitalist oppression supplanted for him faith in God and redemption in the afterlife. In prison and in emigration he intently read the works of Marx and Engels, seeking a firm grounding in the philosophy to which he had devoted his life, in order to put it into practice. Although he was not a theorist, Shlyapnikov sought to understand Marxism and apply it practically. For him, deeds more than words proved who a person was and what he believed, and led to the creation of a better world. A tireless organiser for the Bolshevik Party and the unions of which he was a member, he also wrote valuable and respected memoir histories of the Russian revolutionary movement and of the 1917 revolutions, yet even his published memoirs had a practical orientation. They conveyed to workers an oblique call to action – for workers to emancipate themselves.

Turning points in Shlyapnikov’s life coincided with pivotal events in twentieth-century Russian and Soviet history. From the Revolution of 1905, when he led demonstrations against tsarist rule in his native Murom and was imprisoned for his efforts, Shlyapnikov began developing into a dedicated, bold and experienced revolutionary. Forced to flee Russia in the reactionary year 1908 to avoid arrest, he resumed a life of factory work and political activities (legal and illegal) in Western Europe, from which he returned permanently to Russia only in late 1916. His work in Western-European factories and his involvement in the trade unions there acquainted him with more developed forms of worker organisation than he had seen in Russia, where unions were tightly restricted and for long periods banned outright. Moving in the circles of the Russian party intelligentsia, he grew closer to Vladimir Lenin and carried on an intimate relationship with the noblewoman and socialist feminist, Alexandra Kollontai. Kollontai’s idealism and admiration of the working class resounded with Shlyapnikov; she encouraged him to develop his abilities as a worker-intelligent and as a politician. Under the tutelage of Kollontai, Lenin and Nadezhda Krupskaya, he wrote articles about working-class life and organisation.

Having worked in French, German and English factories and having participated in French and English trade unions, Shlyapnikov firmly believed that Russian workers could learn much from their Western-European counterparts. His investigations into wage rates, production practices, labour exchanges and other problems increased his understanding of the unions’ practical role in workers’ lives. Yet he saw the purpose of trade unions as not only to provide for workers in times of sickness or unemployment, but also to advance the cause of the ‘workers’ revolution’. He favoured new-style production unions, unifying workers of an entire industry, over trade unions that brought together workers