

Letters from the Front Line of the Building Industry: 1918–1938

INTRODUCTION

It should be self-evident that buildings and cities are not made by magic but are the result of the 'union of human labour with the objects and instruments of production.' However, it is rare in the conventional narratives of architectural and urban history that we ever hear much about building workers or, indeed, the *labour* of architects. Human labour might have a bit part, or be a passing reference, but it is seldom placed centre-stage. This antipathy towards 'history as labour' is all the more strange when we consider that what Marx called the *labour process* is the 'universal condition for the metabolic interaction between man and nature, the everlasting nature-imposed condition of human existence.'¹ 'Letters from the Frontline' makes a small contribution to this history of the human species as a history of the labour process. Written in 2011, it was assembled from notes collected in Moscow when the Soviet Union still existed. My research at that point was very much to do with the history of the labour process in the construction industry, and in particular, the Marxist critique of capitalist work practices. This naturally enough led me to look at how and in what ways the labour process had developed differently in the Soviet Union. The three 'letters' here, written as if I am a visiting journalist, chart a 20-year period from 1919 to 1938 – a tale of revolution and counter-revolution. To this day the question remains unresolved: what form will labour take in a post-capitalist society?

1. 1918

Spring comes to Samara on the mighty Volga – a fitting backdrop, for like its unstoppable currents, this history runs deep and strong – a report from the Conference of the All Russian Union of Construction Workers – Samara 12–15 May 1918 – excerpts from the historical annals of the building worker – close the churches – whitewash the icons – declare class war on priests, landowners and imperialists – peace, bread and electricity is the foundation of Soviet power – long live the Internationale – the painters are dismantling the world and putting it back together in colliding planes of colour – Malevic invites the workers of the world to unite with abstract typography laid over broken geometry – here we have it then, laid out bare on the slab, history is up for the making – what shall it be? – Lenin's 'network of producer and consumer communes'? – Bakunin's 'free federation of worker associations'? – Kropotkin's Anarchist Communism, a carnival of independence, mutual agreement and cooperation? – Marx and Engels's futurist society in which class distinctions have disappeared and public power has shed its political character?³ – the signpost on how to get there is revolving – the Communists say that to begin with workers must seize and occupy the institutions of the state and to use it to their advantage in completing their victory over the capitalist class – only when this has been accomplished does it make sense to speak of the state withering like a disease-ridden tree – the anarchists, on the other hand, would take an axe to the trunk tomorrow and abolish the state forthwith – time is pressing, and Alexander Bogdanov is wasting none of it – already he is thinking of an end to toil and of a new type of complex spiritual creative labour that unites mind and body⁴ – perhaps this is what Marx meant by 'revolutionary practical critical activity.'⁵

Organise workers' councils at your place of employment

Every delegate is preoccupied with one question, the alarmingly simple and atrociously difficult, 'What form will labour take in a worker's state?' No longer fearful of arrest, building workers have moved beyond the pressing matters of wages and the working week, and are passionately debating as if the world might end tomorrow what Soviet power might mean for working life on a building site. They are poring over the decrees on workers' control that were announced in November last year. Extraordinary documents in the history of the labour movement, they guarantee the rights and authority of workers through the factory committees and trade unions to control the activities of enterprises.⁶ Copies of Lenin's essays in which he lays out his plan for socialism are passing from hand to hand. His vision of the state losing its coercive nature and becoming an administrative department whose function is to coordinate a network of producers and consumers' communes, chimes with the aspirations of the ordinary carpenters, masons and bricklayers who have packed the hall.⁷ It is both intoxicating and avant-garde. Boundaries are being transgressed. Convention dismissed. Neither are building workers restricting themselves to purely political questions. Utopia beckons. If work on a capitalist building site is back-breaking, repetitive, and ruled by the tyranny of piece rates, then surely they argue, work under socialism should be creative and based on co-operation and the sharing of wages?

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4.1 'Comrades, we have a real opportunity to transcend the printed page and build a new world'

It would be a mistake to think that these themes have sprung up over night. It is certainly the case that the revolution has thrown them sharply into focus, but in truth they have been fomenting in the lap of labour for over 100 years. As quite literally the builders of capitalism's cities and infrastructure, building workers were in the front line of the development of the new ideology of *laissez-faire*. As ancient rules on craft and guild were torn to pieces, they were thrust into a system of vicious competition and contracting that was notorious for being unregulated and dominated by an authoritarian class of contractors.⁸ They were also one of the largest sections of the industrial working class and one of the most militant. As long ago as the end of the eighteenth century, French building workers denounced their employers as 'ignorant, rapacious and insatiable oppressors'.⁹ A few years later in 1833, the Operative Builders' Union in Britain fought for the creation of a builders' parliament and the introduction of a nationwide system of cooperative building production.¹⁰ Inspired by the lessons of Robert Owen, they argued that the wages system should be abolished and that workers should control the building process, adding they were able to build better and more efficiently than any contractor. But that was not all. These were just steps towards their ultimate goal of creating a 'great association for the emancipation of the productive classes'.¹¹ This dream of a prototypical French Commune or Russian soviet was not the fantasy of a few individuals either. At the height of its brief existence, the OBU vanguard mobilized over 40,000 building workers who were possessed by a 'revolutionary temper',¹² and judging by the declarations and the debates at the conference here, their ghosts are mingling amongst the delegates.

The events in Russia, then, are neither an accident nor an aberration. They are the latest chapter in a wave of labour militancy that has swept across Europe over the last 30 years. Building sites in Siberia, Moscow and St Petersburg were convulsed by a succession of strikes in the 1870s and 1890s.¹³ These were indicative of a growing sense of confidence in the organised workers' movement that famously culminated in the 1905 Revolution, when over 3,000,000 workers across the country laid down their tools. They included bricklayers, cement workers, carpenters, painters, and stonemasons.¹⁴ Horrified by this turn of events, the tsarist authorities unleashed a violent storm of armed repression that forced workers' organisations underground. By 1910, police infiltration, mass arrests and imprisonment had succeeded in closing all of the fledgling trade union branches in the major cities and strike activity had dropped to a fraction of what it had been in 1905.¹⁵ This trade union conference, then, is something of a phoenix, and a young one at that. For it was not until 1914 that a union representing the interests of construction workers and architects – 'The Society of Architectural and Construction Workers of the Moscow Industrial Region' – was able to operate in relative freedom from arrest and closure.

During the following two years, the union replaced the slogan 'Better wages' with '*Doloi gnet*': 'Down with oppression'.¹⁶ Battle lines were drawn and workers knew instinctively that the situation had changed irrevocably.¹⁷ Then on 2 March, paralleling the demonstrations in St Peterburg, Moscow exploded. Reports filtered through the city that workers from the Dinamo Plant had marched across the Yauza Bridge and swept aside the police cordons. By the end of the day, workers were in

control of the post and telegraph offices, the telephone exchange, the Kremlin, the railways and the security police headquarters.

It was a turning point and during the next three months there was a dramatic rise in workers' unrest. Between May and October, on the building sites of St Petersburg alone 50 strikes took place.¹⁸ Meanwhile in Moscow, new wage demands were sent out to all contractors.¹⁹ They refused them and following a series of increasingly bitter confrontations, the Moscow Union called a city-wide strike that continued throughout September and involved over 12,000 building workers. In all, from April to November in the Moscow region, 21,000 building workers took part in strike action, with over a third of them raising directly political demands.²⁰

As I write, Russia is in the midst of a civil war and of what senior Party officials have labelled 'war communism'. Many building workers have joined the Red Army. Some, such as the old Union of Plumbers, have entered the ranks of Mensheviks. However, despite the uncertainty and upheaval, it was felt that the union should continue to meet. So here I am in Samara, as an observer at the first-ever conference of the All Russian Union of Construction Workers. I have been a witness at a number of trade union gatherings, but none of them has ever come close to this, and its proceedings are there for all to read in a new journal *Stroitel* (Builder).²¹ Relatively modest motions for the introduction of an eight-hour day, time-based wages, and educational programmes were passed in an instance, as was the decision to unite the disparate smaller unions of building workers into one organisation. But this was just the prelude to two momentous resolutions. The first called for the liquidation of private contractors and the second for the introduction of workers' control of production in all construction organisations employing more than 30 workers. There was still yet more to come. As if conscious that building workers across the world were listening, the conference closed with thunderous applause for the passing of a motion to fully socialise the building industry so that all of its branches would be brought under the organs of 'socialist state power'.²²

2. 1927

Tons of concrete – the proletarianisation of otkhodniki (seasonal workers) is accomplished – concrete and steel architecture springs from the earth – a planetarium is planned to conquer the cosmos – goodbye to the private contractor, your likes will not be seen again – agit prop street art and agit prop trains – spellbound and mesmerised, audiences watch Battleship Potemkin and Strike – propaganda and art unite to stunning effect, and not just in film – factory conductors stand on roofs and conducts symphonies of factory sirens – the People's Commissar of the Enlightenment, Lunacharsky, calls for the Institutions of Art education to be proletarianised – a boy is born and is given the name Zavod, (Factory) – a girl is born next-door and is given the name Dotnara, (Daughter of the toiling people) – the iron sword of the working class will make sure that all remains peaceful – a confusing tension stalks – blind faith, for I have to believe, is battling with disillusionment – which way now? – the Soviet state has survived – but the state is getting bigger and bigger, it does not look likely to wither – who remembers Rosa Luxemburg's warning that if the expression 'the dictatorship of the proletariat' must be used, then it must be on the basis of

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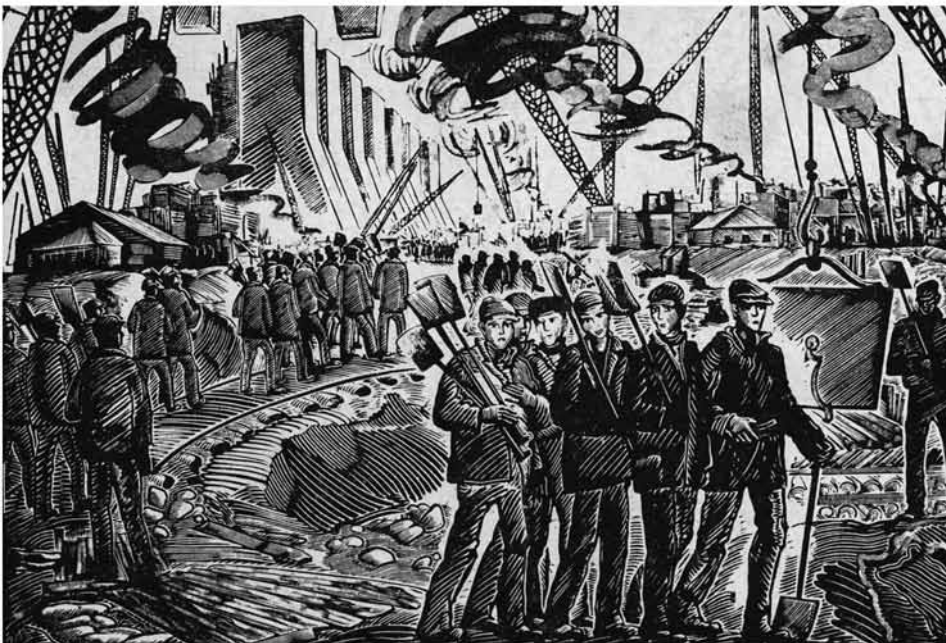
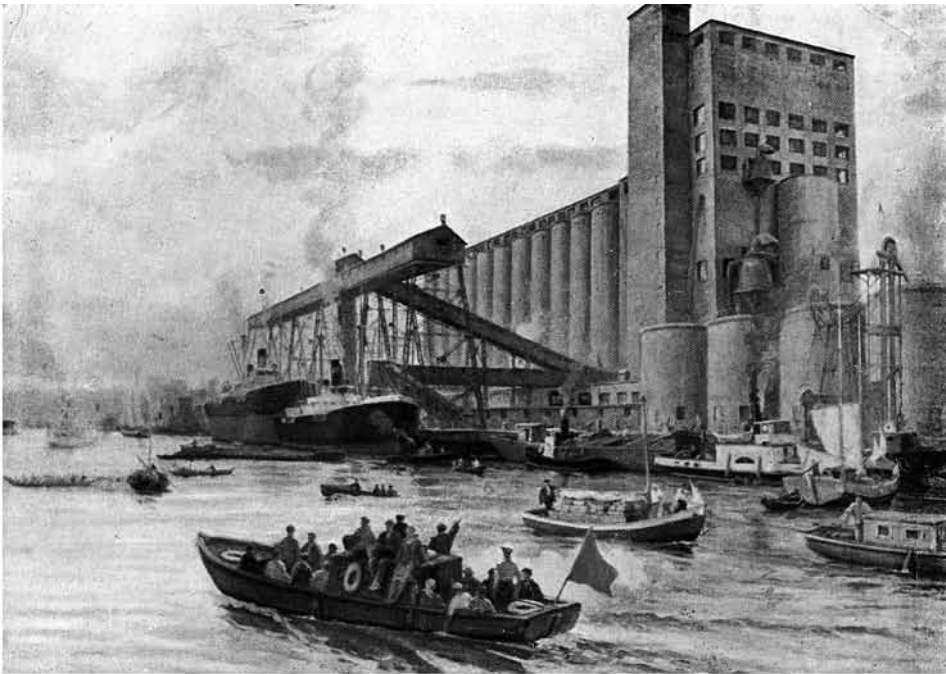
the 'most active, unlimited participation of the mass of the people, of unlimited democracy'²³ – it makes no difference, say anarchists – a dictatorship is a dictatorship is a dictatorship, regardless on whose behalf it is wielded – Comrade, don't read that book, it is ant-soviet and degenerate – Gorky is acceptable, but not that madman Bulgakov – still, the plans for workers' clubs look exciting – build social condensers for our time say the Constructivists – architects ask the users of the transitional commune how they imagine a new way of life – the ingenious metal rings of the Shabolovka Radio Tower broadcast its messages to the world, but what kind of messages are they? – Trotsky said he preferred monumental constructions to Tatlin's tower and that the modernist writer Bely is a corpse – he should be wary that a cadaverous fate doesn't await him as well – the anarchist artist Aleksei Gan has no time for pleasantries and accuses everyone except proletarians of being stricken by artistic podagrisms.

'We didn't fight a revolution for piece rates and Taylorism', say building workers

The statistics department is working overtime. Its typewriters and reprographic machines spew smoke like a turbine hall. Numbers are everything and in purely quantitative terms, the New Economic Policy has been a success. Two thousand new factories have been built. Brick and cement production has recovered its pre-war levels. The number of workers in the building industry has increased four-fold. Gross production nearly ten-fold. The productivity of labour has increased 100 per cent.²⁴ Membership of the Moscow branch of the Construction Union has risen to 150,000.²⁵ Applause rings across the rooftops. The factory hooters sing their praises.

There is much else that the building industry has to be proud of. The first signs of what a socialist architecture might look like are emerging out of the ground. For most of the past decade, architects and urban designers have been restricted to working out on paper the theoretical shape of the urban revolution and the non-capitalist city. All manner of communes, workers' clubs, linear and flying cities jumped from the drawing board to stretch the public imagination and the boundaries of structural engineering. Now the task is to translate these ideas into reality and building workers are rising to the challenge. The foundations for the epic Dnieper hydroelectric dam have been laid. Glazed steel cylinders and flying cantilevered concrete workers' clubs raise a glass to the sky. Mossoviet has built its first project that integrates housing, a crèche, bath house, shops and school, and even the revolutionary newspaper *Izvestia* has a new headquarters: a fragment of modern poetry whose round steel windows look down over the statue of Pushkin. All of this is cause for celebration and from what I understand there are more plans for housing communes and workers' clubs in the coming year.²⁶

But amidst the excitement at Moscow's new architecture and the impressive indices of economic growth, all is not well. Censors are banning books and a culture of authoritarianism is leaking like a toxin through government organisations and Party committees. It is a process of corrosion that has accelerated since Stalin consolidated his grip on the leadership of the Party. Six years ago in the interests of revolutionary discipline the Party banned factions and launched a scathing attack on the millenarian demands of the Workers' Opposition and anarchists. Now it is convulsed again and eating itself from the inside. There is, of course, nothing about this that Voline, Arshinov and Shliapnikov hadn't already warned.



4.2 'In no time at all we shall surpass the West. All hands to the pump in the industrialisation of the economy'

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Power is seductive and is never voluntarily relinquished. For the anarchists, 'all political power inevitably creates a privileged situation for the men who exercise it.' And once the throne has been seized, then like an unfailing mechanical clock, the new incumbents will be '...compelled to create a bureaucratic and coercive apparatus.'²⁷

On the labour front there has been an equally regrettable turn of events. Despite the efforts of Tomskey to maintain independence for trade unions, it looks increasingly likely that as of next year, they will become subordinate organs of the Soviet state. A mixed economy in which state ownership and a capitalist market co-exist is bound to produce mixed results and reactions. Even so, building sites are far from happy places. The reintroduction of capitalist contractors during the New Economic Policy, even if a temporary measure to kick-start the economy, has not gone down well with rank and file building workers, who can not hide their disappointment. As early as 1919, they criticised the way in which private contractors who, only two years before, they had thrown off sites in the 'carting off' ceremonies, were being given rights that ran counter to the workers' movement.²⁸ State building organisations are having to compete on tenders with the private sector and there is evidence of swindlers posing as contractors actually receiving cash advances. And if rumours are to be believed, some of the old contractors are even working in the State Offices for construction!²⁹

The contradictions mount. As NEP has unfolded over the last six years, many workers have looked on in confusion over the concessions being given to foreign building firms and the Party's reinforcement of the system of *edinochaliye* – one-man management. How, they legitimately ask, do we reconcile this policy with the principle that democratically elected workers' collectives should be running building enterprises? Equally contentious has been the introduction of the scientific organisation of labour – *nauchnaya organizatsia truda* (NOT). An adaptation of American Taylorism, it is being championed by Gastev, who is obsessed with discipline and is instructing workers to avoid fraternisation and sharp movements!³⁰ Determined to raise productivity, his office has produced diagrams that purport to show the optimum way of moving hand and foot when laying a course of bricks. But bricklayers are not performing seals. Neither are they robots.

And it gets worse. Over a third of the construction workforce is unemployed, and for those that do have a job, how are they being paid? By piece rates and bonus schemes; the very wage form in which Karl Marx argued capitalist hunger is laid bare. Needless to say, the Party leadership rhetorically defends the system of one-man management, piece rates and Taylorism, arguing that under the conditions of a workers' state, they assume another character. Besides which, they insist, the construction industry is simply not in a strong enough position to dispense with the experience, achievements and techniques of capitalist society.³¹ This is also the reason why they deride as utopian the anarchist demand for the immediate 'expropriation of private industry by the organisations of collective production.'³² For support, they point to no greater authority than Lenin himself, who argued that in order to rebuild the economy, it was necessary to adapt elements of capitalist work practices, reminding workers that they always had recourse to political bodies

if new labour laws were contravened.³³ So be it, but it doesn't make the situation any more palatable for building workers. Many still dream of a qualitatively different way of working and remember fondly the arguments of the Workers' Opposition and industrial unions on how they should be given complete freedom to develop their creative abilities whilst discovering and experimenting with new forms of production.³⁴

Perhaps the strangest aspect of the first ten years of Soviet power has been labour unrest and the last few years have seen a marked increase in what are euphemistically being described as 'general conflicts.' As one might expect, many of these have occurred in the old artels and firms run by unscrupulous speculators who have been allowed back into the labour market. But a good number have been taking place in the state sector. Tales abound of 12- and 18-hour days, the usurpation of labour laws, and of wages not being paid.³⁵ In 1923, 75,000 building workers were embroiled in major disputes over contract arrangements.³⁶ The following year, an astonishing 22 strikes broke out in the building industry, with over 3,000 reported disagreements over wages. It was a pattern that was replicated in the first six months of 1925, when over 25,000 workers were again in disputes over wages and contracts.³⁷

The high rate of incidents in state-run building organisations are particularly contradictory, since workers rightly expect that here at least new working conditions should be upheld. One can only hope that as the building industry becomes fully nationalised next year with the launch of the first five-year plan, such problems will be ironed out. Already in Moscow, virtually all new house building is being carried out by the 'socialised sector', the majority under the direction of the Moscow Soviet and its organisation Mosstroï.³⁸ The role of the private sector has been drastically reduced and in the building materials sector, 90 per cent of it is now state owned.³⁹ Progressive measures though these appear to be, Russian workers should be on their guard, for the state ownership of the means of production is no guarantee of democracy. This is why Shliapnikov asked with regards to the transition from the New Economic Policy to Socialism, the title of a series of lectures by Party economist Preobrashensky: 'By what means during this period of transformation can our Communist Party carry out its economic policy; shall it be by means of the workers organised into their class union, or – over their heads – by bureaucratic means, through canonised functionaries of the state?'⁴⁰

3. 1936

Nine years have passed since I was here last – Kagonovich opens the metro – Plastov paints life on a collective farm – it bears the crimson slogan, 'Life is happier under Stalin' – the knock – all artistic organisations brought under state control – marble is declared socialist – ideanost, partinost and narodnost – ideological content, party spirit and national character – these are the new slogans for the future – Novelist, are you celebrating the class struggle of the proletariat? If not, why not? – Painter, are your images of workers and peasants, figurative and noble? If not, why not? – farewell to the avant garde, gone are

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its sharp edges – welcome to proletarian classicism – Golosov, architect of the constructivist worker's club Zuev has become antiquarian – his new apartment block has been praised as a fine example of revolutionary romanticism – delusion charges across the city – exiled in Paris, Voline has christened the USSR the USCR: the Union of State Capitalist Republics – the Party bureaucracy, he says, is a ruling class that has 'totalitarianised, easily and quickly, the whole Russian administration, and the organisations of industrial workers and peasants'⁴¹ – Arshinov condemns the Soviet state for transforming trade unions into organs of police surveillance – their job, to discipline a working class labouring under a regime of obligatory and militarised labour⁴² – ironically, Trotsky agrees and calls the bureaucracy a 'privileged upper strata – a ruling Soviet caste'⁴³ – atomisation – fragmentation – jackhammers are pounding away as new boulevards split the city – strange facsimiles of renaissance Italy and ancient Greece adorn the triumphal new streets – Doric, iconic, but never ironic – fluting columns and Corinthian curls – the Palace of Versailles has been built underground – it is, it has to be said, magnificent – a true dialectic, a cruel mix of exalted craftsmanship and forced labour – the proletariat shall go to work through the palaces of former kings – ideology is sealed in the stone tombs of the triumphal Lenin library and five-point star plan of the Red Army theatre – Shliapnikov and the economist Isaac Rubin have disappeared – 'Trotskyist theoreticians' are being ritually unmasked with alarming regularity – on the architectural front line, two recent victims of what is perversely being described as 'revolutionary zeal' have vanished – Lisagor, who worked with Ginzburg and the Vesnins, and the radical disurbanist Okhitovich.⁴⁴

Exceed the plan targets and beware of saboteurs: Egalitarianism has been banned by the Communist Party as a bourgeois idea!

Two years ago, a new plan was launched for Moscow. The winning scheme selected by the Central Committee after an international competition is intended to amplify the neo-classical radial plan of the nineteenth century. Blessed by Stalin and steeped in classical antiquity, academic masters from before the revolution like Zholtoskovsky have re-emerged from the shadows of the avant-garde to claim their place at the forefront of Soviet architecture. Bulldozers carve colossal new boulevards that hurtle from the birch forests to the heart of the city. Eventually they will be flanked by cliffs of uninterrupted parade-like housing of the kind that can already be seen on Gorky and Chkalova Street. Existing avenues will be widened so that they are broad enough to land aircraft and move army divisions. Standing at the centre of the ensemble, in place of the recently demolished Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, will tower the Palace of the Soviets that metaphorically, if not literally, will be visible from the corners of every republic. The intention is unambiguous. It is to create an aura of immutability, of theatrical grandeur. Moscow is to become a monumental and triumphant city that broadcasts to the world the might of the Soviet Union. The ideologues of socialist realism claim that it is only right that the proletariat should enjoy architectural splendours that previously were reserved for the aristocracy. Accordingly, there is barely a trace of the aesthetic sensibilities or egalitarianism that informed the work of architects and urbanists in the 1920s. I confess to finding the whole scheme profoundly depressing. For what



4.3 'Women construction workers, raise your productivity in the interests of building socialism'

kind of progressive socialist democracy is it that requires the plan of an imperial city and the pomp and bombastic scale of the Palace of the Soviets? It is as if the Central Committee are announcing in architectural form the concentration and centralisation of all power in the hands of the Party in Moscow. It's as if the stacked tiers of the palace are screaming in deafening stone that the State is no longer constructed by the people, it is built over and above them.⁴⁵ Given this, it is small wonder that the Communist Party under Stalin has declared wage levelling in the building industry as reactionary.

Many who remain committed to the long-term goals of the revolution think that the recent arrests and repressive measures taken by the bureaucracy against all internal opposition are merely passing irregularities. There is no blue print for socialism, they say. Unfortunate measures were taken for expediency's sake. Mistakes will inevitably occur, but lessons will be learnt. After all, revolutions have to be made, remade and then remade again. In time, all will be resolved. But there is little sign of this in action. The Communist Party has occupied all government departments and has assumed absolute control of the country's resources and decision-making bodies.⁴⁶

Under the new system of economic management, directors of enterprises, not workers' collectives, are responsible for the carrying out of plan targets. In addition, directors have been granted complete authority in the appointment of staff, in the general running of the enterprise and in maintaining labour discipline.⁴⁷ In an even stranger twist, trade unions have been informed that 'they must not hinder directly in the running of the enterprise' and that their role is 'to assist actively in the carrying out and strengthening of one-man management'.⁴⁸

Odd announcements indeed for a workers' state. The revolutionary declarations of 1917 might only be two decades old but they seem light years away, and it is difficult to reconcile the transitional idea of 'workers' control of production', let alone Lenin's vision of the next stage, of 'full workers regulation of production', with these new laws and policy statements.⁴⁹ But it gets even stranger. There are only two things that seem to matter. Discipline and productivity. Strange new tools have been introduced like plastering machines, double-handed two-metre long trowels and bizarre straight-edged buckets for pouring mortar along a brick course. But in the absence of significant advances in labour-saving technology, the Party has decided that there is only one way to extract more labour out of workers and that is through a combination of 'scientific' management, wage differentials, and competitive targets.

Accordingly, workers on building sites are increasingly being organised in hierarchical military-style brigades. They are led by a 'brigadier' foreman who is accountable to the 'enterprise director', who operates in much the same way as a divisional army captain. Gathering data from his field of operations, he passes statistics on plan targets and cadre training to regional offices, who then report to the high command in the Construction Ministry in Moscow. This militarisation of the labour collective is designed to ensure both political and economic discipline, and its ideological character is accurately captured by its name, *Khozaschotnie Brigadi*: cost-accounting brigades.⁵⁰ The intention is quite straightforward. It is to link wages directly to output, a system of performance-related pay that is being

reinforced by the increased use of bonus schemes and piece rates.⁵¹ The second weapon in the Ministry's armoury is *sotzialisticheskoe sorevnovaniia*, 'Socialist competition'. Cleaning their tools and preparing materials, one brigade issues a productivity challenge to another. The two then embark on a furious mission to exceed plan targets by as much as is humanly possible or, indeed, imaginable.⁵²

High bonuses and medals await the record breakers, who are ceremonially paraded in front of ordinary mortals in full glare of spotlights and camera. The plasterer Golov is supposed to have raised his productivity by a factor of 25. By what means, no one is entirely sure. Comrade Orlov organised his own bricklaying school and showed young shock workers how to lay a scarcely believable 5,000 bricks a day.⁵³ Individual brigades are reported as having raised productivity by a miraculous 300 per cent. Some are so determined to exceed norms that they have worked flat-out in Stakhanovite fortnights.⁵⁴ Wonders never cease. The electrician Maria Maslova has improved her productivity by over 800 per cent,⁵⁵ and a steel worker by the name of Romanov is reputed to have processed 40 tons of reinforcing steel in a single day, exceeding norms by a staggering 1,250 percent. Not content with such earth shattering statistics, officials have discovered one individual who, in a Herculean feat of mythological proportions, is reported to have laid bricks at the staggering rate of 1,500 per hour.⁵⁶ Despite the claims of the Party, there are doubts about whether the combination of shock work, 'socialist competition', and Stakhanovism, has in actual fact raised productivity that significantly.

This has all been accompanied by a sustained attack by the Party bureaucracy against what are being described as 'left opportunists' who, as late as 1932, still supported the use of *produktoobmen* (product exchange) as a replacement for the use of money.⁵⁷ Also singled out as an 'ideological error' has been the continued popularity amongst young building workers of *Proizvodstvennie Beatovye Kommuni*, (Production Way of Life Communes), which are reported as still operating 'false principles', like wage sharing.⁵⁸ There is no irony to be found here, only tragedy. In what can only be described as a grotesque ideological inversion, Communist Party officials are out in force on building sites to ensure the liquidation of *uranilovka*, egalitarianism. For they claim that it is egalitarianism and 'the equalising policies of the old directors of the trade union',⁵⁹ that is the principle cause of all of the building industry's problems; its low productivity, poor record in improving workers qualifications, and in the lack of commitment to the fulfillment of plan targets.⁶⁰ At the moment the campaign against wage equalisation and egalitarianism is relentless. However, rhetorical attacks are not enough and new legislation has been passed that further increases wage differentials.⁶¹ And so it has come to pass that 20 years after the revolution, the battle cry of *Uranilovka* is now deemed a weapon used by the enemies of the Stakhanovite movement, a 'distortion of the socialist principle of wages according to the quantity and quality of work', and, most extraordinary of all, of being 'petty bourgeois'.⁶² Such is the insatiable appetite of the Soviet state for surplus labour.⁶³

The Party would have everyone believe that Stakhanovism, NOT and 'Emulation' are the movements of the moment, a shining example of socialist labour. But for others it is a draconian regime that utilises many of the worst aspects of capitalist work practices and is undermining collective solidarity.⁶⁴ A deeply insidious system,

it pits worker against worker in a competitive relationship, where mind and body are pushed to the limits of exhaustion. It has created a grotesque culture of the hero worker as part of a full-blown cultural counter-revolution designed to incarcerate hearts and minds through the hagiographic idealisation of everyday life. Like an ideological poison, this has bled into the rhetorical gestures of painting, sculpture, literature, and the ritualised displays of state power. It may not be a workers' state but at least it can be made to look like one. It is all very fantastic and it feels as if I have been on a bizarre journey that started in a city governed by the fetishism of the commodity and took me across the universe to a planet ruled by the fetishism of the plan where Superman is alive and well.

Myth as ever competes with reality in volatile and sharpened circumstances. But memory runs deep and even amidst the culture of fear, tales are leaking of opposition to the Stakhanovite movement.⁶⁵ Long gone are the critical letters in the construction industry journals. These are now devoted to technological questions and upholding the official Party line. But we can draw conclusions by what is not written and what is implied. The journal *Trud (Labour)* has been forced to admit that the Stakhanovite movement has remained weak in the construction industry, which has been hit by numerous incidents of what is being called 'sabotage'.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, *Stroitel'naya Promishlennost* is reporting that conflict is widespread on building sites. It includes a disturbing warning issued to building workers to be vigilant of the Trotsky-Zinoviev bloc who are described as fascist agents, of having organised the murder of Kirov and of perpetrating terrorist acts against the leadership of the Party. Furthermore, it warns that such saboteurs are actively 'spinning yarns' and 'spreading their bloody web on building sites', and that building workers should 'not forget Krivom Ross, Magnitogorsk and Zaporashtal', where the very same bandits 'have been carrying out their mean and base work'.⁶⁷

We should have known when Lenin's body was embalmed, and his brain removed for study that things were taking a turn for the worse. Now his passionate plea for an 'immense expansion of democracy' is barely audible above the megaphones announcing Stalin's declaration that class antagonisms have miraculously been overcome. As for Voline's argument that the real substance of the revolution lay in an immense process of construction based on emancipated labour and fundamental equality, it is no more than the faintest of whispers.⁶⁸

NOTES

- 1 Marx, 1976, *Capital*, Volume I (London: Penguin, 1976), p. 290.
- 2 Daniel Guérin, 'Bakunin on Worker Self-Management' in *No Gods, No Masters: An Anthology of Anarchism*, Book 1 (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1998), p. 182.
- 3 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Penguin Classics, 2002), p. 244, and Peter Kropotkin, 'Anarchist Communism' in Peter Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 31–40.
- 4 See Aleksandr Bogdanov, 'The Paths of Proletarian Creation', *Proletarskaya Kultura*, Moscow, No. 15/16, 1920, and 'The Proletarian and Art', *Proletarskaya kultura*, No. 5,

1918; both reproduced in John Bowlit, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde, Theory and Criticism*, 1902–1934, (New York: Viking Press, 1976), pp. 176–82.

- 5 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, 'Theses on Feuerbach' in *The German Ideology* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985), p. 121.
- 6 'In order to provide planned regulation of the national economy, workers' control over the manufacture, purchase, sale and storage of produce and raw materials and over the financial activity of enterprises is introduced in all industrial, commercial, banking, agricultural, and other enterprises which employ hired labour or give work to be done at home. Workers' control is exercised by all the workers of the given enterprise through their elected bodies, such as factory committees, shop stewards' councils...Decisions of workers' control bodies are binding upon the owners of enterprises and may be revoked only by higher workers' control bodies.' Quoted in Tony Cliff, *Lenin – Volume Three. The Revolution Besieged* (London: Pluto Press, 1978), p. 10. See also Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, 'Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?' in Lenin, *Selected Works* (Moscow: Progress, 1977), pp. 371–4. First published in 1918.
- 7 Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, 'The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government' in Lenin, *Selected Works*, p. 410.
- 8 Richard Price, *Masters, Unions and Men* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 25–31.
- 9 George Rudé, *The Crowd in History* (London: Serif, 1995), p. 127.
- 10 'The trade unions will not strike for less work and more wages, but they will ultimately abolish wages, become their own masters, and work for each other: labour and capital will no longer be separate but they will be indissolubly joined together in the hands of the workmen and work-women.' See the fantastic book by Raymond W. Postgate, *The Builders' History* (London: The National Federation of Building Trade Operatives, 1923), pp. 77–114. Also see Eric P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1980), pp. 909–12 and Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Revolution*, (London, 1997), p. 256.
- 11 '...to erect all manner of dwellings and other architectural designs for the public more expeditiously, substantially and economically than any masters can build them under the individual system of competition.'...to decide upon the amount of work or service to be performed, each day...in order that none may be oppressed by labour beyond their labour and powers.' Postgate, *The Builders' History*, pp. 463–6. Not only this, but the OBU looked far beyond their own interests and imagined the urban reconstruction of the whole nation in a manner that recalled the proto communist programmes of the Diggers, who in 1649 advocated the construction of hospitals and schools for the whole population.
- 12 Postgate, *The Builders' History*, p. 58.
- 13 For details of the early strike movement with numerous entries on building workers, see the Soviet era reference works, *Robochie Dvisheniye v Rossiya v 19 veka*, (Workers' Movements in Nineteenth-century Russia), Volume II, Part II, 1875–1884 and Volume III, Part II, 1890–1894, (Moscow: Politicheskaya Literatura, 1950). For numerous entries on building workers strikes in the Petersburg area and northern Russia see various works by E.A. Korolchuk, *Rabochiye Dvisheniye v 1870–90-x Godov* (Workers' Movements between 1870–1890), (Moscow, 1939), and *Kronika Revolyutsionno Rabochevo Dvisheniya v Petersburg, 1870–1904*, (Chronicle of Revolutionary Workers Movements in Petersburg), (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1940). Nikolai Bogdanov, et al., *Kratkaya Istoria Soyuz Stroitel*, (A Short History of the Construction Worker's Union) (Moscow: TKVSSR, 1927) (Central Committee of the All-Russian Union of Construction Workers), p. 4. See also N. Bogdanov, *Organisatsia Strotlenik Rabochik Rossii I Drugik Stran*, (The Organisation of

- Building Workers in Russia and Other Countries), (Moscow, TK VSSR) and A. Tararukin, *Rabota credi Stroiteli*, (Work Amongst Building Workers), (Moscow: Moskovski Rabochi, 1927).
- 14 Several building workers were elected to the Moscow Soviet and in Novorossiski, cement workers linked with railway and other workers to organise a Soviet of Workers and Peasants Deputies that was to stay in power for over two months. For a detailed analysis of the organised workers' movement in English see Victoria Bonnell, *Roots of Rebellion: Workers Politics and Organizations in St Petersburg and Moscow, 1900–1914* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), and S.A. Smith, *Red Petrograd. Revolution in the Factories. 1917–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). In 1914, at a clandestine conference in Moscow, building workers called for the legal creation of a single united union, a library and lecture programme, an eight-hour day, and wages to be determined locally by trade unions on a time basis. The delegates voted to continue the struggle against the exploitation of seasonal workers, and against the undercutting practices of those artels willing to work on piece rates. In addition, they advocated the replacement of food by money wages, the introduction of a state insurance scheme, training schools, and argued that overtime should only be allowed where there was no unemployment. Bogdanov, *Kratkaya Istoria*, pp. 9–16.
 - 15 See for the development of the construction workers union and its role in 1917, S. Sindeyev, *Professionalnie Dvishenie Rabochik stroiteli v 1917*, (Building Worker's Movements in 1917), (Moscow: Trud i Kniga, 1927)
 - 16 Sindeyev, *Professionalniye Dvisheniye*, ibid., p. 39, B. Boev, *Stroiteli v Revolutzia in '50 let'-Slavnie iubeli Sovetskikh profsoyuz* (Moscow: Profsoyuzdat, 1958), p. 183.
 - 17 Matters in the construction industry were further complicated by the rise of unemployment and by soldiers returning from the war front willing to work for lower wages. This prompted the creation of a labour bureau and law office to deal with the unemployed, as well as the creation of a private contractors' organisation to fight the workers' union, not unlike the Association of Master Builders in London. Sindeyev, *Professionalnie Dvishenie*, p. 13.
 - 18 Boev, *Stroiteli v Revolutzia*, p. 184.
 - 19 Sindeyev, *Professionalnie Dvishenie*, pp. 15–21.
 - 20 With a strike fund of 5,000 rubles, the Moscow workers appealed to peasants and out of town workers not to enter the city, as contractors had begun to organise strike breakers. Despite the attempt by employers to bypass the courts and approach the administrators of factories and sites demanding lists of activists and issuing threats to have workers sent to the war front, the then Moscow Commissar for Labour proposed a court of arbitration which eventually adjudicated in favour of the workers. Sindeyev, *Professionalniye Dvisheniye*, p. 30. See also Diane Koenker, *Moscow Workers and the 1917 Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 311–22.
 - 21 *Stroitel*, No. 2, May 1918, pp. 1–15. For the OBU declaration published in full see Postgate, *Builders' History*, p. 463.
 - 22 *Stroitel*, No. 2, May 1918, pp. 1–15.
 - 23 Rosa Luxemburg, *The Russian Revolution* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1961), pp. 76–7.
 - 24 *Ten Years of Soviet Power in Figures. 1917–1927* (Central Statistical Board of the USSR: Moscow, 1927), pp. 236–7. This needs to be tempered by reports of the industry still being in a state of crisis, due to serious deficits in good quality materials and qualified workers, and due to the persistence of 'individualism' in design and the *kustarnie*

(handicraft) character of the building labour that had entered the industry. *Stroitelstvo Moskvi*, No. 8 (Moscow, 1928), p. 15.

- 25 S. Sindeyev, *Professionalnie Dvishenie*, p. 39.
- 26 During the 1920s and 1930s the majority of the projects of the avant-garde were published in two seminal journals: *Sovremennaya Arkhitektura* (Modern Architecture) that ran from 1926–30, and *Stroitelstvo Moskvi*, (Moscow Construction) that started in 1923 and continued being published throughout the Soviet period.
- 27 Voline, *Unknown Revolution*, p. 249.
- 28 *Stroitel*, No. 10/11 (Moscow, 1919), p. 7.
- 29 Generally speaking during the period of the New Economic Policy, the experiment in a mixed economy designed to kick start Russian industry, the structure of the building industry was a volatile and confused mix of old private Contractors, traditional artisan based *Artels*, new state contracting organisations, and co-operatives. For an overview of construction contracting organisations in the pre and post revolutionary periods, see D.N. Zvorikin, *Razvitia stroitel'no proizvodstva* (Moscow: Stroizdat, 1987).
- 30 Obsessed with mechanisation and standardisation, one of his most famous essays was *Kak Nado Rabotat*, that was first published in the 1920s and reprinted in the 1960s. See Alexei Gastev, *Kak Nado Rabotat, Prakticheski Vvedenie N.O.T.*, (How it is Necessary to Work: The Practical Introduction of the Scientific Organisation of Labour) (Moscow: Ekonomika, 1972). He openly advocated the adoption of Taylorism arguing that under Socialism it lost its class character, and also penned 'mechanistic' poems. For a summary of his influence on early Soviet life see, Stites, Richard, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 149–59.
- 31 *Stroitel'naya Promishlennost*, No. 9, 1924, pp. 233–4.
- 32 Voline, *Unknown Revolution*, p. 221.
- 33 Lenin, 'The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government' in *Selected Works* (Moscow, 1977), pp. 412–13. See also 'Left-wing Childishness and the Petty Bourgeois Mentality', *ibid.*, p. 440.
- 34 Alexandra Kollontai, 'The Workers' Opposition' in *Selected Writings* (Connecticut: Lawrence Hill, 1977), p. 176.
- 35 *Postroika*, 21 July 1926, p. 12.
- 36 Rashina (ed.), *Trud v SSSR, Statistiko, Ekonomicheski obzop, 1922–1924* (Moscow, 1924), pp. 214–40, on labour in the USSR.
- 37 *Rabota Soyuz Stroitel*, p. 112.
- 38 However, for Moscow, whilst at its high point in 1923–1924 the private sector accounted for around a fifth of all capital investment in the housing stock, by 1925/26 this had shrunk to less than one per cent, and by 1927/28 it was insignificant, virtually all house building being conducted by the 'socialised sector', the majority under the direction of the Moscow Soviet but a good proportion by cooperatives. *Stroitelstvo Moskvi*, No. 10, 1927, pp. 6–7, and No. 10, 1928, p. 2.
- 39 *Ten Years of Soviet Power in Figures, 1917–1927* (Moscow: Central Statistical Board of the USSR, 1927), pp. 248–9. It has been pointed out that the most significant area of private industry was to be found in small-scale concerns, handicraft and workshop production.

This is particularly important for the house-building sector, where it is clear that many small builders reappeared in the construction of individual housing in the private sector. In the same years in the whole Moscow area only 27 per cent of the total number of new houses were built by the state and cooperative sectors, although they accounted for 61 per cent of the total quantity in square metres. Another source suggests that in the 1925 building season in 167 Russian towns, 87.5 per cent of all new housing was being built by *chastnie zastroishiki*, that is, private individuals either building homes for themselves or having them built. *Stroitel'naya Promishlennost*, No. 9, 1926, p. 619.

- 40 Alexander Shliapnikov, 'The Workers' Opposition' in *Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai* (Westport, CT: Lawrence Hill, 1977), p. 174.
- 41 Voline, *Unknown Revolution*, pp. 358 and 380. Voline argues that it is a process in which all semblance of independence for working class and peasant institutions has been abolished in a new class structure that has three estates. At the top, party functionaries, in the middle, privileged workers – that is, Stakhanovite pace-setters – and at the bottom, the broad mass of workers and peasants.
- 42 Peter Arshinov, *History of the Makhnovist Movement* (London: Freedom Press, 1987), p. 71.
- 43 His reluctance to label the bureaucracy as a ruling class was based on his estimation that they were not the *legal* owners of the means of production. He did, however, acknowledge that the bureaucracy through the state machinery has 'appropriated the proletariat politically'. Trotsky argued that state property was not the solution to a deficit of democracy; in fact, state property becomes socialist property in proportion to the extent it ceases to be state property. Adding that state ownership is not in itself sufficient to change the character and form of labour, new forms of fetishised social relations are quite possible, the transfer of property to the state changed the situation of the workers only juridically. Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed* (New York: Pathfinder, 1989), p. 24 and pp. 237–49. See also Charles Bettelheim, *Class Struggles in the USSR, First Period, 1917–1923 and Second Period 1923–1930*, (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1978).
- 44 *Arkhitektura CCCP*, No. 9, 1936, p. 2.
- 45 For the construction industry, like other economic sectors, the mid 1930s were a turning point. The comprehensive 1935 plan for the reconstruction of Moscow was the signal for the reordering of space (see below). The catalyst in the restructuring of time and labour arrived in the 1936 decree concerning the 'Improvement of construction matters and reduction in price of construction'. These documents are important. First, because they institutionalised within law Party control over the production of the built environment. Second, the plans for construction were actually carried out in practice, and third, the all-embracing and comprehensive character of the declarations set the framework for the development of the labour process and for the physical character of the city of Moscow for the next 30 years. *Reshenie Partii i pravitel'stvo no xozai'stvennom voproc'am*, Vol. 2, 1929–1940 (Moscow, 1967). *Postanovleniye Sovnarkoma CCCP i TsK BKP, Ob uluchsheniye stroitel'stvo i ob udeshevleniye stroitel'stvo* (On improving and cheapening construction), 11 February 1936. See also, *O general'nom plane rekonstruktsia goroda Moskvi* (On the general plan for the reconstruction of Moscow), 10 July 1935, pp. 534–46.
- 46 *Reshenie Partii (Party decisions) i pravitel'stvo no xozai'stvennom voproc'am*, Vol. 2, 1929–1940, 'O merax po uporiadoenniu upravleniia proizvodstvom i ustanovleniye edinonachaliia' (Moscow, 1967), pp. 125–31. An investigation of the language of law is particularly revealing of the double act that the Party was required to perform. The decree of 5 September 1929 on 'The measures for the regulation of the management of production and the installation of one-man management' was perhaps the pivotal piece of legislation legitimising in law the development of the bureaucracy.

- 47 Whilst the regulations clearly stipulated that directors were required to seek the opinions of trade union and party organisations and to delegate smaller day-to-day running problems, the extent to which rank and file workers could intervene in the actual management of the enterprise was strictly limited.
- 48 *Reshenii Parti*, *ibid.*, p. 128.
- 49 Lenin, 'The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government' in *Collected Works*, p. 410.
- 50 This is where groups of workers were organised into teams and received production tasks as part of the overall planned output for a construction trust. It is worth remembering here that an adapted form of this labour organisation was at the centre of economic policy in the perestroika period.
- 51 The piece wage, *sdelnaya zarplata*, is the most effective way of linking money to output and therefore one of the most effective way of accumulating surplus. The operation of such a system was followed later by the introduction of *progressivno-sdelnaya* (progressive piece wages), part of a general policy for widening wage differentials, which, with the addition of bonus schemes, was felt to be the most appropriate method of stimulating labour and raising productivity.
- 52 In 1930 it is reported that in the construction industry, 51 out of every 100 workers were operating on the basis of *sotz sorevnovaniia*, and 27 out of every 100 were involved in shock brigades. See *Soyuz stroiteli v zifrak i diagrammak* (Moscow, 1930) on the union of builders in diagrams and indices; V.D. Fedorov, *Formirovanie rabochik kadrov na novostroikax pervoi piatiletki* (PhD dissertation, Gorkovsky University, 1966), Avotreferat p. 15.
- 53 *Trud*, 9 February 1936, p. 2.
- 54 *Stroitel'naya Promishlennost*, No. 7, 1936, p. 9.
- 55 *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- 56 *Stroitel'naya Promishlennost*, No. 6, 1936, pp. 5–6.
- 57 A. Barsukov and A. Kristal'nie, *Khozaschot na stroike* (Moscow: Gosfinizdat SSSR, 1932), p. 4.
- 58 V.D. Fedorov, p. 13.
- 59 Y. Pak, *Organizatsiia truda i zarabotnaya plati v stroitel'stve* (Moscow: Stroizdat, 1974), p. 171, on the organisation of labour and wages in the construction industry.
- 60 *Stroitel'stvo Moskva*, No. 10, 1931, pp. 2–4
- 61 A brief history of wage forms in the construction industry from the October Revolution onwards is to be found in Y. Pak, *Organizatsiia truda*, pp. 166, and by the same author, *Ekonomika truda v stroitel'stve* (Moscow: Stroizdat, 1978), pp. 192 ff on the economics of labour in construction.
- 62 *Trud*, 8 May 1936, p. 1.
- 63 Some have argued that since the employer (in this case there is only one – the state) 'does not confront the worker in the same way as the capitalist confronts the wage labourer, labour power in the Soviet Union is not a commodity.' Subjectively, if a worker is at the mercy of productivity targets in which the driver is the wage and is forced to endure, what is the meaning of labour under socialism? See Donald Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and Stalinist Industrialization* (London: Pluto, 1986), p. 259.
- 64 Filtzer, *Soviet Workers*, p. 118.

- 65 Ibid., pp. 200–207.
- 66 *Trud*, 9 February 1936, p. 2. An indication of how widespread the opposition was in other sectors can be gleaned by the reported incidence of ‘sabotage’ in the journal throughout April in places like the Cheliabinsk Tractor and Motor Factory, the Invanovna cotton factories and in the mining regions of the Donbass. *Trud*, 15 April 1936, p. 3, *Trud*, 18 April 1936, p. 1. *Trud*, 31 April 1936, p. 4.
- 67 *Stroitel'naya Promishlennost*, 15 October 1936.
- 68 Voline, *Unknown Revolution*, p. 247.

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