

# Open Research Online

---

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

## Workers in Hungary

### Book Section

How to cite:

Pittaway, Mark (2005). Workers in Hungary. In: Breuning, Eleonore; Pritchard, Gareth and Lewis, Jill eds. Power and the People: A Social History of Central European Politics, 1945-1956. Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, pp. 57-75.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2005 Manchester University Press

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk/catalogue/book.asp?id=1044>

---

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

---

[oro.open.ac.uk](http://oro.open.ac.uk)

# Workers in Hungary

**Mark Pittaway\***

This version, copyright © Mark Pittaway, 2003

## **Introduction**

In his memoirs, written during exile in the Soviet Union in the late 1960s, the former secretary of the Hungarian Workers' Party and the country's leading Stalinist during the early years of dictatorship, Mátyás Rákosi, recounted that in 1950 he "started to look into what the right-wing Social Democrats were doing ..... they were destroying work discipline and manipulating opinion in the factories, so we raised it as a political issue".<sup>1</sup> Prior to the institutionalisation of socialist dictatorship in the late 1940s Hungary had been ruled by a popular front coalition. Competition for the working class vote in the country's industrial communities had been intense. The Hungarian Communist Party (MKP) struggled with the Social Democrats (MSZDP) for dominance on the political left, a dominance eventually achieved through a mixture of mobilisation, electoral fraud and police intimidation that was then sealed with an enforced merger that created the Hungarian Workers' Party (MDP) in 1948.<sup>2</sup> Rákosi thereupon turned his attention to "right-wing Social Democrats"; two years after the merger of the two parties, senior figures within the MDP who had a past that connected them to the MSZDP, led by Hungary's President, Árpád Szakasits, were imprisoned pending a series of show trials.<sup>3</sup>

---

\* Dr. Mark Pittaway, Lecturer in European Studies, Department of History, Faculty of Arts, The Open University, Walton Hall, MILTON KEYNES MK7 6AA, UNITED KINGDOM.

<sup>1</sup> Mátyás Rákosi, *Visszaemlékezések 1940-1956 II kötet* (Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó, 1997), p.827.

<sup>2</sup> I describe this struggle in, Mark Pittaway "The Politics of Legitimacy and Hungary's Post-war Transition", paper prepared for a meeting of Team 1 "Legitimacy in Politics and Culture" of the ESF programme "Occupation in Europe: the Impact of National Socialist and Fascist Rule", Ghent, Belgium, 14 September 2002.

Campaigns against “right-wing Social Democrats” in the political sphere combined with a drive against shop-floor protest by skilled workers in Hungary’s factories during the late spring of 1950. The Stalinist state’s revolution in production was well underway several months after the introduction of the Stakhanovite movement on the country’s shop floors, along with the transformation of wage systems in industry.<sup>4</sup> As wages were tied to performance, and the campaign-style production methods that had permitted the introduction of Stakhanovism lost momentum, production was hit by a wave of sporadic working-class protest.<sup>5</sup> Party propaganda blamed “the press of the reactionary bourgeoisie, and to a considerable extent right-wing Social Democrats within the working class” for attempting “to undermine the credibility of the Stakhanovite movement among the workers”.<sup>6</sup> The regime dovetailed this attack with one on the persistent survival of pre-socialist cultures of shop-floor representation within the Stalinised trade unions, as no less a figure than Mátyás Rákosi attacked “syndicalist tendencies” that “can be seen” in the work of the unions.<sup>7</sup> As the campaign against “right-wing Social Democrats” on the shop floor took shape, it became clear that those whom the regime branded “right-wing Social Democrats” were synonymous with those skilled workers who defended traditional working practices against the assaults of the Stalinist state. According to the party committee of Budapest’s seventh district, “in the printing industry, many of whose members belonged in the past to the aristocracy of labour, syndicalism is particularly pronounced together with the aggressive appearance of the voice of right-wing Social Democracy”.<sup>8</sup>

With the consolidation of Stakhanovism, the introduction of the piece-rate wage system and the reductions in workers’ wages that stemmed from the “revision of the norms”, the

---

<sup>3</sup> Zsuzsanna Kádár, “A szociáldemokraták üldözése és diszkriminálása” in, Lajos Varga (ed.), A Magyar Szociáldemokrácia Kézikönyve (Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó, 1999), pp.163-9.

<sup>4</sup> For more on this, see Mark Pittaway, “The Reproduction of Hierarchy: Skill, Working-Class Culture and the State in Early Socialist Hungary”, The Journal of Modern History, 74: 4 (2002): 746-7.

<sup>5</sup> Magyar Országos Levéltár (Hungarian National Archive, hereafter MOL) MSZMP Budapesti Bizottság iratai (Archive of the Budapest Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party, hereafter M-Bp).-95f.2/296ö.e., pp.106-10.

<sup>6</sup> A Sztahanov-Mozgalom (Budapest: Magyar Dolgozók Pártja Központi Vezetősége Oktatási Osztály, 1950), p.18.

<sup>7</sup> Mátyás Rákosi, “Erősítsük a Pártunk kapcsolatait a tömegekkel, fejlesszük a pártonbelüli demokráciát, a kritikát és önkritikát”, Szabad Nép, 12 February 1950, p.3.

<sup>8</sup> MOL M-Bp.-95f.2/168/bö.e., p.31.

events of 1950 were fundamental to shaping patterns of conflict in Hungarian industry during the first half of the 1950s. They also shaped regime responses to such patterns of protest. This could be seen in recurring concern about the influence of “right-wing Social Democrats” in factories throughout the 1950s; in one textile factory in the capital it was used to explain the demands of skilled joiners for higher wages in March 1951.<sup>9</sup> The regime initiated further campaigns in 1952 when it became clear that, in elections to factory-level union organisations, those whom party secretaries on the ground regarded as “right-wing Social Democrats” were conspicuously successful in being elected.<sup>10</sup> Despite this, there has been almost no exploration of the meaning of manifestations of supposed “right-wing Social Democracy” in Hungarian factories. The work on the afterlife of the MSZDP that does exist tells a story of high politics and repression. It deals mostly with the fate of former members of the MSZDP in Rákosi’s jails and prison camps, but often fails to mention the factories from whence the party had drawn much of its support prior to 1948.<sup>11</sup> Where authors have touched on the phenomenon in the factories, they have assumed implicitly that the survival of Social Democratic opinions among the workers fed a culture of protest against the actions of the Stalinist state.<sup>12</sup> The situation, however, was much more complicated than this. In 1952 the personnel department of the United Lighting and Electrics Factory in Budapest compiled a statistical survey of those considered to be “right-wing Social Democrats” in the factory. Of the two hundred and ninety-one employees so identified, only 50.5 per cent had actually been members of the MSZDP prior to merger in 1948, while a staggering 26.5 per cent had belonged to the MKP.<sup>13</sup> As the officials of the Budapest Party Committee made clear in their accompanying report, while the designation “right-wing Social Democrat” was influenced by an individual’s previous party membership, it was defined

---

<sup>9</sup> MOL M-Bp.-95f.3/345ö.e., p.8.

<sup>10</sup> Lajos Sz. Varga Szakszervezetek a Diktatúrában. A Magyar Dolgozók Pártja és a szakszervezetek (1948-1953) (Pécs, Pannónia Könyvek, 1995), pp.137-69.

<sup>11</sup> Zsuzsanna Kádár, “A magyarországi szociáldemokrata perek története”, Múltunk, 41: 2 (1996): 3-49; Erzsébet Strassenreiter, “A szociáldemokrata emigráció 1945 utáni tevékenysége”, Múltunk, 36: 1 (1991): 58-93.

<sup>12</sup> This assumption appears implicitly in Gyula Belényi, “Bevezetés” in Gyula Belényi & Lajos Sz. Varga (eds.), Munkások Magyarországon 1948-1956: Dokumentumok (Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó, 2000) p. 29; this assumption is more explicit in Éva Beránné Nemes & Erzsébet Kajari, “A szociáldemokrata kérdése a szakszervezetekben (1948-1956)”, Múltunk, 35:3 (1990): 129-42.

<sup>13</sup> MOL M-Bp.- 176f.2/194/19ö.e., p.6.

in part by social position – whether a worker had been a “member of the aristocracy of labour”. What was most important, however, was the attitude of the worker, namely whether he or she exhibited “chauvinist” attitudes towards newer workers, or was undermining “work discipline”.<sup>14</sup>

“Right-wing Social Democrat” was a political identity that was “ascribed” to workers by Hungary’s Stalinist state, rather than one that unproblematically reflected the persistence of a Social Democratic political culture in the country’s factories.<sup>15</sup> It formed part of an attempt to attribute political identities in Hungarian society, explaining social conflict through the actions of chimerical political “enemies” who sought to undermine “socialism”.<sup>16</sup> It enabled the state, at least at the level of propaganda, to link particular kinds of dissent to broader international conflict in the early Cold War years. The press frequently railed at the “treason” of western Social Democratic parties in bolstering US hegemony and bourgeois politics in the western half of the continent.<sup>17</sup> This area of international conflict was conflated with a particular kind of working-class opposition to the labour policies of the regime, namely the discontent expressed by the urban, skilled elite in the face of the state’s transformation of production. The regime argued in 1950 that the emergence of new forms of working associated with Stakhanovism pointed to the occurrence of “basic changes in the structure of our society and our economy”.<sup>18</sup> This “new attitude to production” heralded a transformation of the working class. “In the Stakhanovite movement”, proclaimed the party newspaper, “a new kind of worker has appeared; the first signs of the new Communist working class have emerged.” This “embryonic Communist working class” was born from a struggle fought against “the

---

<sup>14</sup> MOL M-Bp.-176f.2/194/19ö.e., pp. 12-20.

<sup>15</sup> I have drawn on Sheila Fitzpatrick’s work on the ascription of class in the Soviet Union during the 1930s to make this argument. See Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Ascribing Class: The Construction of Social Identity in Soviet Russia”, *The Journal of Modern History*, 65: 4 (1993): 745-70.

<sup>16</sup> There are clear parallels here with Soviet Stalinist practice, see Gábor Rittersporn “The Omnipresent Conspiracy: On Soviet Imagery of Politics and Social Relations in the 1930s” in, J. Arch Getty & Roberta T. Manning (eds.), *Stalinist Terror. New Perspectives* (New York & Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 99-115.

<sup>17</sup> For an example of this kind of propaganda, see Irén Komját, “Bomlás a Jobboldali Szociáldemokraták Taborában”, *Szabad Nép*, 12 January 1950, p.2.

<sup>18</sup> Ernő Gerő, “Felszólás a Magyar Sztahánovisták I. Országos Tanácskozásán” in, Ernő Gerő *Harcban a Szocialista Népgazdaságért* (Budapest: Szikra, 1950), p.620.

damaging legacy of capitalism to the mentality of the working class”.<sup>19</sup> The notion of “right-wing Social Democracy” as a political identity crystallised as the regime faced growing skilled working-class opposition to its drive to transform the shop floor during the first half of 1950.

Yet while “right-wing Social Democracy” was a political identity ascribed by the regime to skilled workers who opposed its policies in the factories, and its meaning crystallised in 1950, it was not simply invented by the regime after the introduction of the Stakhanovite movement. It drew upon Communist experience of the struggle for hegemony among the industrial working class during the period of popular front rule that followed the end of the Second World War. It was fed by the marked opposition of many skilled workers to some of the policies advanced in the coalition years by the MKP in the factories in the interests of reconstruction. It was, furthermore, defined by the way in which some of these localised shop-floor conflicts had become politicised in the climate of intense competition between the MSZDP and MKP, and then as the dictatorship was built following the enforced merger of the two parties. As standardised forms of labour competition, wage systems and later the Stakhanovite movement were promoted by the state to prepare for the introduction of comprehensive economic planning, local officials shaped the campaigns in their factories so as to destroy the cultures defended by the skilled elites. For this reason those skilled elites, particularly in sectors like heavy engineering, resisted Stakhanovism and “payment-by-results” systems of remuneration ferociously. Communists at both national and local level applied their memory and explanation of shop-floor conflict in the mid- and late 1940s to the different tensions of 1950. It bears mention that even in the mid- and late 1940s their explanations had often misread the complex reality of discontent in the factories.

This argument will be developed with reference to one particular case study. The United Lighting and Electrics factory, which lay on the northern fringes of the Greater Budapest conurbation in the town of Újpest, had been a stronghold of the labour movement

---

<sup>19</sup> “Új munkásosztály születik”, *Szabad Nép*, 5 March 1950, p.1.

between the wars and then of the MSZDP during the mid-1940s.<sup>20</sup> During the Stalinist years it both figured prominently in the official promotion of Hungary's Stakhanovite movement<sup>21</sup> and was simultaneously a focus of regime concern about the influence of "right-wing Social Democrats" over the industrial working class.<sup>22</sup> During the 1956 Revolution it was at the centre of the workers' councils movement, something that many, including the socialist regime restored in November, attributed to the persistence of a "Social Democratic" culture in the factory.<sup>23</sup> The present chapter looks firstly at the way in which the micro-politics of the factory overlapped with the macro-political struggle between the MKP and MSZDP for hegemony within the working class between 1945 and 1948. It then moves on to consider the institutionalisation of dictatorship and the conflicts that surrounded labour competition and the institutionalisation of Stakhanovism. It focuses on how shop-floor conflicts were interpreted and misinterpreted by the officials of firstly the MKP and later the Hungarian Workers' Party. It does this in ways that illuminate the afterlife of Hungarian Social Democracy in the factories, showing how, after the MSZDP had ceased to exist, "Social Democrat" re-emerged as a political identity ascribed by the regime to the opponents of aspects of its labour policy.

### **The micro-politics of the shop floor, the macro-politics of the parties: conflict in the United Lighting and Electrics Factory, 1945-8**

In 1952 the Budapest party committee conducted an investigation into what it regarded as the prevalence of "right-wing Social Democracy" in the United Lighting and Electrics factory. It traced this back to the history of labour movement activity in the plant; "Social Democracy had very considerable influence in the factory before the liberation. This manifested itself in close relations with the owners of the plant." It linked "Social

---

<sup>20</sup> For the history of the factory to 1945, see Ferenc Gáspár, *A Tungsram Rt. Története II. Rész* (Budapest: A Tungsram Rt. Gyártörténeti Bizottsága, 1987).

<sup>21</sup> Sándor Horváth, György Majtényi & Eszter Zsófia Tóth, *Élmunkások és sztahanovisták* (Budapest: unpublished manuscript, 1998).

<sup>22</sup> MOL M-Bp.-176f.2/194/19ö.e., pp. 12-20.

<sup>23</sup> On the role of the factory during the revolution, see Mark Pittaway, "Industrial Workers, Socialist Industrialisation and the State in Hungary, 1948-1958", (PhD. thesis, University of Liverpool, 1998), pp.345-57; István Kemény & Bill Lomax (eds.), *Magyar munkástanácsok 1956-ban* (Paris: Magyar Füzetek, 1986); on regime explanations of events in the factory after the Revolution, see MOL M-Bp.-9f.1957-alapszervezetek/15ö.e., pp. 102-5.

Democracy” both to class collaboration and to the skilled elite within the workforce of the factory – “many engineers, many members of the aristocracy of labour, but”, it conceded, “many honest workers joined the MSZDP” after 1945. Even then, the report argued, in areas of the factory like “the machine shop, the tool-making shop, machine maintenance, the power plant”, in other words where the skilled elite were concentrated, “a marked majority were members of the Social Democratic Party”.<sup>24</sup> The United Lighting and Electrics had indeed been a stronghold of the MSZDP between 1945 and 1948, even when compared to neighbouring factories. The Communists themselves estimated in mid-1946 that, of a workforce of around 2700, 1300 were members of the MSZDP. Among the neighbouring factories in industrial Újpest, the MKP predominated in factories in light industrial sectors, while in plants in the heavy engineering sector workforces were evenly divided between the MKP and MSZDP.<sup>25</sup>

The explanation for the strength of the MSZDP in the United Lighting and Electrics does not lie in the strength of the Social Democratic labour movement in the plant prior to the Second World War. During the 1930s the local branch of the Metalworkers’ Union, closely tied to the MSZDP, dominated the channels of interest representation in the factory, as it did in most other Újpest factories in the sector. This, however, was unsurprising; the Horthy regime, based as it was on the suppression of the Soviet Republic that briefly governed Hungary after the First World War, criminalised Communist political activity. The United Lighting and Electrics was a centre of underground Communist activity in Újpest throughout the inter-war years; immediately prior to the onset of the depression in the late 1920s the factory had been nicknamed “red Tungsram” as a result of the militancy of many of its workers. The leadership of the official labour movement was deeply anti-Communist, and towards the end of the 1930s developed a close relationship with the owners of the plant.<sup>26</sup> This, however, was closely linked to the growing influence of the radical right over the working class in the Greater

---

<sup>24</sup> MOL M-Bp.-176f.2/194/19ö.e., p.12.

<sup>25</sup> Politikátörténeti és Szakszervezeti Levéltár (Archive of Political History and Trade Unions, hereafter PtSzL) Politikátörténeti Intézet Levéltára (Archive of the Institute for the History of Politics, hereafter PIL) Magyar Kommunista Párt iratai (Papers of the Hungarian Communist Party, hereafter 274f.)20/35ö.e., p.192.

<sup>26</sup> Gáspár, *A Tungsram Rt. Története*, pp.96-103.

Budapest area and to increasing, often officially sanctioned, anti-Semitism. At the end of the 1930s the radical right, particularly the Arrow Cross party, had seriously weakened the Social Democratic labour movement by successfully winning the support of large numbers of younger workers through linking anti-capitalist rhetoric to anti-Semitism and radical nationalism.<sup>27</sup> The predominantly Jewish owners were, in the face of radical right-wing mobilisation, keen to weaken the radical right among the work-force by strengthening the Social Democratic labour movement.<sup>28</sup>

Thus the existence of a Social Democratic political culture in the factory during the inter-war years does not provide a convincing explanation for MSZDP predominance in the post-war years. The alleged predominance of representatives of the “aristocracy of labour”, namely the skilled unionised elite, does not provide an explanation either. The factory was engaged in the production of a wide range of electrical goods in both the inter-war and early post-war years: light-bulbs, a wide range of lamps and radio components. This diverse production profile meant that the labour process was extremely uneven across the factory, but even so a majority of the total workforce were semi-skilled workers. In December 1933, of a total workforce of 2332 workers, 1760 were employed in semi-skilled jobs; an overwhelming majority of these semi-skilled positions were filled by women producing electrical lighting equipment and radio components. Only 331 workers belonged to the skilled elite, the Communists’ “aristocracy of labour”, and the absolute majority of these workers were concentrated in the factory’s machine shop and were entirely male.<sup>29</sup> Factory employment statistics from December 1947, when the reconstruction of the factory after the Second World War had been completed, revealed that a similar pattern persisted into the post-war period. From a total manual workforce of 2426, 793 belonged to the skilled elite, while 1459 were classified as semi-skilled workers.<sup>30</sup> While only certain shops, and certainly not the whole factory, were strongholds of what the regime would later brand “the aristocracy of labour”, close

---

<sup>27</sup> Miklós Lackó, *Nyilasok, Nemzetiszocialisták 1935-1944* (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1966), pp.184-191.

<sup>28</sup> Gáspár, *A Tungsram Rt. Története*, pp.104-5.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.90-1.

<sup>30</sup> MOL Egyesült Izzó és Villámossági Rt., *Ügyvezető Igazgatóság iratai* (Papers of the Managing Directorate of the United Lighting and Electrics Company, hereafter Z601)/9cs./82t., p.5.

attention to the history of labour movement activism in the factory in the inter-war years shows that both Social Democrat and illegal Communist activism was concentrated among that skilled elite.<sup>31</sup>

The circumstances of the immediate months that followed Újpest's "liberation" by Soviet troops at the beginning of 1945 provide a much more convincing explanation of why the MSZDP was so predominant in factory politics during the post-war years. The German occupation, the deportation of Újpest's seventeen thousand Jews, the banning and suppression of the labour movement and then the encirclement of Budapest by Soviet troops in the second half of 1944 were deeply traumatic for the town's residents.<sup>32</sup> As Hungary's German occupiers rounded up labour movement activists in the town, many went into hiding and lived off the land on the fringes of the town. They were later to form one of the most active partisan groups in the country as the Red Army moved on Budapest.<sup>33</sup> Amid this political turmoil, workers left the United Lighting and Electrics as real incomes collapsed; in 1944 the real incomes of skilled workers stood at only 55 percent of their 1914 level.<sup>34</sup> Those workers who remained were faced with the threat that the Arrow Cross regime and Hungary's German occupiers would strip the factory of its machinery to prevent it falling into Soviet hands. Factory management took the unusual step of illegally arming the factory's workers to resist any German attempts to remove machinery, and armed conflict was only prevented because German plans were insufficiently advanced for it to be possible to remove machinery before Budapest was surrounded.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> Gáspár, *A Tungstram Rt. Története*, pp.94-107.

<sup>32</sup> On the national picture during 1944-5, see Pittaway, "The Politics of Legitimacy", pp. 18-45; for circumstances in Újpest itself, see András Berényi, Mária Palasik, Csaba Rigóczki, Balázs Sipos & Erika Varsányi, *Újpest IV. Kerület* (Budapest: Ceba Kiadó, 1998), pp.24-5; Ede Gerelyes, "Újpest a két világháború között" in Ede Gerelyes (ed.), *Újpest Története* (Budapest: Közgazdasági és Jogi Könyvkiadó, 1977), pp.203-8.

<sup>33</sup> For a participant's account, see Mihály Földes, *Pillanatképek az Újpesti Partizánharcokról. Kollektív Riport*, (Újpest: A Magyar Kommunista Párt Újpesti Szervezete, 1946)

<sup>34</sup> MOL Z601/10cs./93t., pp.2-3.

<sup>35</sup> "Az Egyesült Izzólámpa és Villámossági Rt. ügyvezető igazgatóságának feljegyzése a vállalat vezetőinek és munkásságának ellenállási mozgalmáról, valamint a kitelepítés és üzembenítés részbeni megakadályozásáról", reprinted in, Károly Jenei (ed.), *A Munkásság az Üzemekért, a Termelésért, 1944-1945. Dokumentumgyűjtemény* (Budapest: Táncsics Könyvkiadó, 1970), pp.86-96.

The German occupation was brought to an end with the arrival of Soviet troops in January 1945; this, however, did not end Újpest's agony, but merely marked a new phase of conflict for the inhabitants of the town as Hungary's new occupiers instituted a reign of terror of their own. As the front moved south and then west, there came a second wave of Soviet troops; thus began what one working-class resident described as "the period of fear ... they stole, they raped".<sup>36</sup> The Red Army troops engaged in mass rape, looting and murder in the town. The widespread rounding up and deportation of able-bodied males by Soviet troops increased popular hostility.<sup>37</sup> This reign of terror, in which members of the newly constituted Hungarian police force actively participated, was believed by many of the politically aware in the town to herald the immediate imposition of a Soviet-type regime, along the lines of the Soviet Republic of 1919. Jenő Pál Nagy, later the chief shop-steward in the United Lighting and Electrics, was genuinely surprised to hear that the MSZDP would be allowed to operate legally. This was because "we (the workers) all believed, before the liberation, that there would naturally be no other party allowed than the Communists".<sup>38</sup>

The brutality of the Red Army, the rapes and the mass deportations, damaged the newly founded MKP in Újpest. It was, however, able to construct an appeal to working-class supporters that exploited their fear of a return to the aggressive anti-labour politics of the Horthy years, when they had been marginalised and had generally been poorly served by the moderate policies of the MSZDP. It did this through promoting an ideology of democratic, national reconstruction that allowed the MKP to distance itself from the actions of the Red Army, and exploit the desire of many workers for real change.<sup>39</sup> But the workforce of the United Lighting and Electrics proved largely immune to such appeals, because the Red Army dismantled the factory in early 1945 as part of its drive to extract reparation from Hungary for siding with Nazi Germany during the Second World War. The Soviet command effectively dismantled the factory between March and mid-May 1945. Management estimated that, when the Red Army departed, only 4 per cent of

---

<sup>36</sup> 1956-os Intézet Oral History Archivium (1956 Institute Oral History archive, hereafter OHA) 181 – Péterffy Miklós, p.55.

<sup>37</sup> Pittaway, "The Politics of Legitimacy", pp. 28-32.

<sup>38</sup> OHA 177 – Nagy Pál Jenő, p. 27.

the machinery remained in place, while some 75 per cent of all raw materials were seized.<sup>40</sup> The employment consequences for those dependent on the plant were catastrophic: the factory had employed around 5000 in late 1944; by May 1945 when the Red Army left, it could only guarantee work to around 400, a figure that had only risen to 1569 by October.<sup>41</sup> While the factory committee attempted to organise the workers to defend the factory against the attempts of the Red Army to dismantle it, these efforts were less than successful. The workforce was faced with the task of reconstructing a factory damaged not only by war but by the policies of the new occupiers.<sup>42</sup>

A year after the dismantling of the factory, the local newspaper of the MSZDP in Újpest explained that the machinery of the factory was the price to be paid “for the Ukraine, for the villainy of Horthy and Szalási”. It described the “pain” with which the workers “said goodbye to their machines and their tools”.<sup>43</sup> The paper understated the reaction at the time; the news of the dismantling of the factory was greeted with an explosion of anti-Soviet hysteria among the workforce. Some workers argued that the “Russians would take away everything” because of an alleged impending war with Britain.<sup>44</sup> Sections of the work-force, organised by MSZDP members of the factory committee, engaged in a futile attempt to sabotage the dismantling of the plant, but in the end they had to concede that they “could not hinder it”.<sup>45</sup> As the factory was rebuilt, lingering bitterness among the workers over the actions of the Red Army created a climate hostile to the MKP. As the Social Democrats recruited in the factory during early 1946, Communists complained that they were aggressively deploying “anti-Soviet propaganda” to mobilise the workforce.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> Pittaway, “The Politics of Legitimacy”, pp.34-38.

<sup>40</sup> MOL Z601/10cs./93t., pp.15-6.

<sup>41</sup> PtSzL A Volt Szakszervezetek Központi Levéltár anyaga (The materials of the former Central Archive of Trade Unions, hereafter SZKL) Vas- és Fémmunkások Szakszervezet iratai (Papers of the Metalworkers Union, hereafter Vasas)/28d./1945; “Jegyzőkönyv felvétel az EIV Rt. Üzemi Bizottságának 1945. május 7-én megtartott IB. ülésén”, p.1; MOL Egyesült Izzó és Villámossági Rt. Személyzeti Osztály iratai (Papers of the Personnel Department of the United Lighting and Electrics Company, hereafter Z606)/4cs/9t., p.5.

<sup>42</sup> OHA 177 – Nagy Pál Jenő, pp.40-4.

<sup>43</sup> “Látogatás az Egyesült Izzóban”, *Jövő*, 13 May 1946, p.6.

<sup>44</sup> PtSzL PIL 274f.16/130ö.e., p.89.

<sup>45</sup> OHA 177 – Nagy Pál Jenő, pp.40-4.

<sup>46</sup> PtSzL PIL 274f.16/130ö.e., p.38.

Following the dismantling of the factory and in the face of hyper-inflation and misery in much of the country, reconstruction proceeded quickly. It began in August 1945 with banners above the factory proclaiming that “life is stronger” and with staff optimistically arguing that the factory could be re-built “more modern than before”.<sup>47</sup> Within the year the local press proclaimed the success of the plant’s reconstruction, praising “the worthwhile struggle” of the staff in the difficult circumstances of Hungary’s first post-war year.<sup>48</sup> The reconstruction failed, however, to re-build a factory such as that which had existed in the inter-war years. In 1947 total production stood at only 30.6 per cent of its 1939 level, while the plant only employed 2,514 manual workers as opposed to 4,635 eight years previously. Furthermore, real wages in 1947 still lagged behind the relatively high real wages enjoyed by workers in the plant during the late 1930s; average real earnings for skilled workers were 32 per cent lower than in 1939, while for the semi-skilled majority they had fallen by 33.05 per cent.<sup>49</sup>

At the national level, hyper-inflation ended in 1946 with the stabilisation of the currency and the introduction of economic planning, which was in many ways a precursor of the transition to a socialist economy that would occur after 1948. Within the framework of reconstruction the state, driven to a considerable extent by the MKP, introduced sporadic labour competition, and sought to introduce wage systems based on the principle of “payment-by-results”, with “scientifically determined norms” across industry.<sup>50</sup> In the United Lighting and Electrics such wage systems could be introduced relatively easily; scientific management had dictated work organisation and payment practices in the semi-skilled work-places in lamp and radio component manufacture in the inter-war years.<sup>51</sup> These parts of the factory and the assembly shop were those where “scientific” norms, which bore an uncanny resemblance to pre-war practices, were already in force in August 1946.<sup>52</sup> While statistical returns for the whole of the late 1940s suggest that around 60

---

<sup>47</sup> Ernő Kovács, “Az Élet Erősebb!”, *Szabad Újpest*, 18 August 1945, p.4.

<sup>48</sup> “Látogatás az Egyesült Izzóban”, *Jövő*, 13 May 1946, p.6.

<sup>49</sup> MOL Z601/10cs./93t., pp.9-11.

<sup>50</sup> Pittaway, “Industrial Workers, Socialist Industrialisation and the State”, pp. 85-8.

<sup>51</sup> Gáspár, *A Tungram Rt. Története*, pp.89-92.

<sup>52</sup> MOL Z606/12cs./42t.

per cent of all hours worked by both skilled and semi-skilled workers were paid through “payment-by-result” wages in the factory,<sup>53</sup> this picture is misleading. The skilled minority in the maintenance and machine shops were able to exert far more on-the-job control than the semi-skilled, who were far more fully subordinate to managerial authority. As late as 1948, the shop stewards among the skilled exercised considerable informal control over the performance of skilled workers, ensuring that they made no more than 135 per cent of their norm, in order to preserve union control over wage rates.

<sup>54</sup> A shop-floor culture that stigmatised “rate-busting” in the machine shop was recalled in the official biography of the future Stakhanovite József Kiszlinger. In the late 1940s he “managed to overfulfil his norm. The older ones attacked him, ‘Are you insane? You’re undermining us!’.”<sup>55</sup>

Although Communists would become concerned at the persistence of on-the-job control in the machine shop after 1948, during the period of reconstruction they were far more concerned to smash the political hegemony of the MSZDP in the factory. From January 1946 onwards the local MSZDP organisers regarded the United Lighting and Electrics as their most important stronghold in Újpest, in view of their success in organising party members in the plant, winning a majority on the factory committee and taking its presidency.<sup>56</sup> The MKP were deeply worried and saw MSZDP hegemony as giving disproportionate power over affairs in the factory to “the aristocracy of labour”.<sup>57</sup> Consensus between the two parties over issues such as reconstruction and the importance of combating right-wing resurgence was replaced by marked tension during 1946 and 1947. The MKP used its hegemony in national union organisations and its campaigning strength ruthlessly in order to marginalise the MSZDP. Local Social Democrats complained bitterly that the Communist union officials “take party politics into the factories. They thus undermine work discipline and undermine the will to produce.”<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> MOL Z601/9cs./82t.

<sup>54</sup> MOL M-Bp.-134f.4ö.e., p.104.

<sup>55</sup> Domokos Varga, Kiszlinger József Esztergályos Élete és Munkamódszere (Budapest: Népszava, 1951), p.20.

<sup>56</sup> PtSzL PIL A Magyarországi Szociáldemokrata Párt iratai (Papers of the Social Democratic Party of Hungary, hereafter 283f.)17/85ö.e., p.24.

<sup>57</sup> See the documents in PtSzL PIL 274f.16/130ö.e.

<sup>58</sup> PtSzL PIL 283f.17/85ö.e., p.127.

Following the 1947 parliamentary elections, in which the MKP achieved the status of the largest party on the left, in part through electoral fraud, it began to press for a merger of the two parties. Social Democrats who opposed this faced a campaign of intimidation from the MKP.<sup>59</sup> The seeming inevitability of a merger, the strong support among the MSZDP membership for some form of socialist transformation and the MKP's campaign of intimidation led to the implosion of the MSZDP in the factory prior to the formation of the Hungarian Workers' Party. By February 1948 some 60 per cent of the membership had defected to the Communists.<sup>60</sup> The way in which this implosion occurred would lead many officials of the new unified party to believe well into the 1950s that many "right-wing Social Democrats" were hidden within the membership of the ruling party in the factory.<sup>61</sup>

### **Building the Dictatorship in the Factory**

The plant's nationalisation signalled the end of the era of reconstruction and the beginning of the "construction of socialism". As one shop steward noted, "socialism is the future, and with this the issues of capitalist supply and demand will disappear. There has been no change over the years in the management of the factory .... The workers do not trust the management as a whole .... we need a workers' director immediately."<sup>62</sup> This was achieved with the appointment of the factory committee president, László Somlai, as the plant's managing director.<sup>63</sup> The formation of the Hungarian Workers' Party from the MKP and the ruins of the MSZDP likewise heralded a new era. The new party's leadership at national level justified the merger on the grounds "that the right of the Social Democratic Party [has] tied itself to the re-organisation of Hungarian reactionary forces" and also to the "imperialist line of Truman" at an international level.<sup>64</sup> The leaders of the new party in the factory were also suspicious of former members of

---

<sup>59</sup> PtSzL PIL 283f.17/85ö.e., p.140

<sup>60</sup> PtSzL PIL 283f.17/85ö.e., p.172.

<sup>61</sup> MOL M-Bp.-176f.2/194/19ö.e., p.12.

<sup>62</sup> PtSzL SZKL Vasas/353d./1948; "Egyesült Izzó gyárértekezlet 1948.február 26-án", p.5.

<sup>63</sup> "Somlai László" in, Imre Cserhalmi (ed.), Történelmi Kulcsátvétel. Interjúk államosító igazgatókkal (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1983), pp.140-51.

<sup>64</sup> Mátyás Rákosi, "A Magyar Kommunista Párt és a Szociáldemokrata Párt Egyesülése" in, Mátyás Rákosi, Építjük a Nép Országát (Budapest: Szikra, 1949), p. 192.

the MSZDP, particularly in the shops where the skilled elite dominated. Here, they reported, workers were “indifferent” to the programme of the new party.<sup>65</sup>

As the party consolidated its power in the factory, it seemed more concerned about the continuing influence of political Catholicism among the semi-skilled female workers, given the state’s attacks on church schools and the arrest of Cardinal Mindszenty, than it was about “former Social Democrats”.<sup>66</sup> It did, however, aim to re-shape the remnants of the pre-socialist labour movement in order to incorporate them into the institutional framework of dictatorship, reorganising the trade union in early 1949 to subordinate it to party policy.<sup>67</sup> Worried about the influx of former MSZDP members into the party, and of others, labelled “opportunists”, the party both nationally and in the factory purged its membership. The long-term effects of this, however, were unclear and seem to have led to a large-scale expulsion of white-collar staff from the party.<sup>68</sup>

The drive for political control was accompanied by a concerted attempt to transform production in the factory in order to prepare the plant for comprehensive economic planning. During 1948 the factory was incorporated into the national labour competitions, while the brigade movement – which entailed the reorganisation of the shop floor into a series of work groups committed to the improvement of productivity – was introduced into the factory.<sup>69</sup> Labour competition spread quickly, with the plant newspaper announcing that the first national labour competition campaign, which ended in June 1948, had allowed the factory to fulfil its plan ahead of time.<sup>70</sup> Over the summer labour competition “forged ahead at full power”.<sup>71</sup> Brigades spread during the autumn, though rather than initiating a lasting re-shaping of work practices they were instead formed to complete certain narrowly defined short-term tasks.<sup>72</sup> The spread of labour competition was aided by incentives that were both moral and financial. Individuals in the factory

---

<sup>65</sup> MOL M-Bp.-134f./3ö.e., p.24.

<sup>66</sup> *Tungsram Híradó*, 15 December 1948, p.2; MOL M-95f.3/70ö.e., pp.102-3.

<sup>67</sup> Varga, *Szakszervezetek a Diktatúrában*, pp. 13-94; MOL M-Bp.-95f.2/319ö.e.

<sup>68</sup> *Tungsram Híradó*, 15 December 1948, p.3; MOL M-Bp.-134f./5/a ö.e., pp.203-4.

<sup>69</sup> Mark Pittaway, “The Social Limits of State Control: Time, the Industrial Wage Relation and Social Identity in Stalinist Hungary, 1948-1953”, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 12: 3 (1999): 276-8.

<sup>70</sup> *Tungsram Híradó*, 1 July 1948, p.2.

<sup>71</sup> PtSzL SZKL Vasas/1948/353d.; “Egyesült Izzó üzemi jelentése 1948 jun. 1-től jun. 15-ig”.

were rewarded with the title of “outstanding worker” in recognition of their performance in production.<sup>73</sup> Financial incentives were, however, far more important in underpinning support for labour competition; according to party activists, “most people’s opinion is that labour competition should have started a long time ago. It bears mention that this opinion derives not so much from political opinion, but that extra earnings seem to be the most important factor.”<sup>74</sup>

This conditional support for and uneven implementation of labour competition underlined the degree to which it was a flawed instrument for transforming attitudes to work. It was, furthermore, clear that, while it was relatively successful in semi-skilled work-places, it had failed to erode traditional working practices among the skilled elite. In early 1949, despite the fact that the union had been stripped of its autonomy, the rates achieved by turners, and other skilled workers paid by piece rates, were closely controlled by the skilled workers themselves, in order to maintain the pre-socialist union’s “solidaristic wage policy” to protect wages and differentials in the machine shop.<sup>75</sup> Both the campaign-like nature of the competition and the highly instrumental attitudes of workers toward it were reflected in the fact that, when norms were raised in order to increase productivity, such attempts were met with protest. This in turn necessitated campaigns to encourage the workers to overfulfil the new norms.<sup>76</sup>

The state was painfully aware of the fragility of labour competition in industry nationwide by late summer 1949. Consequently it launched a campaign both to increase productivity and tighten central control over the shop floor by exhorting enterprises to promote individual labour competition as the motor of the movement. Though it did not say so publicly, this was designed to prepare for the radical spread of individualised “payment-by-results” wage systems in preparation for the first five-year plan.<sup>77</sup> Local party organisations in the factories were required to respond to the new campaign,

---

<sup>72</sup> MOL M-Bp.-134f./3ö.e., p.4; *Tungsram Híradó*, 15 October 1948, p.5.

<sup>73</sup> PtSzL SZKL Vasas/1948/353d.; “Egyesült Izzó üzemi jelentése 1948. június 15-től július 1-ig”.

<sup>74</sup> MOL M-Bp.-134f./3ö.e., p.24.

<sup>75</sup> MOL M-Bp.-134f./4ö.e., pp.104-7.

<sup>76</sup> MOL M-Bp-95f.3/70ö.e., p.102.

<sup>77</sup> Pittaway, “The Social Limits of State Control”, p.278.

however, and it displayed features that varied from factory to factory. In the United Lighting and Electrics the factory party committee warned when planning the new campaign in the factory that, while “the innovators and brigades have gained certain good results”, some parts of the factory “worked according to very old working practices”. While little concern was expressed over semi-skilled work-places in the plant, shortages of labour and “old working practices” in the machine shop were exacerbating the fact that the shop was “absolutely overloaded”.<sup>78</sup> A growing shortage of skilled labour in the machine shop and in the maintenance section, visible in September 1949, led the local party to make this shop the focus of its campaign to spread individual labour competition across the plant.<sup>79</sup>

Despite claims in the national press about the “spontaneity” of labour competition, in the United Lighting and Electrics the factory party organisation ran the campaign from above. Its networks of activists were mobilised right across the factory to persuade and coerce workers into making pledges to improve their individual performance, while party members were expected to take the lead in making pledges in order to set an example to their more reluctant work-mates.<sup>80</sup> In this campaign of mobilisation they were aided by the local branch of the Metalworkers’ Union – the only union allowed to operate in the plant. Stripped of many of its traditional functions, it had by late 1949 evolved into an organisation that relentlessly removed obstacles to the regime’s drive to increase production.<sup>81</sup>

Among semi-skilled workers, individual labour competition was characterised by pledges to increase rates of norm-fulfilment and workers undertaking to supervise production on more than one machine at once. In the machine shop – the focus of the local factory party’s campaign – it was initiated with the formation of a brigade, the so-called “Produce More” brigade, that promised to blaze the trail for new production methods.<sup>82</sup> A glance at the leading members of the “Produce More” brigade is revealing as to the

---

<sup>78</sup> MOL M-Bp.-134f./5/aö.e., pp.94-5.

<sup>79</sup> MOL M-Bp.-134f./8/aö.e., pp.60-1.

<sup>80</sup> MOL M-Bp.-134f./8/aö.e., pp.10-3.

<sup>81</sup> MOL M-Bp.-134f./8/aö.e., pp.96-9.

challenge they posed to the dominant culture of on-the-job control in the machine shop. All the members of the brigade were largely excluded from the informal networks that shaped established relationships among workers on the shop floor. Their leader, József Kiszlinger, a twenty-five year old turner at the beginning of the campaign, was a party member with an unusual employment history. He had begun working in the United Lighting and Electrics in 1946 after returning from being held as a prisoner of war by the Germans.<sup>83</sup> He stayed in the factory for a little over a year; as a believer in reconstruction he consistently overfulfilled his norms and was consequently stigmatised by his fellow workers in the machine shop and driven out. He returned in August 1948 and found that little had changed; “there was a consensus among the workers: ‘we won’t go above this level’. Anyone who went over the informally agreed 120 or 130 per cent incurred disfavour because ‘they were busting the rate’.”<sup>84</sup> At the core of the brigade were like-minded young workers in their twenties, who had either trained outside the factory or had only recently arrived in their present jobs. Of those who would later become Stakhanovites were János Lutz, who had trained in the provinces and came to the capital in the post-war period, and his friend, Ferenc Szlovak, both young workers committed to breaking the established shop-floor culture in the interests of social change.<sup>85</sup>

These attempts to use labour competition to bust rates and smash established shop-floor culture were, unsurprisingly, unpopular; nor was this unpopularity reduced by the assertions of members of the brigade that they intended to teach their “less developed” work-mates new production methods.<sup>86</sup> In the machine shop it was often those who had been decorated as “outstanding workers” during the labour competitions of the previous year who were active in opposition. One party activist reported that “the outstanding workers are threatening those who want to radically increase their production”.<sup>87</sup> The

---

<sup>82</sup> Tungsram Híradó, 8 September 1949, pp.5-6.

<sup>83</sup> - Kiszlinger had been a worker in a protected occupation in the Danuvia factory in Budapest. His official biography is unclear about the details but he was arrested by the Germans in 1944 in the western town of Győr for draft-dodging (he did not have his identification documents showing that he was a worker in a protected occupation with him at the time) and was thus held by the Germans as a prisoner of war (Varga, Kiszlinger József Esztergályos Élete és Munkamódszere, p.19).

<sup>84</sup> Varga, Kiszlinger József Esztergályos Élete és Munkamódszere, p.24.

<sup>85</sup> Tungsram Híradó, 5 December 1949, p.1.

<sup>86</sup> Tungsram Híradó, 8 September 1949, p.6.

<sup>87</sup> MOL M-Bp.-134f.5/aő.e., p.55.

opposition of much of the shop floor was expressed through rumours of higher production norms and lower wages if the shop engaged in competition *en masse*.<sup>88</sup>

As autumn wore on, the authorities in the factory shifted from simply seeking to promote individual competition and sought instead to respond to regime calls to introduce the Stakhanovite movement in the factory, and especially in the machine shop. For them the new movement “will sweep away the old system and put another in its place”. In order to do this, local officials recognised that they would have to identify and promote a small number of individual workers who “would know beforehand the results they would achieve”.<sup>89</sup> Production on the shop floor was therefore to be reorganised around certain pre-selected individuals who would work closely with the foreman and factory administration, and who would be ensured a regular supply of materials. Ferenc Szlovak, a founder-member of the “Produce More” brigade, was able to achieve high performance as a turner, enjoying the “permanent attention of the foreman and wage calculator”. Not surprisingly, many workers dismissed his results as “not based on any kind of reality”.<sup>90</sup>

The national authorities urged the factory party organisation to deal with this kind of opposition through careful “political work”.<sup>91</sup> This “political work” was rooted in a two-track strategy that the party pursued with workers in the machine shop. The first track involved ensuring that all workers, not just those selected as Stakhanovites, benefited materially from the reorganisation of the shop; the local party regarded it as important that “those workers who only make 120 per cent don’t lose heart, they can get better results too”.<sup>92</sup>

Another way was to select workers who opposed the regime to become Stakhanovites; this was achieved through a mixture of persuasion and coercion. This method is illustrated by the case of János Sztankovits, a Stakhanovite machine miller. Sztankovits was older than most of the workers of the “Produce More” brigade; he was thirty-two in

---

<sup>88</sup> MOL M-Bp.-134f./8/aö.e., p.6.

<sup>89</sup> MOL M-Bp.-134f./8/aö.e., p.4.

<sup>90</sup> MOL M-Bp.-134f./8/aö.e., p.19.

<sup>91</sup> MOL M-Bp.-95f.4/147ö.e., p.55.

1949. He had also been a member of the MSZDP in the inter-war years and distrusted the Communists. Following the “liberation” of Újpest in 1945, he was detained by Soviet troops and deported to the Soviet Union. He worked in a Moscow machine factory until 1948 and was decorated as a Stakhanovite in view of his achievements as a trained skilled worker in the disorganised post-war Soviet economy. Upon his return home he went back to work in the United Lighting and Electrics. Urged to join individual labour competition by party agitators in 1949, he turned on them: "I ... told him that Stalin could stick his shift up his arse, I worked for him for three years for free, I wasn't even given proper clothes, I was freed and why should I work for him again?"<sup>93</sup> Sztankovits was threatened with punishment for his conduct both by the factory party organisation and the local agents of the state security services. Immediately after this incident he was advised by the head of the machine shop to “try and make the best of it so that they can at least see that you're not part of the enemy. On that basis I decided to show them that I knew how to work.”<sup>94</sup> With assistance from the shop management and a work method learned coping with Soviet machinery in Moscow, Sztankovits began to bust rates on the milling machines.<sup>95</sup> He faced immediate attacks from his work-mates, who told him to “go back to the Soviet Union, if you like it so much there”.<sup>96</sup>

This process can also be illustrated by the case of Ignác Pióker, who was to become the United Lighting and Electrics factory's only nationally known Stakhanovite. Aged forty-two in 1949, he had come to Budapest in the 1920s as a refugee from his native Transylvania. He was employed in the plant as a planer, which was not regarded as a skilled position and was poorly paid relative to other positions.<sup>97</sup> In the post-war years Pióker was a sympathiser of the MSZDP, and managed to persuade shop management that he was worthy of skilled worker status. He gained a special fixed hourly rate – rather than one dependent on his production results – in the late 1940s, in recognition of the quality of his work. When the “Produce More” brigade was started, pressure was exerted

---

<sup>92</sup> MOL M-Bp.-134f./5/aö.e., p.8.

<sup>93</sup> János Sztankovits, personal interview.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Zoltán Halász, *Sztankovits János sztahanovista marós élete és munkamódszere* (Budapest: Népszava, 1951), p.3.

<sup>96</sup> MOL M-Bp.-95f.4/147ö.e., p.55.

on the hourly-rate workers to agree to being paid according to performance and to join individual labour competition.<sup>98</sup> Pióker initially refused to join the competition, because “the quality of my work will be lost”.<sup>99</sup> Economic pressure was brought to bear on the hourly-paid skilled workers through their wage packets; the twenty that remained at the beginning of the competition earned 3 per cent less monthly than the very weakest skilled workers paid according to “payment-by-results”.<sup>100</sup> The party’s eventual persuasion of Pióker to exchange his hourly wage rate for the status of Stakhanovite was clearly designed to undermine dominant patterns of shop-floor culture, and was typical of the “political work” necessary to create the Stakhanovite movement.<sup>101</sup>

The campaign was to culminate in the so-called “Stalin shift”, when workers were mobilised to bust rates spectacularly on the afternoon of the Soviet leader’s seventieth birthday on 21 December. As it approached, the local press argued that the news from the United Lighting and Electrics was a sign of the arrival of “the spirit of socialist competition” in the plant.<sup>102</sup> The factory party committee’s twin-track policy towards resistance did successfully mobilise workers behind labour competition.<sup>103</sup> This culminated in the Stalin shift, which was a resounding success for the party in the plant; according to the factory newspaper, the shift was marked by “the good organisation of production” while “the tool-room worked like never before”.<sup>104</sup>

While the state was keen to proclaim the success of its transformation of the shop floor along socialist lines, a glance at the local implementation of those changes reveals that the new “socialist” methods of working rested on precarious foundations. This was because, quite as much as previous mobilisations, it had taken the form of a temporary

---

<sup>97</sup> Vilmos Zolnay, Pióker Ignác az Ország Legjobb Gyalusa (Budapest: Népszava, 1951), p.9.

<sup>98</sup> Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum Legújabbkori Gyűjteménye (Hungarian National Museum, Contemporary History Collection, hereafter MNM Lgy.) Pióker Ignác vegyes iratai (Miscellaneous papers of Ignác Pióker).

<sup>99</sup> Zolnay, Pióker Ignác az Ország Legjobb Gyalusa, p.15.

<sup>100</sup> MOL M-Bp.-134f.5/aö.e., p.243.

<sup>101</sup> MOL M-Bp.-95f.4/147ö.e., p.55.

<sup>102</sup> “Fellendült az egyéni verseny – nincs többé szűk keresztmetszet”, Észak Pestkörnyék, 3 December 1949, p.5.

<sup>103</sup> MOL M-Bp.-95f.4/77ö.e.

<sup>104</sup> Tungram Híradó, 5 January 1950, p. 1.

campaign. Events in 1950 revealed this to be the case as the state pressed ahead with unpopular attempts to introduce piece-rate systems of wages that rewarded performance according to the goals set down in the plan and raised production norms, thus slashing wages, in order to raise productivity.<sup>105</sup> Wage cuts continued to be opposed absolutely, particularly in the machine shop, where workers complained that “they always take from us and we will never gain anything”.<sup>106</sup> Alongside this absolute opposition, it rapidly became clear that on-the-job control had not been eliminated by Stakhanovism, but had instead adapted to it and other pressures, such as the growing shortages of raw materials and tools that emerged during 1950. Workers engaged in patterns of “informal bargaining” with the lower management at shop level, to manipulate wage classifications and norms; this enabled small groups of elite skilled workers to maintain a degree of control over remuneration.<sup>107</sup> It was in the face of this lack of control on the shop floor that the Budapest party committee first used the notion of “right-wing Social Democracy” to explain the problems in the United Lighting and Electrics. In July 1950 it warned that in the factory “development is being hindered, right-wing Social Democrats are holding back production and trying to persuade them [the workers] to keep down their output”.<sup>108</sup>

## Conclusion

By 1952 the United Lighting and Electrics factory had become identified as a stronghold of “right-wing Social Democracy”. By now the term meant more, however, than skilled worker opposition to regime attempts to strip them of any semblance of on-the-job control over either the labour process or remuneration. It was a phenomenon that, according to party officials, “appears in a changeable way in many different forms in the factory”. It could consist of anything from criticism of the role of the party organisation or complaints about low wages, to opposition to the erosion of the status of the urban, skilled elite faced with an influx of the young, women and workers from rural areas.<sup>109</sup>

---

<sup>105</sup> Pittaway, “The Social Limits of State Control”, pp.280-2.

<sup>106</sup> MOL M-Bp.-95f.4/123ö.e., p.32.

<sup>107</sup> MOL M-Bp.-95f.4/126ö.e., p.103.

<sup>108</sup> MOL M-Bp.-95f.4/119ö.e., p.46.

<sup>109</sup> MOL M-Bp.-176f.2/194/19ö.e., p.15.

In short, during the years of Rákosi's dictatorship, it came to be synonymous with working-class opposition to the labour policies of the state.

It was an ideological construct, but one which arose from and fed on the interactions between Communist party, and then regime, policies and the realities of shop-floor politics between the end of the Second World War and the consolidation of the dictatorship – a consolidation that had occurred by 1950. In the case of the United Lighting and Electrics it was formed as a result of the memory of the struggle of the MKP for power, when faced with considerable support for a different vision of socialism in the factory. This memory fused with shop-floor struggle over the new regime's transformation of production to meet the requirements of central planning. Because of the strength there of the MSZDP in the immediate post-war years and the factory's designation as a stronghold of "right-wing Social Democracy" during the early 1950s, the United Lighting and Electrics factory affords an especially useful standpoint from which to view the issue of how shop-floor conflict became politicised by the Stalinist state in Hungary. Conflicts over skills and control, as well as over hierarchy, in consequence of regime policies towards the working class were widespread during the 1950s across manufacturing industry as well as construction and mining.<sup>110</sup> "Social Democrat" was a political identity ascribed to forms of opposition among the working class by the regime until 1956, and reflected more the desire of regime propagandists to link worker recalcitrance to supposed Cold War "enemies of socialism" than the survival of a Social Democratic culture on the shop floor. That it was closely linked with the practice of Hungarian Stalinism is shown by the circumstances of its eventual disappearance from the ideological armoury of the regime. It disappeared as the Rákosi dictatorship fell from power in July 1956, and as the former Social Democrats jailed in 1950 were rehabilitated and the regime sought to rebuild its shattered links to the working class after the 1956 Revolution.

---

<sup>110</sup> Pittaway, "The Reproduction of Hierarchy".