CHAPTER 13

Socialist Democracy in Yugoslavia: Female Workers' Participation at the Shop Floor

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Socialist democracy was the proclaimed political system in the Socialist Federation of Yugoslavia. Politically, the system emerged in 1950 with the development of self-management, a theory which criticised of the Soviet system, rejected the notion of a people's democracy and put forward Yugoslavia's own ideas of socialist democracy. The biggest difference between socialist democracy in Yugoslavia and the communist Soviet Union was the role of the state, as socialist democracy set on de-*etatisation*, with the aim of abolishing the state. Socialist democracy was based on the self-management system, workers' participation and local self-government. In Yugoslavia, property did not belong to the state, but to society. It was assumed that through the socialisation of property—especially through the distribution of "income" according to the result of work, which meant that the income created was managed by those who produced it—socialist democracy would gradually develop. Income included not only personal wages, but also other funds managed

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by workers and used for building local infrastructure, public services (education, culture, health), community life, investments to accelerate the development of less developed regions in Yugoslavia or other regions in need (humanitarian aid in case of earthquakes, floods, etc.). Although it is debatable in how many factories and to what extent production workers were actually involved in income distribution, especially in determining their own wages, I argue that workers were included in the procedures and this right became an essential part of the moral economy (Thompson 1971; Palomera and Vetta 2016). The right conveyed a particular sense of entitlement; it shaped not only social and political rights, but also generated an expectation that the investments of production workers should be recognised.

This article is based on a long-term oral history study (since 2002) of the experiences of textile workers in Slovenia, one of the Yugoslav republics. I interviewed production workers, mainly women, as the textile sector mainly employed women, but also other professionals (including trade union representatives) from different factories. I also studied minutes of workers' councils in two textile factories in Ljubljana (Pletenina and Dekorativna), reports of social workers working in the factories (Vodopivec 2022), sociological empirical studies and media (daily newspapers, critical magazines, film material made by TV Slovenia).

I focus primarily on the experience of participation in the factories—the basis of socialist democracy. For most of the people to whom I spoke, participation meant their own engagement in work, the production of knowledge and the improvement of life. Workers' participation is therefore interpreted in the context of the work ethic in the factories, industrial culture and the socialist industrial modernisation, as well as the experience of workers' councils—the self-managing institutions in which direct democracy was to be practised.

The participation of female workers in production was subject to various disciplinary regimes in everyday life, as factory work was characterised by strict discipline and hierarchy. Age, gender, class, ethnicity, etc., disciplined workers' expectations, actions and desires. However, the experience of labour concerned not only submission to various disciplinary systems, but also the engagement, value creation, identity and self-formation that took place in everyday interactions and relationships. I argue that paid work had a strong impact on my interlocutors' narratives of their independence (despite many restrictions), which intensely shaped their personal selves, not just their strong professional identities

(Vodopivec 2021; see also Bonfiglioli 2019). The narratives of participation went beyond the factory walls; it was about creating a better life. Socialism should therefore not only be seen from a political perspective as a one-party system, but as a modernising meta-narrative in which the participation of production workers played a key role in progress and a better future.

Yugoslavia was a very diverse state; the republics and regions had different historical backgrounds, cultural traditions, industrial and socialist developments, especially in terms of economy, education and the economic-political situation of women. These differences are not further explored in this article, as the ethnography refers only to Slovenia, but should be kept in mind. It should also be emphasised that the socialist period was long and varied. Experiences during this period depended heavily on generation, class, professional status, gender, religion, ethnicity, the region one came from—not only in Yugoslavia, as significant differences are seen in region, family background and personal characteristics within Slovenia. I draw on material from different periods to show contemporaries' visions, ideas and experiences of socialist democracy. The second half of the 1980s, notably, represents a major change—not only in terms of material conditions, but also in the value system and social climate. With the intensification of the socio-economic crisis—which should be seen not only as an internal matter, but as part of global processes (post-industrial transformation, austerity measures with structural adjustments dictated by creditors)—efficiency became the new prioritised value at the expense of social equality (Toš 2021). This was integral to the new market reforms which found broad support in Slovenia. The change in values emerged with political democratisation in Slovenia and parallel with industrial workers' dispossession caused by privatisation. In times of intense material (impoverishment due to economic crisis, forced bankruptcies, layoffs, exhaustion of companies, etc.), political (withdrawal of workers' rights), social and symbolic dispossession (loss of social position and value), it was, I argue, not new political parties or a critical civil society that fought for the rights of industrial workers (or for the political right of labour), but the transformed socialist institutions—that is, the Slovenian Trade Union Confederation (*Zveza svobodnih sindikatov*, ZSS) and the social attorneys of the self-management.

In the first section of this chapter, I introduce the general ideas of socialist democracy as defined in political texts and history of self-management. I then turn to workers' interpretation and experiences of self-management and workers' councils, and to their understanding of participation, which I relate to the experience of work and the meaning of "our factory" in the context of self-management. I conclude by considering the protection of workers' rights and role of trade unions.

Socialist Democracy and Self-management

Socialist democracy developed from criticism of state socialism and bourgeois democracy. Yet, as claimed by Milovan Djilas[1] at the Sixth Congress of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (LCY) in 1952, socialist democracy was not created because of the West or the East, but "because of our working class and our people" (*Borba komunistov Jugoslavije* 1952, 167).[2] The struggle for socialist democracy was defined as the struggle for the decentralisation and democratisation. Socialist democracy was not about enabling participation only in "the final decision in the form of referendums or assemblies", but in "all the preliminary discussions and activities" (Kristan 1980, 82). This was the primary difference between indirect bourgeois democracy and direct democracy based on self-management (Kardelj 1955, 9). Self-management was understood as "a system of relations in which people in common labour directly manage the means of labour in social ownership, with the conditions and results of their labour" (Kristan 1980, 83). "True workers' participation" was thus possible only through self-management and "the socialisation of the means of production" (Kristan 1980, 80, 81).

Self-management was to emerge through the workers' councils. Crucially, the role of the trade union changed as the system transitioned to be based on the leadership of the industrial working class. The union became the protector of the system, taking care of the remuneration system, social security, education and workers' active participation in the managing/governing bodies responsible for the development of

[1] Djilas, a great supporter of self-management and democratisation, soon after the congress rejected the ruling communist core as "an obstacle to true democracy" (Štih et al. 2008, 465–68).

[2] For more on Yugoslav ideas, constitutional and political visions of socialist democracy see Pavle Antonijević´s chapter in this volume (Chapter 4).

social standard and financial policy (Borba komunistov Jugoslavije 1952, 290). Self-management in the factories was followed by social management in the non-economic sector, together with self-governance and the development of the communal system.[3]

Self-management, which is seen in contemporary historiography as a "long-term vision full of contradictions and oppositions" (Štih et al. 2008, 464), was considered by contemporaries as a process that is "not an economic and legal automatism", but a "living productive relationship between people" (Kristan 1980, 60). A repeatedly noted gap between political declarations and everyday reality was explained by the historical legacy, the poor material and social conditions. The development of socialist democracy depended on economic and social development, because "the true value of socialist democracy" should be reflected in the "appropriate position of the working man" (Vodopivec 1965). The fundamental goal was to raise the living standard of the entire population (Štahan 1974, 147), in order to grow beyond historically determined conditions. Industry was seen as the most important engine for financing the development of local infrastructure and public services, housing, schools, education, health and culture. Everyone was supposed to contribute to the development of Yugoslavia as a whole. In reality, however, some sectors contributed more, and the textile industry was among the sectors that were taxed more heavily (as a labour-intensive sector) for "the common good" (Bešter and Bregar 1977, 59; Glas 1987, 29, 30), resulting in lower wages for workers. Large differences in the economic policy position of individual sectors and factories thus resulted not only from different starting positions, but also from political and economic stimulations.

With the new constitution of 1963 and related economic reforms (Prinčič 1999; Prinčič and Borak 2006), factories became more autonomous; they could now establish their own rules for self-management, including relating to the distribution of wages. The invention of a pure income category allowed them to work independently and develop differently; different factories distributed the funds in different ways, with some spending more on the development of the factory or local infrastructure, while others paying higher wages to their employees.

[3] For more on local self-governance in Yugoslav municipalities see Igor Duda's and Ana Kladnik's chapter in this volume (Chapter 8).

The democratic system was also to be reflected in labour legislation, which regulated only the basics—relations within the organisation were regulated individually by the statutes. Such system was intended to reduce state regulation and enable direct democracy, as companies regulated relations on "the basis of individual experience, specific interests and needs" (Vodopivec 1966, 8).

However, excessive bureaucracy, the growing technocracy and the increasing power and authority of the techno-managerial groups triggered disillusionment; criticism of these undesirable developments shaped the 1974 Constitution (and the accompanying 1976 Labour Law), which placed renewed emphasis on production workers and direct democracy (Musić 2021, 55). Continued decentralisation led to an extremely complex system of political organisation and representation that attempted to develop direct democracy in the smallest work, production and territorial units, the Basic Organisations of Associated Labour (BOAL). Self-management became even more closely linked to participation in local self-governing communities. A representation pyramid was designed to ensure that everyone was included (Štih et al. 2008, 492).

Self-management was a term that appeared frequently in everyday life and in the media, as well as in factories' archives, whereas socialist democracy did not. In the archives of the minutes of the workers' councils of the Pletenina and Dekorativna textile factories in Ljubljana, I rarely came across the term. Self-management, on the other hand, was frequently present. Even in the Slovenian public opinion polls, which have been conducted regularly since 1968,[4] the term democracy appeared less frequently than the term self-management, and when it did, the two were usually used together. In the late 1980s, the term democracy was used more frequently, but its meaning changed to political democracy based on political freedom (Toš 2021, 668), combined with human rights and the rule of law. The term self-management, on the other hand, was frequently used and enjoyed great popularity, as it was described as the greatest achievement of socialist development. It was usually understood to mean that "a large number of people can work together to make important decisions" and "take into account common needs and interests" (Toš

[4] Surveys were conducted at the Research Centre of the Faculty of Sociology, Political Science and Journalism, University Ljubljana (Toš 2021).

2021, 473). However, it was also associated with enabling irresponsible behaviour, especially by those in power (including in factories).

Self-management and worker participation have been studied in detail by empirical industrial sociologists in Yugoslavia and abroad. In the 1970s, these topics found their way into international interdisciplinary research on the study of industrial democracy. In an interdisciplinary comparative study carried out in twelve European countries, it was found that Yugoslav employees had more influence on short, medium and long-term decisions than employees in other European countries, that the desire for cooperation was higher and that Yugoslav employees rated the possibilities of influencing the business and asserting their own interests more highly (IDE 1981, chapters 7, 8).

The question remains: how was self-management understood and experienced by the workers themselves? The female production workers I spoke to never used the term socialist democracy in our interviews. They rarely spoke explicitly of self-management. However, as I will show, they did address the ideas propagated by the system, particularly participation and the criteria of labour investment on which social property was based. Self-management shaped their experience of factory life: it was often said that "workers have a place in the factory", "we could speak our minds" and "we were taken into account". Some spoke directly of workers' councils, assemblies of associated labour or courts of associated labour.[5] The self-management bodies were not considered political. All my interlocutors claimed that there was no politics in the factory. It should be noted that the expectations of the pre-war generation and their ideas of authority, hierarchy and discipline in the factory were very different from those of the post-war generation, especially in terms of gender. Men and women also had different expectations and were expected to behave differently, they were also positioned differently in the hierarchies. Therefore, while some interlocutors stated that they could have expressed their opinion fully, and said anything, others saw themselves as having been "too young to say anything".

[5] These two institutions developed with the new Act of Associated Labour to protect workers' rights (1976).

The Workers' Councils

Self-management was a top-down decision (Čepič 2011, 284) which was not, however, perceived as an imposed system. Empirical studies by industrial sociologists on the power of worker participation (Arzenšek 1981; Kavčič 1972; Rus 1985; Rus and Adam 1986; Rus et al. 1982; Županov 1977; Županov 1989) from the 1960s onwards showed that workers highly valued self-management. However, this did not mean that they had executive power or even perceived it as such. Workers themselves were usually more interested in being informed about the subject and monitoring the implementation of the decision than in the decision-making itself. The workers respected the workers' councils because of their power and important role, and because the councils were a mechanism through which they could express their opinions in a circle of equals, especially with regard to overwork, food, housing and education.

Based on my empirical study, I argue that production workers and other skilled workers in the factory were able to share their knowledge and experiences, their professional perceptions when it came to their immediate workplace, and to voice their grievances (see also Archer and Musić 2017; Bonfiglioli 2019; Musić 2021; Vodopivec 2020). Many complaints were addressed to the workers' councils and concerned workplace relations, supervisors' behaviour, too-high rates of *norma* (the amount demanded by the piecework system), transfer to other jobs, unfair remuneration system, wage distribution, work organisation and conflicts between people. I argue that the workers' councils served as genuine mechanisms for recognising and articulating grievances and seeking solutions. These grievances not only point to numerous problems in the socialist factories, but also show that workers used this institution to demand their rights, and that they trusted in or at least hoped for a better outcome.

The workers' councils in Pletenina (a knitwear factory in Ljubljana) consisted of 50 people (out of 705 employees in the factory) and held 23 meetings in 1966, at which the issues mainly discussed were personal wages, the wage system, the evaluation of employees, company regulations, health care, disciplinary regulations and the distribution of housing.[6] Two years earlier, for example, the factory's workers' council

[6] Historical Archives Ljubljana (Zgodovinski Arhiv Ljubljana, ZAL LJU), Pletenina, tovarna trikotažnih izdelkov Ljubljana, 572/11.

had rejected the annual financial report. They reported "measures to the detriment of the company from which various managers had profited" that had been concealed from the self-managing bodies. They demanded an investigation and clarification of the matter.[7] Another report from the same factory in 1968 documented a "heated (and bitter) debate" when workers complained about the doctor who did not believe they were ill and sent people "who still needed medical attention" back to work prematurely. Rumour had it that people were not sick, but working at home, in the shadow economy or even travelling. However, the workers were furious at the doctor's reaction and the meeting ended with the establishment of a special committee, which included the patients concerned, who could also report anonymously about the doctor and perceived abuse.[8]

The development of self-management and workers' councils was presented in the factory journals and local magazines, with both improvements and criticism being voiced. One of the most common criticisms was the lack of education and information about workers' rights and self-management (which was considered primarily as the responsibility of the trade union).[9] Criticism directed particularly at production workers and women was that not enough female production workers were active in councils' discussions and that "workers' rights and democratic principles" were still being violated. The Commission for the Question of Workers' Self-Management visited 22 companies in the Dolenjska region in 1956 and wrote in the ensuing report[10] that only 29 women participated in 22 workers councils and only 10 women in the management committees, that the discussions in the workers councils were too general, and that the monitoring of the implementation of decisions was inadequate. The report criticised that "white-collar employees were praised more often than blue-collar workers" and that "the financial reports were written in

[7] Ibid., 572/9.

[8] Ibid., 572/61.

[9] At the end of the UN Decade for Women (1976–1985), the republican union executive committees discussed the report *Delavka v združenem delu* which was prepared on the basis of a survey on the socio-economic situation of women (opinion polls were conducted in several factories). The results showed that the female worker was mainly a producer and insufficiently a self-manager (Ivančič 1986, 99), but that more women were involved in participation at work and in trade unions (albeit at a lower level), but fewer in the municipality, the republic and the federal government.

[10] Information was published in the local newspaper *Dolenjski list* (Podbevšek 2018, 81).

technical language and which the workers didn't understand" (Podbevšek 2018, 81).

For most of the women I spoke to who worked in production, participation in workers' councils or other committees (for housing, social standards, discipline, etc.) meant an increased workload: the women were already exhausted from hard work in production and then had to take care of the children and the household as well (see also Bonfiglioli 2019). Some of them described the workers' councils as "time-consuming and exhausting debates" that were "based on gossip or arguments about toilet paper" or "did not make much sense". Experiences with workers' councils varied from factory to factory and over time. The older generation, who in many cases helped set up the workers' councils, and workers actually involved in them generally described them positively. An older production worker from the spinning mill (Litija) said that in the workers' councils (at the department level) they could talk about "yarn, standards, who gets a reward, goes to the coast (holiday) and gets an apartment".[11] She said she prepared before each meeting by asking her colleagues in the locker room what she should say or ask at the meeting, and the next day she reported back to her work group what "we learned, that the system will be stricter, that quality needs to be improved, and that we need to save money". Another woman of the younger generation from the same company told me that she knew nothing because she had to keep quiet as "a worker was not allowed to say anything. Those who were elected had to be there because the workers' council had to work!" When I asked her if everyone was silent at the meetings, she replied: "No, some women were very loud and also banged on the table".[12]

"I have always been told that Svila cannot be an example", said an economist who worked as a financial expert at Svila, a silk factory in Maribor, "there were probably cases where people simply raised their hands as ordered by the management. But at Svila we decided in workers' councils on all the important issues; business plans, what to buy, where and what to invest and how to distribute income. There were heated discussions. The system was designed that way, but it depended on the

[11] Interview, Litija, 2003. All the interviews have been conducted by the author and are anonymous.

[12] Interview, Litija, 2004.

people how it was implemented".[13] Another professional female worker from the construction company in Maribor confirmed this, yet argued that the "real discussion" (business and finance) only emerged at the workers' councils at factory level, where the director and higher management were present, and not at departmental level. She added that "we could only decide on the material that had already been prepared in advance and presented by the management".[14] Education, class and position in the company hierarchy shaped different expectations and experiences with the workers' councils.

A professional from the spinning mill (Litija), who later became a union representative in the municipality, said that with "a younger generation of educated engineers (in the late 1970s), new constructive debates with the director emerged in the (workers' council) meetings".[15] Although she pointed at the importance of professional education, she argued that the director was open to any kind of debate and never interfered in the work of the disciplinary committee or the labour inspection,[16] unlike another factory in town where the regime was strict and the director "behaved like a god". She described the workers' councils as very motivating; "I do not want to say that he [the director] did not take things into his own hands in the end, but still… he had to explain things first. And there were 25 or 30 people sitting there, so he had to justify the proposal. Investments were approved there, if there were trips abroad, they had to be approved and reported on. And of course, the balance sheets had to be confirmed. I think people really felt that this [factory] was ours and that we should save and manage it well".[17]

As emerges from the interviews and has also been confirmed by sociological studies, the main power in the factories lay with the directors and managers, even if their decisions had to be formally approved by the workers' council. "Nobody interfered in our affairs", a former director of the spinning mill told me, "There was workers' self-management but if the management knew how to convince the workers… And the workers were informed a lot, we discussed a lot, we had our own bulletin which

[13] Interview, Maribor, 2024.

[14] Interview, Maribor, 2024.

[15] Interview, Litija, 2004.

[16] The institutions were meant to limit the managerial structures.

[17] Interview, Litija, 2004.

we published regularly. There we told everyone how much was done… If he was a bad director, he did not know how to run the self-management, the production or the people".[18]

After the 1960s, as factories gained more autonomy, more executive power rested with directors and their management teams—even if their decisions had to be formally approved by the workers' councils. In everyday life, however, the directors were highly dependent on the production workers, especially in the textile industry. Workers' increased rate of labour would compensate for shortages and complications, including inadequacies of technology, the shortage of raw materials and the problems caused by complicated administrative regulations, customs regulations, import and export restrictions and difficulties in foreign exchange transactions. The textile industry suffered in particular from the latter restrictions on imports and exports, in addition to general complications caused by inefficient policies and bureaucracy, because it was import-dependent and export-oriented. It was also affected by global restructuring and heavily burdened with taxes, although there were differences in these financial burdens within Yugoslavia.[19] My interlocutors said that in such situations it was the "production workers who saved the factories". In well-functioning factories, I heard, their contribution was recognised, and the workers felt that they were contributing both to the progress of the factory and to the progress of the local community or region. Such joint efforts created a special relationship of commitment and solidarity between the factory workers, and strengthened the sense of a factory collective. As the chairwoman of the Pletenina workers' council said: "We [the female workers] are the ones who create money for everyone. It's our hands, our backs and our eyes".[20] This statement, which expresses pride, collective effort, worth, agency and self-sacrifice (*odrekanje*), relates to the experience of production work in the self-managed textile factories; the female workers carried the progress of the community and the region, not just that of the factory. They earned less, but gave more for the common good. Such an act of self-sacrifice and

[18] Interview, Litija, 2003.

[19] The Slovenian textile industry paid 48 per cent into the fund for underdeveloped regions, although its share in the total production of the Yugoslav textile industry amounted to 21.6% (Debevc 2023, 81).

[20] *Glasilo Pletenina* (factory buletin), June 1978.

labour input created a special value at the time, but in the long run led to exhaustion and impoverishment.

'Our Factory' and Experiences of Factory Work

According to the sociologist Veljko Rus, the hierarchical division of labour within the factory limited the power of the workers' councils. Yugoslav society did not abolish the contradictions between labour and capital, but integrated them (Rus 1985, 9, also Rus 1964), which meant that the position of workers was characterised by the situation of shareholders and wage earners. In a response to sociologist Albert Meister's negative assessment of Yugoslav self-management (Meister 1981, 255–258), Rus argued that Meister's theses were based on a certain expectation and interpretation of self-management, starting from an ideal type defined as a system based on mutual care, an open exchange in which calculating reciprocity is replaced by unlimited solidarity. Rus pointed out two very important aspects: firstly, that there were different perceptions of self-management, and secondly, that hierarchies and conflicts in industry were facts that were empirically studied by sociologists in Yugoslavia from the 1960s onwards. These studies revealed that workers also expected self-management to develop a community without informal groups. They saw the division into interest groups as something bad that did not suit self-management. They wanted a transparent situation, an undifferentiated group with the father at the top. However, the organisation of work, the differences in status and occupation led to the formation of groups with different interests and to the strengthening the authority of the technocracy (Arzenšek 1981; Rus and Adam 1986; Rus et al. 1982; Županov 1977; Županov 1989).

My interlocutors did not question hierarchy and strict discipline—which does not mean, however, that they never criticised certain attitudes displayed by their superiors. Attitudes to authority varied according to region, factory and generation. Certain expectations and rules for social behaviour towards authority were also expected on the basis of gender (albeit depending on the cultural environment). The gender aspect is significant in the textile industry, as women were mainly involved in production, while maintenance, directors and managers were often men. Hierarchies had no impact on the experience of social equality (to my surprise), as my interlocutors, especially older women, associated social equality in socialism with small differences in salaries between hierarchical

positions within the factory, which were regulated and did not go beyond 1:3 in the textile industry.[21]

The hierarchical division of labour in the self-managed factories was similar to that in the Fordist factories, but with an even more intensely experienced separation within the factory between office workers (*režija*) and production. However, when my interlocutors spoke of power and discipline, they were mainly referring to the dictatorship of the assembly line and the piecework system (where the worker is paid according to the number of blouses or kilos of yarn produced). This type of work organisation disciplined the workers, as the dictates of speed and standards penetrated the workers' bodies and minds leading to stress. Yet, the system was also depicted as enabling autonomy, professionalism and creativity. The piecework system was perceived as fair, as people were paid according to performance and could organise their work themselves. On the one hand, the assembly line generated a sense of dependency and frustration, on the other hand it also created a sense of a common project that was strengthened with the ideology and the self-management practice (Vodopivec 2021).

The experience of production work in the self-managed textile factories in Slovenia is based on the interweaving of different values. On the one hand, the self-management system considered production work as "real" work and women's participation as essential for the creation of social standards, progress and modernity.[22] Although education became more important after the 1970s (with the post-industrial paradigm), the nominal value of production labour remained until the end of self-management. The value of production work in the textile factory was also shaped by the political-economic position of the sector and the gender aspect. The textile sector was underinvested and underpaid (Glas 1987, 29, 30). The gender segregation of the sector, as studied by economists and sociologists, demonstrated gender discrimination in the accessibility of conditions[23] and regulation of income (Mežnarič 1981; Jogan 1984;

[21] From the 1960s onwards, the ratio between the lowest and highest salary within a factory was politically determined, with the proposed ratio of 1:4 (Prinčič 2008, 125–128). There were however large differences between factories and regions.

[22] It is also important to recognise the cultural value of labour in Slovenia, which has a long history, including that of women (Vodopivec 2021).

[23] In 1978, 30.3% of women were in the executive bodies and only 7.7% in management (Mežnarič 1981, 133). Studies proved that education could not explain the

Jogan 1988; Jogan 1989). Nevertheless, paid work represented a value for my interlocutors and working in the self-managed factories influenced their experiences of autonomy, social respect and self-esteem (Vodopivec 2021; see also Bonfiglioli 2019). A comparison of the work motivation of women and men shows that slightly more women worked for their own and their families' survival and for a better future for their children, but also for their own satisfaction and a better life in old age (Jogan 1989, 1345). Yet, far more men worked for a comfortable and carefree life than did women. There were also differences in the reasons why men or women accepted overtime: women worked to help their colleagues and their team, men to earn more (Jogan 1988, 5–10).

Specific bonds were created through work, and my interlocutors emphasised in particular a very strong commitment to their work group (including the foreman). These relationships were influenced by their relationships outside the factory, as many of them knew each other from the local community. Such commitments, as well as the norm of being a "good and hard worker" prevalent among my interlocutors, constrained individualistic actions by workers, such as not following instructions or refusing to work, because such actions slowed down the whole group and prevented everyone from fulfilling the norm. A very important part of value was thus also created at the micro level through the activity of factory work, through the commitment of workers based on their investment of body, time, energy, care, skills and knowledge, which should be studied not only in the form of formal qualifications, but also through tacit knowledge acquired through experience (Vodopivec 2021).

Participation for my interlocutors meant just that—their own engagement in work. Everyone talked about how much they invested (*vlagali smo*), in work, in "our factory", in improving their own and their community's lives. "Our factory" was not an expression of ownership in the sense we understand it today, but rather of particular belongings and attachments based on relationships created through work, self-management and performance, long-term loyalty and dedication (Vodopivec 2021). The biggest misunderstanding of social property is its interpretation through the capitalist understanding of property rights. Social property was about the right to manage labour, as arising from the labour invested. Put simply, those who created something had the right to manage what they

discrepancies, that women had fewer opportunities for advancement and incentives and that they were also aware of these discrepancies (Glas 1984, 440, 441).

produced, by participating in the distribution of income, deciding where to invest, what to build (including in the local community) and how high wages should be.[24] Even if workers could not fully practise the distribution of income according to the result of labour (Rus 1964, 1985), there were procedures, plans, proposals, discussions, a promise besides ideology, a certain value created by one's investment and self-sacrifice. "Our starting point was that a worker's position must depend on how much he has created so that the producers get what is due to them", a vice president of the Republican Trade Union Confederation told me, "and there were constant discussions about how to improve the distribution criteria so that those who created the social value would really benefit the most".[25] In factories that functioned well, such as the Mura (Murska Sobota) or Svila (Maribor) clothing factory, production workers said that every three months the profit "they created" was shared. "The proposal for profit sharing was drawn up by experts", said the financial expert in Svila, "but then workers' council had to approve it because the workers managed the factory. The workers felt entitled and fought for their right to manage what they produced themselves".[26]

I argue that my interlocutors' experiences of investments, their experiences and understandings of participation, of everyday work and life, of self-sacrifice, became part of the moral economy (Thompson 1971). The demand for this right—to get what they were entitled to—is also evident in the workers' strikes, in which workers not only demanded higher wages that would enable them and their children to live decent lives, but also what they were entitled to by virtue of their participation and invested labour. Strikes were revolts against the total disregard of norms, rights, duties and responsibilities (Thompson 1971), against false accumulation (Rudi Kyovsky et al. research 1968 cited in Kavčič et al. 1991, 101), and served to define entitlements and rights, forms of social responsibility and obligation, tolerable levels of exploitation and inequalities and dignity and justice (Palomera and Vetto 2016, 424).

[24] In reality, the term remained a complicated and abstract category, which became clear during the privatisation when the question arose of how to find an owner and how to evaluate the property that had been built up through invested labour, sacrifices and joint efforts (see Žnidaršič Kranjc 1994).

[25] Interview, Maribor, 2024.

[26] Interview, Maribor, 2024.

Protection of Workers and Trade Unions

Most of the conflicts among workers concerned the division of income, termination of employment, excessively high standards, the reward system and relationships. The employees not only pointed to various forms of exclusion, but also to different forms of bullying (Vodopivec 1964). They addressed their complaints to the union's legal advisors, to the affiliated labour courts and to the social attorney of self-management (SAS). The latter institution was created to ensure the social protection of the self-management rights of working people and social property (Đurović 1974, 306).Initially, the institution's main task was directed at companies to complete and amend internal legal acts, but there were growing individual cases in which the SAS issued warnings to organisations, advised workers, offered legal assistance or conducted legal disputes in the labour courts. In addition to individual cases, the institution also dealt with collective complaints.[27] In 1978, for example, workers in Postojna filed complaints because they were transferred to lower graded (and lower paid) jobs shortly before their retirement, which worsened the basis for calculating their pension.In Velenje, conflicts arose over the distribution of income in relation to work results against the "responsible employees", who demanded more money for poorly performed work.[28] My interlocutors, production workers, did not however explicitly mention this mechanism. Instead, they linked protection of workers' rights above all with "the system" and legislation, and courts of associated labour.

Workers also expressed their grievances and demands through strikes, which were tolerated to a certain extent, but were formally illegal until 1988.[29] Until then, the strikes were neither supported nor organised by the trade unions. More often they were supported by the workers' councils (Jovanov 1979; Kavčič et al. 1991). Trade unions were during most of the self-managed period associated (in media and among my interlocutors) with vacation homes, canteens and food (the social standard). Yet,

[27] The number of cases rose from 5,459 in 1977 (Poročilo DPS SRS, *Bilten,* May, 1978, 13) to 15,492 in 1987, almost half of which were individual cases (Poročilo DPS SRS, *Bilten*, April, 1988, Table 4).

[28] *Bilten* 1978, 7, 8.

[29] In 1986, the Union of Socialist Youth of Slovenia unsuccessfully tried to legalise strikes. Strikes have been studied empirically by sociologists since 1960. The data was collected by the trade unions.

the role of trade unions changed drastically after 1987, when strikes grew in size and frequency and workers demanded political changes—economic reforms, but not the abolition of self-management. The number of strikes increased in particular after 1985 (from 235 at the beginning of the 1980s in Yugoslavia to 1685 in 1986, Jogan 1989, 1338) and the nature of the strikes also changed—they lasted longer, saw workers physically leave factories and join with experts and office workers to fill the streets, and even included workers from other factories who joined those striking in solidarity and for similar motives (Lukan 1990; Kavčič et al. 1991). The strikes spread to the non-economic sector and criticism of the federal government grew louder. The Republican Trade Union Confederation called on the federal government to take measures to improve the economic and social situation of workers. These widespread demands, which were also raised by other professional groups (including the Chamber of Commerce), were directed against the austerity measures, the numerous taxes that burdened the economy and wages, the misguided credit currency policy and import duties, the abolition of the BOAL system and funds for underdeveloped regions.[30]

These demands must be placed in a specific historical time: The socio-economic crisis was worsening, which should also be seen in the global context—the austerity measures imposed by creditors and the post-industrial paradigm spreading in Yugoslav society (Mesman 2012; Cvek 2021, 19). Public criticism of the federal regulations in Slovenia grew. Various taxes and contributions kept increasing, as did inflation and prices, while at the same time wages were frozen and profit distribution was limited. The state restrictions on wage policy imposed by the adjustment reforms also burdened and impoverished the employees of successful companies, as they were not allowed to be paid higher wages (Woodward 1995, 363). Poverty and unemployment increased, which was a novel situation in Slovenia (unemployment had previously not exceeded two per cent), and negative attitudes towards unsuccessful companies and underdeveloped regions increased as criticism grew that insolvent companies were being bailed out with loans while successful companies were giving up the distributions of profit. Contributions to underdeveloped regions were high, especially in the textile industry, and only increased during the inflationary period.

[30] Socializem po meri birokracije se je do konca izčrpal, Delavska Enotnost, 11 November 1988, 10.

The majority of people in Slovenia at the time supported reforms for a new, self-managed, democratic and market-based socialism, ownership pluralism, political pluralism and democracy. These were seen as solutions to the situation. Yet, public values also began to change. Public opinion surveys show that by 1988, efficiency had become a key value, replacing in importance the value of equality for the first time. The value was accepted on the account of the dismissal of bad workers, unprofitable companies and the restriction of extensive employment (Lesjak 1988, 17–19; Frančeškin 1988, 9). Such a value change, as identified by the Institute of Criminology in Ljubljana at the time (Vodopivec 1991), was influenced by the opinion leaders (directors, politicians, intellectuals) who also contributed to the repressive demands against the unemployed and the poor in the public.[31]

The implementation of reforms presented a completely new challenge for industrial workers, for the trade union confederation, and for the unions working at the plant or municipal levels. The Enterprise Act 1988/1989 contributed to the abolition of self-management and seriously challenged the positions and rights of industrial workers. It also led to an increasing number of bankruptcies, dismissals and the emergence of bypass companies (Žnidaršič Kranjc 1994). I argue that the transformed Slovenian Trade Union Confederation (ZSS) was the only major representative of industrial workers at the time (together with SAS) that demanded changes to the draft of the enterprise Act. It also subsequently published articles in its journal (*Delavska enotnost*) explaining the changes in labour policy and raising objections, fought for the minimum wage, and fought against the wage freeze. The minimum rights of workers were included in the trade union list, which later served as the basis for collective agreements. The Union Confederation demanded uniform criteria against the dismissal of workers due to technical (labour) surplus, reported on corrupt privatisations (forced bankruptcies, the creation of bypass companies) and pointing to dispossession. In its activities, the transformation of the union thus began even before it was formally re-established in April 1990.[32]

[31] Sven Cvek shows how Yugoslav sociologists, who relied on post-industrial theory in the late 1980s, contributed to the paradigm shift in society, the discipling of labour was important part of the Yugoslav austerity measures (Cvek 2021).

[32] The union, however, should not be seen as a monolithic institution even before that, because at the municipal levels the representatives were independent (Mesman 2012).

The transformation from a political body to an independent workers' organisations was, as argued by the union representative in Maribor in our interview, also characterised by the union work "in the field", when trade unionists helped workers in bankruptcy proceedings, represented them, sought new ways to claim their rights in court and even occupied a factory together with them (as was the case at Lilet (Trend) shoe factory in Maribor in 1990). Yet, this was a completely new situation that already heralded the new period. My interlocutors, the production workers, in general talked about the strikes and the role of trade unions in connection to the Slovenian Independence and post-socialist transition when the number of strikes increased and they were organised by trade unions. I argue that the preparation of the Independence Act and political democratisation in Slovenia went hand in hand with the dismantling of workers' and social rights. The trade union became an important civil society actor during this time, the role of the trade union (including other new established trade unions) grew and shaped the socio-economic partnership during the transition (Stanojević 2000).

Conclusion

This article explores socialist democracy based on self-management from the perspective of industrial workers in Slovenia. It refers to their understanding of socialist democracy as embedded in their experiences of their working and living environment, encompassing their expectations, everyday norms, meanings and practices, relationships and commitments. However, the experiences of self-management can only be understood in the context of intersectionality. Self-management is usually evaluated in relation to decision-making processes. Nevertheless, people in the factories had very different ideas, expectations and experiences of authority, discipline and hierarchy, as there were major differences between generations, gender, class, hierarchical positions, regions, etc., which furthermore changed over time.

For my interlocutors, who were all workers in textile production, self-management was about participation, which primarily involved their own engagement in the work and building of their factories. The narratives of participation went beyond the factory walls; participation aimed at creating a better life. Self-management worked so well precisely because it integrated two important traditions—the family and the local community—into factory life. Socialist modernity was not just a promise of a

better future, but also improved the lives of many people. These improvements were particularly appreciated by the older generations, who still remembered the exploitation and inequality felt before the Second World War. The younger generation, on the other hand, experienced the end of socialism, the dismantling of workers' rights and the destruction of the factories they had built. Experiences are always told within a particular framework of comparisons.

This article argues that ideas and practices of self-management not only shaped the experience of factory life, but also created a certain sense of entitlement, a right, that became part of the moral economy. Even if workers could not fully practise income distribution, there were procedures, practices, discussions, a promise and a particular value created by their own investment in the work. The moral economy of self-management was based on the investment of labour and self-sacrifice. This was particularly important for women workers in the textile industry because of the particular position of the textile industry (and textile workers) in socialism. The political democratisation at the end of the 1980s together with privatisation and economic transformations was emerging through the dispossession of these labour investments.

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