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Striking with tied hands: Strategies of labor interest representation in post-communist Romania and Ukraine

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Publication date
2011

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Varga, M. (2011). *Striking with tied hands: Strategies of labor interest representation in post-communist Romania and Ukraine*. [Thesis, fully internal, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

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Chapter 8: Conclusions

8.1. Chapter Outline

Throughout this dissertation we have seen cases of workers standing up in defense of “work and pay” (to cite the demands of two Vinnitsa workers), of jobs, decent wages, and better working conditions. Workers and their unions protested and mobilized in an environment characterized by deep and rapid societal transformation and dramatic deterioration of living standards. Workers mobilized despite significant structural difficulties that meant for labor throughout the post-communist region that establishing solidarity would be problematic, threatening employers often impossible, and breaking out of isolation a bridge too far. Why was it possible that, despite such structural difficulties, there were nevertheless cases of contention during which workers and unions could defend “work and pay”? In one of the countries where cases were selected for fieldwork, Romania, worker protests were – in post-communist comparison – widespread. In the other one, Ukraine, worker protests were isolated and left without the guidance or backing of national trade unions. But even in Ukraine there were worker protests, in several cases succeeding in stopping asset-stripping and returning wage arrears, at least in the short-term saving work and pay. How was this possible? What did these people do?

This chapter presents two sets of conclusions, two sets of answers to these questions. It links these conclusions to the wider industrial relations literature and the literature in political science on post-communist labor. The first set of conclusions (section 8.2.) addresses the questions of when and why contention emerges at post-communist plants. The core argument here is that contention emerges during crises of wage arrears and collective layoffs that disrupt the livelihoods of workers and their dependence on the plant as the basis of their livelihood; in order to emerge contention also requires that trade unions or informal worker leaders find out how to target worker discontent against the employer or the authorities. The second set of conclusions (section 8.3.) answers the question how trade unions can emerge successfully from such contention episodes and focuses on the strategic elements allowing unions to ensure successful labor interest representation. The chapter’s third part (section 8.4.) looks back at the situation in Ukraine and its predominant distributive model of unionism and asks what could be done so that the model might reform in the direction of representative unionism. The fourth part (section 8.5.) ends this chapter by raising two points that deserve more research in order to shed more light on the scope for reform in contexts with distributive unions. First, it discusses how union leadership emerges at post-communist plants and specifically in contexts with strong distributive unions. Second, it looks at the highly de-centralized architecture of post-communist union federations and confederations and the relationships between the various levels of union organizations.

8.2. Explaining the Absence of Contention

Academic proponents of market reforms in post-communist contexts expected the main thrust of opposition to reform to come from an alliance of bureaucrats, managers, and workers (Lipton/ Sachs 1990; see also Milton Friedman’s documentary *The Road to Freedom*, 1991), or directly from labor and the wider groups hurt by economic reform (Elster 1993; Offe 1991; Przeworski 1991). Instead, contention between labor and market reformers or new private employers failed to materialize – or if it did materialize, it could not stop reforms nor reverse the trend of declining living standards. Scholars grappled to find answers to labor’s conspicuous lack of influence and apparent lack of contention. In Chapter 1, I summarized several of the answers previously formulated to the question of why there was

so little contention. Labor in post-communist Europe faces a context characterized by structural difficulties, making it extremely challenging for labor to mobilize, threaten, and break out of isolation.

The question of why there might be little contention between labor and employers when labor seems to have a clear interest in contention has emerged, however, in other contexts and before the post-communist transformation. One can find it in the literature attempting to understand the rise and decrease of labor militancy in the history of the Western working class. Westergaard and Resler, for instance (1975: 387), in a study of the British working class asked “why [...] was a code of restraint so widespread among the workers to whom industrial capitalism seemed to offer promises which it then, of necessity, withheld?” In this Marxist literature, “the working class” faces a well-established “advanced” capitalism that ties workers to the pursuit of profit and evades contention by guaranteeing a minimum income, the possibility of accumulation (workers making savings), and labor reproduction (Burawoy 1996). Workers find such guarantees already at the level of the factory (i.e. they are part of the employment relationship), leading several authors (Gramsci 1971: 312, Burawoy 1996: 78) to conclude that “hegemony is born in the factory”. But such guarantees are either historically declining in scope and size (in Burawoy’s account), or leave certain groups of workers uncovered that “put in long hours and awkward shifts for their wages; cannot expect promotion and regular increments; have few fringe benefits and may find their jobs gone if the economic cycle turns down; are subordinates at work and people with little say in how the society around them is run” (Westergaard/ Resler 1975: 398). Such workers “work only for one reason – for the sake of the pay packet”, in effect confirming “Marx’s diagnosis of the proletarian condition: only a single strand, the cash nexus, ties the worker to his work, his boss and supervisors, society at large in its present form” and leading Westergaard and Resler to warn that “the cash nexus is brittle” (*Ibid.*, p. 401). Contention in these accounts emerges when the mechanism supporting the fragile cash nexus breaks down.

The empirical cases studied in this dissertation seem to confirm - in what has only very recently become a capitalist context (Eastern Europe) - an analysis along the lines of Westergaard and Resler. This dissertation’s first conclusions underline that contention begins when the *cash nexus* ends: Contention usually follows crises of wage arrears, when employers do not pay the workforce salaries anymore, or when employers make use of collective layoffs. Moreover, contention begins *at the plant*, understood not only as a site of economic production, but also as one of eliciting worker cooperation for the pursuit of profit. Contention becomes more likely once the pursuit of profit ceases to require worker cooperation. It also becomes more likely when the pursuit of profit comes at the cost of worker jobs, because factory owners can make profits from selling assets rather than from production. This is when contention emerged in two of the Romanian contention episodes studied in this dissertation: when employers ceased to pay wages and workers interpreted the employers’ actions as signs of imminent plant closure and job loss.

In cases of distributive unionism like in Ukraine, crises of wage arrears and collective layoffs lead to contention when they disrupt not only relations of production (entitling workers to get paid for their work), but also the reproduction of labor power: We have seen how in the cases of contention in Kherson and Ternopil’ crises of wage arrears went hand in hand with the disruption of distribution of critical social benefits, such as access to healthcare or gas and water for plant-owned apartments in worker dormitories. What is at work in post-Soviet countries such as Ukraine is more than just a cash nexus: It is not only “cash” - the wage – that binds workers to the plant and makes them depend on employers and avoid contention. Housing, gas and hot water provision, healthcare, holiday provision, and other fringe benefits regulate the workers’ life outside the plant and make workers depend on the employer for funding such benefits, and on the union for administering them. Since provision of such benefits was in the cases under study the job of the union, it can be argued that the relationship between workers and union in Ukraine is the reverse of their relationship in the country’s pre-Soviet history or in the Romanian cases: It is not unions that depend on workers for collective action and membership fees, but workers who depend on the union for receiving social benefits often established under Soviet

times and currently funded by the employer. The “cash nexus”-concept is insufficient here for capturing the link between workers and their plant and union: not just cash, not just fringe benefits, but an economic and legal framework or system binding workers to the trade union and the trade union to management. Burawoy and Lee usefully refer to “paternalistic regimes” of production (Burawoy 1985; Lee 2007) rather than the concept of a cash nexus for capturing the complex web of ties between workers, on one hand, and trade unions and plants, on the other. It is mostly when paternalistic regimes suffer disruptions – most visible in the form of wage arrears crises and collective redundancies – that contention emerges.

The presence of the paternalistic regime in Ukraine is made possible by the surprising survival of workplace welfare in that country, while in Romania and other parts of the post-communist world paternalism largely disappeared in the 1990s. Paternalistic regimes of production and their importance for containing conflict have received considerable attention in the literature on post-communist labor. Crowley (1997) granted fringe benefits the key role in explaining the absence of contention among Russia’s steel workers in the times when Russian miners organized the Soviet Union’s biggest strikes (1989-1991). Ashwin (1999), too, referred to what she calls “alienated collectivism” to describe the relationship between workers and their plants. The expectation has been that paternalistic production regimes are in decline (Kubicek 2004: 49; Buck/ Filatotchev/ Demina/ Wright 2003, Bamber/ Peschanski 1996), and that they are limited to state plants or to plants privatized to management or employees (i.e., “insider privatizations”). The case studies presented in Chapter 4, however, contradict such expectations by finding that two of the biggest Ukrainian car-plants not only took over the paternalistic arrangements that survived Soviet times but also actively expanded them, either in order to stabilize turn-over (the case of Ukraine’s biggest car plant, ZAZ in Zaporizhia), or in order to prevent contention (the case of the truck-plant KrAZ in Kremenchuk). The expansion of paternalism in these cases is a surprising finding since such paternalistic regimes cannot be connected to ‘insider privatizations’: Both these plants have seen direct privatizations and takeovers by companies previously unassociated with these plants.

But crises of wage arrears and collective layoffs are only half of the story behind contention. As it will be argued in the next section, in order to mobilize collectively workers need more than just to see on the factory’s gates the employer’s order announcing collective redundancies or the indefinite postponement of the payment of wage arrears. The Romanian cases of contention showed how difficult it was for unions and workers to mobilize collectively even in response to asset-strippers, as parts of the union and of the workers believed the employer’s public statement that collective redundancies and wage arrears are signs of necessary restructuring and not of imminent plant closure. The next section presents in comparative perspective (Romania-Ukraine, but also across cases) what else contention required in order to emerge. It also presents the conclusions on how exactly trade unions managed to emerge successfully out of contention episodes.

8.3. Labor Strategy

Labor interest representation

In this section I present my conclusions regarding strategy. Worker groups or trade unions (or both) need to combine three strategic elements in order to bring about contention and to emerge successfully out of contention episodes. The sub-sections follow my analytical framework, specifically by presenting in turn the three strategic elements discussed throughout this dissertation. I will start with what we have learned from this study about the central subject of this dissertation, the (at least from a labor perspective) desired outcome of contention episodes, successful labor interest representation.

The main finding about labor interest representation is the manner in which the concept's three dimensions – autonomy, legitimacy and effectiveness – are mutually linked and affect each other, and specifically that autonomy works as a precondition for legitimacy and effectiveness. Remember that autonomy characterizes a union as a whole (but does not have to characterize it throughout that union's entire lifespan). Legitimacy and effectiveness concern what a union does about the demands expressed by members: whether its actions are informed by worker demands (input legitimacy), whether its actions actually reach outcomes that fulfil demands (effectiveness), and in case such fulfillment was partial, whether workers accept the outcomes (output legitimacy). In contrast to Romanian unions, the unions in contention episodes at Ukrainian plants faced the problem that autonomy cannot be pursued at the same time as legitimacy and effectiveness. In the contention episodes in Ukraine unions were not autonomous at the episode's start, with the exception of the union at the ball-bearings plant in Vinnitsa, and the union in the second contention episode in Kherson. In order to bring about labor representation, worker groups had to first reach the autonomy of the trade union. In all but one cases (the exception is the union in Kremenchuk), the struggle for autonomy took place in opposition to the trade union leaders. Only once worker groups ensured their organization's autonomy – usually in the form of taking actions against the employer, and in the cases in Vinnitsa and Kherson also by voting new representatives into the union council, could the union start the effective and legitimate pursuit of worker demands. The Ukrainian context of labor action, characterized by strong managerial control over union ranks and files, meant for labor that struggles for effectiveness and legitimacy (delivering the goods) could come only after ensuring the union's autonomy.

In other words, autonomy acted as a precondition for legitimacy and effectiveness. In practice – in the case of the union at the harvester plant HMZ in Kherson – this meant that labor could handle the two objectives (autonomy on the one hand and effectiveness and legitimacy on the other) only over distinct contention episodes. This greatly complicated labor interest representation (the effectiveness dimension), since the change in ownership that took place between the two contention episodes in Kherson basically meant that labor had to fight two different employers over wage arrears. Of course, labor in Kherson was lucky that the employer in the first contention episode only sold the plant instead of closing it down, something that actually allowed labor to build on the autonomy gained in the previous episode in the second contention episode. Labor in Romania did not face similar complications. The Romanian unions selected for this study had become autonomous long before the contention episodes under study. But what did we learn from this study about what strategies lead to successful labor interest representation?

The Shared Situational Definition

The cases studied throughout this dissertation showed that it usually took a while before crises of wage arrears gave rise to contention. Furthermore, there are many cases where crises of wage arrears and even collective layoffs do not lead to contention. For instance, if one looks at the situation in Ukraine in times of economic crisis, bringing a steep increase in wage arrears and the number of collective layoffs, contention is rather the exception: The world economic crisis to reach Ukraine in 2008 decimated machine constructing, the country's most affected industry sector. Industrial production in the sector fell by 45% in 2009 (*Kommersant*, January 19, 2010). As a result, the ASMU – the union of civil machine-constructors - was devastated, losing about half of its membership due to collective layoffs in 2008 and the first half of 2009 (A3 2009; down from 106,000 to 60,000).¹⁵⁷ The three places to witness contention were L'viv (bus plant – full layoffs), Kherson (harvester plant, full layoffs), and

¹⁵⁷ In the pre-crisis years of 2005-2007 the ASMU lost 5,000-11,000 members a year, according to an internal document: *Dodatok No. 1 do postanovi vikonkomu TsP profspilki ASMU No. B-XV-2 vid 13.04.2009r* [Annex No.1. to the Resolution of the Executive Committee of the trade union ASMU NO. B-XV-2 from 13.04.2009] (in Ukrainian, in the author's archive).

Vinnitsa (ball-bearings plant, full layoffs), all plants to have been the places of long episodes of contention *before* the economic crisis. The country's largest industrial centers – Kharkiv, Kyiv, Dnipropetrovs'k, Donets'k, and Zaporizhia – remained silent despite wage arrears and collective redundancies, although in none of these cases there were full layoffs like at the three plants mentioned above (in L'viv, Kherson, and Vinnitsa). The same is true for Romania's steel industry, where none of the major steel plants survived the crisis without making layoffs. But the difference to Ukraine was that trade unions in these cases negotiated generous severance payments, so that the numbers of workers wanting to leave exceeded those of workers wanting to stay on the job (see the Chapter 4 case study of the contention episode in Hunedoara, Romania).

The dissertation found the following difference between plants that do witness contention and those that do not (while all undergo collective layoffs or crises of wage arrears): The emergence of contention requires a political moment – a moment when trade unions or groups of workers take up the task of mobilizing their fellow workers against employers (or, as in the case of the harvester-plant in Kherson, first against their inactive trade union). Usually, such groups of workers or the trade union rely for mobilizing tasks on defining the situation of their plant in terms that identify the employer as the culprit for the wage arrears or the collective layoffs.¹⁵⁸ For contention to arise, it is not necessary that most members of a union (including its leadership) share the situational definition. It is only necessary that such a situational definition exists among parts of the workforce. Such a situational definition proved to be highly contested terrain in almost all contention episodes studied during fieldwork, but more so in Ukraine than in Romania. Here episodes of contention often emerged in the absence of or against the opposition of trade unions indebted to distributive unionism and a pattern of accommodation with management.

It is one thing for contention to emerge, and another thing for labor to also emerge successfully from it. That labor emerges successfully out of contention episodes requires at least a *shared* situational definition. Remember that “success” of labor action in this dissertation is defined as bringing about labor interest representation – the autonomous, legitimate, and effective representation of worker interests. In order to bring about labor interest representation, it is no longer enough – as for contention to emerge – that the situational definition only exists. It also has to be shared by most union members and most importantly by significant parts of both the union's rank-and-file *and* its leadership. This is so for several reasons. First, a membership with which it shares a situational definition constitutes for a union's leadership the basic source of threat potential vis-à-vis employers: It is the basis for the strike threat (disrupting production) and the factory occupation threat (disrupting property relations and the employer's control over plant assets).

Second, even in the few cases when trade union leaders can further member interests without disruptive threats, as in Romania – for instance by taking employers to court, leaders still need the rank-and-file to share their situational definition in order for the rank-and-file not to withdraw their support from the union. This possibility (of workers withdrawing support from the union) exists and was particularly salient among the Romanian cases, where unions cannot effectively use social benefits to contain the workers' readiness to engage in contention or leave the union. Especially in the case (COS Târgoviște) where the trade union attempted to address the causes of contention by taking the employer to court workers threatened to withdraw support for the union, since court cases take a long time to be concluded (two and a half years in that case). For many workers in the plants I studied in Romania trade union membership seemed not to pay off anymore, given that workers' most pressing issues (such as the return of wage arrears, most notably in the COS case) could not be resolved before the completion of legal action. In the Romanian cases trade union leaders had to find ways to give in to worker pressure without sacrificing court cases in order to keep the shared situational definition. This

¹⁵⁸ This point resonates with the literature on framing processes in social movements mentioned in Chapter 3.

was a difficult balancing act, which in the case of the contention episode in Târgoviște required that trade union leaders co-opt radical workers asking for strikes instead of court cases.

Comparing the Romanian and the Ukrainian cases leads to the conclusion that in the Ukrainian cases reaching a shared situational definition proved much more difficult, because of the trade union personnel's attachment to the distributive model even in times of wage arrears and halted production lines. The only cases where labor emerged successful out of contention episodes (in Vinnitsa and Kherson) were those where workers first concentrated their actions on gaining their union's autonomy, and only afterwards went also after effectiveness (actually realizing their demands, of getting back wages or protecting jobs). Except for Vinnitsa, in all Ukrainian contention episodes the disagreements over situational definitions paralyzed trade unions by pitting groups of workers demanding strikes and occupations against the trade union leaders arguing in favor of giving employers more time to re-launch production. Only after such internal union conflicts were solved with the triumph (albeit short-lived) of the worker groups was there successful resolution of key worker demands such as return of wage arrears and preservation of jobs.

Whether and how unions develop shared situational definitions matters therefore for the following reason: shared situational definitions help unions overcome the uncertainty over employer intentions. Remember that in my game theoretical analysis, unions basically lack the means to find out from the moves of the employer whether the employer is interested in production or not. Yet overcoming uncertainty - finding out whether the employer is interested in production or in asset-stripping - is crucial for the unions, since under uncertainty they might fail to adjust moves to employer intentions. Back in Chapter 3 I proposed that unions might somehow find out whether the employer is committed to production or not - possibly by relying on connections to better informed actors. This indeed happened in the case of the contention episodes at KrAZ in Kremenchuk, Ukraine, and at CSR in Reșița, Romania. In the contention episodes in Vinnitsa and in the 2008-2009 contention episode in Kherson, unions overcame uncertainty when employers publicly stated their intention to close down the plant. Yet in the 2006-2007 contention episode in Kherson and in the case of the harvester plant TKZ in Ternopil' (Chapter 6), unions were deeply divided between a leadership apparently finding the employer's declared commitment to production credible, and a workforce and marginal shop stewards that feared asset-stripping. In both these cases the unions nevertheless took action (at least in the form of threatening), as if they knew that the employer is an asset-stripper. Yet what moved the unions to act was not the information that the employer was an asset-stripper (the information existed but it was highly debated), but the resolution of internal conflict and the emergence of a shared situational definition in favor of the combative fraction. Especially in the case of the first contention episode in Kherson, the union acted not on the basis of information about employer intentions (as hypothesized by me), but on the basis of which side's situational definition gained the upper hand (became shared) at a given moment. Because the situational definition considering the employer an asset-stripper won the upper hand around December 2006, the union addressed the first threats to the employer. When the shared situational definition shifted in favor of supporting the employer's claim that it is committed to production, the union refrained from organizing disruptive actions and instead sued the employer to win the payment of wage arrears. This is relevant, since it shows that unions overcome uncertainty not only by updating (leaders') beliefs on the basis of available information, but also on the basis of which situational definition gains the upper hand in internal disagreements. Although one might hardly find this point surprising, it is important as it confirms more sociological accounts of organizational processes, as opposed to accounts based on naive rational actor assumptions.

Threat Potential

Successful labor interest representation requires more than just a shared situational definition. The cases studied in this dissertation also show that there is no success for labor where labor cannot or does not want to *threaten* employers. The basis for the threat can vary. This dissertation presented unions

that made a mobilized workforce – capable of striking, for instance – the basis of the threat communicated to the employer. However, strike threats (or other threats relying on disrupting production) worked only as long as the employer was interested in production. Alternatively, instead of relying on their mobilized membership, unions could use their connections to the authorities to credibly threaten the private employer with re-nationalization. Strike threats and re-nationalization threats all ‘worked’ sometimes, in the sense that they ended contention episodes by solving key worker demands, such as the return of wage arrears or winning pay increases.

The case studies also revealed that in the process of threatening, *constituting* a threat also involves many choices for a union, choices that actually play a role in whether the union can end episodes of contention successfully. First, deciding who should be the addressee of the threat proved very important: Taking the “employer” category apart and distinguishing between different layers of management, or between management and owner, could be vital. The different layers of management and owner have different levels of discretion. In the case of the contention episode in Hunedoara, Romania, once the union established communication, the “no” that it would get from the employer or the European-level management would turn to a “yes” from the plant management. Rather than perceiving the employer as a monolithic entity, the union in Hunedoara distinguished between the various levels of management and carefully addressed strike threats to the plant management rather than to the owner or to higher (national, European) management levels. The union in this Romanian town discovered that although local management cannot grant concessions on issues such as workload (issues that were defined by the company’s European management), it can nevertheless offer wage increases in exchange for the union accepting the very high workload. And it was against local management – afraid of irritating European management by missing production targets – that strike threats worked, threats that otherwise (if addressed to higher management levels) would have risked triggering the closure of the plant.

Addressing a threat sometimes involved a switch from threatening the employer to threatening local authorities. This happened for instance in Vinnitsa, Ukraine, with the union at the ball-bearings plant: Confronted with an owner located in the country’s opposing reaches (Donets’k), the union targeted with its threats the authorities rather than the employer, aiming to trigger the involvement of the governor, who could pressure the employer to at least accept negotiations with the union.

In other cases, however, threatening was not enough to convince the employer to grant concessions. Threats actually had to be carried out. Why? The analysis of the cases revealed that just as the situational definition is contested terrain, so is threatening. Employers have many ways of responding to threatening unions. Most obviously, as underlined by Schelling (1960), employers can fight back by undermining a union’s capacity to enforce a threat. Or, even more elementary, they can refuse communication, not allowing the union to communicate a threat (Schelling 1960). Such situations then required actually carrying out the threat – which at the same time enforces and communicates the threat, but also implies costs for the union (for instance, giving up a share of one’s salary in the case of a strike).

Threats were carried out in five out of six contention episodes where unions faced asset-strippers in Romania and Ukraine.¹⁵⁹ Almost all unions, even when facing asset-strippers, first threatened strikes in response to wage arrears and carried them out after employers ignored the threats, only to find out that strikes (disrupting production) would not affect employers since these were not interested in production in the first place. Furthermore, threats had to be partially carried out even in one contention episode where a union faced an employer interested in production (Târgoviște, Romania), as the employer refused communication. Only the unions in Hunedoara, Romania and at the truck plant in Kremenchuk, Ukraine got away without carrying out threats in the episodes studied.

¹⁵⁹ The exception is the first contention episode in Kherson where contention developed into a conflict between workers and distributive union leadership rather than union and employer (see Chapter 5).

But the most problematic aspect for constituting a threat turned out to be the problem of calibrating threats (finding the right threat, the second dimension of constituting a threat) depending on employer intentions. In the cases where unions confronted asset-strippers, calibrating threats to employer intentions involved changing threats from the usual threat of legal action to the threat of factory occupations, an action likely to bring about a swifter resolution of the conflict with the employer. Threatening with a factory occupation implied disrupting property relations to stop asset stripping, or at least force the employer to offer higher severance payments in the case of plant closure. The problematic aspect of calibrating threats is that the capacity to actually calibrate threats sometimes requires union reform. Specifically, it requires a certain type of unionism – one devoted to representing members rather than assisting the employer in running the plant by distributing social benefits. The problem is that distributive unions are not autonomous, the employer having several ways of controlling them – by extending funds to distribute as social benefits, but also by using those funds to control elections and having its own people in the union's ranks. In the cases studied here, leaders of distributive unions avoided threatening employers even during crises of wage arrears or when facing collective layoffs. They feared that after the crisis would be over, the employer would no longer extend them funds to distribute or would no longer use those funds to ensure their re-election. Calibrating threats to the intentions of asset-strippers then required a change in the leadership of the trade union. In all cases (the four contention episodes in Vinnitsa, Kherson and Ternopil'), such change came about only following worker protests.

The other problematic aspect of calibrating threats to respond to asset-strippers involves the political turn that threatening asset-strippers always took (at least in the cases at hand, presented in Chapter 5). Relatively small groups of workers managed not only to stop the employers' decision to close plants down but to win the attention and support of authorities. This raises the question of why such small groups of workers can trigger the involvement of authorities. Why is it that governments listened to the 400 workers to go on hunger strike in Reșița, Romania, or to the 50-60 to block the city center by walking over the pedestrian crossing in Kherson, Ukraine? Why do governments meet in emergency meetings to discuss the demands of such worker groups and their unions instead of using their security apparatus to clear the streets and the factories illegally occupied by the workers?

The literature on labor movements offers two complementary answers. First, Piven and Cloward (1979) argue that the success of "movements" such as the labor movement in achieving their goals is largely a function of the amount of disruption that movements can achieve against the state. However, at least in the context of contention episodes at post-communist plants, a strategy based entirely on the scope or size of disruption proved unfeasible. States (whether Romanian or Ukrainian) proved not only capable but also very willing to use force against workers to prevent them from blocking roads or taking over strategic objects (see the contention episode in Hunedoara, Romania in Chapter 4 and the one in Reșița, Romania in Chapter 5, when workers tried taking over the town's hydro plant). Also in Kherson, Ukraine authorities intervened already at the site of the plant to stop workers from using harvesters to shut down the city center, thus showing the extent to which they knew about the workers' intentions (second contention episode at the harvester plant in Kherson, Chapter 5). Disruption alone can hardly be the key to labor's success in achieving goals; as a rule the state has the means to stop or even to prevent disruption.

Taking a slightly different approach, Pizzorno (1978: 279) argues that labor holds the power not only to disrupt, but also to "threaten" governments with withdrawing the "social consensus", or the "support" for specific governments or for their representatives at various levels of government. Disruption can be effective when accompanied by the visibility of actions taken by workers, increasing the chance that government action against (or failure to support) such workers might entail a cost in terms of popularity for the government or the local authorities. On the other hand, actually doing (or claiming to be doing) something for the workers offers politicians the chance of improving their image. Such political involvement took place repeatedly in the cases presented in Chapter 5, only to fade away

as soon as workers ended their actions, or when such actions decreased in visibility. This is probably why politicians lost interest in the fate of the plant in Oțelu Roșu, Romania as soon as the trade union made the mistake of limiting protests to the plant's premises (see Chapter 5). Furthermore, workers sometimes tap into the conflicts between various political factions or parties fighting at the regional level, as happened in 2009 in Kherson. All local political forces tried to take advantage of the factory occupation in Kherson and use the occupation in order to discredit their political opponents (or prevent opponents from discrediting them). This brought worker actions visibility, as the powerful media groups linked to the various political forces started reporting on the event. In the end, the government put an end to it all and invested at the plant, thus addressing a year-old demand of workers (that it had ignored prior to the occupation).

This dissertation thus brings evidence for the argument that it is not the amount of disruption alone that makes a union or a group of workers effective; labor interest representation also requires that unions organize disruptive actions in such a way as to threaten the local authorities' "support" base.¹⁶⁰ To go back to an important literature, labor actions have to be "more a demonstration than a blow" (Pizzorno 1978, for similar points see also Schelling 1960, Shorter/ Tilly 1974), a demonstration of the damage protesters can do to the authorities' support base rather than a blow via a roadblock or strike to the daily workings of the polity.

Outside Support

The plant-level trade unions studied in this dissertation could have threat potential because they relied on a mobilized membership – workers striking or threatening to do so in demonstrations and pickets. But sometimes unions also relied on outside support in order to establish threat potential. A mobilized workforce was not enough in the Vinnitsa case in Ukraine to win any concessions from the employer, not even a place at the negotiating table. Instead, the union had to ensure support for its demands among state authorities. The Vinnitsa episodes of contention showed a mutually reinforcing relationship between strategic elements of threat potential and outside support. First, the union needed threat potential (based on the mobilized workers) in order to establish outside support among authorities – it threatened the authorities with organizing roadblocks in Vinnitsa. Outside support then became the source of threat potential vis-à-vis the employer – the union later threatened the employer by arguing that it had the support among local authorities to disrupt any employer actions to close the plant.

Other cases showed that outside support relied on other actors as well, in Romania most notably on other trade unions (at plant-, branch-, and national levels). It was the threat of solidarity strikes from other unions that convinced the local management of Arcelor Mittal in Hunedoara to grant wage increases in 2007. This was, however, very different in Ukraine. Contention instances arising from situations of wage arrears or collective layoffs always remained isolated in Ukraine. Isolation was less the norm in Romania, where plant-level trade unions often coordinate their actions. In Ukraine, struggling workers such as at the plants in Vinnitsa and Kherson receive little to no attention from the central leaders of the Ukrainian union federation FPU. This proved to be decisive in limiting the plant-level unions' influence at the national level. The most basic demand of workers confronted with wage arrears and imminent plant closure regarded the re-nationalization of their plants, a demand that could be addressed only in the country's capital. In Romania, Cartel Alfa made sure that the demands of plant-level unions for re-nationalization would be heard in the capital, but this was not the case in Ukraine. The few pickets and ensuing negotiations organized on re-nationalization in Kyiv were the

¹⁶⁰ I present the second argument (Pizzorno's) as an add-one to the first (of Piven and Cloward), although one could also portray them as alternative claims since in the second argument, the size of disruptions does not matter too much (also small disruptions can be effective). However, I consider the two arguments to be complementary rather than alternative, since even in Pizzorno's account there has to be some disruption, even if small in size.

outcome of the plant-level unions' efforts and came at the cost of depleting the workers' savings. National-level union officers in Ukraine would not – once the workers organizing pickets returned to their far-away cities – keep the pressure on government officials to respond to the workers' demands.

In Chapter 7 I studied in detail how, in contrast to Romania (a country that has seen a rupture with distributive unionism), the dominance of distributive unionism in Ukraine limits the chances of unions to actually develop the strategic elements that would allow them to emerge successfully out of contention episodes. First, as argued in the paragraph above, in a country with dominating distributive unionism, trade unions isolate and refuse outside support to the few unions that do get involved in the conflicts between workers and management. Distributive unionism also makes it more difficult for employees to reach a shared situational definition and to develop leadership stemming from the workforce. Furthermore, it facilitates repression, because the employer can isolate groups of radical workers fighting for union autonomy by providing critical social benefits to administer to those trade unionists who do not welcome autonomy. It was also argued in Chapter 7 that distributive unionism often takes labor actions on the arduous and ineffective legal route (suing employers) to addressing worker demands.

Unions need either a shared situational definition, or outside support, or both in order to establish threat potential. Starting from this finding I studied the obstacles that the presence of distributive unionism raises to developing shared situational definitions and outside support. I then developed two findings that help provide a more detailed overview of the situation of labor throughout the wider post-communist region than is found in arguments portraying labor in post-communist countries as similarly weak everywhere (weakness being measured in labor's lacking ability of gaining workers concrete benefits). I argued that labor in Ukraine is, in contrast to labor in Romania's manufacturing sectors, plagued in times of contention by an inability to what I termed channel contention, a difficulty that precedes the difficulty of gaining workers concrete benefits. The difficulty of channeling contention refers to the rifts that emerge during contention times between workers and plant-level unions and between plant-level unions and branch- and national-level union organizations. I then presented an analysis of labor in eleven post-communist countries to show that post-communist labor differs significantly in terms of its ability to channel contention, and that therefore our perceptions of labor weakness in the region should make way to understanding that labor in post-communist countries is not always weak, and that in the countries where it is weak it is so in different ways and for different reasons. The next section concludes this discussion by reviewing the prospects for trade unions abandoning distributive unionism in Ukraine. This is important, because there are several international programs of assistance for trade union reform in post-Soviet countries; this dissertation has reached conclusions and suggestions for further research that could be relevant for informing assistance.

8.4. Prospects of Change for Distributive Unionism

This research initially took off from the author's intention to identify solutions for labor's predicament in post-communism, a task that requires an understanding of what problems labor faces. One sort of problem regards the phenomena that in the literature have been seen as explanatory factors for labor weakness in post-communist countries, such as ideological legacies or structural constraints. By using the Romania-Ukraine comparison, I showed in Chapter 7 how the prevalence of the distributive unionism model in Ukraine causes problems for labor already at the level of the relationship between unions and members. The distributive model makes it more difficult for unions and workers to develop effective strategic elements such as a shared definition of the situation or threat potential. I have also

argued that the prevalence of the distributive model makes it very difficult for the few unions undergoing reform under the pressure of wage arrears crises and collective layoffs by becoming more autonomous from management to establish links horizontally (to other plant-level unions) and vertically (to national leaders) and to build outside support.

What are the prospects for Ukrainian unions to break out of a situation that makes them dependent on distributing welfare rather than representing worker interests? Note that for Ukrainian unions, the issue of labor interest representation is more complicated than for Romanian ones. In most of the Romanian cases the task for unions was to become effective and legitimate, pushing employers to at least partly agree to worker demands. For Ukrainian unions, the issue at hand is not only becoming effective and legitimate, but first of all autonomous. One of the findings of this thesis is that in the Ukrainian episodes of contention, labor could not simultaneously achieve success on all three dimensions of labor representation. Labor (usually groups of workers acting against the trade union) first had to fight for the trade union's autonomy – and elect their representatives to the union council. Only afterwards, with a reformed, representative union council leading the union, could labor also attempt to be effective and address worker demands.

State Involvement

One could look to the state for forcing trade unions in Ukraine to move away from the distributive model to the representative one. What the state could do is free the unions from their welfare tasks, by transferring housing to municipalities or healthcare provision to the healthcare ministry. It seems that the politicians to come to power during the 2004 Orange Revolution supported the idea of the FPU carrying out more representative tasks,¹⁶¹ but in practice did nothing to encourage the FPU in that direction. Nor can the Party of Regions be expected to support such reform, since present FPU leaders (who have repeatedly expressed their satisfaction with the FPU record) are members of that party. Furthermore, transferring welfare from the plant level (where it is the responsibility of private employers) to city- or national levels requires funds that the state does not have.¹⁶² It is also possible that with the arrival of the current economic crisis, the businesspeople paying for plant-administered welfare will demand welfare nationalization. But the state might resist the demand, given its serious budgetary limitations. Another incentive for the state to reform the plant-based welfare model would be to understand that plant-based welfare (especially housing) distorts labor markets, by keeping highly-skilled workforce in the areas where it received housing during Soviet times.¹⁶³ But any action based on such recognition will again have to face the previously mentioned budget constraints.

Strategy Diffusion

I argue that a more promising source of help could be strategy diffusion, the capacity of unions to transfer knowledge about strategies of labor interest representation to other unions. There are few reasons to expect that distributive unions might support such transfers on their own initiative. After all, they usually ignore even calls for help from isolated representative unions. The reaction of other plant-level unions and national leadership when confronted with demands to support struggling unions was generally to ignore their requests (such requests typically included participating in pickets and demonstrations). The next step, of attempting to learn from the experience of such struggling unions and move towards more autonomy, was out of sight for many distributive unions in Ukraine.

¹⁶¹ On the declarations of former President Viktor Yushchenko and Prime-Minister Yulia Tymoshenko about what tasks unions should fulfill in Ukraine see Chapter 2.

¹⁶² One can look, for instance, at the experience in Ukraine with transferring welfare objects from mining plants to local municipalities in the country's East, and how the program had to stop due to the expenses it entailed for local budgets (and for the World Bank, which supported the program). (Haney/ Shkaratan 2003)

¹⁶³ I owe this latter point to David Mandel (personal communication, 2009). On how the Soviet Union controlled the labor market via its housing policy see Meerovich 2005.

And there were important lessons to learn, showing that strategy diffusion is not only possible but also highly relevant. For instance, one of the two core elements underpinning the distributive model is housing (the other one being healthcare), making unions depend on management funds to maintain the housing stock and workers depend on unions for continuous access to housing. The first autonomous union I studied in Ukraine – the union at the ball-bearings plant in Vinnitsa, Ukraine – had gotten rid of the housing stock long before privatization, lobbying the authorities to take the dormitories out of the plant’s property and declare them property of the city. For this step the union in Vinnitsa had taken inspiration from the wheel-plant in Kremenchuk, the trade union leader of the latter plant advising her colleagues in Vinnitsa on how to perform the operation (K8 2007). The trade union leaders in Vinnitsa did not initiate the action out of a desire to strengthen their union’s autonomy vis-à-vis the employer. Instead, they did it because they knew that any contention arising from housing issues would prove tremendously divisive, risking to turn workers against the union (V1 2007, V2 2007). This was a case of unions sharing information and taking inspiration one from another. In other cases, for instance when distributive unions for the first time came under the pressure of wage arrears crises, collective layoffs, and hostile employers, their union leaders were not interested in exchanging relevant information.¹⁶⁴

I could observe such lack of basic information exchange for instance during 2007, when I was doing fieldwork at Ukraine’s two harvester plants, the TKZ in Ternopil’ and the HMZ in Kherson. Both plants were going through similar crises involving year-long wage arrears, collective layoffs, and management pressure to raise the rents in plant-owned housing. Both had seen significant protests from the rank-and-file, with worker groups organizing pickets and demonstrations in the two cities. Yet the leaders of the two unions were not aware of – or pretended to be very surprised by – the fact that plants in the same industry sub-branch, and in the same industrial union (ASMU), were going through such a similar crisis. Of course this is hardly credible, especially since the ASMU was reporting on the two cases in its monthly newspaper *Yednist’*. But the point is that the two unions were not exchanging information, let alone coordinating actions, despite facing at least one very similar problem: They could not communicate with the owner and the owner in both cases was located in the same city, Bila Tserkva. This is important, since it shows that the interest in strategy diffusion was very low among ASMU plant-level organizations despite undergoing tremendous crises, with hundreds laid-off or not receiving their wages.

The interest of trade union leaders in Kherson in learning about strategies of other plants and coordinating with other struggling collectives changed dramatically with the factory occupation in February-March 2009. As described in Chapter 5, the factory occupation also meant a de facto replacement of the union leadership with new leaders in charge of achieving labor interest representation (they stayed in charge until the occupation’s violent end in mid-March 2009 and their subsequent sacking). They did try to establish links to other struggling workers throughout the country (Dnipropetrovsk, L’viv, and Kharkiv), issued a declaration, and initiated a Committee of Struggling Collectives (see Chapter 5). In other words, workers involved in such initiatives showed that they were capable of co-ordinating and willing to co-ordinate actions with workers at other plants, same as labor in other parts of the world. Rather than a characteristic of all Ukrainian trade unions, the opposition to strategy diffusion seemed more a characteristic of the distributive model and the FPU (in itself the biggest union organization in the country, and the only one in manufacturing).

The problem with the Committee of Struggling Collectives was that there was hardly anyone who could help with advice. The FPU was hostile towards an initiative that had made criticism of the

¹⁶⁴ For workers at plants where unions had not made the move to transfer away housing, the issue became pressing when management decided to raise rents and evict workers who could not pay the new rents. This happened in 2007 in Ternopil’ (harvester plant) and led to a one-and-a-half year conflict between workers and plant management. The trade union initially supported the workers, but after the “repression sequence” enacted by management against the union (see Chapter 7), changed sides to supporting management (Te1 2008).

FPU a core point on its agenda. The Confederation of Free Trade Unions (the larger organization of the Independent Union of Miners) was seen by Committee members as too close to the Prime-minister's party, the Yulia Tymoshenko Bloc. Similarly, there was no help from international trade union structures. International and European trade union federations stick to the established communication channels, avoiding to respond to calls coming from worker initiatives trying to contact them directly (i.e. not respecting the FPU hierarchy, ETUC 1 2008).¹⁶⁵ Yet in the past there have been foreign-funded external initiatives of promoting information exchange and strategy diffusion among Ukrainian unions. As argued below, such initiatives came from outside the network of international trade unions (although it was such unions that established it) and relied instead on a Western-funded and – established organization that was not afraid of getting around official hierarchies.

Outside Help

One does not have to look too far into the past to find one important instance of strategic diffusion that worked. Strategy diffusion was not as problematic in the ASMU's past as it is nowadays. In Chapter 2, I argued that in the 1990s the ASMU was an organization that prioritized the move towards more autonomy over welfare distribution. Such an attitude vis-à-vis reform was the outcome of a reform-oriented national leadership, supported by the strong regional trade union in Kharkiv. The national leadership and the Kharkiv organizations supported the information exchange with international trade union organizations and also made sure that such exchange would trickle down to struggling plant-level unions or worker groups. The trade union in Vinnitsa was the beneficiary of such information exchanges at the end of the 1990s (during the days when it fought for autonomy from the employer). With the change in ASMU leadership and the decline of the ASMU's strong chapter in Kharkiv, the ASMU moved back to supporting in practice the distributive model and ignoring unions in crises such as those in Vinnitsa and Kherson. The monthly *Yednist'*, established with the help of the international unions' Transnational Information Exchange (TIE), switched to allocating increasing space to distributive unions. There was no more space granted to worker groups; for instance "The Workers' Corner", a key feature in *Yednist'* past, publishing letters from the few workers whose plant-level unions were not hindering the paper's distribution, was discontinued.

What is left from those days is the link between ASMU and the international trade unions via the TIE. For the ASMU – and for the wider Ukrainian union federation FPU – it was very prestigious to receive international affiliation in the late 1990s. After all, the international trade union movement had blocked the affiliation of Ukraine's FPU and Russia's NFPR on grounds of being unreformed, of keeping too much of their Soviet outlook and personnel. Affiliation of the various branches came only in the second half of the 1990s, and it brought to many trade union leaders the possibility of traveling to Western countries, something that they often could not have afforded otherwise (A3 2009). This is important, because the TIE (the main channel of support coming from international unions for ASMU training programs) could today start to make the training of trade union leaders conditional on the inclusion also of workers from struggling plants, such as the ones in Vinnitsa and Kherson. This would reduce the isolation of such plants. Another measure could be to make access to training programs conditional on allowing *Yednist'* to become more critical and open to worker voices again. These steps could be achieved without extra funding. What would be costly but would be very important is for instance to ensure that a reformed *Yednist'* actually reaches the workers. The TIE and the ASMU would need a list of all union members with home addresses, and *Yednist'* could be sent directly to the

¹⁶⁵ The Committee of Struggling Collectives collapsed after the Kherson workers involved in it were fired from the HMZ plant in the repression that followed the February 2009 factory occupation. The Committee continued under the leadership of Kyiv-based Marxist (the Organization of Marxists) and Stalinist (The All-Ukrainian Workers' Union) groups, both of them being splinter groups of the Communist Party. These groups, however, clashed over the Committee's future and also accused Kherson workers of being too uncompromising and not supporting the plant owner (the critique came from the VSR president, see Ky1 2009).

workers' home addresses, thus circumventing union leaders.¹⁶⁶ The point of this measure would be to acquaint workers with what representative unions do and with their rights (of which workers are often unaware, as e.g. fieldwork in Zaporizhia showed, with workers at the country's biggest car-plant not knowing the name of their union and not having seen the collective agreement signed in their name).¹⁶⁷

Expecting more involvement on the part of the TIE in Ukraine is not at all unrealistic, as shown by the TIE's experience in Russia, where it was not shy to get around established union hierarchies and reached out to workers at the plant level. It was the TIE that connected the workers of a passive, FNPR-affiliated trade union (the FNPR is the Russian equivalent of Ukraine's FPU) at Ford's plant near Sankt-Petersburg with workers at a Ford plant in Brazil. Following the meeting, which showed Sankt-Petersburg Ford employees the workings of a representative trade union, they reformed theirs and launched a series of successful actions against Ford, including strikes. The union became synonymous for reform in the Russian trade union scene, launching several similar initiatives at other Russian car plants (Clément 2008, Greene/Robertson 2009).

Both the TIE's successful experience with reforming the Ford union and the TIE's involvement in the ASMU's pre-1999 existence show that there is plenty that can be done to assist union reform and strategy diffusion in Ukraine. But can we help such union assistance, by advising on where to focus reform processes internal to unions to increase the chances for reform?

8.5. Issues for Further Research

There might be answers to the problem of developing solutions (choosing the right strategy in light of a specific situation), but this research has also shown that it is only certain unions that get to the point of actually being able to construct a strategy – while most do not, especially where the distributive model prevails. There are nevertheless unions that do get around the distributive model and initiate reforms to become more autonomous. We need to know more about how such unions overcome their dependency on management, and how their leaders can evade the repression sequence. This research has made clear that unions need to reform in order to become autonomous before attempting to be effective in achieving worker demands. It has also shown what successful unions do to be effective, once autonomous. But we know little about how unions become autonomous, except for the fact that – in all the cases studied during fieldwork – the move to autonomy happened in the context of wage arrears and imminent collective layoffs, undermining the material base for the distributive model and pushing workers to protest against union leaders and elect new ones. And we also know very little about how unions manage to stay autonomous, particularly where they have to compete with distributive unions, generously funded by employers.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ This was a proposal of ASMU's leadership before 2000, the year of leadership change (A3 2007).

¹⁶⁷ Z8 2008. Several workers saw *Yednist'* for the first time in my hands, although the local ASMU organization should have distributed it to them.

¹⁶⁸ The discussion in this section focuses first and foremost on Ukraine, with implications for other countries with strong distributive unions (Russia, Belarus, China). It leaves out a discussion of the Romanian labor scene, as this has seen a very early move towards autonomy. See Chapters 2 and 7 for a discussion of how the unions organizing Romania's industry emerged bottom-up throughout 1990 with an anti-former-regime agenda and united in an organization called Cartel Alfa. They also quickly established links to Western unions, mainly French and Belgian Christian-democratic formations, and won early affiliation with international trade union organizations. As a result of early reform and early transfer of know-how from Western unions, Romanian unions (at least those part of Cartel Alfa) have proven capable of coordinating actions – for instance by launching industry-wide strikes or simultaneous roadblocks in several towns, so as to increase their effectiveness. Such instances are absent in Ukraine, and this section discusses what can be done in order to help ensure that the Ukrainian unions become capable of autonomous actions.

Leadership

What seems crucial – and worthy of more investigation – is the emergence during such crises of independent leadership from the ranks of the workers. The Ukrainian cases studied here show that contention (conflict) fosters the emergence of leadership. In other words, new leaders are born of conflict. But the contention-leadership pattern holds for the Ukrainian cases only. The trade unions in Romania show other patterns than the Ukrainian cases, in accordance with the specific development of post-communist unions in Romania: Most Romanian leaders came to power with the establishment of Cartel Alfa and have held power ever since.¹⁶⁹

Leadership and how it emerges are crucial in understanding the chances for post-communist trade unions reforming and becoming more autonomous and more capable of strategy, again, especially in contexts with strong distributive unions. This is so because post-communist trade unions have highly concentrated leadership, with one single person – the trade union leader – bearing the responsibility for setting the union's agenda. The trade union leader also has a huge informational advantage concerning the daily workings of the relationship to management, the situation of the plant, the relevant legislation, and the union's network of contacts. Such concentration in the person of the union leader occurs because it is usually only the union leader who works full-time for the union (depending on plant size, there can be other full-time union personnel, usually one for every 1,500 employees). Who holds the job therefore is a crucial issue. And leadership matters for independence. In the words of a worker, “our union boss played the role of the ram leading the herd of sheep to the slaughterhouse” (H8 2009). After management has intervened to co-opt union leaders, it usually takes a long time before an alternative to the co-opted leaders emerges, and we need to know how processes of leadership develop and how they can be assisted. Leadership matters also because labor loses its capacity to act when management takes out the union leadership – by bribing it, firing it, or prohibiting its access to the plant, or even by assassination (see the Tepro case in Romania, discussed in Chapter 2).

The Power Architecture of Trade Unions

Another issue that deserves further attention is the relationship between plant-level unions and central union organizations, branch-level and national. Post-communist Europe stands out in comparison to Western European unions for having a decentralized union scene, with plant-level unions keeping back most (around 70%) of the funds coming from members. This pattern greatly contributes to the concentration of power around the plant-level union leader, making a study of how local union leadership emerges and is sustained or challenged even more important. However, although we know that post-communist unions went through tremendous de-centralization and became the locus of power in each country's trade union organization (replacing the central or national level, Kubichek 2004), we know little about how plant-level unions shape the architecture and outlook of wider, branch-level and even national structures. Despite acknowledging de-centralization, almost all studies of post-communist labor focus entirely on the national-level organizations (for exceptions see Ashwin/ Clarke 2003; Ashwin 2004), ignoring how the rise and fall of various plant-level organizations also prompts changes in the militancy and readiness of branch- and national-level organizations to support militancy from below. In other words, understanding labor militancy might have to rely not only on the study of abstract variables such as union density and strike rates, but also on studying the power architecture of union organization across multiple levels and whether and how it changes. This dissertation introduced an example of how a change in a union's power architecture went together with a change in outlook

¹⁶⁹ There was one case where crises of wage arrears led to the replacement of union council members with more militant leaders coming from the rank-and-file (the contention episode at the COS Târgoviște). In Reșița I could not find out the exact circumstances of how the militant leaders who led the workers during the 2001-2003 conflict came to power; however, it was clear that workers from the rank-and-file replaced the team of engineers leading the union since the Cartel's establishment in a conflict in 1997.

and overall stance towards militancy: The union of Ukrainian machine-builders ASMU experienced a sharp change in its readiness to support militancy once the Kharkiv regional organization (dominated by the *Serp i Molot* motor plant) declined and the Zaporizhia regional organization (dominated by the car plant ZAZ, see Chapter 2) rose to become the most influential.

Studying how union structure affects militancy and contention would mean raising in a post-communist context a hypothesis formulated some 30 years ago in a study of Western European strike and unionization waves. Westergaard and Resler (1975) provided an early formulation of the view that it was “rising expectations” of workers that caused frictions between workers and the trade union organizations, which supported wage restraint in exchange for full employment. This friction ultimately led to the strike wave to start around 1968. Pizzorno (1978: 289) turned the argument around, claiming that in order to understand the emergence of contention one has to conceptualize it as a breakdown of “organizations” such as trade unions developed to ensure “control over the future actions of individuals”. It is “institutions and [...] power relations rather than expectations” or, one could add, ideological legacies that explain contention (for a similar point see also Burawoy 1985). Transferring this argument to the literature on post-communist labor, one can observe a failure in this literature to conceptualize trade unions as potentially representing ways of containing contention rather than as organic emanations of the will of workers; the literature generally views trade unions as one aspect of an entity called ‘labor’ rather than one component of the institutional “structure of incentives” (North 1990) containing worker militancy.

The main danger for the literature on post-communist labor is that such a conceptualization will lead it to conclusions described by Pizzorno (1978: 291) in the following terms: “At every new upstart of a wave of conflict we shall be induced to think that we are at the verge of a revolution, and when the downswing appears, we shall predict the end of class conflict”. All major comparative books on post-communist labor have ended with grim predictions about the lack of possibilities of increasing the influence of post-communist labor over the region’s politics. See, for instance, the three comparative works on post-communist labor heralding the death of the working class as an actor “for itself”, an argument inferred from the attitudes of trade union leaders: Kubichek (2004: 201) doubts that there is any future for union movements in Eastern Europe; Mandel (2004: 269) sees the labor movement as “doomed [...] to failure” since it “rejects class independence”; while Crowley and Ost (2001: 231) argue that “labor weakness” can “lead to class differences being expressed in nonclass and illiberal ways”. But, again, these points hold only if one assumes an unproblematic relationship between trade unions and workers, where workers’ dissatisfaction with their living or working standards expresses itself necessarily in “non-class” ways because they did try organizing along class lines in the form of trade unions only to be marginalized together with their unions. Yet this dissertation has found that many trade union federations have seen little to no break with their communist past and can therefore hardly be seen as collective carriers of worker interests. There is little evidence that the option for workers of organizing along class lines is off the table. And there is research (other than this dissertation) to prove that it is not, research dedicated to studying the *increasing* contention levels at Russian plants displayed outside the structures of the established trade unions (Greene/ Robertson 2009).

We should avoid taking the stances of trade union officers and personnel as indicative of labor’s – of the wider working class’s - willingness to protest and of the probability that contention and militancy will emerge and spread. Following Pizzorno, the trick is not to take the present state and outlook of unions as a sign of labor’s weakness, uncritically assuming an unproblematic relationship between workers and their trade unions. Instead, the present state and outlook of unions should be indicative of the trade union leadership’s contribution to containing industrial conflict. “Periods of destabilization and conflict appear when the unions are either unable or unwilling to exchange moderation for power” (Pizzorno 1978: 292). When writing about the inability and unwillingness of unions to exchange moderation for power, Pizzorno had in mind specific cyclical situations that

probably have little in common with the structural difficulties faced by post-communist labor. But Pizzorno's perspective is important for the study of post-communist labor as it focuses our attention on how unions play their role also in limiting contention rather than only in (directly) representing and expressing the protest potential of their members. Such a perspective is at least capable of explaining the many instances of mass contention initiated by workers around and after 1989 despite "labor weakness": the 1989 and 1991 Soviet mining strike waves, the Polish Solidarity's grassroots militancy and strikes in 1992, the rise of Rural Solidarity, the strike waves in Romania 1990-2003, the general strike in Ukraine in 1993, and the isolated episodes of contention studied in this dissertation. What we need to understand is how and when changes in the union's power architecture actually affect its capacity and/or willingness to enter political exchange. Such analysis might hold many surprises and might even show that the future is open also for post-communist labor.