



Everyday barricades: bureaucracy and the affect of struggle in trade unions

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Abstract

Employees in global workplaces commonly suggest they are being failed by trade union representatives that betray the political ideals of their institutions. The tenacity of this discourse requires interrogation, since the notion persists even in contexts that lack evidence of such practices occurring. Based upon a comparison of Kazakhstan and India, we suggest that there is a fundamental slippage between the emotive aspect of union politics and the banal realities of institutional processes. We explore how conservative and radical trade unions alike rely upon appeals to an affect of struggle, in order to rationalise their work as part of an international and historically continuous political project. The paper explains why it is in the bureaucratic nature of trade unions to betray such an affect.

Keywords Affect · Bureaucracy · India · Kazakhstan · Precarity · Struggle · Trade unions

Introduction

When he was a young man, 57-year-old Artur migrated from Ukraine to seek his fortunes in the coal mines of Karaganda, Kazakhstan. Many years later, Artur seemed unhappy with his employment. He was disappointed in the authoritarian Kazakhstani president who had raised miners' pension age to 63. He was also disillusioned with the international conglomerate ArcelorMittal that bought the mines in 1996 and, subsequently, used the global economic crisis of 2008 as an excuse to reduce workers' employment benefits. But Artur's biggest disillusionment was with his local trade union's lack of support for the struggles of its own members.

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He recounted an incident in 2011, when the wages of workers in some areas of the mine were raised, whilst those in his own were not:

We decided that at the end of the shift, we stay in the mine and will not go to the surface and will organise a strike...

[The trade union leader Mirgayazov] came to the mine with the director, he explained that all the documents for the salary had already been signed. The director told me that if we did not leave the mine now, other people were going to deal with us. The other people – the committee for National Security (KNSB) – are already here and are only waiting for orders to act. Well, then we decided to ascend. Because we need to hold on to our jobs and if trade unions are not supporting us, we cannot do anything.

Later also the bonus was removed and Mirgayazov did not defend us again. Then many miners realised that Mirgayazov signs documents that he should not sign and everyone said that he was bought off. Only a bought off person can sign such documents.

Not everyone can be a trade union leader, you need to support the workers with your soul. But he only wanted power. Whenever there was an unrest, he came here to calm down people, tell them not to strike, said that the question would be solved but he never solved anything.

Artur's narrative points to common sentiments held by many Karaganda coal miners, who regard local trade unionism as variously either corrupt or ineffectual. However, Artur's experience with Mirgayazov does not tell the full story. Although the union leader's engagement with public, and affectively charged, forms of labour struggle is popularly interpreted in terms of complicity, he was nonetheless engaged in sustained efforts to represent the interests of his members. In Karaganda, the union continues to play an important role in everyday workplace negotiations, voices opposition to company policies in national and international media, and actively defends individual miners in the everyday forum of employment tribunals. Working within the legal constraints of the Kazakhstani state, local trade unions seldom engage in strikes. However, they are frequently engaged in less visible and dramatic attempts to improve the conditions of their members, albeit not always successfully.

This article begins from the observation that in a wide variety of ethnographic contexts, there is a popular discourse among workers, which suggests that they are being failed by trade union representatives who do not fulfil the political ideals of their institutions. The content of this discourse is remarkably consistent in both the Global North and Global South—in the liberalised states of the former USSR and in Euro-American nations, on heavy industrial shopfloors and in the service sector, among highly skilled and unskilled sections of the workforce. What seems to define the modern politics of global labour is not only an experience of increasing dispossession, but also an increasing sense that the organs of collective action have either been subverted in the interests of capital or have lost their functional efficacy. In many instances, popular assumptions of trade union failure may well be accurate, and institutional corruption may be integral to the precarisation of labour (Sanchez 2016a). However, the tenacity of the global trade union failure discourse requires a somewhat broader interrogation, since the notion persists even in contexts that lack any clear evidence of such developments occurring.

It is apparent that popular disaffection with formal trade unionism is a widespread feature of contemporary labour politics. In the Global North, the membership and political influence of

trade unions has decreased since the 1970s, arguably in response to capital's increasing freedom of movement (Silver 2003). Elsewhere, the ability of trade unions to represent the interests of their members has been weakened either through co-option by the state (Lazar 2017a) or violent repression by judicial and security forces (Gill 2007). In large corporate workplaces, political faith in trade unions has also been eroded by Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives, which assert that capital has the capacity to conduct itself in a manner that is of benefit to classes of labour, potentially rendering trade unions less relevant (cf Bair and Palpacuer 2012; De Neve 2009; Mezzadri 2017; Rajak 2011; Rogers 2012).

However, although union disaffection is particularly prevalent in the current historical moment (Lazar 2017a), it is nostalgic to assume that global unions previously functioned in a more politically consistent fashion. Prior to the contemporary precarisation of formal industrial labour, global trade unions were often co-opted by the forces of capital and the state (Burawoy 1985). In (post) colonial contexts, conservative trade unions frequently neglected the struggles of workers that lay outside a narrow 'aristocracy of labour', and more broadly favoured complicity with capital ostensibly in the service of national development (Parry 2013; Sanchez and Strümpell 2014). In the mid-twentieth century, large formal sector trade unions continued to play a conservative role in mediating the shifting relationship between the state, corporations, and labour (Sanchez 2012; cf. Kaviraj 1988). In the coming decades, such a dynamic continued in the shift towards neoliberal regimes of production and governance (Shakya 2018; cf. Chatterjee 2008; Baviskar and Sundar 2008). What is significant to this history is not simply the observation that unions have a precedent for renegeing on their affective commitments to class struggle. Rather, one might productively consider the types of social contexts where critiques of this behaviour attain an especially prominent role in popular political consciousness. Although the conservative unions that we discuss in this paper have always been exclusionary in their representation, and selective in their politics, it is in times of loss and drastic social transformation that this discrepancy becomes the subject of popular critique. The precarisation of labour is an instance of such loss and demands a critical assessment of how trade union members understand the relationship between the affective ideals and bureaucratic actions of their institutions.

Research suggests that popular responses to the dispossession of late capitalism are increasingly functioning outside forms of representative democracy like trade unions and political parties (Garces 2013; Graeber 2002, 2004, 2013, 2013; Hickel 2012; Juris and Khasnabish 2013; Wilde 2016). Rather, resistance to corporate and state power is said to be moving towards patterns of direct democracy, as well as largely performative forms of action such as the Occupy movement, where the act of resistance itself is as significant as any definite goal. However, an overreliance on such forms of action is problematic, since it implies that a focus upon material concerns of production and labour have been rendered anachronistic, and the basic forms of trade unionism are no longer relevant for contemporary political struggles (cf Lazar 2017a). This assumption is by no means pervasive. However, it is certainly a significant strand of contemporary academic and activist thought and tends to fetishize the communicative aims of politics and the processes of consciousness building, to the detriment of understanding how political-economic power is rooted in productive infrastructure, and how that infrastructure may be appropriated. We argue that political institutions that articulate collective interests in sites of production have an integral role to play in any resistance to dispossession. Our aim in this paper is to understand how institutions like this are currently being engaged with by their members, who so frequently claim that they are not functioning as they should be.

Based upon a comparison of different types of unions, in apparently quite different contexts of precarity, we suggest that there is a necessary mismatch between ‘ideal’ and ‘practice’ in trade union politics, which means that unions in most environments are seldom able to live up to their ideal forms and self-representation. The paper draws upon ethnographic field research conducted by Kesküla in the ArcelorMittal coal mines of Karaganda, Kazakhstan, and by Sanchez in the Tata Steel and Tata Motors plants of Jamshedpur, India.¹ We ask why different types of unions in these environments would make emotive appeals to languages of struggle that they are usually unable to fulfil in their daily activities. We suggest that there is a fundamental slippage between the emotive aspect of union politics (which reference sudden change through the dramatic struggles of the barricades), and the day-to-day realities of formal unions (which entail slow, tedious negotiation within constrained institutional frameworks). We argue that since the international language and symbol system of trade unionism is historically rooted in the idea of political struggle, trade unionists legitimate their institutions with reference to dramatic and exceptional terms that are rarely replicated in everyday life. We explore how conservative and radical trade unions alike rely upon this presentation to rationalise their work as part of an international and historically continuous political project and show how this diverges from the actual business of everyday politics. The data presented here suggest that whilst the failure of collective action may be an important technology of precarisation, discourses of such failure persist both in the absence of trade union collusion, and in contexts of relative employment security. This fact points towards a fundamental tension at the heart of trade unions as political bureaucracies.

Context and comparison

The Indian city of Jamshedpur is the site of the Tata Motors and Tata Steel works, which was built in 1907 by the industrialist Jamshed Tata, after whom the city is named (Bahl 1995; Fraser 1919; Pillai 1923). Jamshedpur is today home to 1.3 million people, largely descended from labour migrants that arrived from central and eastern India in the early twentieth century. Tata industrialisation was based on the company town model, in which a labour force comprised of new migrants, would be permanently settled in company housing, provided with healthcare and educational infrastructure and encouraged to reproduce itself for generations to come (Keenan and Sorsby 1945: 33).

Until the late twentieth century, Indian economic policy was characterised by high import tariffs and restrictions on the foreign ownership of Indian companies and infrastructure. In this environment, older corporations like Tata benefitted from reduced market competition and a highly stable production regime. However, when India’s economy was liberalised in 1991, Tata’s monopolies in the production of trucks and private sector steel began to collapse. Cheap imports entered the domestic market, and Tata’s rivals were revived by foreign investment. Faced with declining profits, Tata commenced an early retirement programme for large numbers of employees in Jamshedpur, whose jobs could then be filled by cheaper casual workers. This new flexible labour force would receive lower wages, and none of the employment benefits that had characterised Tata work for decades. For the first time in the city’s history, the children of Tata workers would be insecurely employed on lower salaries and with considerably less benefits than their parents.

¹ Sanchez’s field data is derived from Sanchez 2016a.

When redundancies were first implemented in the early 1990s, much of the Tata Worker Union's (TWU) leadership favoured a harmonious relationship with the company that had not seen its members strike since the 1920s. To maintain this harmony, the union refused membership to large numbers of maintenance staff and seasonal labourers who lay outside the traditional Tata working class. As a result, the union had been beset by popular allegations of corruption for decades. In 1993, when the union's president V.G. Gopal proposed a general strike to resist the casualisation of permanent jobs, the strongest opposition came from within his own organisation. That same year, Gopal was assassinated outside of his office by two gunmen hired by members of his own union committee.² Following Gopal's death, the casualisation of Tata labour met with no further resistance from the Tata Workers' Union. By the time Sanchez first began research on the shopfloor of the Tata Motors plant in 2006, more than three quarters of all company workers were employed on fixed-term contracts that could be terminated without notice. They were excluded from membership of the plant's only trade union, took home as little as one fifth of the wages of their permanent colleagues, and were not entitled to sick pay, pensions, company healthcare, homes, or schooling for their children. Such 'casual' workers were recruited from company families and accumulated years of continuous service on a single shopfloor as they were shifted back and forth between different categories of employment. Most claimed that corrupt and violent trade union leaders were complicit in the casualisation process, a charge levelled by both the casually employed majority and their permanently employed parents (Sanchez 2016a). In Jamshedpur, industrial workers' interpretations of precarious employment mobilised a systemic corruption discourse, which described an integral relationship between modern corporate capitalism and the criminalisation of political institutions (ibid; Sanchez 2012, 2015).

Our second case draws on Kesküla's ethnographic fieldwork in Kazakhstan, in the industrial town of Karaganda. The city of Karaganda was founded in 1934 as the centre of the Karaganda Corrective Labor Camp, part of the Soviet GULAG network of prisons. The area was populated with prisoners and 'special settlers', a term referring to various ethnic groups, such as Volga Germans, Poles, Koreans, Chechens, and Tatars who were considered disloyal to the regime and removed from their ethnic homelands before and during the Second World War. In the decades that followed, the Karaganda region attracted labour migrants from across the Soviet Union, who settled the thinly populated area to work in its coal and steel industries.

In the Soviet period, trade unions in Karaganda, as elsewhere in the Soviet Union, were subordinated to the Party and worked closely with the management of their workplaces. Soviet trade unions were institutions for the care and reproduction of labour, even whilst they were being used as symbols of socialist revolution. During 1988–1990, when strikes spread across the declining Soviet Union, miners became one of their primary driving forces (Siegelbaum 2004). Their demands were explicitly non-ideological. Strikers asked for the payment of delayed salaries and the granting of extended annual leave, rather than anything as radical as a regime change. In Karaganda, although independent unions emerged in these strikes, they were quickly ousted by the company, who preferred to continue working with the trusted and compliant trade union Korgau that all new employees automatically became members of. Even after the privatisation of the mines by ArcelorMittal in 1996, Korgau remained in place as the

² Gopal's assassination was orchestrated by a TWU official named Amrendra Kumar Singh, who was convicted of his murder in 2006.

dominant trade union and played a central role in most of Karaganda's labour disputes during the 2000s.

When Mittal assumed ownership, the Karaganda coal mines still employed 32,000 local people. By the time Kesküla began field research in Karaganda in 2013, production of coal had decreased, and the mines' labour force had declined to 18,000. In contrast to the bright new national capital of Astana 200 kilometres north, Karaganda suffered from disrepair, a failing civic infrastructure, constant out-migration, and a chronic lack of investment in the mines since privatisation. The region had further been tested by a series of methane gas explosions in the mines during 2004, 2006, and 2008 that killed nearly 100 people (Kesküla 2018c).

The 2006 explosion in the mining town of Shakhtinsk (70 kilometres from Karaganda) claimed the lives of 42 people and caused thousands of striking miners to take to the main square of their neglected town to demand better pay, health and safety regulations, and civic regeneration. In Shakhtinsk, the shells of abandoned houses faced muddy pavements with no street lighting, and all the trees in the town's public parks had been felled for firewood when the city's central heating system stopped working. As the result of the 2006 strike, most of the miners' demands were met, and the head of the mine's management forced to resign alongside the incumbent leader of the Korgau trade union. It was during this period that a charismatic mine foreman named Marat Mirgayazov rose to power in the union, and whose actions inform the opening vignette of this paper.

In the company towns of Jamshedpur and Karaganda, a popular discourse among industrial workers suggests that locally dominant trade unions are currently failing their members. In these environments, working life is characterised by a decline in economic and employment security that parallels the liberalisation of the national economy. In the Tata company town of Jamshedpur, this process is related to the relaxation of the Monopolies and Restrictive Trade Practices Act in 1991. In the industrial city of Karaganda, privatisation and the 2008 economic crisis resulted in stagnating wages and reduced social benefits, a freezing of recruitment and little investment in productive infrastructure (Kesküla 2018a).

We believe that a comparison of cases such as these is an analytically productive project, which might reveal something important about the institutional nature and affect of labour politics. Our comparison here of India and Kazakhstan reveals how similar political processes and emic interpretations emerge in radically different cultural contexts and uses an interrogation of dissimilarities to uncover commonalities. Following ethnographic endeavours seeking global connections in the manner of Wolf (1982), we support the idea of global comparative ethnographies that seek out connections between places. We ask quite simply why discourses about trade union failure seem so consistent in both India and Kazakhstan, and why languages of political struggle share such a similar affect and significance in two environments with radically different histories.

The affect of struggle

Whilst a wide variety of political institutions establish their regenerative power by stressing continuity with their own past (cf Bloch 1992), not all relate themselves to a historical referent of confrontation and change. Such a position is however a characteristic of political organisations that have their roots in moments of struggle and revolution, yet assume current bureaucratic and administrative responsibilities as agents of management and negotiation. In

these institutions, discourses of betrayal and failure are very common, since the banality of everyday politics can seldom satisfy the discursive appeal to a history of struggle. Political projects of this type, grounded in opposition to durable structures of power, tend towards a utopianism that has the capacity for mass motivation in times of conflict (Scott 2014; Wilde 2016) and, yet paradoxically, contains the seeds of its own critique.

Whilst leftist popular politics increasingly favours less deterministic models of how the world should be reformed and the proper means of doing so (Hardt and Negri 2017), more traditional forms of labour organisation (such as trade unions and some types of cooperatives) remain essentially modernist in their focus upon an idealised telos of progress. In this regard, they share much with the progressive logics of capitalism itself (cf Kasmir 1996). For the purpose of this paper's comparison, it is notable that the projects of capitalism, socialism, and colonialism share a teleological concern with progress (see Guyer 2007; Negri 2004). As Adams et al. argue, modernist temporalities are anticipatory ones where 'the future sets the conditions of possibility for action in the present' (Adams et al. 2009: 248). Drawing on Hegel, Marx's dialectical model of social structure and change was also rooted in a modernist temporality of progress (Berman 2010; Huyssen 1984; Lunn 1984). In the popular and intellectual politics of the twentieth century, the final resolution of the dialectic was elevated to a motivating utopian endpoint (Althusser 1970; Cornforth 1961), as most clearly expressed in Marxist-Leninism.

Revolutionary and activist institutions are particularly reliant on progressive, utopian ideals, since such frameworks provide the imaginative wherewithal to conceive of radically different alternatives to the status quo (Lefebvre 1970). Whilst recent articulations of anarchism explore the productive role utopian imagination plays in innovative and flexible forms of everyday activism (Davis 2014), in the formal sector, trade unions discussed in this paper the tendency towards affective idealism is a basis for popular discontent. In global trade unionism, progressive, modernist narratives are frequently mobilised in order to inspire allegiances and affective responses among their membership. The idealised referents of such a project ironically provide trade union members with the basis on which to mount critiques of their intuitions, and a standard against which to measure their failure.

Whilst it is common for trade union members to profess satisfaction with the bureaucratic functioning of their institution during times of stability (when the institution's role is to maintain positions of local privilege and comfort), the slippage between the affective and bureaucratic nature of trade unionism becomes more apparent in periods of accelerating precarity. More broadly, the content of trade union critique necessarily shifts in relationship to changing social conditions. In contexts of participatory democracy, where trade union members vote freely for their representatives and are expected to hold them to account, the language of trade union corruption may be a productive force for controlling and disciplining union leaders (Lazar 2007). However, in the contexts discussed in this paper, rank and file union members have markedly less effective control over the constitution and decision-making power of their institutions. In these settings, members are generally alienated from the bureaucratic processes that unions engage in, and popular critiques highlight the slippage between a discourse of dramatic confrontation and the disappointing progression of quotidian politics.

The political spectrum of global trade unionism varies considerably, ranging from the radical anarcho-sindicalism of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), to the neoliberal conservatism of the Indian Trade Union Congress (INTUC). And whilst Marxist notions of class consciousness are integral to the campaigning of some unions, in others, they are barely

present. In Kazakhstan for example, the leader of the dominant mining union Korgau suggests that it is currently impossible to know ‘whether the left or right has answers’, and although the union respects the broad ideas of Marx, their struggle for members’ interests are chiefly defined and legitimised by an intimate knowledge of miners’ work. However, despite their ideological differences, the trade unions discussed in this paper share a common characteristic, which is that they are based around an affective core of struggle.

Currently, the subject of much anthropological attention, the notion of affect has nonetheless often proven a difficult one to operationalise ethnographically, particularly in studies of political economy, although Muehlebach’s work on Post Fordist Affect in Italy (Muehlebach 2011) suggests that the concept might yet be deployed to good effect in studies of labour. In this paper, we adopt a theory of affect inspired by Rutherford’s synthesis of the approaches of Massumi and Sedgwick (Rutherford 2016; Massumi 2002; Sedgwick 2003). As Rutherford describes, for Massumi, affect is ‘a felt bodily intensity, the feeling of having a feeling, a potential that emerges in the gap between movement and rest’ (Rutherford 2016: 286), whilst for Sedgwick, affect is a pluralised, prediscursive field, comprised of mutually reinforcing drives (ibid). Bringing these two approaches into conversation with one another, Rutherford proposes the conception of the affective turn in anthropology as inviting closer attention to the ‘forces that move people, forces that attract, repel, and provoke’ (ibid). Such forces underpin the more objective structures of political life and deserve careful attention from scholars concerned with critical understandings of power and economy.

The affective core of a political institution provides emotive content, inspires sentiments of identification, and suggests basic principles that are consistent across time. Situated within a more anachronistic framework, one might consider that it is the affective core of an institution that fosters collective effervescence among its participants (Durkheim 1912, cited in Shilling and Mellor 1998). All political institutions have an affective core of some type that creates feelings of purpose, significance, and belonging and constructs an idealism that underlies the less inspiring business of everyday life. The affective core of trade unions revolves around an ethic of struggle, which suggests an idealised understanding of the relationship between the institution and the process of political change. As organs of collective action, even conservative institutions such as the Tata Workers’ Union rely upon an affective core of struggle to assign significance to their roles.

Affects of struggle may certainly inform collective strike action that functions entirely outside the framework of formal trade unionism (Kideckel 2008; Laterza 2015). Elsewhere, similar affects may arguably emerge through workers’ attempt to ‘win’ in their daily, personal struggles with the production process (Burawoy 1979; Kesküla 2016; Parry 1999). They also feature in informal gendered solidarity networks (Pollert 1981; Westwood 1984), or when one endeavours to reclaim skilled workmanship by forging new connections with colleagues and machinery (Bear 2015; Cross 2011; Leitch 1996). Furthermore, an affect of struggle may be expressed in indigenous cosmologies and ritual practices, which critique capitalism and promote class consciousness (Mills 1999; Nash 1979; Ong 1987). Affects of struggles are also salient to cultures of collective nostalgia, reminiscence and complaint (Kesküla 2018b; Kesküla 2019). Our assumption is that these multifarious expressions of struggle are not mutually exclusive. As such, our aim is to explore what the significance and contradictions of the affect of struggle is to trade union politics, rather than to claim that the value of struggle is peculiar to those politics.

In this instance, a focus upon how affects of struggle relate to unions is germane, since in the Indian and Kazakhstani contexts with long histories of trade unionism, suppression of other

collective political initiatives, and a historical fragmentation of the working class (Ashwin 1998; Parry 2013), such institutions remain a central locus of political action. In the Post-Soviet context of Karaganda, trade union politics speaks to a value placed upon labour and class in socialist ideology, which tenaciously lingers in contemporary local imaginaries. In the Tata company town of Jamshedpur, trade unionism plays a central role in the local political consciousness, since the modern mythology of the city suggests that it was founded as a heterogenous urban space, where a new industrial working class was formed through labour struggle (Sanchez and Strümpell 2014; Sanchez 2016a) Further, consolidating this politics of class and labour in Jamshedpur is an underlying presumption of urban exceptionalism, which sees national politics of caste and ethnicity as both dangerous and distant from the Tata experience (Sanchez 2016b). In both field sites then, terrains of class and labour struggle are deeply embedded within the local political consciousness. It is for this reason that this paper focuses upon how an affect of struggle relates to trade unionism.

The affect of struggle is comprised of an international symbol-system of institutional forms, political tactics, images, terms, and concepts that allow those who engage with it to interpret their activities as constituent parts of a global, *longue durée* opposition to antagonistic and unjust forms of power. Such an assemblage is a characteristic of collective social institutions that engage with the world as agents of idealised change that may express core political and ethical values, class interests, or religious sentiments. The broad affect of struggle often retains a notable consistency between political activists on the far-left and the far-right, among formal sector trade unions and ‘grassroots activists’, and among chauvinistic utopian movements of religious fundamentalists. What defines the affect of struggle is the emotive value placed on justified suffering, and conscious collective opposition to the agents that precipitate such a condition (cf Holbraad 2014). In this regard, the affect of struggle is a core constituent of any form of knowingly subaltern class-consciousness (Thompson 1991; Sanchez 2016a:25ff). The aesthetic content of the affect is itself highly significant, since it is the ability to interpret such symbols that helps to create intimate solidarities among current participants (cf Herzfeld 2005), and the emotional force of them that helps to recruit new persons into political communities (Riles 2000: 130ff).

In Karaganda, trade union leaders did not refer directly to the long struggle of the working class, and the victory achieved after the October Revolution. However, the affect of struggle was embodied in everyday references to the union’s more recent history and current practices, which entailed a similar emotional and aesthetic content. As ArcelorMittal systematically removed the social benefits of its employees following the 2008 economic crisis, the locally dominant union of Korgau and its new leader Mirgayazov began to vocally oppose the company in the media and public events. ArcelorMittal’s management claimed that the union’s militant posturing stemmed from the fact that the company had recently ceased to allow the union to manage workers’ medical facilities and had deprived a resentful Mirgayazov from a personal source of income. The outcome was a conflict between the union and the company. In 2013, the company announced further redundancies, whilst the Kazakhstani media widely reported the lavish £50-million wedding ceremony that Lakshmi Mittal organised for his niece in Barcelona. Mirgayazov’s response in the local newspaper was very telling and typical:

Now he wants to fire 2,500 steel workers. But three years ago, we defended miners with our actions and none were fired. We, Korgau, are a strong trade union, therefore we could guarantee that no one was fired. We will continue to fight and will never stop. Mittal wants to earn money but we will keep this money for the miners. /.../ We

understand his position, he only wants to dance at weddings, but we are on the side of the miners/.../ The money he has now, has been brought to him by miners and steel workers. And when he tells us to tighten our belts, he must also tighten his. One needs to live the life of a miner, not a shareholder.

For the union of Korgau, the affective core of struggle centred on the experience of ‘living like a miner’, workers’ declining material conditions, and a sense of being disrespected by a rapacious international capital that profited at the expense of workers’ livelihood, health, and dignity. Mirgayazov’s engagement with the affect of struggle emerges in his reference to manning the picket-lines and barricades of a long and just conflict, and the class antagonisms he identifies between those whose surplus value is alienated from them through wage labour, and those that dance at opulent weddings. Without explicitly using the language of class, Korgau nevertheless engaged with the memory of a more prosperous and worker-friendly Soviet regime as the glorification of manual labour, widely accepted by both workers and unions persisted even after Kazakhstan became independent. The union suggested that this historical model was being dismantled by new economic forces, locally represented by ArcelorMittal, which functioned as agents of precarisation.

However, much like in the Tata workplaces of Jamshedpur, in Karaganda the dominant trade union language of struggle and conflict was necessarily overshadowed by mundane activities that cast trade unions as bureaucrats, managers, and welfare providers. At the end of their shift, workers would enter the union representative’s office in their particular mine or factory to present their grievances. On a single day, one person arrived at the office to complain that they had been given poor-quality work boots; another complained that they had been assigned to a shift that clashed with their moonlighting activities; someone else came to ask for ‘material help’, a euphemism for a cash fund that the union distributes for medical costs and such. The union also assumed the administrative responsibility of distributing vouchers for employees’ health resorts, and workers came to the office to negotiate whether they could receive the vouchers to coincide with their annual holidays.

The Korgau offices occupied an entire floor of a building close to Karaganda’s regional government offices. Korgau’s offices consisted of union employees focussing on health and safety, recreation, labour rights, sports, a meeting room, and Mirgayazov’s spacious office. The building was busy, with union members constantly arriving to meet their leader, whilst his secretary’s phone never stopped ringing with different complaints, questions, and requests. Besides giving fiery speeches, Mirgayazov was engaged in preparing for court cases, readying members to testify at tribunals, collating reports, and meeting with union representatives in the mines themselves. When Kesküla met with Mirgayazov in 2013, he was primarily engaged in preparing an important new collective labour agreement for the mines. The negotiation meetings that took place every 2 weeks at the company, and trade union offices well illustrated the everyday shape of the unions’ political role. Such meetings consisted of slow progress through the many and, sometimes, tedious points of an agenda. Negotiations over the subtlest minutiae of labour conditions were punctuated by Korgau’s denunciations that the company was treating its employees unfairly, whilst for their part, the company responded with the charge that the union was poorly informed about market economics. These confrontations were often tense and bitter, but behind the big words and insults, there was recurrent attention to the technicalities of holiday leave, minor pay rises, health and safety conditions, transport to work, and the like (cf Lazar 2017b).

Such everyday negotiations are also taking place 5000 kilometres away, in the Indian offices of the Tata Workers' Union, where Collective Settlement Agreements are thrashed out between the union and the company in painstaking meetings. Likewise, the small numbers of Tata workers that are still able to become union members may visit their representatives to demand redress for a pair of company work boots that fit too tightly, or a holiday pay allowance incorrectly calculated. But despite the TWU fulfilling these functions, the trade union failure discourse among Tata workers describes a context where senior members of the union have been convicted of murdering their more radically inclined colleagues, where vast numbers of workers are alienated from collective representation, and where the union has remained conspicuously silent on the most significant dispossession of its labour force ever witnessed. The Indian context is therefore a fundamentally different one to that in Karaganda, where the precarisation of labour does not assume the same forms and is not enabled by the same political technologies. Nonetheless, it is striking that Karaganda workers like ageing Ukrainian labour migrant Artur, characterise Mirgayazov using a discourse of trade union failure that is largely consistent with the Indian case. We suggest that this may be explained by the discrepancy between the affective ideals by which trade unions mobilise support, and the inability for a functioning, dominant institution to meet these ideals through the types of banal, bureaucratic functions that comprise the everyday business of political life in formal sector trade unions. Put more simply, it is in the nature of successful trade unions to betray their affects by virtue of wielding bureaucratic power. In the section that follows, we ask whether the disjuncture between struggle and banality is also a feature of less dominant and ostensibly more radical trade unions. In doing so, we suggest that the affect of struggle provides failing trade union actors with the will to endure the open-ended frustrations of bureaucratic process.

Struggling unions

In the industrial city of Jamshedpur, the communist Jamshedpur Mazdoor Union (JMU) occupied two dilapidated rooms in a decaying building beside a busy roundabout. The structure was built around a central courtyard, with access leading off two roads. To the front of the building, the lower floors were occupied by a phone booth, opticians, and liquor store. The rear of the building was taken up by an eatery and the courtyard that served as its outdoor kitchen. Jagged pieces of masonry and assorted construction debris protruded through the dirt of its unsurfaced floor.

The JMU office was located up a steep flight of stairs, with windows facing out onto the courtyard kitchen. The small office contained a large heavy wooden desk, three chairs, and a bureau. Stacks of yellowed, dusty papers populated the room's shelves, documenting campaigns and complaints stretching back many years. The walls of the office glorified the founding fathers of international communism—portraits of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Ho Chi Minh, and Joseph Stalin. Elsewhere, a revolutionary image of Lenin sat beside a poster advertising the latest All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) activity, whilst Che Guevara's iconic face was emblazoned on a bright red map of South America. One wall displayed a photograph of the state's first Communist MP, V.K. Mishra: the grandfather of one of the JMU's ageing committee members, S. Mishra. Beneath his portrait was the legend: 'He gave his life to the cause of the working people of Jamshedpur'.

Except for one middle-age man engaged in a long struggle to unionise the workers of a small local iron works, the JMU's committee was comprised of men in their late 60s. In

contrast to the rather formal Tata Workers' Union leaders, the JMU were eager to spend extended periods of time discussing the politics and history of the town. The office served as a forum for older Bengali men to debate the declining fortunes of the state's communist movement, with regular infusions of sweet tea and chewing tobacco from stalls outside the building. Sitting in their cramped, dark office, the ageing committee members felt themselves to be part of an international socialist struggle between the forces of labour and capital. Throughout the long, hot afternoons of daily life in the JMU, erstwhile firebrands from regional communist organisations would arrive to discuss radical moments in the city's history, which seemed far removed from the frustrating conditions of modern leftist trade unionism. Hailing visitors with the South Asian communist salute of 'Lal [Red] Salaam', the JMU used the symbols and affective vocabulary of more inspiring times. On learning that Sanchez was a former member of the British Socialist Workers' Party, the elderly JMU men took to addressing him with the somewhat nostalgic term of 'comrade' and enjoyed nothing more than a debate about the decline of British trade unions in the wake of Thatcherism, or the lessons learned in the Paris Commune of 1871.

The JMU's *raison d'être* was an ongoing legal struggle surrounding a 1981 strike by contract workers in Tata Steel. The JMU maintains that in 1981, a government edict based upon the Contract Labor (Regulation and Abolition) Act (1970) demanded that a large number of contract workers in Jamshedpur's Tata industries be given permanent employment. At this time, approximately 10,000 unskilled labourers, cleaners, and maintenance operatives were eligible for regularisation in Tata Steel, most of whom were Adivasi tribal migrants from surrounding rural areas. Discussing the matter one afternoon in his office, JMU president Dulal Munshi stated that whilst most industries in Jamshedpur complied with this requirement, Tata Steel refused to do so. Although the Tata Workers' Union were unwilling to provide any support to the aggrieved workers, the JMU organised a three-day sit-down strike among 1500 contract employees which effectively closed an entire Tata Steel division. The JMU alleges that the sit-down was finally broken by company-hired thugs, who stormed the shop floor with local police and detained the demonstrators:

They were put into trucks, at midnight, like this [miming bound hands], and taken to Chaibasa. Then they put them out and left them in the Jungle.

Munshi claimed that once the striking workers had completed the 60-kilometre walk back to Jamshedpur from the town of Chaibasa, they discovered that their jobs in Tata Steel had been filled by new contract labourers. He explained that the extreme poverty of the region's rural areas provided Tata Steel with a ready supply of desperate migrant workers, who were prepared to break the strike for even lower wages than their predecessors. Speaking candidly, his colleague S.K. Mishra explained that in 1981, the JMU failed its members because they lacked the political and coercive influence of their rivals:

We did not give them [the strikers] the leadership at that time to resist. We don't have the resources to resist or [tapping his temple] the mind-set. Who can stand against the SP [Superintendent of Police]?

In the context of a costly regularisation of thousands of workers, conservative monopoly trade unions such as the TWU are believed to be complicit in the safeguarding of corporate profitability. As the 1981 strike-breaking suggests, the TWU's position is partly entrenched through the use of corporate and state violence. However, the monopoly of the TWU is also supported by long-standing allegiances with national political parties and a *de facto* closed-

shop in Tata industries.³ In this context, the overt and dramatic experiences of violence provide the JMU with a clear foil for their efforts. However, it is the slow frustration of the law and bureaucracy that truly erodes their ability to mount effective resist. The conception of bureaucracy as political power has long been embedded within sociological thought, particularly in discussions of how everyday management may be applied towards utopian goals (Weber 1994, cited in Bear and Mathur 2015: 18). However, this paper considers how bureaucratic complexity may be enacted as a form of violence, in which the labyrinthine tedium of the state is an effective barrier to resistance (see Gupta 2012; Graeber 2012).

Unable to negotiate with a potentially coercive employer that did not recognise their legitimacy, in 1981, the JMU submitted a complaint to the State Labor Commissioner on the grounds that Tata Steel had violated the Contract Labor (Regulation and Abolition) Act (1970). Although a state employment tribunal originally found in favour of the 1981 strikers, Tata successfully contested this judgement, arguing that the case was too important to be judged at tribunal level. A resulting High Court Judgement against Tata was also appealed, followed by a Supreme Court ruling that was also appealed. Each of these hearings took several years to progress, and in 2000, the case was brought before the Supreme Court for the second time. The Supreme Court ruled that it was not the correct institution for such a matter and referred the matter back to the state employment tribunal, where the case had first been heard 19 years previously. At the time of initial field research, 6 years later, the state employment tribunal had still reached no decision. Munshi disclosed that of the original 10,000 contract workers whose regularisation was being debated, about 700 were still traceable. Many were seriously ill or deceased, and most had returned to their native villages in rural areas of the Jharkhand, Orissa, and Chhattisgarh states. Referencing the corrupt relationships that they perceived between Tata and the state, the officers of the JMU believed that the case was unlikely to be resolved by any Indian court. When Sanchez returned to the JMU's offices in 2014, the case was indeed still ongoing, choked by hostile bureaucracy whilst the JMU's leadership grew older. The violence of the bureaucratic state rests both in its complexity and in the open-ended uncertainties that such a condition imposes upon political resistance. Whilst the languages of dramatic struggle play a key role in defining the JMU's identity, the actual mechanics of their daily work are constrained by legislative and institutional considerations that are more technical, and which the politics of the barricades are unable to make an impact upon. In Kazakhstan, the 'miners' families' fringe union, similarly positions itself as a radical, transparent, and ideologically consistent alternative to dominant institutions. In reality, such small independent organisations are unable to reconcile the affective core of their politics with the nature of everyday campaign work, which is likewise mired in bureaucracy and legal obfuscation. Cutting across the regional and ideological differences in formal labour politics is a disjuncture between ideology and practice that characterises trade unions as political bureaucracies.

Both miners' families and the JMU were decidedly poorer than their local rivals, as was visible in their basic accommodation. However, the walls of their offices carried a suggestion of international solidarity that seemed to belie their lack of resources. In India, the communist JMU proudly appropriated the symbols and characters of historic socialist struggle. In

³ All of Jamshedpur's Tata industries have an explicit policy of negotiation with unions affiliated to the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), of which the TWU is a founding member (Tata Motors Limited. Jamshedpur 2001). Assuming the unlikelihood of a rival to the TWU emerging from within INTUC, non-INTUC unions in Tata industries operate in opposition to a company policy that has been extant since the mid-1920s.

Kazakhstan, Miners' Families displayed photographs of visiting international partners in mining enterprises in Europe and Russia whilst their leader talked about truly caring for miners. In this regard, the aesthetic forms of the JMU and miners' family offices are devices that both define the intimate local boundaries of their interlocutors and project outwards to an imagined international community of similarly inclined political actors (cf. Wolf-Meyer 2006). As such, whilst the Indian and Kazakhstani fringe unions do not use the explicit same language of class, they nevertheless share an affective core of global struggle.

Although more radical unions may emerge from unusual and dramatic moments of struggle where strikes and demonstrations mobilise large numbers of members in public spaces, after the initial critical event has subsided, everyday patterns of labour politics function quite differently. In the aftermath of the barricades, trade unions withdraw to the offices and court rooms of the local state, where they mobilise the tools that the given legal and political framework allows them to use in ordinary times. Since these legal battles can take decades to conclude and the short-term results are often disappointing, even radical unions that emphasise their sincere relationship to the affective core of international struggle often fall short of the values and self-image with which they legitimate their existence.

Conclusion

For fringe unionists, the affective ideal of struggle often enables one to endure the slow grind of legal and bureaucratic work, whose end is often unforeseeable, and whose daily processes are mundane and frustrating. By situating such work within broader processes that are globally and historically significant, the banality of everyday appears more effective, meaningful, and hopeful for radical trade unions and their members.

Institutions of collective action are deemed efficacious by their potential participants, when they are perceived to possess the ability to enact change upon the world. The recognition of such a technology is a precondition of the type of faith in political institutions that we discuss in this paper. Following Crapanzano's definition of 'hope' as a temporal orientation towards a future goal, hope should be regarded as a political orientation that collectivises suffering and underpins the will to endure (Crapanzano 2004: 100–101). For radical trade unions, languages of struggle are essentially hopeful objects of this type. Although they seem to speak from a vanishing past, discourses about public and affectively charged political struggles provide beleaguered, radical unions with a register that casts their bureaucratic frustrations in terms that are historically significant and may result in a final and positive conclusion. In short, the affect of struggle allows radical trade unions to believe that their stalled daily engagements with the state are minor thrusts and parries, in a larger fight that they might yet win.

For the conservative trade unions that dominate labour politics in their environments, the affective ideal of struggle similarly plays an important role in the daily work of their institutions. In environments where the compromises of joint consultation are widely critiqued in terms of corruption and ineffectiveness, the affect of struggle enables unions to legitimate their authority as sincere and efficacious political actors. However, for their critical members, it is the reckoning of everyday banality and bureaucracy against the affect of struggle that lends weight to allegations of institutional collusion and failure. We suggest that the slippage between ideal and practice in these apparently rather different institutions suggest something about the nature of trade unionism more generally.

In political organisations based upon an ethic of collective action and campaigning, the effectiveness of these groups is intimately tied to a confrontational affect of struggle. However, when placed in positions of everyday authority as institutionalised political actors, their banal functions as bureaucrats, managers, legal advocates, and negotiators contradicts the terms of the affect itself. This is the paradox of struggle in global trade unions and explains the prevalence of discourses of failure and betrayal even in contexts where such an interpretation is empirically unsubstantiated. This tendency heavily informs the role that trade unions are believed to play in the precarious conditions of modern capitalism.

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Legislation and resolutions Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act, 1970

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