

Labour Movements, Trade Unions and Strikes (Russian Empire)

By [Gleb J. Albert](#)

Summary

This article outlines the development of the labour movement in Russia from the outbreak of the war until the Bolshevik revolution. It gives attention to workers and their forms of protest as well as the activities of the organised labour movement and its institutions, such as trade unions and political parties. It outlines the decline of strikes in the second half of 1914, and the subsequent resurgence of protest in the following years, leading to the toppling of autocracy in 1917.

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Workers and the Labour Movement Before the War

The Russian Working Class

The process of industrialisation in the [Russian Empire](#) gave birth to a new class of industrial labourers, recruited from Russia's predominantly peasant population.¹ At the beginning of World War I, the number of urban wage labourers is estimated at between 12 and 22 million, roughly half of them being employed in factories, small-scale enterprises and construction.

Nearly 4 million worked in large industrial enterprises.² The Russian urban working class was heterogeneous, divided between urbanised and migrant workers, as well as along

occupation, gender and ethnic lines.³ What they had in common were appalling work conditions, housing problems, low wages, and a weak position vis-à-vis the factory administration.⁴ Moreover, workers were separated from [urban society](#). While some recent authors have stressed the growing integration of workers into a national whole in the pre-war years,⁵ others suggest that at the eve of the war, workers were still at one end of a polarised society, with the higher classes making little effort to give workers and their grievances room to be heard in the political arena.⁶ Compared to the other European nations, the Russian working class was the least integrated into the nation state.⁷ Thus, the politics of national cohesion ("*Burgfrieden*") called out by the governments of the combatant nations had to be far more fragile in Russia than in other European countries.

Strikes and the Pre-War Labour Movement

The organised labour movement was weak due to its almost complete illegality. By 1914, only a mere 0.5 to 0.8 percent of the industrial workforce were members of either the Bolshevik or the Menshevik factions of the Social Democrats.⁸ The trade union law of 1906 for the first time codified the right of workers to organise, however these trade unions were bereft of any political power, and their statutes had to be approved by the authorities.⁹ In early 1914, trade union membership encompassed 1.2 to 4.6 percent of the industrial workforce.¹⁰ Strikes, however, were a widespread phenomenon. Workers went on strike to demand better wages, workplace conditions and individual dignity, but also in solidarity against repression towards workers elsewhere, and in support of other general issues associated with processes of democratisation.¹¹ While strikes were classified as "economic" or "political" by the authorities, and subsequently by historians, the boundaries between these categories were often fluid.¹² The two biggest strike waves in the pre-war period occurred between 1905 and 1906, in the wake of the [revolution](#), and between 1912 and 1914, as a reaction of the massacre of mine workers in the Lena goldfields. Both strike waves can be best understood in the context of two structural processes occurring within the Russian industrial workforce in this period: first, increasing urbanisation and the geographical concentration of a mostly young workforce in the cities, and second, the rationalisation of work processes, the changes in both the general composition of the workforce, and the forms by which it was remunerated. These two ongoing processes continued to shape the labour struggle well into the war period.¹³

The War-Time Labour Movement

The War and Industrial Labour

The outbreak of the war in 1914 had multiple consequences for [Russian labour](#). A substantial part of the workforce was subject to conscription: Between 600,000 and 1 million workers went through the imperial army during the war years.¹⁴ At the same time, due to the needs of the war, branches of industry related to military production (particularly metal working and chemicals) experienced growth; in Petrograd, the working class in the capital grew by 62 percent.¹⁵ These processes resulted in changes in the composition of the working class. Peasant workers, war [refugees](#), women, and adolescents made an influx into the factories.¹⁶ At the same time, skilled workers were sought after by the war industry. This strengthened their self-confidence and encouraged them to carry out labour disputes. Skilled metal workers were on the forefront of war-time political strikes.¹⁷ The world war also brought about a militarisation of factory labour. In August 1916, 94 percent of all workers, and 61 percent of all factories in Petrograd worked to fulfil the army's demands.¹⁸ Moreover, the workplace itself became increasingly militarised. Some of the skilled workers who were originally drafted into the army were sent back to the factories to make their military contribution on workbenches rather than in trenches, remaining under military discipline within the factories.¹⁹

The Breakdown of the Labour Movement in 1914-1915

The outbreak of the war brought the Russian labour movement to a complete halt for nearly a year. While the Factory Inspectorate reported 3,493 strikes with 1,327,897 participants in the first seven months of 1914, it reported only forty-one strikes with 9,561 workers for the following five months.²⁰ Workers felt threatened by the prospective of being drafted, but also a temporary upsurge of patriotism had permeated the working class. This particular trend manifested itself not only in active rejection of socialist agitation, but also in products of "patriotic" mass culture, eagerly consumed by workers.²¹ Another visible manifestation were protests fuelled by anti-German sentiment, which in some cases took the form of pogroms.²² At the same time, one can observe a complete breakdown of revolutionary parties, especially within workplace environments. Wherever party cells existed in the workplace, they were highly conspired and isolated. Even in the capital, there remained but a few hundred socialist activists. The Bolsheviks had a certain advantage over their socialist rivals in that they were more likely to be called upon to perform illegal work, however their contributions were

scattered. For other underground parties on the Left, the situation was even worse.²³ Nevertheless, these scattered revolutionary activists managed to exert influence on the shop floor when the temporary halt of the labour struggles ceased in mid-1915, and even more so on the eve of the February Revolution.²⁴

Other forms of labour organisations also came close to a halt during the war. Even though there was never a general decree that outlawed trade unions during the war, they were violently disbanded by the authorities one the other and barred from re-registration. Only three non-industrial unions (pharmacists, janitors, and printers) operated legally in the capital, while eleven other unions maintained an underground existence, rarely uniting more than a few hundred members at one time.²⁵ Sickness insurance funds, workers' cooperatives and workers' educational facilities constituted the only legal form of labour organisation during the war, but their political influence was almost non-existent.²⁶ In the summer of 1915, the Central War-Industries Committee (TsVPK), a liberal industrialist association, proposed to introduce a so-called "Labour Group" into their structures in the hope of a tighter incorporation of workers into the national war effort. Enterprises chose electoral delegates to constitute the group, and after a turbulent election, the Labour Group in the capital was constituted by Menshevik representatives. At provincial branches of the TsVPK, local Labour Groups were founded as well. Once installed, the Labour Group tried to distance itself from the industrialists, but still lacked the reputation of a legitimate representation of workers' interests.²⁷

The Resurgence of Strike Activity in 1915-1916

In the summer of 1915, the strike movement resurfaced from its one-year hiatus. While in the last five months of 1914, only between forty-one (according to the Factory Inspectorate) and seventy strikes (according to post-1917 calculations) with 9,561 to 34,752 participants were recorded, the year 1915 saw between 928 and 1,063 strikes with between 531,528 and 569,243 strikers. In 1916, the movement gained momentum and there were between 1,284 and 1,542 strikes with approximately 951,695 to 1,172,052 participants.²⁸ The lion's share of strikes took place in Petrograd: in 1915, there were 146 political strikes with 132,384 strikers, and 157 economic strikes with 78,563 strikers in the city. In 1916, 330 political and 354 economic strikes, with 377,431 and 243,500 strikers, respectively, were recorded.²⁹ The statistics reveal not only that the capital was at the centre of strike activities, but they also reveal the high number of political strikes as compared to economic unrest. In Petrograd the metal workers displayed the most intensive and numerous strike activity. Between the outbreak of the war and the [February revolution](#), metal workers organised 71.8 percent of all

strikes and provided 83.6 percent of all strikers.³⁰ Metal workers were recruited not from unskilled migrants, but primarily from worker populations with previous factory experience. They were rather well-paid relative to other workers, and were not hit as hard by war-time wage shortages.³¹

Strike activity between 1915 and the February Revolution can be divided into three “waves”: August to December 1915, January to June 1916, and July 1916 to January 1917.³² The first wave was accompanied by political events such, for example the rout of the Russian armies in Galicia and the dissolution of the [Duma](#), and a worsening of living conditions for the general population.³³ One immediate cause of continued strike action was the brutal crushing of unrest in Ivanovo and Kostroma, where workers’ protests against food shortages were violently suppressed. This triggered a massive wave of protest strikes in the industrial centres of the empire.³⁴

The second wave of strikes in the first half of 1916 brought about an even more disproportionate amount of strike activity in Petrograd compared to the rest of the empire, and of metal workers compared to other branches. Metal workers began to become involved in economic strikes while, unlike other workers, they had not yet substantially suffered from a decline of real wages.³⁵ Economic strikes often turned political, for example when the strike at the Putilov factory in February, which had begun as a fight for more wages, branched out into protests against the militarisation of labour after the military applied harsh measures to the original strikers.³⁶

The third strike wave of July 1916 to January 1917 was also carried by metal workers. While political strikes outside Petrograd were recorded in significant numbers in Moscow and Nizhegorod provinces, in the capital itself it was the metal workers of the Vyborg district who constituted a mere 1 percent of Russia’s industrial working class, that incited 45.7 percent of all political strikes.³⁷ The fervent activity of the Vyborg metal workers spread to the cotton factories with its mostly female workforce in the same district. Also for the first time workers succeeded in driving soldiers into political action.³⁸

The autumn and winter of 1916 brought along a general rise in popular discontent. The strikes with their mixture of political and economic demands coincided with a general mood of upheaval in society. They also emboldened the organised political labour movement. The strike in commemoration of 1905, which took place on 5 January 1917, saw the participation of over one-third of Petrograd’s industrial workforce, and on 14 February of this same year,

85,000 workers laid down tools.³⁹

From February to October

When female workers in Petrograd took to the streets on 23 February 1917 to protest against food shortages, the protests widened into a political general strike in the capital. The result was the overthrow of Tsardom. The revolution was a result of complex interplay between workers' unrest, general popular discontent and elite decision making.⁴⁰ The labour movement was, however, the primary force enabling political change.

The post-revolutionary situation presented the labour movement with completely new conditions. The new regime declared strikes and street demonstrations legal, immensely widening the scope for protest.⁴¹ All political parties could operate in the open, and the Leftist parties were allowed to grow substantially.⁴² "Soviets" - workers' councils, which emerged spontaneously during the 1905 Revolution - surfaced again. The Petrograd Soviet constituted one half of the "[Dual Power](#)" system, competing and collaborating with the [Provisional Government](#). The soviets gained in strength during 1917, and particularly in the provinces, they gradually supplanted governmental organs.⁴³ Trade unions re-established themselves and grew substantially compared to the war years.⁴⁴ A completely new type of workers' organisation, the factory committees, surfaced at the enterprises. Their primary aim was to negotiate between employers and employees, but gradually they took control over many aspects of production.⁴⁵

The establishment of a revolutionary regime did not by any means put a halt on labour struggles.⁴⁶ For a short while, the relations between the government and the labour movement entered into a "honeymoon period".⁴⁷ However, the revolution could not put an end to the economic grievances caused by the ongoing war effort. Thus, workers continued striking for economic betterment, supported by factory committees and trade unions.⁴⁸ Already in April and May, large anti-war demonstrations took place. During the "[July crisis](#)", in Petrograd alone, there were up to 350,000 workers taking the streets. While economic struggles continued, the political strike movement gained new momentum throughout September and October, while at the same time General [Lavr G. Kornilov's \(1870-1918\)](#) failed coup made the Bolsheviks increasingly popular among workers.⁴⁹

When the Bolsheviks took power on 25 October, it seemed like a new "honeymoon" period might begin between the labour movement and the new government. The Bolsheviks'

“Decree on Workers’ Control” legalised factory committees’ control over production. However the economic catastrophe that unleashed itself thereafter put the existence of industry itself at stake, greatly reduced the numbers of the working class, and accelerated its disillusion with the new regime. By the time [peace was concluded in Brest-Litovsk](#) in March 1918, the Bolsheviks viewed the nationalisation of industry “from below” via factory committees as failed, and proceeded to nationalise industry “from above” from June 1918 onwards.⁵⁰ It is still an open debate whether the final political expropriation of the working class by the Bolsheviks was completed by the early or the mid-1920s.⁵¹ In any case, workers did not give up strikes and other forms of resistance under the new regime.⁵²

Conclusion

The actions and politics of the workers from the outbreak of the war up until the October revolution shaped the course of Russian history for the whole 20th century. Thus, the history of the Russian war-time labour movement is as crucial as it is contested. When the Bolsheviks took power as a self-proclaimed workers’ vanguard, the history of the labour movement during the war became a crucial point of departure for the legitimisation of their rule – a fact that has shaped [Soviet](#) and [Western historiography](#) alike.⁵³ However, many of the Soviet and Western stereotypes haven been debunked by the efforts of social historians past and presents. Neither did the working class as a whole turn against the war immediately after its outbreak, nor were they led by the Bolsheviks, or any other radical party. Instead, it was one particular segment of the working class, the metal workers, who, due to their specific position within industrial labour, carried out the political strike movement almost single-handedly throughout the last three war years. Their struggles, combined with increasing discontent felt throughout society at large, resulted in the overthrow of autocracy. However, research has also shown that the culmination of the war-time strike movement, the February revolution, was not completely “spontaneous”. Despite their initial breakdown after the outbreak of the war, revolutionary parties and their activists took part in labour struggles and increasingly managed to shape their course.

The social history of the Russian war-time labour movement is, by and large, already written. The cultural history of the Russian working class, its protest activities and its intersection with the revolutionary-political movement is, however, still in its infancy. The general decline of the interest in labour history in recent decades notwithstanding, one hopes that new, innovative research in this area will emerge in coming years.

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