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Compulsory reduced working time in Belarus: Incidence, operation and consequences

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Abstract

This article examines compulsory reduced working time (CRWT) in five Belarusian factories, to assess its impact on employment relationships and evaluate arguments about ‘Soviet legacies’ and labour ‘patience’. Local use of CRWT increased between 2001 and 2012, and took a form more inimical to worker interests, thereby differing from official macro statistics. Managers expressed discontent at being pushed by state policy to use CRWT, but used it as a disciplinary tool. Workers perceived worsening work relationships and threats of collective response were in evidence. Arguments about ‘Soviet legacies’ and labour’s ‘patience’ therefore currently appear inappropriate.

Keywords

Collective bargaining, employee voice, labour relations

Introduction

This article examines the incidence, operation and consequences of ‘administrative leave’ and short-time work in a group of Belarusian enterprises in the 21st century. We jointly designate both practices ‘compulsory reduced working time’ (CRWT), distinguishing between them where necessary. The subject is important because it bears on the questions

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of how ‘patient’ (Beissinger and Sasse, 2013) workers in the region are in the face of worsening conditions and considerable repression. It also helps understanding of the social settlement in this important economy on the ‘transitional periphery’ (Bedo et al., 2011; Demirbag et al., 2015). Societies on the ‘transitional periphery’ (Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, the countries of the Caucasus and the Central Asian republics) are characterised by the apparent continued importance of ‘Soviet institutional and cultural legacies’, their geographic position on the edge of neighbouring major economies, their historic subordination to large powers, rapacious elites and weak democratic traditions (Demirbag et al., 2015). They contrast with the ex-Soviet countries now in the European Union, which have evolved in more democratic directions. On the transitional periphery, elites have captured state apparatuses, suppressing opposition. They have re-regulated employment relations by weakening employees’ positions and trade unions, suppressing previous trends to increased collective voice.

Most previous research on Belarusian labour has been at the macro level (Gaiduk et al., 2005, 2006; Sokolova, 2011, 2012; Vankevich, 2010; Vankevich et al., 2008). Indeed, Vankevich (2010) argues that the macro–micro distinction has little validity in the Belarusian case due to the economy’s centralisation. Enterprise-level studies (see e.g. Makovskaya, 2006, 2008) have been concerned with internal labour markets and wage formation rather than with worker experience. With the sole exception of a case study of one factory (Morrison et al., 2012) we have been unable to find any substantial research on how employee experiences have evolved in recent years at workplace level in these countries. Although it is clear that trade unions have been relatively successfully kept or brought back under state control, in some of these countries, including Belarus, how this has affected employment relations below the institutional level is also unclear. In Central Asia, serious labour disturbances have occurred in the 21st century, illustrating how workers may take large-scale action independent of unions (Dudarev, 2013; Petrov and Gafarly, 2013; Scherbak, 2007; Ziegler, 2010). There has been no equivalent in Belarus and perhaps partly as a result there has been very little research published on workers’ experience of employment, stimulating questions about how far workers accept the current industrial position. Much attention has been paid to ‘union revitalisation’ by western scholars (Frege and Kelly, 2004); we examine the consequences of a suppressed attempt at union revitalisation.

We use short-time working and administrative leave as routes into our broader issues for two main reasons. First, their impact and incidence across time indicates how far the official ideology of a ‘social economy’ may be considered plausible or sustainable. Second, income stability is a central concern to managers and employees and therefore crucial to how they view the wider social settlement. Both short-time working and administrative leave are forms of CRWT with serious implications for workers’ earnings, household economies and for employees’ willingness to invest in themselves and their current employers. Short-time working and administrative leave are different forms of CRWT, both of which have a legal basis explained in detail below. Short-time working is extensively regulated by the Labour Code providing the worker with legal grounds to dispute it in court, potentially limiting management prerogative. The role of trade unionism – which has a well-established legal watchdog role – is therefore relevant even when account is taken of the judiciary’s questionable independence (Kryvoi, 2006).

The article is structured as follows. We begin by deriving our research questions from ‘transitional periphery’, HRM and employment relations literature. We then explain our methods. Next, we present the relevant legal context explaining how legislation structures management options. In the subsequent section we analyse the incidence of CRWT according to enterprise and national statistics. Our core section then examines managers’ and workers’ perceptions of CRWT. Finally we conclude, paying particular attention to the role of ‘legacies’ and the issue of local labour’s ‘patience’ when confronted by CRWT.

Theory and research questions

Broad consensus exists that state traditions of regulation have deep historic roots in former socialist states in general, that are today particularly evident in states on the ‘transitional periphery’ (Danilovich and Croucher, 2011; Kuzio, 2000). It has also been argued that global trends towards financialisation and marketisation will eventually prevail, overcoming the barriers protecting national systems and their ‘path dependence’ (Streeck, 2009); but at present there is little current sign of this future being realised. In many of these states, elites continue to exert great influence through capture of state apparatuses. In ‘transition’ countries generally, while some have taken evolutionary paths, others, notably those on the ‘transitional periphery’, have exhibited regressive tendencies (Burawoy, 2002), have pursued continuity with the Soviet past and even used methods not deployed in Soviet times. Politically, there has been an increasing trend towards political Diktatura in Belarus by government through Presidential Decree and the marginalisation of opposition forces (Way, 2005). Organised labour has been increasingly repressed, less subject to international influence and workers themselves have been argued to have been relatively patient in international terms.

Crowley (2004) argued a decade ago that ‘labour’ was ‘quiescent’ and accepting of the status quo. He explained this ‘quiescence’ in terms of the Soviet institutional and cultural legacy, arguing that such legacies were difficult to overcome. He suggested that activists had become unsure what legitimate union functions were. Yet ‘quiescence’ is rather different from the ‘patience’ that Beissinger and Sasse (2013) suggest has been the predominant way of conceptualising worker attitudes in Eastern Europe, including Belarus. While quiescence suggests a lack of responsive and especially collective action, patience is a wider term that encompasses worker attitudes as well as their actions. Here, we are interested in both. In Belarus, workers’ patience was assumed to be at least partially the product of cultural and historical legacies. This causes them, in Hirschman’s terms (Hirschman, 1970), to resort to exit, rather than voice, in relationship with management. However, it may also be that workers owe their loyalty to enterprises rather to fear of adverse economic conditions which limit their employment options outside current workplaces than to a cultural legacy.

The social compromise has been explicit. In the century’s early years, the government’s position was that ‘shock therapy’ or rapid transitions were to be avoided; living standards were to be improved as market disciplines were slowly introduced and labour collectives preserved as far as possible. ‘Privatisation’ has therefore been formal with the state retaining control of major companies (Bakanova et al., 2006; Pastore and

Verashchagina, 2006; Vankevich et al., 2008). For the decade down to 2006, the settlement was underpinned by growth assisted by preferential access to Russian markets prior to a slowdown in production and exports in subsequent years (Favaro et al., 2012). Large scale lay-offs were recently considered imminent (Mikhailov, 2013). The obverse of this 'social economy' has been that in the political sphere, opposition and trade unionism were to be respectively curtailed and turned to regime purposes. The marginalisation of opposition was largely achieved, and the institutions which could potentially have policed the social compromise had been removed (Danilovich and Croucher, 2011). Workers had been deprived of 'voice'. Absence of voice is likely to mean employees allow their relationships with managers to atrophy and withdraw from 'committed organisational participation' (Donaghey et al., 2011: 53). Meanwhile, 'exit' possibilities were also restricted. Workers have limited mobility on the external labour market since they are linked to enterprises through the system of social guarantees, many of which they will not receive if employed elsewhere (Nozdrin-Plotnitsky and Vorobieva, 2009).

The social compromise may currently be more unstable than it appears. External government debt at 1 March 2014 was \$12.3 billion (Minfin, 2014) rendering further extensive subsidies to enterprises unsustainable. Crisis increases the influence of finance capital and elites at the expense of both managers and workers (Wood and Lane, 2009). Many leading enterprises have returned reduced net profits since the financial crisis. Thus, government attempts to delegate provision of social guarantees to enterprises have brought no discernible results.

As we noted above, whether key practices such as CRWT may be viewed as temporary pragmatic expedients or as more embedded practices is significant. CRWT has long been a feature of labour management in the 'transitional periphery' (Kosmarskaya, 2001). In Soviet times, CRWT was not used and it first appeared during 'transition' (Kosmarskaya, 2001). In an early study of Ukrainian companies Rosevear (1999: 347–358) referred to unpaid leave as a popular 'quick fix' for companies' cost management problems. She argued that the paternalistic nature of labour management stimulated managers to postpone difficult staffing decisions. She further suggested that under Ukrainian circumstances, the use of involuntary unpaid leave as a short-term solution was justified as it gave companies time to develop longer-term responses to the crisis of transition. The suggestion was therefore that it was an acceptable part of an enterprise-level adjustment process, a view shared by Vankevich and colleagues (Vankevich, 2010; Vankevich et al., 2008). Rosevear's conclusions are consistent with findings from other studies on the Ukrainian economic transition (see e.g. Andreyeva and Dean, 2007; Ishaq, 1997). In Ukraine, the practice appears to have become uncommon in the 21st century, and official Belarusian statistics (National Statistical Committee, 2013, 2014) suggest that this has also been the case in Belarus.

CRWT, designed to minimise labour costs, is part of a wider picture which encompasses simple non-payment of wages, wage arrears, moving workers onto one-year contracts that deprive them of legal rights and other practices inimical to employee interests (Kryvoi, 2006). We suggested above that the issue of unpredictable reduced earnings episodes creates major issues of economic democracy and therefore of employee voice on an issue of great importance to workers, i.e. the stability and predictability of their earnings. Unpredictable earnings clearly impact domestic economies, injecting uncertainty and suggesting that other risks may be shifted onto them. The absence of a social

security safety net (government denies the existence of significant unemployment) is very material. CRWT therefore seems likely to de-motivate employees and reduce their willingness to develop their human capital not only through employment and training but also through informal and self-directed learning which is associated with 'intrapreneurship' within workplaces (Langemeyr, 2009). It also has effects on companies in that it reduces 'employer–employee interdependence', i.e. the ties that link employers and the employed, which encourage mutual attachments, knowledge exchange and long-term investment (Whitley, 1999). Managers therefore also have sunk investments in the social relations within enterprises and these, too, are likely to be disrupted.

In these circumstances, how far workers can exercise voice becomes especially important to industrial and political democracy. In Belarus, workers' perceptions of their voice possibilities appear likely to have been affected by the repression of relatively independent forms of trade unionism which occurred since the mid-2000s (Croucher, 2004). In the early 2000s, Belarusian unions were active in public protests against governmental policies. They were also involved in international programmes conducted by the Global Union Federations designed to assist them to move away from their previous Soviet-style welfare and 'legal watchdog' orientations to become more active bargaining agents and protagonists of employee interests (Croucher, 2004). These developments seem likely to have both reflected and conditioned employee perceptions of unions, raising hopes of more representative and bargaining bodies. The reform developments were ended by a series of measures taken by Presidential decree in the mid-2000s. Trade unions were largely subordinated to government, becoming agents of the state rather than management (Danilovich and Croucher, 2011) under the auspices of FPB (Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus). The remaining independent union minority, united under the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions (BKDP), has a semi-legal status, with membership being a cause of persecution of individual workers by management according to several of our respondents.

Nevertheless, employee attitudes both to exercising voice and taking industrial action independent of the now firmly incorporated FPB unions cannot simply be 'read off' from this situation, as some have tended to do (see e.g. Crowley, 2004). International evidence shows that very different attitudes to both mobilisation and unions are possible where unions have been de-recognised or neutered (see e.g. Bacon, 1999). Worker mobilisation at work has proved possible in other countries on the transitional periphery under certain circumstances (Morrison et al., 2012). Moreover, there is a need to examine workers' perceptions of the incorporated trade unions; one possible attitude is that nothing may be expected from them; another (not mutually exclusive with the former) is that on the contrary, something may be expected. Workers might also expect unions at least to continue to exercise their Soviet-style welfare roles, a function shown in the transitional countries of Eastern Europe to increase in salience during times of economic downturn (Croucher and Rizov, 2012). Alternatively, they may hold some expectation that unions might take on a negotiating role to mitigate CRWT's impacts, for example by pressing for short-time rather than administrative leave.

Our research questions are therefore: (a) how has the use of CRWT developed in the 21st century and does it appear to be a temporary expedient? (b) How is CRWT experienced by managers and workers? (c) What are CRWT's effects on workers' perceptions

of employment and trade unions? The answers should assist in assessments of the broad issues raised above, i.e. how far CRWT is encouraged by state policy, the extent to which CRWT may be regarded as a short-term expedient and of how workers view CRWT, trade unions and their possibilities of influencing the situation.

Method

There are considerable difficulties associated with enterprise-level research in Belarus. Since Soviet times this type of research has been considered problematic as official ideology did not allow for the possibility of ‘problem zones’ in the so-called workers’ state, and enterprises are sensitive to that. Researchers based outside Belarus must either obtain official permission before beginning work, to obtain credibility with enterprise directors, or use gatekeepers. The latter was the case here, since the research was conducted in collaboration with a Belarusian university. This granted the authors access to richer information than would otherwise be disclosed by companies. Researchers must also be aware of the extreme sensitivity of managers and employees to questions which might imply criticism of anyone in authority. ‘Sore points’ such as administrative leave cannot be raised directly with workers in management presence for fear that access will be withdrawn. The roots of the sensitivity stem from the past and the present of industrial relations locally, where the management and workers have been (and continue to be) subject to heavy surveillance by the state.

The enterprises selected for detailed study are four large quasi-privatised and one large state-owned enterprise located in the Mogilev region: a major chemical fibre manufacturer, two textile and two machine-building plants specialising in agricultural and construction machinery. All are controlled by government through ministries or conglomerates (*kontserns*). Quasi-privatised enterprises are state-owned, since the government is their largest shareholder (retaining up to 99% of shares). These plants are major employers in the region, with 15,546 employees in 2012 and are representative of large-scale national industry.

Some enterprise-level information collected for the study derives from monthly, quarterly and annual panel data on labour for 2001–2012. Other data on personnel we examined included average monthly wages (per enterprise), and evidence on CRWT incidence. We were also able to conduct five semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2008) with labour planning managers and non-managerial employees, and a short survey of non-managerial workers in order to assess the impact of CRWT on employees.

The survey on CRWT was administered at three enterprises as part of a larger study of labour flexibility conducted in December 2013–January 2014. Questionnaires were not distributed in the most and the least financially successful enterprises because it proved impossible to secure agreement for the researchers to do so. The three enterprises surveyed had comparable financial profitability. A total of 1147 questionnaires were distributed and 831 valid questionnaires were received, a response rate of 72.4%. The high response rate was obtained because HR managers distributed and collected the questionnaires. Although the method is questionable given that it potentially compromised respondent anonymity in negative ways, it also seems likely that any effects will be in the direction of employees providing answers less critical of management and others in

Table 1. Interviewees by occupation.

Interviewees	Group 1 number of respondents	Group 2 number of respondents
Labour planning managers (LPM)	5	
Foremen (FM)		2
Technical specialists (TS)		3
Skilled workers (SW)		1

Source: Interview transcriptions.

authority than otherwise and responses should be seen in that light. It needs to be noted that since the actual ways Belarusian enterprises are managed are determined by the state, workers' responses will not force the management to change anything. Thus, the management does not care much about the negative assessment of the company policies workers may give in the responses to the survey as these will not change anything. Workers, in turn, realise this, hence their responses tend to be mostly reliable. The fact that the survey was anonymous promoted valid and reliable responses.

Follow-up interviews with workers were also used to check the validity in responses to questionnaires. Interviews were held at five enterprises with two small groups of employees, one of which included labour planning managers (group 1) and another involved non-managerial personnel: foremen, technical and less skilled workers (group 2: see the composition of groups in Table 1).

Although the interviews with managers were recorded and transcribed, managers were reluctant to allow the researchers to interview employees on a more structured basis and so the two small groups of workers had to be interviewed *sub rosa*, and note taking was used rather than recording. All interview data were manually analysed by coding in relation to the research questions and emergent themes; all quotations given below are typical of respondents' views more generally and are chosen to reflect their centrality.

The legal framework

Short-time working and administrative leave are envisaged and structured by state policy albeit to different degrees. Use of employer-initiated administrative leave is explained only in Article 191 of the Labour Code. The article does not specify the maximum duration of partially-paid or unpaid leave; rather, it grants an employer the right to keep the employee on such leave indefinitely, depending on the enterprise's economic circumstances. An employee can be placed on administrative leave due to temporary suspension or reduction of the enterprise's work if there are no alternative employment opportunities at the enterprise. The employer must obtain an employee's consent. However, this is a formality. The form by which 'consent' is given is not clearly defined; nor is the share of the nominal wage received by an employee in the case of partially-paid administrative leave. Both matters have formally to be established by mutual agreement but employees are in no position to bargain.

Use of short-time working is heavily regulated on the other hand, through seven separate articles of the Labour Code (Articles 32, 118–119, 185 and 289–291); these are supplemented by the government Enactment No. 1154 (27.07.2000) (with the amendment No. 10 [5 January 2001]) containing the Order for granting and aggregation of labour leaves. The authorities also claim to adhere to international labour standards in regulating short-time working, notably to the ILO Convention No. 175 and Recommendation No. 182 (Ostrovsky, 2005).

Article 289 regulates the introduction of short-time working, defining it as less than the normal established working week (Labour Code Articles 111–112). It may take the form of a short working day or a reduced working week. According to Article 289, the conditions of short working time are established at the start of a person's employment when an employee is signing the collective agreement (formally, this is negotiated and agreed by the management and enterprise union although in reality management simply presents these formal and largely legal documents to unions) and the individual contract where its form and duration are specified. After an employee signs these documents, the conditions of short working time cannot be changed. The agreement may be established for a certain time or indefinitely. The reasons for putting an employee onto short-time working should be justified on economic or organisational grounds; an employee must receive a letter no later than one month before the short working time starts. An employee can legally challenge being put on short working time. At this point, the union has the possibility of exercising its traditional 'legal watchdog' role.

The main features of the two forms of CRWT are presented in Table 2.

Thus, administrative leave is much less regulated, and has fewer legal implications for employers than short working time. The use of administrative leave is also beneficial to companies from a financial perspective because of technical payment provisions deriving from the status of short-time working as a form of social benefit under Belarusian law (Ostrovsky, 2005).

CRWT incidence

In general, enterprises preferred to use involuntary leave to adjust short-term labour demand throughout the whole observation period. The use of short-time was, on the other hand, limited to the period 2002–2004 (see Table 3).

A comparison was run for 2001–2006 and 2007–2012, using aggregated data from the sampled enterprises. The results are presented in Table 3.

These results were obtained from annual reports submitted to the state statistical service by the labour planning departments of the selected enterprises (forms 1T, 12T and 4T).

There is a mismatch between enterprise (Table 3) and macro-level results for CRWT. At micro level, the data collected from our five enterprises for the period 2001–2012 show increased use of administrative leave, but the opposite trend is reported in official statistics for the national labour market. According to the latter data, employer-initiated administrative leave had virtually ceased to exist as a management practice by 2012.

Short-time (in the form of shorter working days) was used by enterprises only up to 2006; the data demonstrate a rapidly decreasing trend in the use of this practice. We

Table 2. Employer-initiated administrative leave and short-time working: key legal differences.

Points of comparison	Employer-initiated administrative leave	Short-time working
Length (duration)	Indefinite	Time-limited; the particular form of short-time working should be identified as well as the maximum number of hours
Grounds for use	Production and economic requirements	Production requirements, with employee's consent
Form of consent	Not defined	Written; work contract should be amended accordingly
Wage	Unpaid (or partially paid at employer's discretion)	Full wage for the duration of time actually worked with the preservation of additional non-tariff payments
Conditions	Worker's general consent	Written justification of the reasons for transferring an employee onto shorter working time. Must be sent to an employee no later than a month before the transfer.

Source: Labour Code of the Republic of Belarus.

Table 3. Evolution of CRWT in the five enterprises, 2011–2012.

Period	Administrative leave (person-hours)	Short-time working (person-hours)
2001–2006	35,272	11,961
2007–2012	38,023	0

Sources: calculated by authors from enterprise records.

therefore see no evidence of its use in enterprise statistics after that point. Simultaneously, at micro level, the data demonstrate a steadily increasing trend in the overall amount of time worked across the period 2001–2012.

The reason no evidence for the use of short-time working was obtained for the macro level is simply because these data are not collected at country level. Thus the difference between the two levels of statistics potentially arises from simple sample bias. However, the alternative possibility is that the inclusion of data from small and medium-sized enterprises in the national statistics dilutes the apparent incidence of administrative leave since small companies make very little use of it (Carragher and Carragher, 2006).

Thus, macro-data on CRWT suggest that enterprises are reducing such practices, which is consistent with the image of a socially-oriented, worker-protecting economic model. However, the micro-level data show a different picture. The micro-level statistics suggest that the legal structuring of employer preferences towards the less equitable form of CRWT, i.e. administrative leave, became material from 2006 onwards. From that point, the more equitable short-time working disappeared in practice. A second inequitable element arises from the use of administrative leave. Partial pay is a possibility, particularly

for 'core' personnel. A standard practice when putting both core and peripheral workers on administrative leave is to put the latter on unpaid leave to save funds which are then redistributed to provide partial pay for core personnel. We report further on this below.

Perceptions of CRWT

Managers

Labour and planning managers in all five enterprises suggested that they were either developing or had already implemented labour optimisation strategies, usually coupled with technological modernisation, in order to improve efficiency. Our analysis of enterprise labour statistics showed that labour productivity had indeed been raised by an aggregate 12.8% between 2001 and 2012 across the five enterprises. They therefore expressed frustration at those efforts being undermined by the unofficial order 'from above' (as they put it) to preserve the labour collective at any cost, leaving them no choice but to enforce CRWT measures, which one of them referred to as the 'administrative solution'. They explained that it had become a standard practice. Another senior manager complained that this tool had to be used in the Belarusian context, contrasting the situation with one in which employees would simply be fired at will as she imagined would happen in market economies, thereby providing some insight into her vision of a 'market economy'.

The lowest level of management experienced CRWT in ways which echoed workers' own experience, that is as something over which they had no control, but at the same time these managers felt opprobrium associated with acting as messengers. One foreman said:

The shop floor manager comes to you with this rotation paper and you have to put people on it, suddenly you get these wolf looks as if you are the enemy of the people. And what could I do? I had to go on it like everyone else but because I am in charge, but I am suddenly the guilty one, as if I invented it all.

Although, as we showed above, administrative leave is the option which managers are pushed towards by the law, managers also exercised agency. Managers at all enterprises studied found administrative leave an effective tool for disciplining workers and of effecting dismissal with no legal consequences. Workers not favoured by management are repeatedly placed on administrative leave until they finally decide to resign. Since they have left their jobs 'voluntarily', they have no legal recourse as a dismissal has not occurred. Therefore the union cannot exercise its traditional legal watchdog role.

Workers

Typically, a worker placed on administrative leave loses the non-basic (non-tariff, i.e. shift and bonus premia and other supplements) part of their wage completely, plus part of the tariff wage. The proportion of the tariff (basic) part of the wage retained by workers varied from 54.8% to 72% across the companies surveyed in the 2001–2012 period.

In addition, the enterprise only makes a proportionately diminished payment to the social protection fund (analogous to the National Insurance fund in the UK). Thus, at a conservative estimate, losses to workers' total pay check are around 50%.

The questionnaire responses also show the following:

- 62% of respondents were placed on involuntary leave in the last five years at least once and 21% experienced it twice or more.
- 98.4% reported that involuntary leave and short-time working discourage them from working hard and add to general dissatisfaction with the job.
- 37.1% of respondents agreed that frequent use of administrative leave and short working time contributed to stress in relations between employees.
- 84.6% believe that CRWT increases tension between management and workers. However, at the same time, only 11.3% of respondents were prepared to leave their current employment. The majority do not see employment opportunities outside of the enterprises they currently work in. Since Belarus claims to have near zero unemployment, no vacancies for skilled workers or technical specialists exist in the external labour market.

Our interviews allowed more detailed examination of a group of workers' perceptions. The quotations reproduced below are paradigmatic of others. Overall, there was a perception of a generally worsening situation. One worker said: 'I've been working there [name of factory] for 13 years now and we have never been so bad before. Last year we worked three days a week for four months, then it was normal again. Then all of a sudden, the head of my department broke the news that everyone will have to apply for a vacation at their own expense for three weeks. I was just in shock.'

Another also pointed to negative recent trends in their terms and conditions of employment and put these in the wider context of their domestic economy:

This year everything is bad. First, they changed the collective agreement and moved the payday from the 16th to the 25th. Then last month it was announced that we have to wait even for this money. Now we have this unpaid 'holiday' we have to agree to. So right now we are at home. They paid some in advance but what is 470 thousand, just enough for the bread. Hope they pay the rest in time for the New Year.

Several respondents commented on inter-worker tensions, although this should be seen in the perspective of the survey results shown above which demonstrated that many more respondents identified tensions with management than with co-workers. More skilled technical workers for example pointed out that their less skilled counterparts felt that they were privileged by higher pay but that in fact CRWT also had a negative effect on their earnings.

Another made a general point about affective reactions within the workforce that run somewhat counter to suggestions that workers are 'patient' in the face of developments: 'Just try saying something, everyone snaps. People are so angry these days, at everyone. Understandable of course, we all have kids but this uncertainty puts people on edge.'

Reactions ranged backwards as well as forwards in respondents' life courses causing some to resent previous investments in their own training:

You know, I think I made the wrong choice when I went to that university, I should have been a nurse, could've gone to Russia then. They do need nurses but they have no need for engineers, not someone like me.

In response to this reference to the possibility of migrating to Russia, another rejected it, saying:

I won't leave, where will I go? Maybe if I were single, I could go to Russia but not with the family. And what will I do, I am not a construction worker, or a plasterer so what can I be there, just a janitor and this is even worse than here. At least here you know people and they know you.

Thus, in these cases, we are reminded that workers for whom migration may theoretically be regarded as possible are not in a majority and that this 'safety valve' for discontent is not available across the board. Since 'exit' is not always possible, both downward flows of information and 'voice' become proportionately more important. Variations in downward communication from managements in different plants caused some complaints, sometimes linked to the possibility of victimisation for exercising voice:

Well, where [name] works they at least talk to you. Ours are not like that. You aren't happy – leave, the doors are open. And if you try to say something, you'll be on leave every month ... or at least as much as they can by law, so at the end of the day you will have to go.

Others without direct experience of CRWT had kinship links exposing them to it indirectly. One woman worker from water purification in one factory linked this to criticism of both management and the union's unwillingness to at least listen to complaints:

People from our service are not usually placed on leave but this is because we are in a hazardous job and are always understaffed. But in other services and in the workshops many people had that. My sister Natasha had that and the worst thing is that you can't complain because no one listens, no one cares, not the management, not those parrots in the union. Everyone just keeps quiet.

One respondent referred to threatened strike action as a potential response:

The men in our workshop and two other workshops decided to go on strike but then the director came down and talked them out of it, promised we would get paid by the end of the month.

The threat of strike action is also reported by respondents to have reappeared in the factory worst affected by CRWT in our sample at the time of writing in mid-2014.

Thus growing tensions exist inside working collectives as some workers (usually the best connected but also those working in short-staffed areas) are rarely placed on such leave. Yet there is also a greater incidence of strong discontent directed towards

Table 4. Worker attitudes to enterprise trade unions (in percentages).

	Totally disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Totally agree
'Enterprise trade union exerts a considerable influence on enterprise management'	91.2	7.4	1.4	–	–
'Trade union provides social support for me'	37.3	29.6	4.7	25.7	2.7
'The support of trade union will help me keep my wage at least at the same level it is now'	84.7	15.3	–	–	–
'Trade union represents my interests as an employee'	67.3	15.6	17.1	–	–
'Trade union is an important actor in shaping HR policies at the enterprise'	89.6	10.4	–	–	–

Source: Calculated by authors from questionnaire data.

management and especially towards trade unions since their representatives are widely viewed as useless in protecting workers' interests.

Our questionnaire results placed this last point in a wider perspective since it confirmed a high level of dissatisfaction with enterprise unions. Although the questions were posed in a general sense, they also occurred in the context of CRWT both in reality and in terms of our investigation. These are reported in Table 4.

These results show a more or less complete lack of confidence in enterprise unions' capacity to influence managements in ways favourable to workers. The only area in which workers see them as performing any positive function is in providing some social support. Even in this case, respondents may incorrectly imagine that the use of welfare funds is determined by unions rather than by managers as is in reality the case. In other words, at best, unions' associative functions may play some small role in sustaining employees through difficult times. Overall, our results imply a lack of union influence over workers; when industrial action was threatened, it was a senior manager who directly persuaded the workers not to go on strike, apparently without any mediation by union representatives.

Conclusion

Our first research question concerned the evolution of CRWT. This evolved towards exclusive use of administrative leave from 2006 in the enterprises studied, in a trend that ran contrary to that which may be identified in official statistics at national aggregate level. Since the end of the observation period, we have been informed that its use increased still further in 2013. The statistics and management responses to our questions made it clear that it has become an established part of enterprises' labour management

routine. It is used as a way of adjusting labour costs to demand without challenging government ideas of socially-responsible labour policy, and as a disciplinary tool to remove certain workers. Increased use of administrative leave undoubtedly had a considerable negative effect on workers' earnings and by extension household budgets.

Our second question was how this strategy was perceived by managers and workers. Both groups expressed dissatisfaction with CRWT use and we speculate that the two may be mutually reinforcing; discontent with the technique clearly has different roots for the two groups, but there is also a degree of overlap between the two groups' perceptions. For senior managers, it was a blunt tool for achieving control within state-imposed restraints while for more junior managers it brought opprobrium from workers. Among the latter, it evoked a number of reactions including a worsening of internal relations between workers and management and between groups of workers who were differentially impacted.

Our final question concerned workers' perceptions of employment and unions. Widespread feelings of dissatisfaction with management and work were expressed by respondents to our questionnaire and in interviews. Uneven downward communication by managers in different plants was complained of, accompanied by frustration at the lack of voice possibilities and indeed considerable fear in expressing negative views for fear of victimisation. Survey results showed a more or less universal lack of confidence in unions but interviews also evoked anger at their behaviour indicating that workers still expected unions to do something for them in a bargaining direction rather than in social or associative senses. Thus, the removal of union independence has not also removed workers' expectation that unions should listen to worker problems and make some efforts to bargain for them.

Two findings have significant implications for the study of Belarusian society and constitute the first aspect of our contribution. First, the gap between official portrayals of the situation at national level and the reality at least in the workplaces studied here is considerable; the findings of the large number of studies based on these statistics are therefore questionable. Second, and directly linked to the first point, it appears that even before the financial crisis there was a deterioration in the social settlement.

A third aspect of our contribution has been to propose that 'patience' is an inadequate description of workers' reaction to the CRWT practice. Our findings on employee voice suggest that the removal of union independence after a period of increased union mobilisation has left a residue of suppressed frustration illustrated by the level of anger in relation to lack of voice, entertainment of the exit possibility and threatened strike action. One previous account of women clothing workers' resistance to worsening employment conditions in Moldova showed how they were willing to take limited industrial action (Morrison et al., 2012). Despite the even more repressive conditions in Belarus, our findings are consistent with those of Morrison et al. (2012). Both sets of findings show that 'legacy' interpretations of worker behaviour are now at least questionable. In the Morrison et al. (2012) case, women workers used Soviet ideological legacies in ways which were not available under communism. In our case, it is precisely the Soviet trade union legacy that was being questioned in the face of a practice not used under communism.

Nevertheless, the divisive effects of CRWT and continued possibility of individual solutions such as emigration illustrate the problems likely to be encountered in mobilising large groups to protest. There appears to be a gap between the apparently minimal extent of organised collective interest protection in Belarus and that across the more secure, non-peripheral countries of 'Eastern Europe', where unions have been recently shown to continue to exercise some influence on managements (Croucher and Rizov, 2012).

The social settlement in Belarus may be less stable than it at first sight appears. The official ideology of a 'social economy' appears increasingly contested by workers' reactions at local level and the idea of collective responses remains despite unions' loss of independence. Our findings are not consistent with arguments that workers are 'patient' since they expressed considerable impatience that threatened to become collective action. This is consistent with the findings of one recent macro study of labour protest in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (Beissinger and Sasse, 2013) and inconsistent with Crowley's (2004) argument of a decade ago. Nevertheless, the closing down of collective voice possibilities in much of the 'transitional periphery' means that labour protest has been and seems likely to remain fragmented, sporadic and unpredictable.

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