

I. PROBLEMOS IR SPRENDIMAI / PROBLEMY I ICH ROZWIĄZANIA

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DISCOURSES OF LABOUR PROTEST IN POST-COMMUNIST LITHUANIA*

This article explores the emergent discourses of labour protest which have accompanied the transition process from communism to the market economy. Building on the ground-breaking theoretical paradigm of V. N. Voloshinov and contemporary attempts by Marxist scholars to develop a materialist socio-linguistics, the gradual emergence of class-based labour discourses in the new market economies of Central and Eastern Europe is examined. A number of recent labour protests in ex-soviet Lithuania are examined. The complex articulation of labour identities is charted. Their legitimization, as social actors with "independent" demands, in the context of transitional Lithuanian society, is analyzed through the discourses of protest. Discourses of labour protest have emerged in contestation and tension with seemingly contradictory attempts to impose a "supra class" ideology. The imposition of both neo-liberal ideology which seeks to exclude organized labour from an independent role in civil society, and at the same time, the cultivation of the language of social partnership, which seeks to incorporate labour in national tripartite structures, are complementary attempts to forestall the emergence of more radical class-based discourses. The emergence of dialogic discourses between labour and capital, and the forms of their social resonance, reveal much about the current limits of labour protest in the new market economies. Such discourses also reveal much about possible future forms of labour contestation, as the new market economies of Central and Eastern Europe are incorporated into the newly enlarged European Union.

KEYWORDS: *Discourse, Voloshinov, labour protest, post-communism, Lithuania, European Enlargement.*

Introduction

This article explores the emergent discourses of labour protest which have accompanied the transition process from socialism to the market economies. It is a first preliminary attempt, based on admittedly fragmentary samples of discourse, to provide a basis for future more extensive analysis. Even these limited snatches of discourse however provide a condensed telegraphy of protest revealing the potential emergence of more challenging "emancipatory" discourses¹. The discourses

are comprised of spoken utterances of participants in labour protests captured in news reports, slogans on banners and placards, protest manifestos and declarations. These are "dialogic" statements of discontent "from below", addressed to ruling authorities and posing uncomfortable, even potentially incompatible questions about the new social order of post-communism. Very often such dialogue takes a moralistic accusatory tone, addressing issues of fairness in society, more particularly of the perceived betray-

* This article is a shortened version of a forthcoming publication in the *Atlantic Journal of Communication* 2006 Special Issue, and is published here by kind permission of the editor.

¹ HUSPEK, Michael. Language and Power. In *Language and Society*, vol. 20, 1, p. 131-137.

al of expectations and promises of what a “free” democratic post-soviet Lithuania would offer to its citizens.

Theoretically, this article draws on the work of V. N. Voloshinov, a scholar who laid the basis for a Marxist school of social dialogics during the first phase of socialist transformation in Russia, and whose important theoretical work has been in English translation for some three decades². Although increasingly recognized as a seminal work, hitherto, this perspective had been largely unapplied empirically. More recently, however, the approach sketched by Voloshinov has been developed in the active critique of both structuralist and Habermasian approaches to social discourse analysis³. In contrast to structuralist analyses, priority is given to the linguistic sign in the realized and contested spoken utterance as the vehicle of ideological social consciousness. In distinction to, although not necessarily in opposition to, the insights of cognitive cultural theory⁴, the analysis presented here remains on the terrain of the collective group identities, formed in specific social and historical circumstances. The dialogic realization of utterances is seen as contingent upon the underlying and unfolding processes of the new forms of labour’s collective alienation in the sphere of production, the systemic relocation of labour within

emergent capitalist relations of production. Empirically, post-communist transition society offers a unique window into these changing forms of consciousness in a changed world, one in which labour’s alienation is taking radically new appearances.

Within this altered world, the specific refraction of reality which each ideological sphere attains through the semiotic materiality of signs, achieves particular clarity in the dialogic discourses of labour protest. According to Voloshinov:

Every ideological refraction of existence in the process of generation, no matter what the nature of its significant material, is accompanied by ideological refraction in word as an obligatory concomitant phenomenon⁵.

However, in this process, language is no mere mechanistic reflection of the struggle of base within superstructures. Voloshinov identified not simply the reflection of reality in signs, but its ideologized refraction, infusing an “inner dialectical tension” in word meaning. This dialectical tension creates a clash of “differently oriented social interests within one and the same sign community”. The refraction of class struggle is registered in what Voloshinov termed, the “social multiacculturality” of the ideological sign, in which theme and form of sign are inextricably intercon-

² See: VOLOSHINOV, Valentin N. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. New York; London, 1973; WOOLFSON, Charles. The Semiotics of Working-class Speech. In *Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, 1976, vol. 9, p. 163–197; WOOLFSON, Charles. Culture, Language and the Human Personality. In *Marxism Today*, 1997, vol. 21, 8, p. 229–240.

³ MCNALLY, David. *Bodies of Meaning: Studies on Language, Labor and Liberation*. Albany, 2001; GARDINER, M. *The Dialogics of Critique*. London, 1992; BRANDIST, Chris. Bakhtin, Marxism and Russian Populism. In BRANDIST, C.; TIHANOV, G. (eds.) *Materializing Bakhtin: The Bakhtin Circle and Social Theory*. London, 2000; COLLINS, Charles. *Language, Ideology and Social Consciousness – Developing a sociohistorical approach*. Aldershot, 1999; FOSTER, John; WOOLFSON, Charles. How Workers on the Clyde Gained the Capacity for Class Struggle: the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders’ Work-In, 1971–72. In MCILROY, J.; FISHMAN, N.; CAMPBELL, A. B. (eds) *British Trade Unionism 1964–79*. Aldershot, 2000, vol. 2, p. 297–325; WELTY, Gordon. *A Critique of Habermas’ Proposed Reconstruction of Historical Materialism presented to the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences (August 17, 1989)*. http://www.wright.edu/~gordon.welty/Habermas_89.htm; JONES, Peter E. Discourse and the materialist conception of history: critical comments on Critical Discourse Analysis. In *Historical Materialism*. Vol. 12, I, p. 97–125.

⁴ IGNATOW, Gabriel. Speaking Together, Thinking Together? Exploring Metaphor and Cognition in a Shipyard Union Dispute. In *Sociological Forum*, 2004, vol. 19, 3, p. 405–433.

⁵ VOLOSHINOV, footnote 2, p. 15.

ted and ultimately determined by these sets of contested forces:

Indeed, the economic conditions that inaugurate a new element of reality into the social purview, that make it socially meaningful and “interesting”, are exactly the same conditions that create the forms of ideological communication (the cognitive, the artistic, the religious and so on), which in turn shape the forms of semiotic expression⁶.

For present purposes, the “new element of reality” is the complex unfolding of class identities in the newly emergent market economies of post-communism. This process is conditioned by the legacies and inhibitions of the previous era, but it is also sensitive to the impacts of economic and political change of unprecedented scope and rapidity, no less than the establishment of the new order of the market economy. Dialogic discourse allows us to begin to analyze these impacts within changing forms of social consciousness. As Voloshinov suggested:

The word is the most sensitive index of social changes, and what is more, of changes still in the process of growth, still without definitive shape and not as yet accommodated into already regularized and fully defined ideological systems. The word has the capacity to register all the transitory, delicate, momentary phases of social change⁷.

But the “indexical” potential of words, in providing a window into changing social consciousness, is conditioned by contemporary ideological interventions which are themselves politically and socially “motivated” by the need to secure the hegemony of new market forces. Over the period of more than a decade and a half since the collapse of the Soviet Union, an attempt has been made to impose forms of social dialogue based on non-class “shared” assumptions of |social partnership”

between labour and capital, “united” in the common project of transition. This has been an acutely “necessary” form of intervention, given the fraught social tensions created by the spiraling inequalities of post-communist society, and the supplanting of collectivist outlooks and supports with those based on forms of radical individualism. Like all ruling classes, the new elites of post-communism have attempted to give a supra-class, or eternal and “immutable” quality to word meaning in language, and therefore, to perceived reality. Above all, it has been necessary to forestall any return to previous “alternative” discourses of socialism, creating a radical rupture in social consciousness, by superimposing a new unified national identity in order to carry through the awkward business of post-communist transition. The search for new unifying ideology was well articulated by one spokesperson for the nascent Lithuanian independence movement of the early nineties:

It is necessary for us to become citizens of Lithuania. It would be our common joy... we would have common duties and common concerns⁸.

Crucial to the consolidation of this constructed unified national identity of “common duties” and “common concerns”, was the resurrection or re-invention of symbols of nationhood. This required the negotiation of an uncomfortable authoritarian (largely proto-fascist) legacy from the inter-war era of Lithuanian national independence. The resurrection of Lithuanian national identity also entailed the contemporary reinstatement of the primacy of the Lithuanian language over Russian, now the rejected language of the Soviet “occupier”, although still the first language of a significant minority, especially of the working population. Largely deprived of the legitimizing resources of past history, and consumed with the

⁶ VOLOSHINOV, footnote 2, p. 22–23.

⁷ VOLOSHINOV, footnote 2, p. 23.

⁸ JUOZAITIS, Arydas. Statement of member of the Sąjūdis Initiative group. In *Lituanus, Lithuanian Quarterly Journal of Arts and Sciences*, 1990, Spring, vol. 2, 36, 1. http://www.lituanus.org/1990_1/90_1_06.HTM

expurgation of its more contemporary Soviet history, the nascent independence movement in Lithuania resorted to the creation of a sometimes spurious vocabulary of symbolic unity. Such conscious deployments of meanings and language however are always liable to contestation, creating what Voloshinov called, semiotic "flux" within language. It is this continuing potential for flux, which potentially poses socially disruptive challenges to the increasingly fragile assumptions underlying the new social order which is examined here. It is the privileged site within which a more or less fierce and ongoing "socially interested" interrogation of signs between labour and capital takes place.

The study of contemporary labour protests accompanying the class re-formation of Lithuanian society provides an empirical field for the application of these theoretical insights, and in the real world, for a contest around the newly constructed "unity" of the Lithuanian nation. The analysis this article seeks to develop is predicated therefore on understanding the actively embodied language of labour protest as the pre-eminent arena of contested dialogic utterances, viewed in the developing context of rising class tensions. The approach is concrete and historical, and is applied to a specific body of empirical circumstances. Following a brief political and economic analysis of post-communist Lithuania, its emergent discourses of labour protest accompanying "new elements of reality" in post-communist labour relations are then examined.

Lithuania: a post-communist society

In the Central and Eastern Europe of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries a double transformation has occurred, first from planned socialist economies to the free market, and from protective economic integration into a politico-economic bloc to sudden exposure to the raw forces of globalisation. In the most recent period, a third transformation has been inaugurated, the

wider integration of major parts of the former communist world of Central and Eastern Europe into the European Union project of eastwards enlargement. The massive economic changes that have taken place in Central and Eastern Europe since the early 1990s have been well rehearsed many times. These have included the dissolution of state enterprises, emergent foreign and joint ownership patterns, as well as the massive growth of domestic small and medium entrepreneurial concerns. The transition process to market economies has been accompanied by privatization, bankruptcies, restructuring, and the growth of unemployment, underemployment and a radical "flexibilisation" of the workforce. All of these factors have created a sharp imbalance in power between employers and employees at the workplace and the marginalization of labour rights.

Lithuania, an ex-Soviet republic is typical here. A small Baltic nation with a population of some three and a half million, Lithuania was one of the smallest countries in the Soviet Union. It nevertheless played a pivotal role in its final breakup. Most memorably, on August 23, 1989, the formation of a 370-mile human chain stretching from Lithuania in the south, through Latvia to Estonia in the north, linked anywhere from one to three million "Balts" in a unified popular protest against Soviet rule. The demonstration climaxed a series of denunciations of Soviet occupation, marking the 50th anniversary of the Nazi-Soviet Non-aggression (Molotov-Ribbentrop) pact, the "secret protocols" of which assigned the Baltic States to the Soviet sphere of influence. These actions, meant to highlight the "illegitimate" character of Soviet rule, symbolized a newly-found Baltic unity and a common striving to "restore" their independence. The Lithuanian Reform Movement (the Sąjūdis movement for *perestroika*), under its astute leader Vytautas Landsbergis, sustained the ongoing struggle for national independence through the continued mobilization of anti-Soviet

sentiment⁹. The declaration of the Sąjūdis showed their close sensitivity to the power of language in political struggles:

Today all the people of Lithuania know that there is a word in the Lithuanian language which is pronounced with hope. The word is *Sąjūdis* (movement). For the first time, the word attained new meaning in the Great Hall of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences in the late evening of June 3, 1989. Later the word became known to everybody and it came to mean what we call "The Lithuanian Reform Movement"¹⁰.

However, the Sąjūdis proved incapable of retaining political power in the face of acute policy divisions in their own ranks, resulting in their replacement first by a government of reformed communists, which also was to fall as a result of its perceived association with gross abuses accompanying the restructuring process of the economy and the "widespread belief in the corruption of its leading politicians, and the cynical way in which it feathered the nests of the old communist *no-menklatura* at a time when standards of living for ordinary people were in rapid decline"¹¹. In this process, and thereafter, as various unstable coalitions of the right and center-left succeeded each other, the notion of "democracy" as such, was increasingly discredited. At the same time, the deep-seated degree of disenchantment with the political process in the new "democracy" continues to be a major issue as corruption and gain-seeking by the elites erode whatever little legitimacy the new system might have attained. So much so, that it has required the importation of a Lithuanian émigré Valdas Adamkus to act as a unifying presidential figurehead in an attempt to restore the moral authority of the state. As one contemporary observer has put it, aptly capturing the linguis-

tic "flux" of the word "democracy" in the context of post-communist Lithuania:

The political class mouthed the vocabulary of democracy but sometimes their actions showed either that they did not understand the meaning of the term, or cynically ignored it. The election of President Adamkus in 1997, in a sense an outsider who had spent most of his adult life in the United States, epitomized the contrast between two political cultures, each using the same vocabulary but differing radically in their understanding of the words¹².

Significantly, Adamkus, politically on the right of the political spectrum, embarked on his presidential electoral campaign by offering himself as the embodiment of non-party unity under the supra-class slogan – "Accord of the nation".

At an economic level in Lithuania, the political and business elites have embraced neo-liberal ideology, fostering the myth of a stable prospering Lithuania, with few social and economic problems. The reality of the privatization of the Lithuanian economy and the drive for foreign investment has been rather less unproblematic. The form of privatization itself did much to undermine the attempt to establish a supra-class "unity" of Lithuanian society. The rapid expropriation of state assets in the process of transition to capitalism was effected, in the main, via emerging business criminality. Privatization, the economic engine of the transition process, according to its most enthusiastic proponents, was supposed to make workers "co-owners", and fulfill egalitarian "social justice" and equity objectives. Yet within a matter of a few years, sometimes even within months, the majority of privatization vouchers handed out to workers in former state enterprises were sold on the black market for cash. They

⁹ LANE, A. T. *Lithuania Stepping Westward*. London, 2002.

¹⁰ JUOZAITIS, footnote 8.

¹¹ LANE, footnote 9, p. 134.

¹² LANE, footnote 9, p. 131.

ended up in the pockets of enterprise managers on extremely favorable discounted terms, jarring with "public expectations...strengthened by propaganda, promising high dividend rates, high profitability of the shares and higher living standards"¹³. So great was public disaffection and unrest concerning "corruption and the influence of organized criminal groups" over the process of privatization that it was temporarily halted. The more recent history of Lithuanian political life has been equally scarred by allegations of the involvement of organized crime at the highest levels of the state, adding to the popular disenchantment with many of the earlier myths of a united nation struggling to find its place in a new world.

The darker side of the transition process has also been evident in the sheer scale of impact of economic reforms on the workforce. The first decade and a half of transition was marked by a massive deterioration in the wages and working conditions of labour, and the growth of high levels of unemployment. However, mass hardship was not simply a passing feature of the early turbulent years of transition. In two years, between 1997 and 1999, as a result of ongoing privatizations in Vilnius the capital city of Lithuania, nearly one quarter of job positions disappeared in the largest five factories. In the Kaunas industrial region, where the largest number of factories are located, the number of jobs in large enterprises decreased by about 40 per cent¹⁴. According to one analysis, these job losses have disproportionately affected older workers, the unskilled and women whose participation declined from 56 per cent to 50 per cent¹⁵. The process of a marginalization of a large group of workers has been accompanied,

as elsewhere in Eastern Europe, by a sharp growth in income differentials. In 2000, one third of families with three or more children representing 16 per cent of the population, were estimated to live below the official poverty line of 50 per cent of the average wage¹⁶. Conservative estimates of Lithuania's "informal" economy suggest that this sector employs some 300000 workers, or more than 20 per cent of the total working population. All of these workers, by definition, are excluded from protection with regard to secure and safe employment conditions.

In sum, since its exit from the Soviet sphere of influence, Lithuania's path of transition to the market economy has been guided by an aggressive neo-liberal program. Despite local disputes over the pace and nature of privatization, this project has been largely uncontested among the political classes. Pressures, in particular from the International Monetary Fund and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, have left successive governments little room for maneuver. Although increasingly viewed with suspicion and disillusionment at a mass level, 80 per cent of enterprises were rapidly privatized. Today, only a few significant enterprises remain in state control.

Strikes and trade unions

The levers of economic and political power, both at national level and in the workplace, have been firmly gripped by the new employer class. So far, however, organized trade union resistance has failed to emerge in the forms that are commonly understood in Western democracies. The classical

¹³ MALDEIKIS, Eugenijus. Privatisation in Lithuania: Expectations, Process, Consequences. In *CERT Discussion Papers*, 1996, 96/3. <http://www.som.hw.ac.uk/cert/wpa/1996/dp9603.pdf>

¹⁴ *United Nations Lithuanian Human Development Report, 1999, Lithuania (Vilnius)*, p. 64.

¹⁵ DOVYDENIENĖ, Roma. Trade union responses to globalization in Lithuania. In *International Labour Organisation, Institute for Labour Studies, Labour and Society Programme*, 2000. <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/inst/papers/1999/dp111/index.htm>

¹⁶ Republic of Lithuania, *Department of Statistics Yearbook*. Vilnius, 2000.

labour dispute has been a rarity in Lithuania, especially in recent years. When it has occurred, it has experienced significant legal as well as organizational impediments¹⁷. A US Embassy report on Lithuania noted reassuringly that "labour unions are relatively uninfluential", and that the country "has not seen any major industrial strikes since regaining independence"¹⁸. In fact in 1992 public sector workers took industrial action, as well as hairdressers, photo studio operators and transport drivers. Systematic collection of statistical data about the strikes in Lithuania only started in the year 2000. According to these statistics, in the year 2000 there were 56 strikes (including 21 warning strikes), and during 2001 there were 34 strikes (including 29 warning strikes). Most of these strikes were organised in educational institutions of the state sector, although there were also strikes in transport and manufacturing sectors. The main reasons for striking were conflicts concerning late or non-payment of wages¹⁹.

The transition process has been accompanied by a sharp polarization of society, as previously described, in terms of the growth of inequality. With this has come the emergence of the objective basis for class-based discourses of labour protest. However, the articulation of such discourses has been far from straightforward. A legacy of anti-Sovietism has meant that any collective class-based expressions of discontent, for example, through the organized trade union movement, have been largely discredited. The formerly unified Soviet-led all-union trade union confederation divided into four separate federations aligned with

various political groupings across the politically-tolerated spectrum, from centrist Social Democratic to rightist Christian Democratic. The official trade union centre was renamed after independence, as the Confederation of Free Lithuanian Trade Unions. Over the following decade and a half, the various trade union confederations fought among themselves for control over an ever diminishing number of registered members and the assets of the former Soviet trade unions. In 2003, the unions were collectively stripped of these assets, thus further severely restricting their ability to act.

At a mass level, the trade unions, hitherto at least, have not been "trusted" institutions of the "reconstituted civil society", primarily through their association with the previous system. Thus, trade union membership in Lithuania, as elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe, has plunged to catastrophically low levels in recent years and is currently under 10 per cent of the workforce, mainly concentrated in the public sector, with collective bargaining agreement coverage being even lower²⁰. Moreover, a particularly restrictive set of anti-strike laws is in place with an extensive list of "essential services" in which the right to strike is either removed or severely limited²¹. With elaborate mandatory pre-strike procedures for conciliation, and a threshold requirement of at least a two-thirds majority of workers voting in favor of industrial action, these make the pursuit of collective industrial protest very difficult, and indeed are the cause of continuing concern by international human rights bodies²². Thus, in the first phase of transition, legitimized oppositional collective discourses have

¹⁷ WOOLFSON, Charles; BECK, Matthias. Re-mapping Labour's Rights: The Case of Transitional Lithuania. In *Europe-Asia Studies*, 2002, vol. 54, 5, p. 749-769.

¹⁸ *Country Commercial Guide: Lithuania*. Vilnius, 1998.

¹⁹ Social Dialogue and Conflict Resolution in Lithuania. In *European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions*. <http://www.eurofound.eu.int/publications/files/EF0451EN.pdf>

²⁰ ANTILA, Juha; YLÖSTALO, Pekka. *Working Life Barometer in the Baltic Countries 2002*. Helsinki, 2003.

²¹ WOOLFSON, Charles; BECK, Matthias. The Right to Strike, Labor Market Liberalisation and the New Labor Code in Pre-Accession Lithuania. In *Review of Central and East European Law*, 2003, vol. 28, 1, p. 77-102.

²² Helsinki Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (2004) Concluding Observations on the implementation of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (E/1990/5/Add.55), 27, 28 April 2004.

struggled to emerge in any defined class sense. As such, the fragmentary discourses of labour protest chart the difficult road that Lithuanian labour has traveled in the last decade and a half.

In the more recent period, the ever-watchful US Department of State has observed the continuing absence of strikes. In notes that, according to the Lithuanian Department of Statistics, no official strikes were registered that year. Farmers protesting low milk prices blocked roads and as a result, "criminal proceedings were initiated"²³. There were also "a number of unregistered protest actions by the employees over wage arrears and dismissals"²⁴. However, the lack of registered strikes does not mean that labour conflicts have been entirely extinguished however. While major union-led industrial disputes have been the exception, it is precisely these "unregistered protest actions", or embryonic collective actions by labour which are significant indicators of continuing underlying and often suppressed forms of conflict. It is just such protest actions which comprise the main body of material analyzed here.

Individualized protest

Some measure of the increasingly desperate condition that labour has found itself in, can be gauged from the following episode. In its review for the year 2000, state television included brief news footage of a distraught middle aged man being wrestled to the ground by three police officers, before being bundled into the back of a police Lada. The man, who had doused himself in petrol and was about to set himself on fire in front of the presidential palace in the capital city of Vilnius, was shouting "let me die – I have nothing left to lose". In this one single utterance, the despair of the post-communist dispossessed proletariat is

articulated. The incident was a solitary act of desperation by one of several dozens of workers who had been on hunger strike in protest against the non-payment of wages by defaulting employers of bankrupt enterprises. As it happened, the newsreel summed up much about the state of Lithuania's economy and labour relations. The enterprise from which this particular worker had come, Litoda, was located in a town in the west of the country and formerly produced synthetic leather. In the new Lithuania, in which Mafia men and their legions of adolescent imitators strut in regulation black leather, the demand for its synthetic imitation has slumped, while export of this product had proven almost impossible. Hunger strikes by cheated employees lasted for six weeks and saw their participants removed to hospital with probable permanent physical damage. This brief and desperate cameo of individualized public protest action is remarkable only in the sense that it was captured on camera. Most such acts of attempted self-destruction are entirely "voiceless" and take place in private hidden corners.

Symbolic collective protest

A second contemporary labour protest, although not yet a full collective withdrawal of labour, represents a development away from mainly individualized acts of protest. While not yet a strike as commonly understood, it was a substitute symbolic protest performed *on behalf of workers* by their organized leadership. In the late nineties a rightist coalition of Liberals and the New Union (Social Liberals), assumed office with a radical program of "business-friendly" and anti-labour proposals. The new government published a resolution spelling out its intentions²⁵. Under the

²³ Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2003. <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2003/27850.htm>

²⁴ Country Reports, footnote 23.

²⁵ Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania, Resolution on the Program of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania for 2000–2004, 9 November 2000, Nr. IX-20, Vilnius.

heading of "Liberalization of Labour Relations", this resolution proposed a number of radical changes to trade union and employment laws which were to become part of the new government's action plan of the first one hundred days. These included:

1. an approved typical form of an employment contract to be recommended but not compulsory;
2. all restrictions in concluding any type of civil contracts between natural persons as well as between natural and legal persons to be lifted;
3. restrictions on temporary employment contracts to be gradually phased out;
4. statutory requirements for an employer to inform the social insurance commission (Sodra) on the employment of a person on the same day and dismissal from employment within three working days to be no longer applicable;
5. mandatory working time records no longer to be kept;
6. requirement that employees have employment identification documents to be waived;
7. compensation for public servants and other employees as provided by existing legislation to be reduced in amount;
8. employers no longer required to consult trade unions before making workers redundant, where the worker is a member of a trade union;
9. if there is an interruption to production and the employer wishes to temporarily redeploy a worker but the employee refuses to accept redeployment, the employer obliged to pay only one third of the minimum wage rate instead of the full statutory minimum rate;

10. workers who receive training at employer's expense to compensate the employer if changing employment.

The proposed measures, officially aimed at "reducing unemployment in Lithuania", were part of a concerted attempt to create labour market "flexibility" which appeared as a major threat to existing trade unions. Following the publication of these proposals, the four trade union confederations, united for the first time since independence, threatened nation-wide industrial action. Articles on employee rights and conditions began to appear in the Lithuanian press, one of which typically asked "Who imprisoned work in Lithuania?"²⁶. By the early Spring of 2001, the trade union opposition at national tripartite level led to a postponement of the planned liberalization package. On March 23rd, nonetheless, the Seimas (parliament) passed new liberalization legislation.

During Spring 2001, labour protests took place outside the homes of Liberal and New Union MP's, while over a hundred trade unionists from throughout Lithuania attended as "silent witness" at the plenary debate on the new legislation in the Seimas. Opposition Social Democratic coalition MP's, who sponsored the trade unions "silent witness" in parliament, called on the President not to ratify the new law. Presidential ratification, however, duly followed, with trade union representatives "threatening" to boycott future Tripartite Council discussions, on the grounds that no prior discussion of these crucial measures had taken place in the Council. During the dispute, overt protest on the part of the trade unions created public relations risks for them.

Protest action was directed against individual MPs who supported the liberalization measures. In most instances, these protests involved small quiet pickets of perhaps a dozen or so smartly dressed men and women, standing with placards in

²⁶ LAZUTKA, Romas. Kas Lietuvoje įkalino darbą? In *Lietuva*, December 2000, Nr 9.

dignified order outside MPs homes. Some newspapers claimed the protesters had caused a fatal heart attack to one MP's mother and denounced the intimidation of families and innocent children. On TV, the wife of one MP was seen on the television news arriving in a Mitsubishi four-wheel drive unmolested by the "pickets". The direct "personalization" of the protest against the liberalization measures was easily construed by a hostile media as "intimidatory". The linguistic "flux" of social opinion, to return to Voloshinov's perspectives, was captured in television broadcasts. These broadcasts provided pictures, remarkable in the context of media representations of post-communist society, of the condensed and semantically loaded telegraphy of protest. One placard began almost cozily, only to end with stinging rebuke: *Dear Neighbors – We elected your neighbor Rolandas Pavilionis but he voted in the Seimas for measures that will make you a slave without rights*. On other placards there was an even more bald accusatory tone: *We did not elect you to vote for our enslavement*, and in the same vein, *We did not elect you to vote to remove our rights and jobs*. One protest placard displayed a message asking a member of parliament; *Do you know what an autocracy at work means G. Dalinkevičius?* The personalization of *you* in the slogans implied a real human identity as its referent. The *you* is named, it is someone known to and present in the community, albeit that s/he is a Member of Parliament. Another banner contained a cartoon representation in one corner of a boss aggressively pointing a finger at the figure before him of a worker on his knees. Such keywords as "autocracy" (*savivalė*) and "slave" (*vergas*) may seem quaint to outsiders, but they are imbued with accusatory, potentially explosive, meaning. Lithuania was meant to have emerged democratically reborn, but now the forces of the free market seemed to betray that common interest.

It is perhaps not going too far to suggest that the use of these terms was an implicit riposte to the language of the post-1991 order, in terms of its self-justification as one of "freedom", in contrast to the "autocracy" of the previous order. The "one-nation" ideology which was an important political lever in the dislocation of Soviet power now had ironic resonances in the post-Soviet period. In the new democracy, where politicians are supposed to represent the "unified" interests of the people, the sense of betrayal was palpably conveyed by such personalized admonishments. However, given the magnitude of the threat posed to basic labour rights by the new liberalization legislation, it can be argued that the trade unions acted with "restraint". Most likely, this restraint was a mark of their overall weakness and, perhaps, a recognition that, in Lithuania, concerted worker protests could be not yet be fully legitimized.

"Muted" collectivist discourse

In this section, "muted" collectivist discourse is analyzed. It concerns a group of workers not normally associated with public protest actions, the police. The Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania, and legal acts on trade unions recognize the right of workers and employees to form and join trade unions and extends this right to employees of the police and the armed forces. However, the Law on the Regulation of Collective Disputes of 1992 does not allow withdrawal of labour by employees involved in law enforcement and state security²⁷. This prohibition on the right to strike has had particular effects on the police as an occupational group in Lithuania. In the early period of independence, there were few attempts to raise their status and effectiveness as professional law enforcement officers. The origins of labour unrest among this sector date back to 1997,

²⁷ Republic of Lithuania, On the Regulation of Collective Disputes, Law Nr 12386, 17 March 1992.

when government promises of higher wages for senior officers were not matched by an appropriate budgetary allocation. As a result, funds that were initially earmarked for lower ranking police officers were diverted. Rank and file police complained of low wages, as well as lack of funds for basic equipment, including replacement uniforms and petrol for vehicles (at that time more than half being Soviet-built Ladas with a tendency to self-immolate, and no match for the new BMW-driving criminal classes). Police in the capital city were on occasion without facilities for long-distance telephone connections, due to unpaid bills while some six thousand employees had been laid off. It was against this background of rising frustration that the police officers' trade union, the Union of Police Constables and Police Employees, was established.

By December 2000, the police trade union was sufficiently well organized in the Vilnius region to mount a public protest. This consisted of a "lunchtime walk through Gedimino Prospect", the main thoroughfare of the capital, by around 400 policemen and women in full uniform supported by firebrigade colleagues. The "walk" culminated in the handing over of a petition listing their grievances to the Seimas²⁸. The leader of the police trade union commented; "We have no money for lunch, so at least we will have some fresh air to breathe". A simultaneous demonstration was held in Klaipėda, a port city in northern Lithuania. Two further mass demonstrations of this nature were held (June 2001 and May 2003), involving police trade unionists from the increasingly well-organized outlying regions of Lithuania, as well as at least one spontaneous sit-in at the end of shift over delayed payment of wages, a fairly remarkable occurrence in view of the strict police discipline code. In the case of the mass demonstrations, the Lithuanian police trade unionists were latterly able

to call on the support of Italian and German police union colleagues who marched side by side with the Lithuanians as fellow members of the European Police Trade Union Confederation. This is the first recorded example of international trade union solidarity at European level in a dispute involving a section of the Lithuanian workforce.

Senior police officers who had been publicly hostile to the first protest action, verbally at least, supported the demands of their lower ranking officers. A measure perhaps of their growing strength as a union, was the absence of reported victimization of activists, commonplace in Lithuanian labor relations. The police trade union now claims to have recruited about 1000 of the capital's 2500 police and some 5000 out of the 11000 for the whole of Lithuania. If accurate, these figures represent the highest trade union density of any sector of the workforce. The public impact of these demonstrations, especially of the first, was sufficiently great to produce a substantial new budgetary allocation. It also brought to a halt the ongoing redundancies of police officers. Nevertheless, some important grievances have remained unresolved and the language of incorporation has only partially met its goal of dampening labour protest among Lithuanian police.

The promised increase in salaries for lower ranking police did not emerge and unrest continues over unpaid wages. Moreover, a new statute governing police work stipulates shift work in excess of the 48 hours allowable maximum working week according to ILO's Convention. This adversely affects more than half of police officers who work in shifts and has resulted in formal complaint to the ILO Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations, to which the government of Lithuania has been invited to respond. Besides unwelcome exposure to international scrutiny with respect to labour stan-

²⁸ Dignified walk of police. In *Lietuvos Rytas*, 16 December 2002, Nr 2.

dards in Lithuania, the police trade unionists' protests have a singular significance, in that nationwide collective labour protest appears to be emerging, even in sectors of the workforce that are legally precluded from taking part in collective withdrawal of labour. Meanwhile, in 2004 at an extraordinary Congress of Lithuanian Trade Union Confederation, the former Chairperson of the Lithuanian Trade Union of Constables and Police Employees, Artūras Černiauskas, was elected as a new Chairperson of Lithuanian Trade Union Confederation (LPSK), perhaps the first of a new generation of more combative labour leaders to emerge in post-communist Lithuania.

The response of the Lithuanian authorities to labour unrest among the police has been predictable, the incorporation of the new police trade union into a framework of social dialogue and the recognition of the union as a "social partner". Yet how far this "incorporation" represents an enduring "restabilization" is a more open issue as the conclusion section suggests. Police officers in their thousands subsequently undertook legal action against the state to recover lost wages, although so far the promised threat of (illegal) strike action has not yet materialized. Meanwhile, as unrest has intensified in the period from 2002 to 2005, Presidential intervention has urged "dialogue" and "compromise" on both sides²⁹.

Collective labour discourse in the enlarged European Union

The question that remains, is whether the emerging discourses of protest may be assuming more clearly defined oppositional collective class-based articulation, more in keeping with commonly understood expressions of labour protest in established Western democracies. On 1st May 2004, Lithuania, together with seven other Central and

East European states into the enlarged European Union. The choice of "Labour Day" as the date of accession of the former communist states, was an inspired act of bare-faced symbolic theft. However, it may yet come back to haunt the masters of the new Europe. With entry into the European Union, latent dissatisfaction with the consequences of the pursuit of neo-liberal economic policy among the workers in post-communist countries such as Lithuania, may acquire a new dynamism. The European social model is meant to balance the market and social priorities. European Union Directives address many aspects of working environment, including health and safety conditions, hours of work, consultation and information rights and so forth, while the accompanying European Charter of Fundamental Rights legitimates the basic right to collective forms of protection through trade unions, up to and including, the right to strike. Thus with European accession, a new assertive impetus may be given to the discourses of collective labour rights, resonating with underlying accumulated grievances of the workforces. Whether such impetus will be realized depends, to some extent, on the trade unions' organizational capacities, which as noted, are currently seriously depleted.

Until now, the discourses of labour discontent in post-communist Lithuania, have mainly expressed themselves through individual and symbolic acts of resistance. In part, the lack of strike action is also the result of two generations in which there would have been little collective labour action, and possibly a decline of class consciousness. In part also, the undeveloped nature of the discourse is the result of the break up of any collective class confidence – and of the explicit ideological marginalization/suppression of the language of class action, through concepts of "common interests" and institutional structures of "social part-

²⁹ SEPUTYTE, Milda. Adamkus mediates police, government discord. In *The Baltic Times*, 5 April 2005, vol. 10, 456, p. 1, 5.

nership". Emergent labour protests, therefore, have taken both a personalized and a political form – rather than immediate resort to the use of "traditional" collective strike action. Protests have included hunger strikes and public demonstrations by placard-bearing "victims" of injustice. These have occurred outside the employer factory gate or residence, as well as outside the symbolic site of the State, be it the presidential palace or parliamentary building. Occasionally and, most dramatically, protests actions have assumed huge personal sacrifices, setting up the dialogic tension of accusatory symbolic gestures which have resulted in real harm to those making them.

The future may be rather different. Following the expansion of class horizons accompanying accession to the wider enlarged European Union, the potential for larger-scale, more organized strikes in post-communist societies can now be recognized. Given the predominantly neo-liberal approach of ruling elites in the new EU member post-communist states, as their one-sidedly class-based nature becomes increasingly transparent, the legitimizing potential of demands for labour rights may re-infuse the trade union movement with combative vigor. With that, the temporary national unity of the early post-communist years may finally be dissipated. The first significant blows in the coming battles have already been struck, in terms of an employers' offensive through the imposition of labour market liberalization measures in new labour codes throughout Central and Eastern Europe. The reactions of labour can only grow more defined, especially as the established European trade unions extend their solidarity actions to the new member states. The class-fracturing of the language of "social partnership" has begun. The failures of European social democ-

rary to protect workers rights may in the future become subject to renewed critique and development in a more explicitly class-based direction.

It can reasonably be argued that there will be an inevitable shift from more individualized and muted acts of protest, to more open collective forms of labour struggle as the process of European integration proceeds, and as links between organized workers are solidified and capacities strengthened on a pan-European basis. A recent analysis of industrial relations in four Central and East European countries also warned that it is "not clear yet whether the fairly peaceful character of industrial relations in Central and Eastern Europe can be maintained in the future"³⁰. Again, the conclusions of this survey could equally well apply to Lithuania. The study noted that "unavoidable major reforms in the public services are still to be carried out in all of the countries considered". Such reforms it added, "might lead to the further radicalization of public service trade unions", an area in which trade unions are actively recruiting. Equally, the four country survey noted the possible emergence of "a more aggressive trade union strategy in the post-enlargement phase, which would seek the redistribution of the benefits of productivity gains in the context of employees' expectations related to accession to the EU"³¹.

The accession of Lithuania, along with seven other Central and East European countries to the enlarged European Union, may mark a turning point in which the dynamics of labour protest. Its accompanying discourses, while not in any sense determinative, may undergo significant change. The compass of ideological reference is pointing away from the past negative associations towards trade unions and collectivism and the Soviet system is now a fading memory of a decade and a

³⁰ TÓTH, András; NEUMANN, László. Labour Dispute Settlement in Four Central and Eastern European Countries. In *European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions*. <http://www.eiro.eurofound.eu.int/2003/01/study/index.html>

³¹ TÓTH; NEUMANN, footnote 30.

half ago. A new reference point is emerging, where trade unions are increasingly to be seen as necessary active defenders of legitimate labour rights, in the face of continuing employer abuse. Moreover, the right to the collective withdrawal of labour, and to free association and collective bargaining, are both endorsed as democratic rights at European and international levels in conventions to which Lithuania is a signatory. This new reference point provides a discourse of democratic rights legitimizing independent collective trade union action, up to and including, the right to

strike. A free society is, by definition, a society of "free" collective bargaining. It suggests that the (re)legitimization of collectivist labour discourses may be one of the most significant, although unintended, consequences of the eastwards expansion of the European Union. The gathering prospect of an end to post-communist "labour quiescence" brings with it potentially incompatible challenges to the current order of neo-liberal economic prescriptions, a development which in itself seems likely to be increasingly reflected in the discourses of labour protest.

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DYSKURS PROTESTÓW PRACOWNICZYCH W POSTKOMUNISTYCZNEJ LITWIE

Streszczenie

Artykuł jest poświęcony analizie dyskursu protestów pracowniczych w okresie transformacji systemowej od komunizmu do gospodarki rynkowej. Stopniowe kształtowanie się dyskursów pracowniczych opartych na interesach klasowych w młodych gospodarkach rynkowych krajów Europy Środkowej i Wschodniej analizowane jest na podstawie nowatorskiego paradygmatu teoretycznego W. N. Wołoszynowa i współczesnych prób naukowców marksistowskich stworzenia materialistycznej socjolingwistyki. Artykuł przedstawia analizę kilku stosunkowo niedawnych wystąpień pracowniczych, mających miejsce w byłej sowieckiej Litwie. Poruszona została problematyka złożonej tożsamości ruchu pracowniczego. Jego legitymizacja jako grupy aktorów społecznych z „niezależnymi” żądaniami, w kontekście społeczeństwa litewskiego w okresie przejściowym, analizowana jest poprzez dyskursy protestu. Dyskurs protestów pracowniczych ukształtował się w trakcie sporów i napięć wokół pozornie sprzecznych prób narzucenia ideologii „ponadklasowej”. Narzucenie ideologii neoliberalnej, zmierzającej do niedopuszczenia zorganizowanego ruchu

DARBO JĖGOS PROTESTAI POSTKOMUNISTINĖJE LIETUVOJE

Santrauka

Straipsnyje analizuojami darbo jėgos protestai, lydėję perėjimo iš komunizmo į rinkos ekonomiką procesus. Centrinės ir Rytų Europos naujosios rinkos ekonomikos besiformuojantis klasinis darbo jėgos diskursas nagrinėjamas, remiantis novatoriška teorine V. N. Vološinovo paradigma ir šiuolaikiniais marksistinių mokslininkų bandymais sukurti materialistinę sociolingvistiką. Straipsnyje analizuojama keletas neseniai įvykusių darbo jėgos protestų buvusioje sovietinėje Lietuvoje. Pateikiamas sudėtingas darbo jėgos tapatybės išreiškimas. Lietuvos visuomenės pereinamajame kontekste darbo jėgos kaip socialinių aktorių, turinčių „nepriklausomus“ poreikius, legitymizacija yra analizuojama per protesto diskursus. Darbo jėgos protestų diskursai atsirado kovojant ir patiriant įtampą dėl, regis, prieštarų bandymų primesti „viršklasinę“ ideologiją („supra class“ ideology). Primetimas neoliberalios ideologijos, kuri siekia pašalinti organizuotą darbo jėgą iš pilietinės visuomenės savarankiškos veiklos, ir kartu socialinės partnerystės, siekiančios įtraukti darbo jėgą į nacionalines trišales struktūras, kalbos palaikymas

pracowniczego do zajęcia niezależnej pozycji w społeczeństwie obywatelskim, a jednocześnie kształtowanie języka partnerstwa socjalnego, mającego na celu włączenie ruchu pracowniczego do krajowych struktur trójstronnych, są komplementarnymi próbami zapobieżenia powstaniu bardziej radykalnych dyskursów klasowych. Powstanie dyskursu dialogowego między ruchem pracowniczym a kapitałem oraz wykształcenie się form rezonansu społecznego przynosi więcej informacji o obecnym zakresie wystąpień pracowniczych w młodych gospodarkach rynkowych. Takie dyskursy ujawniają również ewentualne sposoby przyszłych form wystąpień pracowniczych, gdyż młode gospodarki rynkowe Europy Środkowej i Wschodniej zostały włączone do rozszerzonej Unii Europejskiej.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: dyskurs, Wołoszynow, protesty pracownicze, postkomunizm, Litwa, rozszerzenie Unii Europejskiej.

yra papildomi bandymai sustabdyti dar radikalesnių klasinių diskursų atsiradimą. Dialoginio diskurso tarp darbo jėgos ir kapitalo bei socialinio rezonanso formų atsiradimas daug sako apie dabartines darbo jėgos protestų ribas naujosios rinkos ekonomikoje. Tokie diskursai taip pat atskleidžia būsimas tikėtinas darbo jėgos kovos formas, kadangi Centrinės ir Rytų Europos naujosios rinkos ekonomikos jau yra įtrauktos į prasiplėtusią Europos Sąjungą.

REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI: diskursas, Vološino-vas, darbo jėgos protestai, postkomunizmas, Lietuva, Europos Sąjungos plėtra.

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