WORKERS' PARTICIPATION IN THE MANAGEMENT OF ENTERPRISES AND ORGANIZATIONS IN THE USSR. THE 1983 LAW ON LABOUR COLLECTIVES AND ITS IMPLEMENTATION

ANDERS FOGELKLOU
Assistant Professor, Faculty of Law. Senior Lecturer, Department for Soviet and East European Studies, University of Uppsala, Sweden

1. Introduction

Workers' self-management and industrial democracy has – except for a short time, and mostly for tactical reasons, during the Bolshevik ascension to power in Russia in 1917-1918 – never been an important feature of Soviet industrial relations. Trade unions are controlled by Party and state and the independence that officially has been given to enterprises and organizations in an otherwise centralized economy, is to a large extent legally and socially firmly in the hands of management.

But failures in achieving economic goals in the USSR have inter alia resulted in the political leadership paying more attention to passivity and apathy among workers. The demands for intensifikatsia, i.e. a strategy of intensive economic growth and higher productivity, has for a long time had a prominent place on the Soviet political agenda. An increase in production by an extraction of a larger amount of raw materials and the utilization of more labour has exhausted its potentials in the USSR. Soviet leaders have so far declined to make any substantial reforms of the economic systems. Changes introduced by Yuri Andropov, have been limited to an experimental level and, continuing these experiments, Michail Gorbachev has so far only made smaller reforms. In order to improve the quality of goods and services the Soviet government has taken recourse to traditional organizational and disciplinary measures.

The exhortations and campaigns to increase productivity and combat irresponsibility and bad management have become an integrated part of

2. Decree of the Central Committee of the CPSU and the Council of Ministers of the USSR, 4 Aug. 1985; Pr. 5 Aug. 1985, 1.
Soviet public life and labour discipline has been the object of endless, ritualistic propaganda. Material incentives must be supplemented with disciplinary and organizational measures. The stick has to be used together with the carrot in order to get things done in enterprises and organizations. In accordance with such a view a new decree aimed at imposing stricter labour discipline was adopted in 1983.4

Also various organizational measures have been contemplated. To organize the work force in brigades has been regarded as a way of achieving higher productivity. Brigades should be given more responsibility and work on a contract basis. At the same time they should ensure stricter labour discipline. Although 70% of employees, engaged in material production, now are organized in brigades, the expectations attached to them have not so far been fulfilled and one legal scholar warned that stronger work motivation and stricter discipline cannot primarily be achieved through organizational measures such as brigades. The causes of poor discipline and inertia lay elsewhere.4

In reality the regime has got stuck in a vicious circle. Strong material incentives in the form of better access to consumer goods and good quality services would improve the situation, but the present system prevents the emergence of such a possibility. Besides, low productivity is caused as much by poor equipment, bad organization and delays in deliveries as by an attitude of indifference among workers to the final results of production if these do not provide visible material gains.

In order to solve these problems also political measures such as increased participation have been suggested. The involvement of workers in the administration of enterprises would help from this point of view and stimulate productivity. But the existence of trade unions, various other committees and commissions, and Permanent Production Conference have only in exceptional cases involved the majority of workers in enterprises and organizations in more intensive participation.

Soviet sociological research has shown that only a minority of employees plays an active social and political role in enterprises. The majority seems

3. See e.g., Gorbachev's speech of 11 June 1985; Pr. 12 June 1985, 1-2.
4. SP SSSR 1983 No.21 item 115.
8. See e.g., Trud 7 June 1983.