

## **Workers beyond Socialist Glorification and Post-Socialist Disavowal: New Perspectives on Eastern European Labour History**

University of Vienna, 24-27 May 2018

Studies of labour under state socialism increasingly question the historiographical clichés of East European workers. Scholars problematize the notion of workers as inherently combative and homogeneous historical actors, as victims of totalitarian states or alternatively, as accomplices in the preservation of the communist rule. Recent research challenges these often contradictory, but equally simplified representations of labour inherited from socialist and early post-socialist years by using the theoretical and methodological insights of the cultural turn and *Alltagsgeschichte*, but also building and expanding upon the best traditions of social and labour history. The focus on the relationship between the party-state and labour helped alter the traditional visions of state socialism as a static system ruled over by monolithic parties as well as highlighting the ambivalent and delicate nature of socialist class formation from below.

Following the pioneering works of Padraic Kenney, Malgorzata Fidelis and the late Mark Pittaway on the creation of a (gendered) socialist proletariat in early post-war Poland and Hungary respectively, new research has begun to explore industrial and other forms of labour in existence during different phases of socialist modernization in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. This conference seeks to gather a range of contemporary research initiatives which deal with labour in Eastern Europe, encourage increased exchange and provide a forum to contrast and compare findings. Aiming to creatively contribute to a common body of knowledge about varieties of labour practices and working class subjectivities (during socialism and beyond), the conference pursues two goals:

Firstly, it seeks to map out the state of the art with regard to the study of labour in different countries of Eastern Europe and provide a platform for the presentation of recent and on-going research in an expanding field of study. It encourages comparative and transnational approaches, whether they compare different socialist countries, introduce labour into the studies on connections between the Second World and the Global South, or embed socialist workplaces into broader global trends and exchanges by challenging the binary divisions between the “East” and “West”.

Secondly, the conference seeks to bring the study of labour in state socialism into dialogue with the theoretical postulates of global labour history by looking for common themes and trends, but also rethinking the contribution of labour history written under state socialism. One example is the broadening or rethinking of the concept of wage work, the most obvious model of employment in state socialist societies, from the point of view of both the party-state and the global history of commodification of labour. The conference welcomes research dealing with factory, artisanal, coerced, unpaid, affective, informal, reproductive, domestic, agricultural, and subsistence labour.

The focus of the conference is on the socialist period but we also invite research on – sometimes extended – periods of transformation (including the pre socialist and post socialist periods). In terms of geographical scope the focus is East, Central and South-Eastern Europe. However we also welcome contributions pertaining to socialist labour outside these spaces. In addition to historical approaches to the study of labour, social anthropological, sociological and interdisciplinary approaches are encouraged.

Potential topics may include:

- working class formations in socialism (including the contradictions between officially upheld presentations of workers as the new ruling class and actual labour relations on the ground)
- Peasants, proletarians and those in between (including connections between the countryside and industry, daily commuting, absences and fluctuations of the workforce)
- The socialist work place, working class communities and everyday life
- Informality, improvisation and grass root entrepreneurialism (moonlighting, smuggling of scarce goods, using the state workplace for individual profit)
- Gendered labour (paid and unpaid labour, gendered roles and representations in socialist workplaces, un/equal pay, gendered labour regulation, etc.)
- Class and nation (the interplay of class, nation and religion within the socialist labouring classes)
- Strikes, resistance, 'Eigensinn', daily negotiations, labour's formal and informal bargaining (for instance endeavours to advance workers' position through official labour institutions and informal channels of communication with management, trade unions, local authorities and the party-state)
- Labour, work, and internationalism (ILO, international trade unions, transnational interaction within and beyond Eastern Europe)

The Conference is convened by Rory Archer (UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies/CSEES University of Graz) and Goran Musić (Central European University/CSEES University of Graz) in the framework of a 2014-2018 research project supported by the Austrian

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We invite scholars to send abstracts (250-500 words) and a short biographical statement to [EastLabour@gmail.com](mailto:EastLabour@gmail.com) by **15 January 2018**. Selected presenters will be informed by 10 February 2018. The working language of the conference is English. Please note that the organizers are unable to fund travel and accommodation costs other than a limited number of stipends for junior scholars.

The event is generously supported by:

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International Conference of Labour and Social History

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