The State of Labor Discipline in the Urals Mining Industry in the Late 19th-Early 20th Century

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Abstract

There is a steady research interest in modern Russian social science in studying the characteristics of the labor behavior of modern Russian workers, primarily in terms of revealing the degree of its adequacy to social and economic reforms. At the same time, the problem of the reverse influence of labor moral on the direction and character of transformations is investigated far less. The solution of these problems involves their consideration in a broader historical perspective. This circumstance and the insufficient study of this problem at the regional level of the post-reform Urals caused the choice of the topic. In the course of the study, conclusions were drawn about the low quality of the production discipline of the mining and metallurgical workers of the Urals. Its typical features throughout a long historical period were absenteeism, tardiness, drunkenness, theft of factory property, non-observance of safety measures. This practice took the most widespread character during the revolutions of the beginning of the XX century.

Keywords: Labor discipline, Workers, Ural, Post-reform period.

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1. Introduction

The Soviet sociologists in their studies of the mid-80s of the XX century distinguished a “lumpenized” type of worker, accounting for 50-60% of the total number of workers in industry. In addition to such behavioral features as low production activity and responsibility, it is characterized by a low level of labor discipline. The specialists did not doubt that these qualities were generated by the command-bureaucratic Soviet economic system.

Meanwhile, the crisis in labor motivation in post-Soviet Russia makes one doubt the rigid linking of the labor image of the Russian worker to the post-October history and leads to the necessity of analyzing it in a broader mental and sociocultural perspective, revealing the degree of continuity of the norms of labor behavior in pre-revolutionary, Soviet and modern Russia.

In this regard, the analysis of the labor discipline of one of the leading detachments of the Russian working class in the face of the mining and industrial workers of the Urals at the stage of Russian reforms in the second half of the XIX - beginning of the XX centuries seems quite reasonable and logical.

The study of such components of the corporate ethic of Ural workers as their level of motivation, production discipline, qualifications in the context of the characteristics of the organization of local industry and the influence of serfdom began in the pre-revolutionary period. R. Popov (1874), I.Kh. Ozerov (1910), A.N. Mitinskie (1909) in their works pointed to such features of the production relations in the Ural mining enterprises as low labor productivity and the general culture of the population of the region, drunkenness and theft at work.

In general, all the pre-revolutionary authors agreed on the significant impact of the “original structure” of the Ural industry on the labor image of local workers and the reverse impact of the production mentality of workers on the development of mining districts as one of the survivability factors of pre-industrial relations in the Urals.

The focus of Soviet historiography was on such plots of working history as the number, composition, placement of workers, the level of their wages and the duration of the working day, forms of social protest (Viatkin, 1965; Gavrilov, 1985; Zabolotnyi, Kamynin, & Tertyshnyi, 1997). The problem of labor motivation of workers was broadened beyond the research interests.

A revival of interest in this issue is observed in the works of modern sociologists (Shatalov, 2000), historians (Mironov, 1999; Feldman, 2001; Korobkov & Gnevek, 2017). Its further study on the basis of expanding the source base and using modern research methods is promising from a scientific point of view and is of undoubted practical interest in the face of modern market transformations.

The study of the level of labor discipline of the Ural workers in a long historical term will make it possible to reveal its sociocultural bases and will provide the possibility to correct its current state.

2. Methods

The main methods used in this paper were historical-genetic, allowing to trace the impact of the “original structure” of the Ural industry on the level of labor motivation of workers and its reverse impact on the state of the mining industry; historical and comparative, giving the opportunity to trace these changes in a long historical perspective and identify general and particular of different historical periods; historical and typological, allowing to identify the main factors of changes in the evolution of labor discipline of the Ural workers.
3. Results and Discussion

According to B.N. Mironov, empirical signs that allow to give an operational interpretation of the level of labor discipline can be absenteeism, tardiness, breach of employment contract and internal regulations, poor performance, drunkenness and theft at work (Mironov, 1999). These parameters were regularly recorded in the documents of the Ural Mining Office of the XIX - early XX centuries.

The state of labor discipline in the enterprises of the Urals in the pre-reform period is characterized by the list of crimes and misconduct of workers, which were divided into two large categories - heavy and unimportant. According to the instructions of the chief commander of the Ural mining plants of May 15, 1830, unimportant matters should have been resolved without a formal court and included: “short-term absences, failure to comply with the rules, deceptions of various kinds, slight beatings, insults in a fight or quarrel, drunkenness, conspiracy, disobedience, violation of decency, unimportant thefts” (Podshivalov, 1925).

In the post-reform period, along with data from factory and mining statistics, a visual representation of the level of labor discipline, the stability of its main components is provided by the analysis of documents defining the internal routine of factory work (rules, instructions, contract terms, payment books).

Already the first post-reform agreements fixed the following major violations of labor discipline, which, in turn, were typical during the time of serfdom. In May, 1863, the contract of government of the Chermozsky Plant with the artisans spoke of such offenses as: 1) disobedience, misconduct, rudeness, boldness, violence, drunkenness, quarrels; 2) lost and damaged property; 3) absenteeism, late attendance at work, unauthorized absenteeism, failure to perform a task; 4) theft, fraud (The state of the workers of the Urals..., 1960). All of them, with the exception of drunkenness and theft which invoked more serious penalties, were grounds for fines. At the turn of the XIX-XX centuries, the situation did not change for the better, and the main violations of labor discipline remained the same. In the internal regulations of the factories of the 3rd West-Ekaterinburg district of 1892, such ones are noted as: 1) untimely attendance or unauthorized absenteeism; 2) failure to observe the fire safety rules in factory premises; 3) non-observance of cleanliness and tidiness in the same premises; 4) violation of silence when working with noise, shouting, scolding, quarreling or fighting; 5) disobedience; 6) coming to work drunk; 7) unauthorized gambling (cards, chuck-farthing, etc.). “Penalties” remained the same as before. (The state of the workers of the Urals..., 1960).

The mass character of the low production discipline of the Ural workers is confirmed by the presence of a “bloated” staff of various supervisors for their activities. All of them were concerned about the strict observance by the workers of the internal regulations. As indicated in the contract of the Nizhne-Isetsky plant with their workers in 1874, the main demands of the administration to their workers, which determined the content of their labor morality in the first years after the reform, were the call “Behave soberly and honestly” (Chetin, 1963).

The main violations of labor discipline, which were fixed in the internal regulations, are reflected in the safety documents. In particular, in the manual for the prevention of accidents by workmen and workers of the Nizhny Tagil factories in 1890 such violations of labor discipline were noted that led to occupational injuries, such as failure to follow instructions from direct management, self-will, working with damaged equipment and useless tools, negligence in the production process, poor adherence to process discipline; especially noted the inadmissibility of coming drunk (Chetin, 1963).

The lack of readiness and unwillingness of workers to change their “production mentality” is evidenced by their complaints about the tightening of rules and orders, “which slightest deviation — as reported by the workers of the Nizhne-Ufaleisky plant in 1895 — will inevitably entail judicial reprisal, and then again -
such fines and other various penalties” (RGIA F. 1291. Op. 71. D. 182. L. 2), mass resistance to the introduction of new payment books because of recording the workers’ duties therein, the refusal to accept the work checks that were to reduce the number of cases of tardiness and transitions to other workshops. In this respect, the reaction of the workers of the Ust-Katavsky and Katav-Ivanovsky plants, who told in 1901 the yet unchecked workers of the Yuryuzansky plant, is typical, that “we are currently working only for fines” (TsGIA RB. F. 187. Op. 1. D. 35. L. 583 ob.). According to the testimony of the mining chief of the Zlatoustovsky plant, the reason for the refusal of workers to introduce new payment books in 1903 was the inclusion of extracts from the laws on workers’ duties (TsGIA RB. F. 187. Op. 1. D. 35. L. 593). The workers of the Revdinsky plant did not want to “bind themselves by any obligations” (RGIA. F. 74. Op. 1. D. 316. L. 76).

The peaks in the fall of labor discipline and the associated decline in labor productivity occurred during revolutionary periods, which is associated with the general situation in the country and the workers’ peculiar interpretation of the freedoms obtained as permissiveness and impunity. This was discussed in the decisions of meetings and congresses of the Ural industrialists in 1905-1907, in private statements of persons of the factory administration and representatives of the Ural Mining Administration. Their common position reflects the summary of the mining chief of the Kama-Votkinsk mining district in November 1906, which linked the general decline in labor productivity with the mass participation of workers in regular meetings on "questions of the liberation movement or opposition to it" (RGIA. F. 37. Op. 58 371. L. 55).

The situation aggravated in 1917. As early as April 1917, workers' organizations began to sound the alarm at the sharp drop in labor discipline. Zlatoustovsky Board at its meeting on April 7, 1917, noted that “many workers go home before the end of the shift, they insistently ask for a pass from their masters, without any important reasons for that” (News of the Zlatoustosky Board of Worker Deputies. April 1917).

The question of absenteeism was specifically considered at the general meeting of the Motovilikhinsky Board on April 5, 1917. Based on the fact that they “were the result of the workers’ irresponsibility or even malicious intent”, it was decided to return to those disciplinary measures applied during the old regime and which the workers then actively opposed: fines and dismissals. This decision was followed by an appeal by the Executive Committee of the Motovilikhinsky Board, which stated that “Many of us do not go to work for 3-4 days or more without good reason, but just idly walking ... The local committee aims to warn those comrades to immediately go to work, otherwise the local committee aims to dismiss such comrades and draft them into the military for the absenteeism of 3 days in a row without good reason for that” (Permskaia zhizn. 1917. April 16).

However, appeals and threats of Motovilikhinsky and other Boards and workers' organizations did not bring the expected result. The situation continued to deteriorate, not only in the mining industry, but also in the factory one. In June 1917, the working committee of the Perm mechanical plants turned to their workers with a request not to walk “without any need in the workshops”, to put the checks for one person only, come in time, “not to go home earlier”, and not to come to work drunk (News of the Ural Board of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies. 1917. June 13), and the meeting of workers of the Theological Copper Plant on July 31, 1917, in addition to fines and dismissals for being late and absenteeism, adopted the order of dismissal for harvesting, the prohibition to go home earlier without good reason, prosecution of “any insults or threats against officials and elected officials”, punishment of “all sorts of hooligan actions”, including “sending to the front and dismissal with appropriate certification” (RGIA. F. 37. Op. 75 D. D. 782. L. 8).

An unusual and rather harsh punishment by decision of the local Board was introduced in July 1917 on the coal mines of the Kyshtymsky plant. Workers who worked less than 20 shifts per month were deprived of
the right to receive apartments from the mines (RGIA. F. 37. Op 75. D. 788. L. 23). These and other documents that came out of the working environment provide a real picture of the level of labor discipline at the Urals enterprises in 1917 and allow us to agree with the opinion of the committee of united industrialists about the threat of a complete halt of industry without the adoption of measures by the Ministry of Trade and Industry to influence workers’ masses.

One of the typical phenomena of mining and industrial life and an indicator of the level of labor discipline was theft at the enterprises of the region. It became wide-scale in the feudal period, which was facilitated by the general atmosphere in the serf enterprises, where, according to Popov’s testimony, “everything was stolen: the steward stole, shopkeepers of various kinds and supervisors stole. However, it was impossible not to steal, receiving such insignificant fees established at that time ...” (Popov, 1874).

In addition to the material factor, the socio-psychological characteristics of the artisans influenced the situation. The idea of a serf worker could never come to terms with the fact that the results of his labor are not his but someone else’s, “official” property. In his view, the factory products should “in all fairness” belong to him, as its creator. By virtue of this, the appropriation of factory production was not recognized as “theft”. A crime was to kidnap an ax from your brother, a worker, since it was bought by the latter for his labor money. There is no crime to take the same ax from the factory, since it is made by the hands of the same craftsman who takes it. In the first case, we would have, according to the ideas of the serf workers, theft, in the second case they did not recognize the crime. An honest worker could never encroach on the property of a worker, while at the same time without remorse of conscience he took the “factory”, “state” stuff.

The same attitude to the “lordly” is typical for the peasant psychology. If a peasant steals anything from a peasant, he is treated with hatred and contempt and called “thief”, “crook”, “scoundrel”. If a peasant steals the lordly good, they approach him with approval, even with some respect, and call him “a clever, crafty peasant”. In everyday life he had not a shadow of distrust.

The same situation is quite correctly described by the phenomenon of “in-group favoritism” that is well-known in social psychology, expressed in the preferences of its group and a biased interpretation of facts and assessments in relation to another group, which form a double standard of standards. In addition, the opposition of "we" and "they" served the function of psychological protection of the masses, because it allowed giving if not legal then at least moral legitimacy to a real violation of ethical norms (such as theft, which is not compatible with the Christian commandments).

This conviction has strongly strengthened among the serf workers and peasants, passed on to the level of the “collective unconscious” and passed down for generations. The “additional income" at the expense of factory products turned into a sustainable everyday phenomenon the authorities had to reckon with. Moreover, as the manager of the Ufa Mining District noted in 1907, the workers of his subordinate enterprises considered theft as "valor” (RGIA. F. 48. Def. 1. D. 234. L. 89).

The plant and factory reports provide no statistical data allowing us to estimate the real scale of this phenomenon, therefore, it is necessary to use indirect evidence. One of them, reflecting the massive nature of theft in the mining industry, is the widespread practice of searches at factory entrance checkpoints. Their removal at the enterprises of the region after the Manifesto on October 17, 1905 led to a sharp surge in theft of factory property. In particular, according to a district police officer in December 1905, workers of the Zlatoustsky plant, “having achieved the abolition of searches when leaving the factory, they steal everything every day they can” (GARF. DPOO. 1906. D. 236. Op. 6. L. 11).

The same is evidenced by the rules for workers recorded in their payment books, which single out only two violations at work: drunkenness and “unauthorized appropriation of the working tool, manufactured
metals, products, supplies and other factory stuff” (RGIA F. 1291. Op. 66. D. 27. L. 176), - as it was, for example, recorded in the relevant documents of workers of the Kyshtymsky plant in the 1890s.

Nothing has changed since the overthrow of the autocracy. Already in March 1917, the council of the head of the Zlatoust plant decided to establish the strictest control “in order to completely eliminate all kinds of plant theft from any side”. (Proceedings of the Zlatoustsky Board of Workers' Deputies. 1917. March 27).

It is obvious that the mass practice of the “thefts” of the Soviet period is due not only to the concrete socio-economic realities of socialist production, but also to the cultural and historical factors of the previous period.

4. Conclusion

The conducted study allows us to draw a conclusion about the low level of labor discipline of the Ural workers in the post-reform period, as evidenced by the widespread nature of such deviations from the norms of civilized labor behavior such as being late, absenteeism, drunkenness, theft, and non-observance of technological discipline.

Among the reasons that influenced the formation of labor moral of the workers of the region, first, conservation until 1917 of the main features of the “original structure” of the mining industry and the crisis nature of its post-reform development should be mentioned. In many respects, the situation was influenced by the preservation of the obligation relationship, which reproduced the conviction that the workers had in the pre-reform period that the owner was obliged to provide him with work, which minimized his labor efforts.

The focus of the management of enterprises on the predominant provision of work to local workers in comparison with newcomers also had a negative impact. According to A.N. Mitinskii, this practice "corrupted" workers, who knew that a plant owner should "give work to his worker, even if the latter was inept and drunk" (Mitinskii, 1909) and led to a decrease in labor discipline.

In general, the corporate ethic of the Ural workers was in the framework of the ideas of the traditional society and was characterized by a low level of labor motivation. Its restructuring in accordance with the requirements of the industrial era at the turn of the XIX-XX centuries was at the initial stage.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare that the provided information has no conflicts of interest.

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