

Anika Eszter Bartha

The Disloyal „Ruling Class“: The Conflict between Ideology and Experience in Hungary

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Peter Hübner / Christoph Kleßmann /
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Anikó Eszter Bartha

The Disloyal „Ruling Class“: The Conflict between Ideology and Experience in Hungary

Introduction

My other problem is this world economic crisis. They told us that it won't sneak in and it still did. I think, they should have known this before. Hang on a minute, the crisis should be over by now.¹

I have read an article in the Today's Magazine, „The rich poor or the poor rich“. It asked if there are poor and rich people. Average is, who earns 1 800 Ft a month, and rich is who makes more than 6 000. According to this, only 1,1% of the workers is rich, and 10% is average. The distance is increasing between the workers and the upper leading class.²

Our economic situation is getting worse and worse every year. The less I earn is the mirror of our economic situation. It is the worst for us, young people because what is our perspective: we have to buy a flat, we live in a one and half room-flat at my mother-in-law's. There are factories, which produce deficits every year, nay, our enterprise is surely one of them. It is clear that there are external influences but the internal organization is also bad. This has a bad impact on the people, they turn inside. Everybody is interested only in his or her future. But it is also because no one listens to us.³

The above quotations are part of interviews conducted with workers in November-December 1984, in a research of Erzsébet Szalai, which aimed to map the reactions of people belonging to various social strata to the planned economic reform and its social consequences. Though this research did not focus on the working class, the interview abstracts are indicative of the two most important theses that emerged from the analysis of archival material presented in the paper. The context of these theses is Hungary's distinctive road to socialism (or capitalism seen from today's perspective) with a more liberal economy and po-

1 All of the four quotations come from Szalai Erzsébet, *Beszélgetések a gazdasági reformról*, Budapest 1986. The narrator is a 45-year-old skilled worker, party member, party secretary of a ground cell, with a monthly income of 6 200 Ft, member of the vgmk (= economic working communities within enterprises; quasi-private enterprises within the factories).

2 39-year-old skilled worker, party member, member of the party leadership, with a monthly income of 6 200 Ft, member of the vgmk.

3 27-year-old skilled worker, party member, member of the committee of the Union of Young Communists, with a monthly income of 4300 Ft, without additional income from the vgmk.

litical climate than the socialist systems established in East Europe. The former is introduced in the second part, while the latter is important because it enabled a higher level of criticism and a much more open official discussion of dissent than in the case of East Germany.⁴

The first thesis the paper argues is that a certain collective identity emerged at the shop floor („we“, the workers as opposed to „them“, party leaders, intelligentsia, peasants, the self-employed) that was built – and declared – increasingly in opposition to the official ideology and the communist party.⁵ Important factors in this process were the growing economic difficulties, the party's apparent inability to solve them and the increasing materialism people experienced in the everyday life – including party member- and leadership. From the mid-70s onwards, the workers could perceive the worsening economic situation of the country by the decrease of the real wages and the need to do overwork or take extra jobs (first in the agriculture and then in the so-called vgmk-s) to keep the former standards of living. The continuously increasing prices made the impact of the „global market“ real regardless of the stance of the Central Committee. The sharpening criticism of the system is formulated, however, not from the viewpoint of the individual but that of the worker, which suggests the existence of a collective identity. One may call it a paradox of the Communist ideology that the system, after all, was successful to develop working-class collective identities but these were built in opposition to the Communist regime and not for it. The paper will attempt to show how these „oppositionist“ identities were formulated and in what ways they are indicative of the alienation of the workers from the workers' state.

The second thesis is that the workers reacted to the appearance of non-socialist phenomena in the socialist society with a withdrawal from the work for the movement and increasing materialism. The expansion of the informal economy – a result of the economic reforms – led to growing material differences between those, who participated in it and those, who did not. This caused significant changes in the social stratification and rendered the socialist class relations based on labor largely illusory. A nation-wide sociological inquiry in the early 1980s found that the two most important factors that influenced social stratification were occupation and participation in the second – or informal – economy.⁶ On the basis of this, the sociologist Iván Szelényi modeled the Hungarian society by two intersecting triangles – representing the positions occupied in state sector and the informal economy – and argued that this „twofold segmentation“ was characteristic of the late social period.⁷ While the process of embourgeoisement received attention in the media and the literature⁸, there

4 This paper is part of a dissertation project, which aims to compare the formation of working-class identities and political attitudes in East Germany and Hungary in the late socialist and postsocialist periods. Since the archival research in Germany is not yet complete, the paper focuses on the impact of the specific Hungarian economic conditions on working-class identities.

5 In this respect, it is telling that almost all of the critical workers in Erzsébet Szalai's research were party members, and many of them even held party functions (such as secretary of the ground cell). Note: the presented source materials also over-represent party membership.

6 Kolosi Tamás, *Tagolt társadalom*, Budapest 1984.

7 Iván Szelényi, *Új osztály, állam, politika*, Budapest 1990.

8 An analysis of the youth literature of the late socialist period (which was obviously not free from propaganda) shows that the main message is not to *collectively change* this situation, but rather, to develop *individual strategies* to resist the materialistic temptation.

was no effective „central“ resistance against this phenomenon. This reinforced the workers' notion of „we“ as opposed to „them“, and increased their alienation from the regime.⁹ A consequence was people's withdrawal from the „useless“ social activities and an (over)strained work for individual prosperity.

The aim of this paper is to examine the formation of working-class attitudes and identities in the light of archival materials collected from the county of Győr-Sopron and particularly the Rába factory. My analysis seeks to show the „making“ of a critical collective identity, which effectively de-legitimized the socialist system in the workers' eyes. This was so successful that for many workers the distrust in any leftist alternative survived even the everyday experience of transformation with all aspects of cumulative decline such as the disintegration of the factory, the loss of the workplace, the fear of unemployment and a much more radical fall of the standards of living than in the late socialist period.¹⁰

The main source materials for this paper include the registers of party meetings (at the levels of the ground cell, the factory and the county), the surveys conducted for these meetings, the information reports and party statistics. In the case of the Rába factory, all these materials survived while the workers' correspondence with the director and higher organs was destroyed to spare space.¹¹ Since all these data were produced for official use, the question raises to what extent they are manipulated and to what extent they reflect the workers' views and everyday life experience. Given the big enterprises' general resistance to economic reforms, one cannot exclude the chance of manipulation and the overrepresentation of critical views. There were, nevertheless, many issues raised that were not in line with the official ideology and were not flattening to the party and the socialist regime. This leads me to believe that the sources give a more or less reliable picture of the problematic relationship between the workers and the workers' state in the late socialist period.

Bringing back the Market: Economic Reforms in Hungary

Hungary's New Economic Mechanism, which provided the first legal basis for the expansion of the private sector, emerged out of the long-term discussion of the country's economists and growing concern within the party leadership over poor export performance and the inefficient operation of much state-owned industry during the mid-1960s. Decided upon in

9 That there was reflection on the under-representation of the working class in the literature is also supported by my findings. It is worth quoting at length from an extensive survey on the conditions of the working class in the county of Győr-Sopron: „During the interviews with the children of blue-collar workers, they asked: to what extent the literature reflects on our problems? Today it is outdated to write anything on the working class though life is still not easy [...] This country never sacrificed so much for the intellectual life, and got back so little from it.“ (GyML, Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP, 124/12, register of the meeting of the Executive Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP on 25. February, 1972, Implementation of the decisions of the Central Committee and the party organs on the conditions of the working class, S. 18.)

10 This statement is supported with the findings of my oral history project (25 interviews conducted with people still employed in the factory and 25 interviews with former workers of the Rába).

11 In the case of the Carl Zeiss, it is the other way round: party documents were destroyed and workers' correspondence survived.

1966 and implemented in 1968, the New Economic Mechanism confronted these problems by dismantling the apparatus of centralized economic planning, replacing it with indirect state control over more autonomous state enterprises, which were instructed to maximize their profits. Indirect control was established through state setting of prices and taxation of enterprises, which were shielded from the impact of the world market by administratively determined prices and the maintenance of the state monopoly over free trade.¹² The somewhat Orwellian concept of regulated market competition was reflected in the guidelines of the reform: „An important feature of the New Economic Mechanism is that it gives space for the economic competition of socialist enterprises and it urges them to compete in the market. This competition is, of course, limited. It is limited by the level of development of production forces (concentration and specialization of production and distribution) and the socialist nature of our plan economy. This limited competition has, nevertheless, a special significance for the development of enterprise initiative, the increase of efficiency, technical improvement and the satisfaction of buyers' needs.“¹³

In addition to the internal contradiction between market competition and planned economy, the development of the New Economic Mechanism was hindered by the maintenance of the system of large-scale state-owned enterprises, which had quite contradictory interests. The structural transformation of the industry was on the agenda since 1958 but the „experimental“ enterprise concentration was followed with a retreat and it was only in the period 1962–1964 that a new industrial structure emerged characterized by giant enterprises, and an almost absolute lack of small companies. The grand-scale concentration of the means of production was expected to decrease the management hierarchy and increase the authority and responsibility of the enterprise leadership. This industrial re-organization – while formally remaining within the framework of the planned economy – led to a special economic management system, whose basic unit was a concentrated giant enterprise enjoying monopoly over one branch of products. The enterprise was then responsible for the survey of the needs for this branch (responsibility of planning) and the satisfaction of the measured demand (responsibility of supply). The monopoly of the enterprise was directed to one profile, and in this field the enterprise was also responsible for the improvement and the change of products.¹⁴

The implementation of the New Economic Mechanism and the maintenance of this industrial structure created a controversial situation, where the demand of making profits conflicted with the responsibility of supply. The priority of the enterprises was the satisfac-

12 In English, see Nigel Swain, Hungary. The Rise and Fall of Feasible Socialism, London & New York 1992. Out of the extensive Hungarian literature see e.g. Bauer Tamás, A vállalatok ellentmondásos helyzete az új mechanizmusban, in: Közgazdasági Szemle, 6, 1976; Nyers Rezső, Útkeresés-reformok, Budapest 1988; Pappné dr. Ritter Jolán-dr. Tüti Lászlóné, A kis-és középüzemek szerepéről, in: Gazdaság, 2, 1968; Schweitzer Iván, A vállalatnagyság, Budapest 1982. In the 1980s, as a result of the sharpening economic crisis, discussion became widespread among economists to formulate a more radical program than that of 1968. That time the requirement of economic reform was connected with the liberalization of politics. This explains why there were so many economists among the members of the democratic opposition in Hungary.

13 A gazdasági mechanizmus reformja. A Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt Központi Bizottsága 1966. május 25–27.-i ülésének anyaga (Budapest, 1966), S. 104–106ff.

14 Schweitzer Iván (1982).

tion of supply, which was also the expectation of their departmental controlling bodies. Since the enterprises had little resources to finance improvements, the requirement of the development of enterprise initiative remained largely illusory. The monopolistic situation of the enterprises in fact, proved counter-productive for the central bodies to cut down spending and stop the production of loss-making articles. The leaders of the giant enterprises would typically argue that any product could be made profitable with more investment, and refuse to reduce production because it can lead to severe shortages in the domestic market. The conflict between profitability and the responsibility of supply sharpened in the 1980s, when the critical economic situation forced the central leadership to touch the taboo of the economic management system.¹⁵ In the period 1979–1982 there was a central attempt of decentralization, which resulted in a retreat. As one expert participating in the re-structuring concluded, it was easier to close down one enterprise than reduce its branches because the enterprise could easily prevent the latter by using personal connections and exerting pressure on the apparatus.¹⁶ The real significance of this period is therefore not the transformation of the enterprise-structure (which did not happen) but the first steps to the restructuring of ownership. The permission of the enterprise form of branch factory increased the right of ownership, and the setting up of management councils with decision-making rights increased the autonomy of the enterprise. While the importance of the latter became clear only in the process of privatization, the extension of the former led to important changes in the Hungarian economic sphere.

It has been argued that even the „limited“ concept of 1968 had a limited impact on the industry given the maintenance of the economic management system. It was, nevertheless, very effective in the agriculture, where the 1968 reform of motivators enabled the expansion of the private sector. Although the reform did not have a concept of ownership, it made the development of the co-operatives' subsidiary branches of industry possible, which afterwards did not carry out agricultural productivity, but industrial and service activities. The private economy within the framework of agriculture started to expand towards the industrial and service sectors, which influenced the competitive position of the state industrial and service companies in the domestic market significantly more than the very limited competition created by the private retailers and craftsmen. Although in the 1970s the attacks against the agricultural subsidiary industries were renewed again and again, these became the bases of the development of the private sector right up until the 1982 legal package for small entrepreneurs.

The second important step towards the „mixed“ economy was the government's authorizing the introduction of 9 forms of small business in 1982. The 9 forms of small business ensnared the large state industries and the service sector, and rapidly created a serious competitive situation with the large companies which held monopoly positions in the domestic market. This competition was basically a salary competition: salaries in the private sector were considerably higher than in the state enterprises. Thus the grey matter and network of expert management of the state enterprises started to wander away towards the private en-

15 On the relationship between the enterprises and the central leadership see Szalai Erzsébet, *Gazdasági mechanizmus, reformtörekvések, és nagyvállalati érdekek*, Budapest 1989 and Voszka Éva, *Reform és átszervezés a nyolcvanas években*, Budapest 1988.

16 Voszka (1988), S. 215.

terprises. To appease workers and cope with the chronic problem of shortage, this system was extended to the state-owned large-scale industry. Employees could establish the so-called economic working communities within enterprises (vgmk), which had the right to undertake certain projects outside of the working hours but using the infrastructure of the factory. These extra jobs usually offered better pays than the normal job in the factory, which enabled those, who could participate in it, to maintain their standards of living at the price of more work. This opportunity was, nevertheless, not open to everybody: the director of the Rába factory, for instance, strictly banned the formation of vgmks in the enterprise claiming that performance should be achieved in the normal working hours.¹⁷

In short, the failed attempts to reform the economic management system and the increasing financial difficulties increased the faith of leading economists and the younger cohort of party leadership in the omnipotence of private ownership as the main incentive to economic development and the improvement of technology. The reforms of the 1980s effectively advanced the expansion of the small-scale private sector, which was first intended to function as a significant adjunct to the state-owned large-scale industry. The weakening of the Soviet control has, nevertheless, radicalized the demands.¹⁸ By 1988, both the reform communists and the democratic opposition abandoned the concept of „mixed economy“ in favor of the dominance of private property. In 1988, the first secretary Miklós Németh announced that capital-related income was of equal value as labor-related income. The announcement of the first secretary was followed by a change of legislation, which propelled property reform towards the change of regime.

Crisis and Consciousness: Economic Policies from Below

The general climate in the factory is invariably negatively influenced by the continuously rising prices. In our judgment, the workers are not enlightened enough to accept this process as natural. Especially not if we take into account that the „impact“ of the global market always means the increase of prices, we do not meet such an impact that would decrease them. Our employees add that according to many department leaders, our products are

17 GyML, Party Committee of the MVG of MSZMP, 122/6, register of the meeting of the Executive Committee of the MVG of MSZMP on 18. March, 1984. Report of the director of the MVG on the utilization of production capacity, S. 7; GyML, Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP, 415/156/2/4, register of the meeting of the Executive Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP on 4. September, 1984. The development of production and the perspectives and tasks of improvement, S. 4. The director Ede Horváth was equally suspicious of the socialist brigade movement; he often mentioned that workers should compete in the sport-field and not at the workplace (source: my interviews with former leaders of the Rába and the book of Dusza András, *A birodalom végnapjai*, Győr 2003. This critique was also expressed in a meeting of the Executive Committee of the MVG of MSZMP on 29. August, 1980, which put the first secretary of the party organization in the uncomfortable position to defend the brigade movement without openly contradicting the director. Ede Horváth was in the position to afford this, since he was for a long time member of the Central Committee and had good contacts to the Soviet economic and political circles.

18 Földes György, *Az eladósodás politikai története 1957–1986*, Budapest 1995.

*getting cheaper and cheaper in the world market, while their prices are massively and continuously increasing in the domestic market.*¹⁹

The investigation focuses on the period 1970–1987, and aims to map the impact of the two waves of economic reforms – that of 1968 and 1982 – on the formation of identities and political attitudes of the workers. In the light of the documents of the executive committees of the county and the party organization operating within the enterprise, the conditions of the working class constituted a distinguished field of interest in the 1970s – an interest, which showed a decreasing tendency throughout the 1980s, and almost completely disappeared from the agenda of the county meetings in the second half of the 1980s. The main sources of this period are the colorful and – even from the perspective of the late 1980s – somewhat „outdated“ information reports.²⁰

The introduction of the New Economic Mechanism triggered a number of negative responses amongst the workers. They not only worried about their own material decline but they strongly disapproved of the increasing materialism amongst the state- and party leadership, and the growing distance between the managers and the working class. This latter criticism even led some of them to question the economic management system, in particular state ownership („the workers do not feel themselves proprietors“). While the system firmly resisted even smaller changes of the economic management system, the material demands of the workers in the early 1970s received some consideration. This policy of appeasement failed for two reasons: first, it could not compensate for the subsequent increase of the prices; second, as I will show, it helped little to re-establish the honor of socialist work.

In addition to the decline of real wages, increasing materialism appeared not as an anomaly of the society but rather as a necessary „corrective“ of socialism. After the reform of 1968, which enabled the expansion of the private sector in the agriculture, many workers felt irritated with the increasing wealth of peasantry, which, as one report concludes – „has a negative impact on our policy of alliance.“²¹ „In the 1980s the reference class of the peasantry is gradually replaced by the self-employed (the so-called *maszek*), and the somewhat vague term of „dealers“²² – the latter including a significant part of the state-, party- and social leadership. Workers reacted to the non-socialist reality of the socialist society with increasing indifference to political work, decreasing activity in the mass organizations and movements, and overwork in the private economy. The „impact“ of the global market manifested in the continuous increase of the prices rendered many people disillusioned with the regime and mistrustful of further promises. The information reports of the late 1980s sug-

19 GyML, Party Committee of the MVG of MSZMP, 537/1, information report from 13. May, 1985.

20 The impression of being „outdated“ comes from the fact that often the old, „hard-liner“ style is used to reflect on such phenomena as e.g. the coming of Western tourists or the debates of the central leadership. This gives the impression as if social reality had slipped out of the textual control.

21 GyML, Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP, 134/2, register of the meeting of the Executive Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP on 9. October, 1974, Report on the conditions of the working class of the county of Győr-Sopron on the basis of the standpoint of the Central Committee in March, 1974, S. 16; policy of alliance: the worker-peasant alliance.

22 The term „ügyeskedő“ cannot really be translated. It is a collective term for people who misuse connections to make a profit (also includes dealing in articles stolen from the factory and other illegal or semi-legal ways of making money).

gest a deepening sense of crisis and a generally negative „political climate“²³ related to the decline of real wages and the insecurity of the future. In what follows an attempt will be made to show how the economic situation combined with the effects of the economic reforms – the spread of materialism and growing inequalities – contributed to the formation of a critical collective identity at the shop floor.

Following the reform of 1968, the county party leadership showed an increasing concern over the preservation of the standards of living of the working class.²⁴ The first secretary of the executive committee of the county of Győr-Sopron used a particularly critical tone when addressing this issue²⁵: „On p. 11 there are problems related to price policy. I think, the problem is bigger in the reality, and we should state this clearly in the report. With the increase of prices the dissatisfaction of employees and particularly that of the workers increases. The value of forint is decreasing. We cannot convince the workers to accept the 1,5–2% price increase given by the Statistical Office. We deal a lot with the explanation of the increase in our agitation work, but our experience is that the more we are trying to make it accepted, the more the party loses credit in this topic. I have told it many times and supported with a lot of facts at the conferences of the county first secretaries, where we reported on economic political issues to comrade Nyers²⁶ that primarily the prices of those articles increase significantly that the workers buy the most frequently and in the largest quantities. We should propose the leadership to slow down this process with the adequate means. We have to show people’s opinion of the prices in this material so that the highest leadership realize how harmful this topic is for the mass relations of the party.“²⁷

The first secretary was also pessimistic about the political activity of the masses and the party’s popularity in general: „According to me, it should be indicated that after the X. Congress the mass relations of the party did not improve to such an extent as we expected after the successful Congress. Quite the contrary, our experience is that after the parliament and council elections the political activity of the masses decreased and the mass relations of the party got weaker. Our political mass work fails to increase the activity to the desired level.“²⁸ The first secretary reserved some critical notes for the central economic policy and the flow of information within the party: „When the factory directors or the leaders of the

23 The term is used in the information reports.

24 A note on the source material: The materials of the county committee, of course, refer to the total industrial workforce in the county. Since the enterprise Rába was the largest in the county and amounted to around ¼ of the county’s industrial workforce, I used much of the county’s materials as representative of the Rába. An advantage of the county materials is that they usually place the industrial workforce in a wider social context. In addition, there was also a personal overlapping between the executive committees of the county and the enterprise: the party secretary of the enterprise organization was, for instance, previously head of the county department of economic policy.

25 The names are left out in all of the quotations in line with the act on the protection of personal data.

26 Nyers Rezső was one of the main initiators of the economic reform of 1968, and was secretary of the Central Committee until 1974.

27 GyML, Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP, 118/13, register of the meeting of the Executive Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP on 8. December, 1971, Notes on the discussion material Political debate on the mass relations of the party, party organizations and mass organizations, mass movements, S.3.

28 Ebd., S. 2.

councils ask the central management bodies about the economic tasks and perspectives of the year of 1972, in the majority of the cases they cannot find a leader who would dare to declare something with responsibility. With such an economic management it is not possible to prepare factory plans for 1972. [...] In my judgement, only 1/3–1/4 of the important central decisions get to party members. Secretaries of ground cells have to memorize very important tasks at one hearing, an achievement of which the majority of them is not capable.²⁹

It is a question to what extent these critical views related to the retirement of the first secretary soon afterwards.³⁰ That they reflected – to some extent – the general climate, is supported by a survey among the party members in the county in 1972. The survey aimed to measure the level of ideological education and political attitudes in relation to the leading role of the working class. The research had the disappointing result that in the workers' eyes the working class loses control over the economic management, furthermore, the new economic policies depart from the socialist principles insofar as they reinforce petty bourgeoisie tendencies amongst the high leadership. Thus, the survey found that „a significant part of the workers limits the term „working class“ to the blue-collar workers, criticizes their decreasing number in the leadership and wrongly concludes that the leading role of the working class is decreasing.“³¹ Workers would also critically reflect on the increasing material differences between the managers and the workers as a result of the bonus system established in 1968: „Workers expressed the view that the interests of party leadership and party members have become separated, even contradictory. In their view, our society is only theoretically divided into classes and strata, in practice there are the wealthy and the non-wealthy. Many workers think that a new elite emerged, which has a multiple income than an average worker. They count the majority of state- social- and enterprise leaders and the petty bourgeoisie to this elite.“³² These „wrong“ views lead to „distorted“ images of socialism: „Many people universalize economic interests, and the result is either the cherishing of illusions or ungrounded pessimism. We can observe a limited concept of socialist existence and consciousness, the reduction of existence to material issues.“³³ Consequently, many workers jump to the wrong conclusion that „due to the change of the economic management system and the intensification of technological requirements the working class lost its leading role, and the social leadership was taken over by the more educated economic and technical intelligentsia.“³⁴

According to the survey, the workers relate the rise of petty bourgeoisie tendencies to the New Economic Mechanism: „Blue-collar workers claim that the petty bourgeoisie mentality is very much widespread in the high party leadership, and many leaders fell into the sins of greediness and idleness. Factory workers sharply criticize the phenomenon that it is not the work but the car, the plot and the weekend-house that have become the scale of human value

29 Ebd., S. 5.

30 According to the confidential explanation, the first secretary was asked to retire because of health reasons (mainly related to alcohol problems).

31 GyML, Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP, 127/71, register of the meeting of the Executive Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP on 26. May, 1972, Report on the results, problems and tasks of the ideological education of party membership, S. 10; stress is indicated by the author.

32 Ebd., S. 13.

33 Ebd., S. 13; stress is indicated by the author.

34 Ebd., S. 16.

and the more modest lifestyle is something to be ashamed of. In the individual success pull-stringing, social connections and backstairs influence play an ever-increasing role.³⁵ It is worth adding that there are some internal inconsistencies in the criticism of embourgeoisement: „while the blue-collar workers sharply condemn the egoistic petty bourgeoisie phenomena and criticize the leaders for their failure to live up to the socialist standards, they are not very consistent either to realize this ideal. When speaking of themselves, they do not consider it immoral to do black work or violate the working discipline.“³⁶ These double standards of judgment can be observed also in the research of Erzsébet Szalai: while the workers would typically condemn the pursuit of materialist goals, they were much less consistent to hide their own interest in material prosperity.³⁷

The increasing materialism in the society was paralleled with the workers' decreased willingness to be mobilized for party work. In the examined period – from the early 1970s to the disintegration of the party – every year the blue-collar workers constituted the largest group of drop-outs from the party.³⁸ The most common reason for the exclusion was the negligence of party life (non-payment of party fees, non-attendance of meetings) but there were also many people who voluntarily left the party because of disagreement with the party politics or inability to accept the world-view of the party (this mainly meant the practice of religious customs such as baptizing children or church wedding). As the author of the report notes, workers' disinterest in this regard can be seen as a manifestation of the criticism of party politics amongst the workers: „I very much agree with comrade X, when he raises the problem of blue-collar party membership that it expresses the public opinion of the given area. I would even go further that this reflects people's opinion of party politics. In general they agree with the party politics and its realization but in particular issues there are different standpoints amongst the workers. For instance, the wage policy, the inadequate development of prices, etc. As the ratio of drop-out workers show, there is no existential dependency amongst the workers, they „go from one work-bench to the other.“³⁹ In many cases, membership is only formal, and the workers fail to take part in the party work: „When we recommend someone for membership, I am not convinced that they get the proper training and they are aware of their responsibilities to the party. For instance in the Wagon Factory⁴⁰ suppose we asked a few party members what their responsibilities are, 5 out of 10 would not be able to answer.“⁴¹ Finally, materialism also penetrates the working class and replaces the work for the movement with the pursuit of self-interest: „In the county of Szolnok a fresh party member was asked if the ideas that attracted him to the party were realized. He an-

35 Ebd., S. 22.

36 Ebd., S. 23.

37 Szalai (1986).

38 Around 65–70% of the drop-outs in the county belonged to the working class according to the annual statistics.

39 GyML, Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP, 117/8, register of the meeting of the Executive Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP on 13. October, 1972, Report on the social structure of the members admitted to the party since the X. Congress and the structure and reasons of drop-outs, S. 9.

40 The well-known name of the Rába in the period. (That was the traditional profile of the factory, which was abandoned in the early 1960s, but the name survived.)

41 Ebd., S. 12.

swered that the party did not meet his expectations, he could not profit by that.⁴² Although the renitent worker does not come from „our“ county, the raising of the issue in the executive committee suggests a growing concern over the spread of „petty bourgeoisie“ attitudes in the working class.

The increasing materialism in the society undoubtedly harmed the policy of alliance. The workers' complaint that the peasantry lives better than the socialist leading class keeps on recurring in the discussions of party meetings and the reports on the condition of the working class. The critical-minded first secretary summarized this as the following: „I recommend that we mention the increasing tension between the incomes of the working class and the peasantry amongst the problems indicated in p. 10. The I-V. Five-Year Plans determine that the incomes of the working class and the peasantry should increase by the same rate. This is not fulfilled and we cannot fulfil it in the future. According to the regulators we can keep the rate of increase of 3–4% but we cannot regulate the income of peasantry. While this year the income of the working class increased by 4%, that of the peasantry by 16%. This causes an increasing tension and many workers believe that we have a „peasant policy“ with respect to income.“⁴³ According to a report of 1972: „Urban workers have a tendency of measuring the worker-peasant alliance by comparing the standards of living of the two classes. We can meet anti-peasant opinions, people would contrast the low working-class incomes with the high village incomes. We often hear the remark: „It is always the working class that had to and has to make sacrifices.“⁴⁴ The same criticism arises from the information reports: „Many workers are concerned with the significant difference of incomes between the workers and the co-operative peasantry. They ask whether the extra income from the private small plots is not achieved at the expense of collective work?“⁴⁵ Or another frequent complaint: „The prices of vegetables and fruits trigger great dissatisfaction amongst our workers. The people's opinion is that it is again the peasantry who profits by that, but it is less and less bearable for the simple worker. One needs an opportunity to participate in the second economy. This one can find in the village (keeping animals, extra jobs). And then we are back to the problem of housing.“⁴⁶ The workers' criticism of the „peasant policy“ was included in the summarized information reports of the MVG: „At many places workers raised the issue that the income of peasantry exceeds that of the workers. They asked how come that they can build such houses.“⁴⁷ The problem emerges also in a report on the social structure of the county: „The workers are highly critical of the private plot-

42 Ebd., S. 10.

43 GyML, Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP, 124/14, register of the meeting of the Executive Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP on 30. March, 1972, Notes on the realization of the policy of alliance, S. 6.

44 GyML, Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP, 122/6, register of the meeting of the Executive Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP on 15. August, 1972, Report on the results, problems and tasks of the ideological education of party membership, S. 8.

45 GyML, Party Committee of the MVG of MSZMP, 198/22, information report from February, 1976, Hátsóhid Gyáregység.

46 GyML, Party Committee of the MVG of MSZMP, 199/5, information report from May, 1976, Motor Gyáregység.

47 GyML, Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP, Documents of the Apparatus, 415/47/12, information report of the MVG from January, 1975.

incomes of the peasantry. The greater part of the peasantry has a higher income than the industrial working class. We can admit this."⁴⁸

It is probably not accidental that after his appointment, the new first county secretary made a sharp attack on the increasing importance of personal property and the spread of materialistic perspective. The criticism was mainly addressed to the party leadership, but in general, it expressed concern over the divergence of the everyday realities from the socialist lifestyle. „We can meet more and more people, whose minds are occupied with the increase of their personal private property, independent from the others, and separated from the interests of the whole community. The problem with the accumulation of personal property is not that this property increases but rather that even if it is achieved by honest means, the personal property becomes omnipotent. For instance one does not build a weekend house to rest there but his purpose is that if the other has a house, he should also have it. I visited a county and we had a talk with a leading comrade. I observed that he does not pay attention to what I say, but he keeps on looking out of the window. I asked him, what is in his mind. He said that he is afraid that it will be raining, he sprayed insecticide on his plants yesterday and if there is rain, he will have to do it again. Sadly, we can often meet such phenomena."⁴⁹ The omnipotence of private property leads to non-labor based division among the people: „Due to the size of personal property, a new type of „gentry-like“ man emerged. Though today a car-owner is not considered to be a thief, the car slowly becomes a symbol of status. Friendships tend to formulate on the basis of the trade marks of cars. The owner of a Mercedes surely does not make friends with the owner of a Trabant. How it would look if the two friends went on a trip together. Or there are the circles of the owners of weekend-houses. I make friends with the owner so that he invites me to his weekend-house. If someone does not have a weekend-house, he drops out of the company."⁵⁰ Materialistic attitudes are also characteristic of the working class, though the first secretary blames the leaders rather than the workers for this divergence: „A worker in Budapest earns 3 000 Ft a month in his workplace and 1 400 Ft in two days in the private sector. I ask, what he will have in his mind of socialism. The state pays him 3 000 Ft for a monthly work and in the private sector he earns one third of this in two days. This increases his desire for unnecessary articles. In this society the man who can accumulate more wealth counts to be clever. The other question is theft. We often consider it a honest thing to do."⁵¹

In another meeting, the first secretary explicitly relates the decline of party discipline and communist morale and lifestyle to the spread of materialism. The main target of criticism is the leadership but the morale is decreasing also in the working class: „It is right that people buy cars, plots and weekend-houses at the Balaton,⁵² but we do not agree with the fact that

48 GyML, Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP, 415/1/20, register of the meeting of the Executive Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP on 19. June, 1977, Report on the social structure and class relations of the county, the main directions of changes and the resultant political tasks, S. 18.

49 GyML, Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP, 134/1, register of the meeting of the Executive Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP on 29. March, 1974, On the role of enterprise democracy and the tasks of further development, S. 23.

50 Ebd., S. 24.

51 Ebd., S. 25.

52 Lake Balaton is the main holiday resort area in Hungary.

this becomes the goal of the lives of many communists, comrades use their position because once they have the plot, they need to build a fence, if they have the fence, they need a well and a bungalow and for that they need pull-stringing. They are not interested in their work but in how many vine-stocks they can plant. We criticize workers for black work but the leaders say that they finish the work but how much the bonus will be. With respect to communist morale, we can search for it with magnifying glass. I do not want to argue about the percent of 5%,⁵³ but we can easily multiple this by 5, even then we whitewash reality, no numbers can express the indifference to party work, political questions that when there is a sharpening debate, the party members stand there with open mouths, they do not stand for the party and explain our standpoint. This question does not even emerge outside in the factories, and then we are satisfied, and declare that everything is all right.⁵⁴

While the first secretary took the workers' stance in the criticism of the materialism and the decline of communist morale in the leadership, he was careful not to mention a completely different type of criticism which was aimed at the economic management system as such and worth quoting at length from the report: „The largest part of the working class does not consider itself a leading force, proprietor⁵⁵, because the deficiencies and shortcomings at the workplace confuse their judgment. For instance, no-one asks for their opinion, they have no say in the production, the enterprise democracy does not function and there are unreasonably high differences between the pays of workers and managers. In many factories workers feel that they have the right only to work.“⁵⁶ The quotation is interesting not only insofar as it mediates an unusually sharp critique to the high leadership but also as an evidence of the criticism of the economic management system – and thereby „actually existing socialism“ – amongst the workers.

Not surprisingly, the political criticism of the system remained without echo. The economic demands, nevertheless, received some consideration. In accordance with the central policy, in 1973 the wages were revised in the industrial sector, and there was an extra increase of wages in many enterprises to stop labor fluctuation. In the county, the central increase of wages ranged 6–11% amongst the industrial enterprises (on average, the wages of direct production leaders increased by 8%, that of the skilled workers by 6% and that of the unskilled workers by 4%). In successful enterprises such as the Rába was that time, there was an extra increase of 5–6%. Thus, we get the following data from the county:

53 According to the discussion material around 5% of party membership can be considered passive.

54 GyML, Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP, 134/2, register of the meeting of the Executive Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP on 14. November, 1974, Report on the situation of party discipline, communist morale, conduct and lifestyle, S. 18–19ff.

55 Stress is indicated by the author.

56 GyML, Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP, 134/2, register of the meeting of the Executive Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP on 9. October, 1974, Report on the conditions of the working class of the county of Győr-Sopron on the basis of the standpoint of the Central Committee in March, 1974, S. 6; stress is indicated by the author.

The sum of the average monthly increase, Ft⁵⁷
(Men, women together)

| | Skilled | Unskilled | All workers | Employees | Direct prod. leaders |
|-------------------|---------|-----------|-------------|-----------|----------------------|
| Heavy industry | 372 | 192 | 276 | 146 | 404 |
| Light industry | 280 | 179 | 226 | 150 | 349 |
| Food industry | 285 | 171 | 205 | 111 | 327 |
| Building industry | 303 | 130 | 212 | 93 | 248 |

The sum of the average monthly increase, Ft
(Women)⁵⁸

| | Skilled | Unskilled | All workers | Employees | Direct prod. leaders |
|-------------------|---------|-----------|-------------|-----------|----------------------|
| Heavy industry | 361 | 173 | 185 | 93 | 313 |
| Light industry | 274 | 170 | 216 | 107 | 294 |
| Food industry | 275 | 161 | 171 | 93 | 317 |
| Building industry | 367 | 133 | 138 | 63 | 500 |

57 Source: GyML, Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP, 128/1, register of the meeting of the Executive Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP on 28. June, 1973, The impact of the revision of wages and the introduction of various wage forms on the conditions of employees and the movement of labor, S. 104.

58 As another report states that deals specifically with the situation of women, the increase of male wages was in general higher than that of the female wages. While 35,8% of the blue-collar workers was female, only 16,5% was skilled worker. The oral interviews also made it clear that there was a strong resistance to the „equal pay“ on behalf of skilled male workers. In addition to the lower female incomes, the report mentioned the problem of the little political activity and under-representation of women in party and social organizations: „At many places the party and mass organizations accept that a significant part of women has the opinion „we have no time“ or „we are not interested in public affairs.“ It is often the case that women are not even invited to enterprise- and institutional meetings. The conduct of passive women can be partly related to the fact that their political education, knowledge and horizon is lower than the average. Family circumstances, the husband and the conservatism of their kinship play a role in this passivity.“ (GyML, Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP, 128/1, register of the meeting of the Executive Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP on 4. May, 1973, Report on the implementation of the decision of the Central Committee on 18–19 February, 1970 to improve the political, economic and social conditions of women, S. 7).

The development of the average income of workers, Ft⁵⁹

| | 01.03.1972–31.12.1972 | 01.03.1973–31.12.1973 | Increase (%) |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------|
| Heavy industry | 2354 | 2707 | 15,0 |
| Light industry | 1884 | 2109 | 11,9 |
| Food industry | 2039 | 2146 | 5,2 |
| Building industry | 2486 | 2696 | 8,4 |
| State farms | | 2538 | |
| Small enterprises (co-operatives) | | 1927 | |

As we have seen above, these measures, were, however, insufficient to appease the workers though they solved direct production problems in the factory.⁶⁰ An ambiguous picture emerges from a county-wide survey on the „interpretation of our policy of the standards of living amongst the party members in the engineering industry.“⁶¹ While according to 99% of the respondents the standards of living increased, only 33% thought that the increase of incomes was greater than the increase of prices, 28% considered them equal and 39% found that the increase of prices exceeded the increase of incomes. In the Rába the latter ratio was 44%. 68% of the respondents believed that the income of peasantry was higher than that of the working class though, as the report stated, „under peasant they also mean the commuting workers. It is not the village peasant who lives better but the worker who lives in the countryside. According to the statistics, the workers own much more land than the peasants. What is reflected from the material is that the commuting worker tries to do work in his land so that he can obtain extra income.“⁶² That this was indeed the case is supported by the fact that 48% of the respondents claimed that they spend their free time working.⁶³ In the judg-

59 The impact of the revision of wages ..., S. 105.

60 Particularly important was the increase of the wages of direct production leaders since it was a frequent complaint at the meetings of the Executive Committee of the MVG that a good skilled worker would not take this position because he can earn more in shift work than as a production leader (GyML, Party Committee of the MVG of MSZMP, 522/3, register of the meeting of the Executive Committee of the MVG of MSZMP on 22. July, 1975, Report of the director of the MVG on quality, economy and the conditions of workforce, S.2–3ff). During interviews with old workers, it was a frequent boasting that they earned more than the bosses.

61 More than 70% of the 1013 participants was employed in the Rába. Out of the total number, 53% was blue-collar worker. The average monthly income was 3100–4000 Ft (47%), which was higher than the county average. 19% was above that (4100–5000 Ft: 16%, 5100–6000 Ft: 2%, more than 6000: 1%), while 22% had an income 2600–3000 Ft, 9% 2100–2500 Ft and 3% 1600–2000 Ft. (GyML, Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP, 415/7/14, register of the meeting of the Executive Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP on 27. April, 1976, Interpretation of our policy of the standards of living amongst the party members in the engineering industry, Appendix 2.

62 Ebd., S. 4. Note: in the plant of Győr 39% of the employees were commuters (GyML, Party Committee of the MVG of MSZMP, 204/4/3, register of the meeting of the Executive Committee of the MVG of MSZMP on 12. September, 1980, On the conditions of the commuters, S. 2. (The enterprise had plants in other towns as well).

63 Interpretation of our policy ..., S. 14.

ment of the standards of living there was a gender difference: more women than men thought that there was a significant improvement of the standards of living.⁶⁴

Despite the fact that the respondents had higher incomes than the county average,⁶⁵ the survey found that „they are only moderately satisfied with their incomes“⁶⁶, which shows a certain materialistic perspective.⁶⁷ An even more worrying tendency is that „a significant part of the workers measures the increase of the standards of living only by the wages. They do not see the relationship between the wages and the achievement.“⁶⁸ Thus, only 19% of the respondents thought that work determines the wages and allowances, 22% answered that to a small extent and the rest found no relationship between the work and the wages.⁶⁹ While the report called the attention of the „competent comrades“ to the deficiencies of the wage system, we can go further to argue that the respondents in fact expressed their opinion of the socialist work. From this the unambiguous conclusion emerges that the policy of the standards of living did little to restore the honor of work.

In the subsequent years, the continuously rising prices made the policy of the standards of living largely illusory. In the Rába the ground cell meetings were not the most popular platforms for criticism; in the mid-1970s, there was even a town survey that concluded that „there are serious problems with the regular party life in the Wagon Factory. It almost looks like as if it were a punishment to participate in ground cell meetings. Party groups should keep regular monthly meetings.“⁷⁰ The surviving – very few – written accounts of the ground cell meetings are mainly limited to the discussion of personal matters and the recitations of the decisions of the Central Committee. Some „real“ discussions, nevertheless, survived. Such was for instance the contribution of a mechanic: „With respect to information reports, I can freely tell that on my side the political mood is not good. The previous speakers raised the issue of the revision of norms, which influences the blue-collar workers. We have unpleasant feelings both because of this and the increase of the prices. Still they say that our average mood is good. That cannot be said at all. The statistics shows that everything is very good here. For me, the rise of the prices does not show that my political mood is good. I do not feel the increase of the standards of living. When I read the news, everything makes me angry what I read. With respect to the utilization of working hours: even the psychologists of the capitalist countries showed that the human body needs a rest during the 8 hour of work. So we cannot spend the 480 minutes working. I think that the workers' interests are not represented here. They always demand more work for less money. With this revision of norms, I cannot earn my money even if I violate the technological

64 Ebd., S. 3.

65 See the data of Appendix 2.

66 The words are underlined in the original.

67 Interpretation of our policy ..., S. 10.

68 Ebd., S. 11.

69 Ebd., S. 11.

70 GyML, Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP, 415/4/31, register of the meeting of the Executive Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP on 26. November, 1975, Report of the Executive Committee of the town of Győr on the activity of the leadership of the party committees at the shop floor, S. 2.

discipline. I cannot understand where is the increase of the standards of living here. Prices are increasing and they are decreasing our money.“⁷¹

That such views cannot be seen as exceptional is shown by the fact that the only occasion of strike in the late socialist period (and even after) took place because of wage disputes.⁷² As the report states, „on 4. June, 1977 64 workers of the Unit 28 of the MVG stopped working because of their unsettled wages. Comrade director Ede Horváth spoke to the workers, who then started working. To clarify the events, two investigations were conducted (meanwhile there was a stoppage for two weeks because of maintenance in the MVG).“⁷³ The issue was raised in the meeting of the Executive Committee of the county but the director laconically declared the matter to be settled.⁷⁴ That the workers were not quite satisfied is shown by one finding of the investigation (which was not mentioned in the meeting of the Executive Committee): „During June and July the blue-collar workforce of the MVG decreased by 222 persons, which can be partly related to the non-payment of the bonus.“⁷⁵ One can relate this form of resistance to the criticism of the mechanic, and argue that it was not the two-week bonus that was at stake here but rather the human conditions of the working class. The action they took against the treatment they considered unfair – whether in the form of strike or the large-scale notices – can be interpreted as a manifestation of a critical collective identity.⁷⁶

Throughout the 1980s, two tendencies can be observed. The first is the gradual disappearance of the materials addressing the conditions of the working class, and the shift of focus on production-related issues and the improvement of technology. Large-scale surveys can be no longer found in the materials from the 1980s. Main source materials include the information reports, accounts of the party building and the regular discussions with party mem-

71 GyML, Party Committee of the MVG of MSZMP, 196/9, register of the meeting of the Auto ground cell on 26. January, 1977, S. 4–5ff.

72 The revision of norms triggered sharp criticism also amongst the metallurgical workers. Some quotations from the information reports: „Our workers are mainly concerned with the problems that influence their earnings. Such thing is the revision of norms – which was unreasonably high – which coincided with the rise of quality requirements. These altogether caused that their pays decreased by 30–40%. According to the people, it should not be allowed that a skilled worker who proved his skills many times, can only earn 15–16 Ft an hour!“ (GyML, Party Committee of the MVG of MSZMP, 201/9, information report from 15. May, 1979, ground cell of metallurgy). Or another: „Our workers are mainly concerned with the increase of prices. They said that one hour of their pay does not even cover the breakfast they bring with themselves to the factory, and, as they say, one cannot work with bread and marmalade.“ (GyML, Party Committee of the MVG of MSZMP, 201/9, information report from 2. August, 1979, ground cell of metallurgy).

73 GyML, Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP, 415/12/22, 16. August, 1977, Report on the investigations in the Unit 28 of the MVG and the payment of the two-week bonus, S. 1.

74 GyML, Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP, 415/12/23, register of the meeting of the Executive Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP on 12. September, 1977, S. 2.

75 Report on the investigations ..., S. 3.

76 As his later reflections show, the director failed to take into account this dimension of the criticism and reduced the issue to a wage dispute. „We need three-shift work, piecework, quality. If someone cannot provide this, then there is fluctuation. We have to accept that if the worker gets more money elsewhere, he desires to leave.“ (GyML, Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP, 415/26/29, register of the meeting of the Executive Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP on 18. March, 1980, S. 4.)

bers.⁷⁷ The second tendency is the sharpening of open criticism and the general deterioration of the political mood. The decline of real wages, the necessity to do overwork, and the growing material inequalities seem to be parts of the everyday life rather than things that can be changed. This has the impact that workers are increasingly retreating from party life and politics.

The decline of the real wages becomes such a common topic of the information reports collected at the levels of ground cells, enterprise party organization and the county that only the most „innovative“ quotes will be presented. Such examples are the following: „At the ideological training course we are often criticized because of the structure of our information reports. It is true that we cannot satisfy these needs because the public mood does not react to the events according to the given aspects. If we do not want to falsify information (and we do now want) we can only write about what really concerns the people. These are the prices and the wages, the provision, the traffic and the „keeping“ of the standards of living. On these we cannot write anything new because the circumstances do not change and they are rather deteriorating after the increase of the price of petrol. We ask for the acceptance of our information report!“⁷⁸ The same secretary reports in half a year time: „There are no positive changes in the prices and the traffic so the people’s opinion (which I reported earlier) did not change much either.“⁷⁹

The contrast with the Western standards of living was a further source of frustration: „We agitate the people that we cannot compare the Western prices and wages with ours because it gives an irrational picture. What happens then? The head of the department of the price office argues that we have to raise the price of petrol because it costs 10 schilling in Austria! Why to make such comparisons? How can we agitate after this with the incomparability of the prices. People understand that the prices will increase but they don’t want to be treated as fools.“⁸⁰ The same report notes: „The workers say that the coming increase of prices is irrational. It is getting more and more difficult to live from honest work!“⁸¹ Or a more laconic remark: „After the increase of prices the Ászok beer has disappeared from the shops.“⁸² As a summarized report concludes: „The workers find it difficult to understand and even more difficult to bear that the economic crisis sneaked in to us. The unfavorable development of the prices and wages triggered a sense of insecurity amongst the workers.“⁸³

The deterioration of the conditions of the industrial workers as compared to other strata is an equally frequent source of criticism in the reports: „The most important topic amongst the workers is invariably the standards of living. They criticize that the prices keep on chan-

77 These discussions aimed to survey the general mood amongst party members.

78 GyML, Party Committee of the MVG of MSZMP, 211/38, information report from 26. February, 1982, ground cell of new foundry).

79 GyML, Party Committee of the MVG of MSZMP, 211/38, information report from 27. August, 1982, ground cell of new foundry).

80 GyML, Party Committee of the MVG of MSZMP, 212/14, information report from April, 1982, vehicle II.

81 Ebd.,

82 GyML, Party Committee of the MVG of MSZMP, 212/26, information report from June, 1982, machine production.

83 GyML, Party Committee of the MVG of MSZMP, 206/4, information report from February, 1983, MVG.

ging without being announced. They are always concerned with the savings of the people, how much they increased but no one investigates how much money the workers have in the bank.“⁸⁴ A contribution from the Unit Célgépgyár: „Workers complain of the fall of the standards of living. The statistical office likes to publish the amount of the savings of the population, which leads them to conclude that the prices can still be revised. Our workers say that if someone investigated who stands behind the savings, he would find very few Rába-workers amongst them.“⁸⁵ The contradictions of socialist life are also addressed in an account of the results of ideological training amongst party members: „The workers do not feel the improvement of the balance between prices and wages even in spite of overwork. In their judgment the basis of distribution is not labor. They think that more and more income goes to the non-productive sphere, and less and less to the working-class people who produce the national income. An „upper class“ emerged, which is not concerned with the economic situation of the country. The restrictions influence the income of the people working in the overregulated industry. They are worried about the expansion of private enterprises, which will broaden the group of people with higher incomes.“⁸⁶

The really interesting question is, of course, not the content of the criticism but rather, how the non-socialist reality of socialist life influenced working-class political identities. A politically conscious party secretary from the Unit Motor used the trick to present his answer in the question: „It is a general opinion that today the urban workers can only make ends meet with difficulties. One can discuss here the increase of demands but we do not think that is important. Everybody needs additional income, who wants to achieve something, let it be a car, a family house or support for the children. Here we can ask the political question what will be decisive in the consciousness of the worker: where he goes to work or where he earns the money?“⁸⁷

The archival evidence supports the notion that the collective critical consciousness of workers manifested itself in a growing indifference to party policy. There are abundant complaints in the reports on the experiences of the building of the party that materialism became dominant in the working class, „they are not satisfied with their wages, and rush to the next workplace, where they take any extra jobs.“⁸⁸ The following „experience“ clearly shows how the working-class identity was contrasted with the socialist regime: „The respect of the Communists is more and more decreasing because the people see the principles for which the Communists, the trade union and the best people of the working class have fought before the liberation, to be buried and forgotten. For instance many workers ask what hap-

84 GyML, Party Committee of the MVG of MSZMP, 212/15, information report from November-December, 1982, K. J. Blacksmith.

85 GyML, Party Committee of the MVG of MSZMP, 212/6, information report from March, 1982, Célgépgyár.

86 GyML, Party Committee of the MVG of MSZMP, 210/3, register of the meeting of the Executive Committee of the MVG of MSZMP on 14. October, 1982, Report on the results of ideological training amongst party members, S. 2.

87 GyML, Party Committee of the MVG of MSZMP, 212/5, information report from February, 1982, motor; stress is indicated by the author.

88 GyML, Party Committee of the Rába MMG of MSZMP, 529/1/2, register of the meeting of the Executive Committee of the MVG of MSZMP on 3. May, 1984, Report on the experiences of the building of the party, S. 6.

pened to the 3x8 hour. Why the 8-hour work, 8-hour free time and 8-hour sleep changed to 10-12-hour work and why they have to do overwork to keep their former level.⁸⁹ Another manifestation of this „oppositionist“ working-class identity, which showed passivity to the regime, comes from an account with the discussion of non-party members: „There were non-party members who said that that they would not speak to those, who cannot even work properly.⁹⁰ There were workers who said that no-one asked them when they spoil the standards of living. There were people who said nothing because their opinion won't be considered anyway.“⁹¹ The sentence in bold reflects a clear contrast of the „proper work“ – as the main constituent of working-class identity – with the party representative.

This collective critical identity was also reflected in the political attitudes. There were people who openly expressed their mistrust in the state- and party leadership. „With respect to internal political information, we can report that the political mood of our workforce is deteriorating slowly but proportionately to the problems of how to make a living. When they return from the holiday, people complain that they can spend their monthly income in a week and still they can't feed properly the family. We can't explain everything with the weather. Even comrade János Kádár gave evasive answers to the questions on the deterioration of the standards of living.“⁹² A summarized report on the political mood in the county in 1986 found that „a significant part of the people thinks that the fight against the mistakes is futile, and the leaders themselves do not know the answer to many questions.“⁹³ A report from 1987 stated: „The controversial declarations of the central leadership triggered confusion and insecurity amongst party members. The people do not know how to relate to the information that the information of the public was not always sincere. [...] Many people think that the party does not have an alternative, which could reassuringly solve the problems of the economic management system. People judge the perspectives of progress with a reduced trust.“⁹⁴ A discussion with the party members concluded: „People believe that the leading role of the party decreased, it is only manifested in the possession of power, it no longer plays an initiative role. They think that the decrease of the leading role of the party is reflected in the decrease of trust in the party, the loss of respect of local party organs, the comments of non-party members on party members and the difficulties of the work of party-building.“⁹⁵ These documents give no details of the social structure but in the light of the

89 GyML, Party Committee of the MVG of MSZMP, 202/1/2, register of the meeting of the Executive Committee of the MVG of MSZMP on 3. May, 1984, Report on the experiences of the building of the party, S. 2.

90 Stress is indicated by the author.

91 GyML, Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP, 415/36, register of the meeting of the Executive Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP on 5. April, 1983, The experiences of the discussions with non-party members, recommendations of further tasks, S. 7.

92 GyML, Party Committee of the MVG of MSZMP, 217/4/8, information report from August 1984, machine production.

93 GyML, Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP, 236/12/3, Documents of the Apparatus, information report from the county, November, 1986.

94 GyML, Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP, 237/4/9, Documents of the Apparatus, information report from the county, March, 1987.

95 GyML, Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP, 220/4, Documents of the Apparatus, 28, March, 1988, Summary of the experiences of discussions related to the exchange of party books, S. 4.

information reports from the ground cells, such opinions were expressed also at the shop floor.

Another dimension of the critical collective consciousness was the withdrawal of the working-class youth from party life. At the party meetings, this was primarily related due to the increasing materialism but some commentators found that the real problem was the youth's unwillingness to be organized in the party. „Indifference has become more and more widespread amongst the people. They lost the interest in social work. The first for them is the economic work, this is what they want to do well. This is the opinion of blue-collar workers but also that of the managers. The elder people got tired of the social work and the young think that it has no perspective. They are only interested in material rewards.“⁹⁶ That it was not just that, is shown by the comment: „Many of them [working-class young people] have to work overtime to earn a „honest living“ for themselves and their families. This contributes to their materialistic attitudes, which work against public activity. With respect to indifference the report states that in general it is not true since they show interest to issues that directly influence their lives. Passivity means the distance from the official organizations.“⁹⁷

In the eyes of many workers, the experience of „actually existing“ socialism led to the effective de-legitimation of the socialist system. This was particularly apparent in the Western counties where the population had a better picture of the capitalist standards of living. „The more courageous (and the least informed) even question the superiority of the socialist order over the capitalist society. The transitional economic difficulties make their opinion credible and because of the deficiencies of our propaganda, they do not judge the situation according to the decisive role of socialist property, the power of the proletariat, and the social redistribution. The overrating of the economic and technological achievements of capitalism renders it more difficult to realistically evaluate our situation.“⁹⁸ In the light of the information reports, many workers would agree with the following: „Today the Hungarian people work in Europe and still get to nowhere. Our socialist way of life looks like that everybody works himself to death, and the society goes to the dogs.“⁹⁹

96 GyML, Party Committee of the MVG of MSZMP, 529/6/4, register of the meeting of the Executive Committee of the MVG of MSZMP on 12. April, 1985, On the development of human contacts, S. 1.

97 GyML, Party Committee of the MVG of MSZMP, 236/4, Documents of the Apparatus, 27. December, 1986, Report on the activity of the KISZ, S. 1; stress is indicated by the author. Characteristic, is, for instance, that while in 1985, 35% of the young workforce of the Rába MMG was member of the KISZ, by 1987, this was reduced to 12% (GyML, Party Committee of the Rába MMG of MSZMP, 529/10/5, register of the meeting of the Executive Committee of the MVG of MSZMP on 19. November, 1987, Report on the measures to improve the social status of the young workforce, S. 4.)

98 GyML, Party Committee of the Rába MMG of MSZMP, 529/2/3, register of the meeting of the Executive Committee of the MVG of MSZMP on 16. July, 1985, Tasks of the ideological work and the agit. prop., S. 2.

99 GyML, Committee of Győr-Sopron County of MSZMP, 236/8, Documents of the Apparatus, county information report from September, 1986.

Statistically, of course, it is not possible to measure how much this collective critical consciousness was widespread at the shop floor. Important is that such consciousness emerged, and workers formulated their criticism of the socialist society, party and leadership as members of a collective, which was demonstrated with the presented materials. Paradoxically, then, we can conclude that the regime effectively contributed to the formation of a collective identity- but in opposition to the system rather than for it.