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

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Preface

It was a hot day in Kherson, Ukraine, and the group of workers stood silent in the shadow of the trees in front of the local council's palace. As I approached them, only one person was talking in the group, addressing the workers, a tall man in a white shirt wearing sunglasses. "Let's follow the signal", he said, "we have to move all at once". When the signal came, the workers moved, following the man in the white shirt to block the boulevard in front of the city council. They formed a circle of people walking over the zebra crossings surrounding the intersection. They were not many – maybe 50 or 60, but enough to keep the zebra crossings blocked. TV crews and policemen rushed in, but the latter had no grounds on which to stop people from legally crossing the street. Instead of intervening, the policemen telephoned with their superiors. Soon, on both sides of the road block, long rows of trolley busses formed. Black, metalized all-terrain-vehicles drove into the side streets, by-passing the roadblock. One tried to force passage through the human roadblock. Some workers gave way, some others shouted at the driver and started hitting the car. The car pulled back. Groups of retirees – entitled to use the trolley busses for free – stepped out of the trolleys and approached the workers. "Who are you, why are you doing this?", they asked. "We're combine-plant workers, they've laid us off and we want our jobs back", came the answer. "Why are you hurting us while the big shots can use the side streets? And why aren't you wearing any signs or banners?", others asked. "Yes, maybe we should have worn the banners", said Grisha, one of the roadblock's organizers.

That day on fieldwork I was taught a great deal about strategy and representation of worker interests, my dissertation's central topics. As on previous occasions, I could observe how workers deal with some basic dilemmas of strategy. They had found a form of disruption – blocking the zebra crossings – that would protect them from the police, so that was alright. But it was difficult to focus that disruption only on the addressee that the workers had in mind: the local council. Instead, they hurt most the retirees in the trolleys. And they had not thought about communication: since they were carrying no banners and shouting no slogans, it was difficult to identify them as combine plant workers. In the end, they bowed to the pressure of trolleybus drivers and passengers and left the zebra crossings. But two weeks after, they would try it again, that time blocking in the same way an important bridge not crossed by any public transport lines. That time the banners were there. And it did not matter that the protest did not take place in front of the local council: the politicians rushed in as soon as they heard that workers had blocked one of the country's strategic bridges.

Questions about strategy – how and when workers unite around certain demands and for certain actions such as the roadblock above, how they communicate their threats, how they calibrate and address threats of disruption – are all questions that led this research in Romania and Ukraine in 2006-2010. I was also concerned about the question of protest incidence, since much of the literature argues that workers in post-communist Europe did little –and rarely protested – about reforms that severely deteriorated their living standards. But were protests indeed so rare? Among the places where I did fieldwork in Romania and Ukraine, at three of the plants thousands of workers went on strike, but the official statistics failed to count them since the strikes were not legal. And if "a social structure reveals itself in the way it reacts to pressure" (to cite Burawoy), what do worker protests tell us about the world workers live in? More specifically, what obstacles do employers and authorities raise in the face of worker interest representation? How widespread are such obstacles in the post-communist region? And, most central to this dissertation, what can we learn about how workers can overcome such obstacles, what strategic choices do they face?

This dissertation project started as an inquiry into the lifeworld of Eastern European workers and the ways governments respond to and contain worker protests. It would have never come to life without the trust, inspiration, and support of Annette Freyberg-Inan. It benefited most from the advice of my supervisors, Annette Freyberg-Inan, Jelle Visser, and Marc van der Meer. It also was fortunate enough to literally grow in the International Political Economy Club at the University of Amsterdam. I

would like to thank all the club's members who went through the trouble of reading and commenting on my work in progress. My project also benefited strongly from the discussions with and the reading tips from Rüyâ Gökhan Köcer (some of the recommended readings brought the fun back to industrial relations) and David Mandel at the Université du Québec à Montréal, for showing how a little help can have tremendous importance. I would like to thank for all his advice Brian Burgoon, a constant source of inspiration and well-intended advice. I also found inspiration in room B119, thanks to Andrew Gebhardt, Marii Paskov, and Matthijs Rooduijn, my colleagues who offered me a fun and stimulating working environment in our office in the Oost-Indisch Huis.

And special thanks go to the workers who granted me week-long interviews, allowed me to shadow them throughout their plants and cities, and who have taught me so much about the tragic demise of the communist factory and the little that workers could do to protect their lifeworld. In Romania: Marian in Reșița, Mihai Toma in Târgoviște, and Pif in Brașov. In Ukraine: Leonid Borisovich and Pyotr in Kherson, Dima in Kharkiv, and Petro Tyutunov in Vinnitsa. And I would also like to thank my parents, who were the first to draw my attention – back when I was still in high school – to the worker protests happening around us and the problems that drove the workers into the streets.

“Work and pay. All we want is work and pay.”

Two workers at the ball-bearings plant in Vinnitsa, Ukraine