Most recent studies of labor relations in Russia after the fall of the tsarist regime reject the formerly held view that the Russian revolution was beset from its very inception by a bitter, insoluble conflict between workers and their employers. Though we might disagree on how prominent such tendencies were, all of us studying the various manifestations of the workers’ movement see the first two months of the revolution as marked by moderation, readiness to compromise, and concern for what was presented to workers and employers as the interest of revolutionary Russia. Historians also agree that, beginning in late April or May 1917, this pattern of moderation gave way to one of intransigence, growing conflict, and an eventual polarization which, by early July, had made political coexistence impossible.

However, in our understanding of these changing patterns of labor relations we have just begun to move away from the essentialist view of an escalating, predictable, even inevitable, industrial conflict rising directly from the interaction between labor and capital. The present paper looks at the three-way relation among the owners and managers of factories, their workers, and the Mensheviks who sought to manage labor relations, first through the labor section of the Petrograd Soviet, and later, after the Menshevik party had joined coalition government, through the Ministry of Labor. This paper does not attempt a comprehensive analysis of labor relations in the revolution but simply offers some thoughts about the varied and interlocking factors that affected the interaction between workers and employers.

I will present two sets of arguments. The first holds that workers’ and employers’ responses were informed by longstanding attitudes that were at

the same time deeply embedded and highly ambiguous, even if economic factors often set the extent to which such responses could be conciliatory.

The second set of arguments concerns the setting within which industrial relations functioned. The changing patterns of industrial relations, I argue, involved not simply a linearly escalating conflict but rather two or even three quite distinct phases, each taking place within a particular setting. These phases differed from one another in the organization and exercise of political authority and this in turn produced changes in the expectations of workers and employers. Also important in these "settings" were the leaders who shaped and interpreted a succession of political arrangements. The visions of the revolution which competing leaders offered their followers could foster, alternatively, moderation or militancy. However, the ability of these self-appointed leaders to have their views accepted by industrial workers and the commercial-industrial sector was itself affected by the changing tenor of labor relations and the prevailing political setting. In the case of the Mensheviks, their very ability to mediate the industrial conflict was influenced by such factors.

The Early Pattern of Moderation

The history of industrial relations in Petrograd in the years since 1905 has suggested to many observers the likelihood of a heated conflict once the instruments of enforcement—police and army—had disappeared. Attempts to involve labor in the wartime mobilization of industry had far less success in Russia than elsewhere, both because of the earlier history of confrontation between labor and organized industry and because the tsarist government and the majority of employers would not make the necessary concessions.

In the aftermath of the February victory workers began to press for the immediate satisfaction of certain "economic" demands, most notably the eight-hour workday.2 "Now that we have political freedom in the country," workers were saying, "we have also to try to destroy the economic slavery that has survived until now in the area of capital-labor relations."3 Claiming a right to live as was "deserving of a free citizen,"4 workers demanded a shorter workday, higher wages, the institution of a minimum wage, the "purge" of objectionable personnel, and the election of factory

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2. The use of the collective term "workers" is not meant to deny the difference of experience, attitude, and political orientation that divided workers along the lines of skill, factory size, industry, and city district, as well as sex and age.
