Communist Legacies, Postcommunist Transformations, and the Fate of Organized Labor in Russia and China*

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This study aims to generate fresh hypotheses concerning emergent variations in labor politics across postcommunist settings. Although labor may be weak throughout the postcommunist world, a historical comparison of labor politics in Russia and China reveals consequential differences in the extent and sources of union weakness. Taking these differences seriously, the study asks why organized labor in Russia—in spite of a steeper decline in union membership, greater fragmentation, and a conspicuously low level of militancy—was *relatively* more effective in advancing working-class interests during economic liberalization than the growing, organizationally unified trade union apparatus in China. The comparisons suggest that some constraints on organized labor are more malleable than others, allowing for openings where labor can affect outcomes in ways that surprise, if not scare, state and business. Specifically, key differences in historical legacies and in the pace and dynamics of institutional transformation have conferred upon Russian unions key organizational, material, and symbolic resources that Chinese unions do not possess to the same degree. These differences reflect mechanisms capable of generating increasingly divergent prospects for organized labor mobilization over long-time horizons.

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Introduction

Recent scholarship attests to the role that labor movements have played in political and economic transformations worldwide (e.g., Collier, 1999; Silver, 2003). Worker protest is widely acknowledged to have contributed to the weakening of communist regimes across Eastern Europe, most directly in the cases of Poland's Solidarity movement and the Soviet miners' strikes (Kubicek, 2004; Ost, 2001). Yet most analyses of postcommunist transitions generally ignore labor relations altogether or downplay the prospects for coordinated labor mobilization. This is not surprising given the decline in union membership, dwindling resources, and the low levels of autonomy and influence unions seem to possess in the postcommunist world. However, this assessment is based primarily on studies of labor in individual countries (e.g., Chan, 2001; Christensen, 1999; Crowley, 2001; Ost, 2001) or comparisons designed to reveal common sources of labor weakness (e.g., Kubicek, 2004; Ost and Crowley, 2001). A handful of recent studies (Avdagic, 2005; Robertson, 2004) notwithstanding, *differences* in postcommunist labor relations have been considered analytically insignificant.

This article is motivated by the suspicion that seemingly small differences deserve more careful consideration because they may reveal mechanisms capable of incrementally generating divergent pathways over longer time horizons (Pierson, 2003). A variation-finding comparative historical study of labor politics in Russia and China can provide the basis for new hypotheses concerning the sources and implications of institutional diversity within the postcommunist universe.[1] Although labor may be weak in both countries, a cross-national comparison reveals important differences in how much anxiety state and employers have expressed over union activities, and how much common ground rank-and-file members have found with union leaders. This study takes these differences seriously and asks why organized labor in Russia—in spite of a steeper decline in union membership, greater fragmentation, and a conspicuously low level of militancy—was *relatively* more effective in advancing working class interests during economic liberalization than the growing, organizationally unified trade union apparatus in China. The comparisons points to specific historical and institutional factors that, we hypothesize, directly contribute to the differential prospects for union-led labor mobilization.

The first concerns *distinctive legacies of specific communist-era labor practices in Soviet Russia and Communist China.* While certain features of communist-era trade unionism initially inhibited the development of independent unionism throughout the postcommunist world (Kubicek, 2004; Ost and Crowley, 2001), we argue that other aspects of the Soviet inheritance are more adaptable in postcommunist contexts and can constitute organizational, material, and symbolic resources for Russian unions. These include the more visible and active role of unions in managing employee welfare and personnel issues; the codification of job rights and union membership; more heterogeneous social ties among a more urbanized workforce and union leaders from diverse regions and sectors; and sustained involvement in institutions and discourses dealing with international labor standards.

Second, we note the relevance of *distinctive institutional environments in shaping the roles and strategies of unions vis-à-vis the state, business, and the working class in the postcommunist era, specifically*: (1) how much legal, operational, and

financial autonomy unions have as they develop discrete preferences and strategies; (2) how much the structure of organized labor creates incentives for union leaders across regions and sectors to take action on behalf of workers' grievances; and (3) how much the pace and character of economic reforms prompts workers to look to union leaders rather than paternalistic managers in attempting to protect their rights and livelihoods. We recognize that postcommunist transitions everywhere create some common dilemmas for labor with the dismantling of communist-era employment practices accompanied by the worldwide shift toward flexible production (Crowley, 2002; Kubicek, 2004; Sil, 2003). But we also contend that particular processes of postcommunist institutional evolution profoundly affect the long-term opportunities for labor mobilization.

In comparing Russia and China, this study proceeds into somewhat uncharted waters. While comparisons across Soviet and Chinese communism were once common, analyses comparing postcommunist Russia and China have been rare. In the context of labor, a few anthologies have juxtaposed separate studies of the two countries (e.g., Lü and Perry, 1997), but studies featuring Russian labor tend to draw upon East-Central Europe for comparative referents (Kubicek, 2004; Ost and Crowley, 2001; Robertson, 2004), while those featuring Chinese labor look to East and Southeast Asia (Chan and Nørlund, 1998; Unger and Chan, 1995). Whereas such comparisons are instructive, a "contextualized comparison" (Locke and Thelen, 1995) of more diverse cases within a wider postcommunist universe promises fresh insights into how distinctive legacies influence distinctive pathways of institutional change across time and space (Ekiert and Hanson, 2003). Especially significant is that Soviet institutions were not replicated in China to the same extent they were in Eastern Europe; as a result, we might expect greater variation in the content and influence of communist-era legacies as they affect labor relations. Moreover, the absence of an abrupt regime change and the more incremental process of market reform in China, considered alongside the more sweeping transformations in Russia and Eastern Europe, allow for greater attention to the varied effects of "diverse paths of extrication" (Stark and Bruszt, 1998: 4) on the structure and behavior of organized labor.

The following section examines variations in communist legacies inherited from apparently similar systems of industrial relations in the USSR and Communist China. The next two sections trace the evolution of labor relations in postcommunist Russia and China respectively, placing the structure and behavior of organized labor within the context of the distinctive political and economic transitions that have unfolded in each country. The following section compares key points in these narratives, with an eye to gauging the prospects of union-led labor mobilization in Russia and China. The conclusion considers the implications of this analysis for the construction of hypotheses that can guide further research into postcommunist labor politics.

One Legacy or Many? Communist-Era Labor Institutions Compared

The common features of industrial relations across communist countries are seen as a key reason for labor weakness across postcommunist settings (Kubicek, 2004; Ost and Crowley, 2001). Emergent *differences* in aspects of communist-era labor

institutions have not been given the attention they deserve in view of their potential implications for postcommunist labor politics. This section identifies four key differences between the Soviet and Chinese systems of industrial relations that were in evidence by the end of the 1970s.

The first concerns the role unions played as "transmission belts" between workers and the party, serving as partners of enterprise managers in meeting production targets while maintaining industrial peace. In the Soviet Union, the trade union movement was eventually coopted by the party-state apparatus through the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions (AUCCTU), which encompassed national federations of unions corresponding to branches of the economic ministries as well as regional union bodies spanning several branches. These were, in turn, composed of representatives of factory trade union committees that were responsible for communicating party directives to the workforce and assisting managers in reassigning workers and promoting labor discipline and productivity (Berliner, 1988). While this Soviet model was not replicated in China to the extent it was in Eastern Europe, the 1950 Trade Union Law established the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), which was structured in the same manner as AUCCTU and charged with the same mission: to serve as a "transmission belt" for party directives and ensure worker cooperation (Lü, 2001; Lee, 1986).

Even as "transmission belts," Soviet unions came to play a more active, visible, and sustained role. Following the 1917 Revolution, union officials participated in national debates over working hours and wage scales, and factory unions served to check the power of "bourgeois specialists" retained to administer production. Although Soviet leader Josef Stalin scaled back the functions of unions, in the post-Stalin era, unions administered employee welfare, controlled a sizeable enterprise social fund, and represented workers in decisions concerning dismissal or reassignment. Moreover, while rhetoric seldom matched reality, official publications glorified labor and interpreted the status accorded to unions as an indication that workers were indeed "masters of the factory."

In China, unions did not have the same status or visibility. The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) emphasis on peasant mobilization before 1949, the disruption of the industrial workforce during the Great Leap Forward, and the dissolution of unions during the Cultural Revolution—all contributed to the peripheral status of ACFTU (Naughton, 1997: 176). Unions never came to possess the same range of responsibilities as their Soviet counterparts, and they were not relevant for workers employed outside the state sector. These differences do not suggest that Soviet unions had greater influence in economic or social policy, but underscore their higher status and greater involvement in the everyday welfare of virtually every working citizen.

Second, in both China and the Soviet Union, the regime offered workers in state enterprises job security, union membership, and a substantial array of nonwage benefits. In post-Stalin USSR, overtly coercive measures gave way to a new "social contract" between regime and worker, where physical safety, cheap access to basic foodstuffs and utilities, and incremental improvements in living standards were offered in exchange for a commitment to labor peace and productivity (Cook, 1993). These guarantees, first anticipated in Nikita Khrushchev's 1961 party program, became codified in the 1971 Soviet labor code as explicit, standardized guarantees

of full and secure employment, price controls on basic necessities, automatic union membership, and a series of welfare benefits allocated through factory unions. Workers in sectors considered more important received better treatment, but the entire workforce was accorded a standardized set of job rights and social benefits, even those employed in collective farms (Lane, 1987).

Workers in Chinese state enterprises were similarly accorded the benefits of what became known as the "iron rice bowl." These included guarantees of job security and guaranteed access to a range of goods and services unavailable outside the state sector (Walder, 1986; Lü, 2001). Yet these benefits were neither codified nor standardized as in the USSR; they remained part of an informal understanding with paternalistic managers (Walder, 1986), and they only applied to workers in state enterprises which, given the slower pace of industrialization in China, accounted for a minority of the workforce. This also meant that the majority of the Chinese workforce never associated employment with union membership or any standardized set of welfare benefits as in the USSR. Not surprisingly, labor politics in post-Soviet Russia has featured more extensive debate over nonwage benefits, with many new unions and politicians gaining national prominence by vigorously defending these benefits.

Third, there are similarities and differences in patterns of labor mobility and the character of social networks. In both China and the USSR, there was steady growth in the size of the industrial workforce and in the rates of literacy and urbanization. Concerned about potential social unrest, both regimes sought to exercise social control through an internal passport system that restricted access to jobs and job-related benefits to residents of particular locales. This system allowed each regime to monitor and channel the flow of workers across firms, sectors, and locales. It also limited possibilities for turnover, while transforming the enterprise into an arena where workers, managers, and union officials could form collusive networks to evade the pressures and demands foisted upon them by central planners (Berliner, 1988; Walder, 1986).

In the Soviet Union, the more rapid and sustained processes of industrialization, combined with constant fears of a labor shortage among managers pursuing high plan targets, created more opportunities for workers to pursue alternative employment through official and unofficial channels of recruitment (Berliner, 1988). This trend contributed to greater labor mobility among the Soviet workforce, as evidenced in an annual average turnover rate of 20 percent during the 1970s (Gaddy, 1996). By contrast, China's huge labor surplus and the qualitatively different employment terms for state sector workers made it much easier for the regime to limit labor mobility, as evidenced in turnover rates of less than one percent during the 1970s (Naughton, 1997: 173). Moreover, the slower pace of urbanization and the survival of rural social institutions meant that recruitment processes and social networks revolved largely around "native place" identities shared by local party officials, managers, and permanent workers (Perry, 1995, 1997; Honig, 1996). While this was a valuable social basis for sporadic collective action, it impeded the development of organizational links necessary for collective action on a wider scale.

In the Soviet Union, the rapid pace of urbanization, the near-total destruction of rural institutions under Stalin, and a variety of conferences and recreational activities organized by unions from different regions—all facilitated more heterogeneous,

malleable, and porous interpersonal networks where ethnic or regional ties were less important than access to goods, services, political influence, and alternative employment (Gibson, 2001). Precisely because the networks were not dominated by local identities, union leaders and members in post-Soviet Russia could build on ties that spanned various regions in establishing alternative trade union centers.[2]

Finally, in the international arena, trade union federations in both countries embraced the ideology of "proletarian internationalism" and viewed themselves as leading a worldwide struggle to emancipate the working class, and considered trade unionism in the West to be little more than a façade for the bourgeoisie's continued exploitation of the proletariat. They were also wary of outside attempts to interfere in labor relations within their societies and actively discouraged contact between unions in their countries and labor organizations in capitalist countries.

However, the Soviet regime and AUCCTU proved to be significantly more active in forming transnational linkages and participating in debates over international labor standards. Between 1956 and 1991, the Soviet Union ratified 50 separate ILO conventions, including six of the eight conventions considered to be "fundamental human rights conventions" by the ILO (with the remaining two later ratified in the post-Soviet era). AUCCTU took the lead in forming the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), together with leftist unions within and outside the Soviet bloc that rejected the Western-dominated International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU). Despite the gap between rhetoric and reality in the Soviet era, union behavior and labor discourses in post-Soviet Russia bear the imprint of prolonged involvement in, and exposure to, discourses on international labor standards. In debates over labor law, all unions have regularly cited ILO conventions and filed complaints over violations of labor rights. Even the Russian government sought a report from the ILO to legitimize several provisions of a new labor code it was promoting.

Yet the People's Republic of China, which joined the ILO in 1971 as a result of its seat in the United Nations, did not ratify a single ILO convention until 1990 (ILO, 2004). Although ratifying several conventions in the 1990s to gain entry into the World Trade Organization, the Chinese government has claimed exemption from several fundamental conventions because of its developing nation status (Kent, 1997). Moreover, ACFTU was, and still is, prohibited from joining international labor bodies or forming ties with foreign trade unions without government approval. In such an environment, international labor standards have not been a part of the discourse on labor in China.

These four sets of differences are summarized in Figure 1. Most important, these dimensions of the communist-era inheritance are more *adaptable* in that they can be separated from communist-era economic and political institutions and can potentially affect aspects of labor politics in the postcommunist period. The more frequently cited negative features of communist labor institutions, such as the role of unions as "transmission belts" and their cooperation with managers, were more embedded in a now extinct system of centralized planning and have had progressively less relevance for a new generation of trade unionists coping with new challenges in a new institutional setting. To examine just how, and how much, specific legacies of communist-era labor relations matter, we turn to the evolution of labor politics in postcommunist Russia and China.

Figure 1
Differences in Labor Relations in Soviet Russia and Communist China, 1970s

	SOVIET RUSSIA	COMMUNIST CHINA
ROLE, STATUS AND VISIBILITY OF TRADE UNIONS	Although "transmission belts," Soviet unions have more active and sustained role at both factory and national levels, with administration of social welfare and control of substantial material assets.	Chinese unions also "transmission belts," but have lower status in national economic debates, were disbanded during the Cultural Revolution, and did not have a sustained role to play in relation to personnel issues or social welfare.
TRADE UNION MEMBERSHIP, JOB RIGHTS AND WELFARE GUARANTEES	Soviet "social contract" offers guarantees of union membership, employment security and substantial non-wage benefits to entire workforce, with terms formalized through the Soviet labor code.	China's "iron rice bowl" also offers union membership, job guarantees, and generous welfare benefits, but these are informal understandings and apply only to minority of workforce employed in state-sector.
EXTENT OF LABOR MOBILITY AND NATURE OF SOCIAL TIES AMONG WORKFORCE	Use of internal passports to control workforce, but faster pace of industrialization and urbanization, together with fears of labor shortage, leads to higher turnover and more heterogeneous social ties among workers.	Slower rate of industrialization and urbanization makes internal passports more effective, leading to much lower rate of labor mobility in industrial workforce and formation of more durable social ties based on "native place."
PARTICIPATION IN INTERNATIONAL LABOR BODIES AND CONVENTIONS	Although suspicious of unions in capitalist countries, Soviet government and AUCCTU are active in ILO since 1950s, with high rate of ratification of ILO conventions and exposure to debates on labor standards.	Chinese regime more suspicious of international interference, with little attention to ILO conventions until recently and with ACFTU prohibited from involvement in international labor bodies without government approval.

The Transformation of Labor Politics in Postcommunist Russia

Labor politics in post-Soviet Russia represents a puzzle in itself. After intense labor unrest in the waning years of the Soviet period, worker protest died down and newly established unions became virtually irrelevant during much of the 1990s. This "social explosion that wasn't" (Crowley, 2001) surprised and frustrated many observers, leading to deeply pessimistic assessments of the fate of the labor movement in Russia (Cook, 2001; Kubicek, 2002; Zaslavsky, 2001). However, while the Vladimir Putin era has witnessed increasing restrictions on civil society, there are also indications that state and business are anxious about, and sometimes responsive to, the threat of coordinated labor protest. This section outlines the evolving story of labor politics in Russia, with an eye to understanding what mechanisms have accounted for the weakness of labor and what conditions might yet facilitate organized labor mobilization over the longer term.

The Failure of Corporatism and the Fragmentation of Labor in Yeltsin's Russia

Soon after the 1989 miners' strikes ended, AUCCTU's leadership severed its ties to the Communist Party, and its Russian branches reorganized themselves to form the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia (FNPR), still the largest trade union center in Russia. In 1991, Boris Yeltsin issued several decrees banning communist party organization in enterprises, recognizing the right to strike, and allowing firms to dismiss workers (albeit under a set of highly restrictive conditions). Following the break-up of the USSR, the new Russian government also embraced

the ILO's model of tripartite "social partnership" in establishing the Russian Trilateral Commission on the Regulation of Social and Labor Relations (RTK) as the main forum for negotiating general agreements between firms and workers (Connor, 1996).

In the course of accelerated liberalization, concerns over labor unrest and sagging productivity prompted the government to retreat from its initial commitments. A 1995 law permitted strikes only after two failed attempts at arbitration, written notice of the intention to strike, *and* a one-day warning strike. Furthermore, tripartism was hampered because there was no clear separation between those representing workers' interests and those representing the enterprise administration (Simon, 2000; Zaslavsky, 2001). On the labor side, two-thirds of the seats on the RTK were allocated to FNPR, with the rest divided among newer unions (such as Sotsprof, or "Social Trade Unions," and the Independent Union of Miners) that preferred to cooperate with the government rather than with FNPR. On the business side, a majority of representatives were directors of former state enterprises who formed the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs (RUIE); associations formed by newer employers, such as the Congress of Russian Business Circles, constituted a small minority. That is, the main cleavage proved to be not between labor and business, but between those who wanted to temper Yeltsin's reforms (e.g., FNPR and RUIE) and newer organizations that backed the reforms (Connor, 1996; Simon, 2000).

With both labor and business fragmented, the otherwise weakened Russian state found itself in a relatively strong position to manage industrial relations. Yeltsin frequently issued unilateral decrees and struck *ad hoc* deals with particular unions to diffuse industrial conflicts. Given its size and potential political significance, FNPR fared well in these dealings, being allowed to hold on to its substantial inherited assets. Newer unions sporadically gained minor concessions but generally became frustrated by the government's refusal to redistribute FNPR's assets. Managers, for their part, ignored or diluted whatever "general pacts" were negotiated at the RTK, often falling behind on wage payments and relying on informal arrangements at the workplace to maintain a labor surplus and secure ownership rights in the course of privatization (Zaslavsky, 2001).

The divisions within organized labor also hindered the emergence of labor as a viable political force. The behavior of newer unions was dictated almost entirely by the objective of redistributing the material assets and membership base that FNPR inherited as the successor to the Soviet unions. These unions accused FNPR of selling out workers to retain its privileges and sought to cultivate a relationship with Yeltsin in hopes of curtailing FNPR's influence. This combination of supporting economic reform and criticizing the union to which most workers still paid dues proved to be a failing strategy for generating support among rank-and-file workers (Ashwin and Clarke, 2003). Moreover, conflicts among key leaders and ideological differences impeded the coordination necessary for an alternative trade union center. For example, the Confederation of Labor of Russia (KTR), formed in 1995, became truncated when the key miners' union withdrew to set up a new federation, the All-Russian Confederation of Labor (VKT). During this time, FNPR focused on larger political battles rather than bread-and-butter issues of concern to the workers, supporting the platform of the Communist Party and others who criticized the

pace of reform. This posture also made the FNPR susceptible to the charge of its competitors that it was a holdover from a bygone era, ill-equipped to represent the concrete interests of workers in the post-Soviet period (Ashwin and Clarke, 2003). These conditions militated against the emergence of a coherent agenda around which workers could mobilize (Kubicek, 2002; Simon, 2000).

For workers, the recognition of the right to dismissal, along with mass privatization and changes in the level and administration of benefits, produced heightened anxiety over job security, earnings, and social safety nets. During the 1990s, wage arrears grew rapidly, unemployment reached double-digits (with significant hidden unemployment and underemployment), and average real incomes declined precipitously along with health and safety conditions at the workplace (Christensen, 1999; Crowley, 2001). Although FNPR noted these conditions in criticizing the government, most workers were reluctant to heed union calls for strikes or demonstrations against the government, given their suspicions about the motivations of union leaders and their confusion over the government's role in the new economy (Javeline, 2003). Moreover, they depended on access to the workplace for a host of in-kind benefits offered by managers to compensate for falling or unpaid wages, and for a variety of covert earning schemes vital to their survival in uncertain times (Clark and Kabalina, 2000; Southworth and Hormel, 2004). Once Yeltsin ended the automatic dues check-off for employees and took away the unions' role in administering social benefits, union membership plummeted, falling 50 percent between 1992 and 1999 (Table 1). National unions came to suffer from the same low trust ratings as businesses and most governmental institutions (Crowley, 2002; Mishler and Rose, 2002: 57). And, as some surveys revealed, workers were more inclined to appeal to paternalistic managers than to unions to address their everyday needs (Christensen, 1999; Zaslavsky, 2001).

These aspects of labor politics in the 1990s were not conducive to the strengthening of organized labor. However, it must be remembered that Russian unions began to function as autonomous organizations under very difficult conditions characterized by a rapid economic transition, a concomitant transformation of political and legal institutions, and an anxious workforce worried about everyday survival. More important, these conditions are not immutable. Indeed, labor politics in the Putin era, in spite of recent moves to reign in civil society, point to some emerging possibilities for organized labor mobilization in Russia.

Labor Politics in Putin's Russia: The Labor Code and Beyond

The clearest indication of this trend may be found in the politics accompanying the adoption of a comprehensive new labor code in 2002. The government's original draft of the code retained restrictions on strikes and gave employers greater flexibility in dismissing workers, renewing temporary contracts indefinitely, permitting longer work weeks (up to 56 hours), and even choosing which unions to negotiate with. Significantly, the debates over this draft reflected a clearer cleavage between business and labor than previously evident: employers' associations, including RUIE (the industrialists' association that once acted in concert with FNPR), backed the government draft, while all of the trade unions, including FNPR, worked to defeat it. It is not clear whether the Putin administration anticipated such widespread op-

position, but what is clear is that the initial draft of the labor code, which the government went to great lengths to promote and which was widely supported by the Russian business community, would have been rejected in the Duma had it gone forward without at least a few concessions to labor.

The version of the code that was eventually adopted was based on a "compromise" bill that FNPR helped draft and that was approved by a solid majority in the Duma in late 2001. While the final version incorporated much of the government's proposal, and while FNPR officials admitted that more was needed to secure the rights and livelihood of the average worker,[3] the concessions extracted from the government were noteworthy. The termination of long-term contracts requires that several conditions be met; the list is long, but the specificity accords workers some protection not possible in the more open-ended government draft. Strict limits have also been placed on what percentage of a worker's earned income can be paid through in-kind distributions, thereby reducing the scope of informal workplace arrangements. There is also a minimum wage tied to the officially determined subsistence level; the government insists that such a provision cannot be enforced soon, but it did change its position to recognize the principle of a minimum wage tied to subsistence. While a legal strike still requires the support of half the workers, this ratio is based on an assembly of two-thirds of the total workforce at an enterprise. In addition, management cannot simply choose which union to negotiate with: that right goes to whichever union represents half of the company's personnel. The latter two conditions do not bode well for smaller unions or sector-specific labor mobilization, but they do allow larger unions opportunities to coordinate labor action and become regular participants in collective bargaining.

The debates over the labor code also point to the increasing sophistication of competing unions. FNPR was more cooperative than its rhetoric would suggest, but the decision to work with the Putin-backed Unity Party on the labor code—and to distance itself from leftist critics of the government—allowed FNPR to preserve its financial and legal autonomy as well as its membership, which still accounts for more than 80 percent of union members across sectors (Ashwin and Clarke, 2003). This strategy, while criticized by alternative unions, enabled FNPR to consolidate its position as the leading component of the labor movement, with its affiliates being more likely to gain the right to represent workers in collective bargaining. Newer unions also gravitated toward diverse strategies to increase visibility and influence relative to each other. The two largest alternative centers (VKT and KTR), once hoping to displace FNPR, now acknowledged FNPR's position as a "real" union, coordinated with its affiliates on local disputes, and offered qualified support for its position on the labor code. In exchange, they gained FNPR's support in acquiring membership in the ICFTU and secured their positions as the dominant unions in particular sectors (precious metals for VKT, dockers and sea transport for KTR). The more liberal Sotsprof and the more leftist Zashchita Truda, both much smaller, chose to set aside their ideological differences to jointly attack the labor code and capitalize on the frustrations of workers who were worried about the effects of the code. While the politics behind the labor code reveal continuing divisions within organized labor, they also suggest that unions' strategies have become more differentiated and more sophisticated over time.

In addition, workers are beginning to pay more attention to unions and vice versa.

The new restrictions on in-kind remuneration and informal workplace arrangements have created new incentives to participate in labor action as a means to protect workers' livelihoods. Recent trends at the local and firm level suggest that workers are more willing to take to the streets to protest, and that the protests are prompting unions to take a stand on key issues and enabling union leaders to gain greater visibility. Zashchita Truda's leader, Oleg Babich, was elected to the Duma as a result of his vigorous defense of Soviet-era job rights during debates over the labor code. In March 2002, protests and strikes took place in several cities in response to sharp increases in apartment rents and municipal utility costs. Strikes in the city of Voronezh forced employers to meet with local union leaders to revise wage agreements in accordance with the rising cost of living. In 2003, the significance of union activities became evident in the city of Norilsk, home to the politically influential metallurgical giant, Norilsk Nickel. The company's union leader, Valerii Melnikov, handily defeated a host of company-backed candidates in the mayoral elections following a labor dispute with the company over indexing wages to the cost of living (Kagarlitsky, 2003). Melnikov's success gained him nationwide attention and even made him a potential candidate for the Communist Party for the 2004 presidential elections. In 2004, a government plan to monetize key social benefits for pensioners and veterans (to cover costs of transportation, medical treatment, and municipal utilities) saw further convergence between the unions and the citizenry. FNPR then attacked the bill and supported nationwide protests in January 2005 that forced Putin to publicly criticize its implementation.

These events coincide with an end to the decline of union membership. FNPR has even reported a slight growth since 1999 (see Table 1). The level of trust in unions is presently higher than the trust shown in private firms and most government institutions; and, more important, the percentage of *union members* expressing confidence in national trade union bodies more than doubled since 1995 (Crowley, 2002; Rose, 2002). These trends suggest that workers have come to understand the new role of unions and the limits of enterprise paternalism and that organized labor have begun to pay greater attention to bread-and-butter issues directly affecting workers' livelihoods. As a result, there has been much greater convergence between workers' grievances and union agendas than was the case in the early 1990s. This convergence, if sustained and deepened, may provide the basis for union-led labor mobilization over time.

In sum, Russian unions can no longer be viewed as "transmission belts" of government policy; even those cooperating with the government have maintained their legal and financial autonomy while making independent strategic choices on the basis of entirely reasonable calculations. Interunion competition has revealed increasingly sophisticated strategies featuring selective cooperation among key unions as well as debates focused on substantive issues such as labor standards and social benefits. Workers who remain union members trust unions more than they did than a decade ago, while some union officials have been able to use salient labor issues to gain popularity and win elections to local and national offices. Putin, who has otherwise had his way with the Duma, has had to modify his stance on at least two key bills that were supported by the business community but criticized widely by workers and unions. This suggests is that organized labor is not totally powerless and that there are limits to what the Russian state can do in the arena of labor relations.

The Transformation of Labor Politics in Postcommunist China

In contrast to post-Soviet Russia, where regime change was abrupt and followed by rapid mass privatization, the dismantling of Chinese communism was incremental, beginning with Deng Xiaoping's "Four Modernizations" program in 1978. Some observers expected reforms to be rolled back after the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, but at the Fourteenth Party Congress in 1992, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) reaffirmed its commitment to an expanded private sector. At the Fifteenth Congress in 1997, the CCP called for the privatization of small and medium-sized state enterprises (Gallagher, 2002), and even endorsed the induction of capitalists into the party. Although these reforms evolved gradually, the CCP took its cue from industrial conflicts elsewhere, triggered by unemployment and disappearing safety nets, and invested considerable energy in restructuring industrial relations.

The Changing Role of Unions: Representation without Autonomy

The evolving role of ACFTU as the sole legal national trade union organization provides the clearest indication of the character and limitations of recent changes in Chinese labor law. In the Trade Union Law of 1992, ACFTU's appellation as an organization "under the leadership of the Party" was dropped, implying that the unions were no longer formally "transmission belts" for CCP policies. Subsequently, ACFTU leaders were invited to participate in debates over a new 1994 Labor Law, a comprehensive package intended to supplant all previous regulations and statutes related to work. ACFTU's involvement did not yield radical changes in the final document but did ensure the establishment of a five-day work week, a reduction of maximum regular working hours per week from 48 to 44, and a decrease in maximum overtime hours per month from 48 to 36. At least on paper, these benefits appeared to be at least as important as those secured by the more autonomous Russian unions in their negotiations (Chan and Nørland, 1998: 189; Hong and Warner, 1998: 63–74).

The government also acknowledged ACFTU's role in collective bargaining and defending workers' rights at the enterprise level. The 1994 Labor Law gave union branches the right to negotiate "collective contracts" with managers and stipulated that ACFTU had the right to participate in all labor arbitration cases and other labor-related disputes (Perry, 1995: 322). In addition, "joint conferences" (whereby union, state, and party representatives periodically meet to discuss labor issues) and the double-posting system (whereby union officials simultaneously hold positions in local government and party organs) theoretically combined to give the workforce multiple officially sanctioned channels through which to air grievances and seek redress (White, 1996: 442). The Trade Union Law of 2001 went even further, granting ACFTU the right to seek legal redress against enterprises that violate labor regulations. Unions were permitted to approach labor dispute arbitration bodies for assistance, and where the arbitral ruling was unsatisfactory to the union, they were permitted to take the case before a People's Court. The law also enumerated specific violations that could trigger legal action by unions, such as unpaid wages, poor health and safety conditions, extended working hours, and the poor treatment of female workers (IHLO, 2001).

These changes in the labor law suggest that ACFTU can no longer be viewed merely as a "transmission belt." At least nominally, it is expected to represent "workers' interests" as distinct from the interests of state and the firm. While this shift prompted some to invoke the language of corporatism (Unger and Chan, 1995), as with the RTK, the blurred cleavages between the supposedly autonomous "social partners" made it impossible to characterize concretely this as tripartite bargaining (White, 1996). If we shift the comparative referent from the past to labor relations in other postcommunist settings, the expanded role of ACFTU did little to spur, and may have further constrained, organized labor mobilization.

The major reason for this is that ACFTU, unlike FNPR, is not even formally autonomous from the party-state apparatus. Although the 1992 Trade Union law deleted clauses formally linking ACFTU and the CCP, ACFTU's own constitution still declares the federation to be one of the "mass organizations of the Chinese working class led by the Communist Party of China" (Hong and Warner, 1998). The state retains the right to approve or reject any newly established union branch; without state recognition, such groups are illegal and subject to official persecution (Lee, 2000: 57). In addition, the 2001 Trade Union Law not only prohibits independent unionism, but also requires ACFTU unions' to support the goals of improving productivity and deepening market reform. Several clauses legally obligate unions to "observe and safeguard the Constitution," and to "restore the normal order of production as soon as possible" following work stoppages. According to Article 4 of the law, ACFTU unions must also "take economic development as the central task, uphold the socialist road, the people's democratic dictatorship, leadership by the Communist Party of China, and Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought and Deng Xiaoping Theory, [and] persevere in reform and the open policy." Such clauses effectively yoke ACFTU to the CCP on the most divisive issues confronting Chinese workers, sharply limiting the scope of organized labor's ability to autonomously define and defend workers' interests in the course of market reform.

The state has also continued to regulate union membership across specific firms and sectors. While union membership increased by 22 percent between 1985 and 1995, overall union density declined in this period, primarily because workers in township and village enterprises (TVEs), joint ventures, and foreign-owned firms were not encouraged to form unions while unionization rates in the state sector remained close to 100 percent during the 1990s (ILO, 1998: 21). Moreover, the subsequent rise of union membership since 1999 (Table 1) has been a function of active government, promoting union formation in foreign companies and in the rapidly expanding private sector. This suggests that unions, far from being considered potential instigators of labor unrest, are viewed by the state and the private sector as allies in maintaining labor peace and productivity. This is in marked contrast to Russia where even the most cooperative unions have been able to voice opposition and have succeeded in delaying the passage of key pieces of legislation favored by the government.

The absence of independent revenue streams is another important constraint on ACFTU's activities. Unlike FNPR, ACFTU's national federation depends precariously on dues forwarded by local union branches, which depend on management's willingness to release union funds on time (White, 1996). In practice, this means that managers transfer funds at their convenience, and uncooperative unions may

run into endless delays in securing funding. In some wealthier regions, unions have set up their own enterprises to generate revenues or provide jobs for dismissed workers or unemployed youth, but most unions remain dependent on the cooperation of managers for access to scarce funds (White, 1996).

Under these conditions, the expanded role of Chinese unions in national policy discussions proved to be a "Faustian bargain" (White, 1996: 445): ACFTU received vague promises of access and influence in exchange for its commitment to market reforms, economic productivity, and labor peace. While FNPR's leadership had made a strategic decision to cooperate with the state to preserve its autonomy and its assets, ACFTU's leadership effectively acceded to a deal that sharply circumscribed its ability to define, let alone defend, the interests of workers. With the CCP now admitting private businessmen into its ranks, ACFTU is in an even more compromised position with regard to the protection of workers' rights and the enforcement of labor standards.

Labor Market Regulation and Worker Responses in the Reform Era

As with legislation on trade union activity, regulations governing the terms of employment in the 1994 Labor Law appeared to benefit workers more on paper than in practice. The law mandates a contractual employment relationship between enterprise and worker with clear delineation of job responsibilities, compensation, and duration of employment. In principle, this would give workers greater choice in securing jobs and compensation commensurate with their skills; firms could have more flexibility in dismissing redundant workers and hiring ones with the right skill-sets for changing production requirements. In reality, these changes effectively signaled the end of the job security and welfare guarantees previously associated with the "iron rice bowl." Whereas before the reforms, state-sector employees could only be dismissed for the gravest of offenses, the law now gave employers the freedom to dismiss workers for purely economic considerations. Elderly and female employees, viewed as the greatest liabilities to efficient production in the state sector, became especially vulnerable (Ding and Warner, 1999: 249).

Perhaps more significant, the new labor contract system was not accompanied by even a qualified recognition of workers' right to strike. This has allowed management to use the threat of dismissal to ensure compliance and productivity at the workplace, with employees increasingly facing harsher work regimens and more stringent enforcement of labor discipline. Even workers in state enterprises, the last group still enjoying some measure of social protection, now face new performance-based criteria that have increased wage differentials and workplace status distinctions. Some managers have even demanded changes in personal habits to turn employees into "useful and productive citizens" (C. Chen, 2000: 157). Some categories of workers, notably young female migrant workers in joint venture or foreign firms, are subjected to draconian restrictions on their behavior under the threat of verbal harassment and even physical abuse (Chan, 2001).

In seeking redress, workers have sometimes turned to official mechanisms such as the labor mediation and arbitration commissions. However, these bodies have not been adequate, given the explosive growth in the number of cases. Between 1992 and 2003, the number of disputes brought before labor arbitration commis-

sions rose from 8,150 to 226,000 (China Labor Statistical Yearbook, 2004; Lü, 2001: 192). In spite of ACFTU's establishment of legal assistance centers to aid workers, the growing caseload has resulted in uneven enforcement at best, especially in neglected sectors or more remote regions where the government's reach is comparatively weak. When ACFTU has intervened on the side of workers, it had done so mainly in "absolutely winnable" cases where the breach of workers rights is unquestionable and where the claims have been brought forth by individuals going through official channels (Chen, 2003: 14–15). Where cases have come up for committee consideration, local labor bureaus and union branches have often sided with enterprises and pressured workers to withdraw complaints to avoid jeopardizing tax revenues and access to union funds.

In response to the deterioration of socioeconomic conditions, workers facing poor working conditions or layoffs have been bypassing ACFTU and formal grievance procedures in favor of direct action to secure redress (Hurst and O'Brien, 2002; IHLO, 2001). Some have engaged in deliberate work slowdowns to challenge the new performance-based criteria, while more disgruntled workers have taken to overt forms of collective action, ranging from petitions and sit-ins at government offices to wildcat strikes and increasingly violent street protests (Lee, 2000; 2002). The state sector in particular has been a hotbed for intensifying protest as workers facing major reductions in social benefits and job and income security have increasingly engaged in street demonstrations since the early 1990s (F. Chen, 2000; Cai, 2002). The strikes remain illegal, but their number has grown and unofficial worker movements have proliferated (Wright, 2003). The *scale* of unrest has also risen to unprecedented levels, as evident in a February 2000 demonstration by some 20,000 mine workers protesting planned lay-offs and a March 2002 protest by some 20,000 oil workers complaining about inadequate severance packages (Cai, 2002: 339; Pomfret, 2002). While the timing of these actions suggests some coordination at particular locales, and while militancy has produced some gains for workers in sectors or regions characterized by labor shortages, the lack of union involvement in labor protest and the absence of other organizational resources to facilitate collective action mean that labor unrest remains largely local and sporadic.

Another response among workers has been to turn to personal networks and informal social pacts (Perry, 1995; White, 1996). Social networks reflecting the significance of "native place" (Perry, 1997) have remained a salient feature of the labor market, whether in the search for supplemental employment or new lucrative jobs. In some instances, workers, most notably migrants, have organized themselves under the cover of "associations of fellow townsmen" (*tongxianghui*) and "brotherhood associations" (*xiongdihui*) to safeguard their rights without overtly challenging government restrictions (Chen, 2003: 28). The result is a rapidly growing informal labor market that mitigates the effects of unemployment or forced early retirement. For their part, many enterprises, TVEs in particular, have relied upon informal understandings and networks in hiring and retaining reliable, productive employees (C. Chen, 2000).

As in Russia, managers in labor-short areas continue to offer a host of non-wage benefits, including free meals, movie tickets, and even housing, as a way of preempting dissatisfaction. Although initially a means to retain highly skilled person-

nel in new or privatized firms, these benefits have been gradually extended to a wider range of employees, recalling practices typical of the very *danwei* system the state has been attempting to dismantle (Lü, 2001; Lü and Perry, 1997).

In sum, ACFTU's visibility has risen in the era of reform, but labor still operates in a highly confined political space where unions are legally obligated to support national economic policies and promote enterprise productivity. With unions severely constrained in their ability to defend workers' interests, workers have pursued their grievances through other channels, sometimes through official channels, but more often through local acts of protest and informal workplace understandings. Although the state remains the driving force behind changes in Chinese industrial relations, it has inadvertently pushed the most vigorous forms of labor politics out of the realm of formal institutions, resulting in the growth of labor militancy and informal paternalism. Changes in labor law appear to have intensified the very problems the CCP most sought to avert in seeking to restructure ACFTU's role in industrial relations.

The Limits and Prospects of Organized Labor Mobilization in Russia and China

Most studies of labor relations in either Russia or China rightly conclude that organized labor is too weak to pose a serious challenge to state and business actors. The main unions, descended from communist-era trade union bodies, seem to have acceded readily to legislation limiting the scope of collective bargaining and restricting the right to strike. In both countries, union leaders have close ties to government officials and business leaders, and opt for negotiation rather than militancy in addressing industrial disputes. Moreover, the increasing economic insecurity most workers have experienced has led them to rely on informal paternalistic arrangements with employers and sporadic local protests orchestrated without involvement from national unions. These common features of labor politics in Russia and China appear to confirm the prevalent view that organized labor throughout the postcommunist world is weak and likely to remain so for the foreseeable future (Kubicek, 2004; Ost and Crowley, 2001).

At the same time, following the lead of studies that take seriously variations in the *extent* of labor weakness in postcommunist contexts (Avdagic, 2005; Robertson, 2004), our study of labor politics in Russia and China employs a variation-finding comparative strategy to identify potentially consequential differences in the prospects for organized labor mobilization over the long term. In this process, typical indicators of labor strength—such as union membership levels, fragmentation within the labor movement, and labor militancy—may initially seem to favor the prospects of labor mobilization in China rather than in Russia. Chinese unions, after experiencing a 15 percent decline in membership through most of the 1990s, saw a 50 percent growth in union membership between 1999 and 2002, while Russian unions saw their membership rates cut nearly in half since 1992 (see Table 1). ACFTU remains structurally unified and has been granted a place on national deliberative bodies, while organized labor in Russia has been fragmented into competing federations that are selectively permitted by the government to participate in specific labor-related policy discussions. China's workers have exhibited growing militancy

Table 1
Union Membership in China and Russia, 1992-2002
(with net change per period and year)

	CHINA	RUSSIA
1992	103 million	73 million
1996	102 million	45 million
	-0.97% (-0.24% / year)	*-38.4% (-9.6% / year)*
1999	87 million	37 million
	-14.7% (-4.9% / year)	*-17.8% (-5.93% / year)*
2002	130 million	39 million
	+49.4% (+16.5% / year)	*+5.4% (+1.8% / year)*

Source: The figures for total trade union membership are reported from data provided by the main national unions, ACFTU for China and FNPR for Russia. For Russia, the figure includes not only FNPR's own members but also the approximate membership of newly formed All-Russian trade union federations. These are also the sources used by the International Labour Office for calculating trade union membership (ILO, 1998a: 235-264).

across locales and sectors in the form of street protests and wildcat strikes, while Russian workers outside of a few select sectors (e.g., coal mining) have remained generally docile.

A closer examination of the relationships among organized labor, state, business, and the workforce suggests that such typical indicators of labor strength are not useful in gauging the prospects for labor mobilization in postcommunist settings. In relation to union membership, it is worth emphasizing that the surge in membership in China since 1999 has little to do with the political mobilization of labor. Rather, it reflects the continued expansion of the manufacturing sector, along with a vigorous effort by the Chinese government to promote union membership in privatized and foreign-owned enterprises to diffuse workplace conflict and maintain labor productivity.

In Russia, the much steeper decline in union membership and density in the 1990s is not surprising considering the abrupt process through which labor relations were restructured during the transition. The ending of automatic check-offs for union dues, along with the hectic pace of privatization and the radical overhaul of laws and statutes governing employment and social welfare, combined to initially produce a steep drop in union membership. Against this backdrop, it is noteworthy that the rate of decline in union density has slowed since 1999, and the total level of union membership appears to have risen. This has occurred even though state and business in Russia, unlike their counterparts in China, have sought to undermine rather than promote trade unionism.

Similarly, the greater fragmentation within labor in Russia must be considered alongside the low level of autonomy for China's one legal trade union center, ACFTU. Given the sheer size and resources of FNPR within the Russian labor movement, the level of intra labor fragmentation is not nearly as problematic as might be the case in countries where two or more roughly equal trade union centers seek the patronage of competing parties as, for example, in Poland (Ost, 2001). FNPR, similar to the dominant trade union center in the Czech Republic, has enough represen-

tation across sectors and regions that it is taken seriously as a player by state and business in salient policy debates. At the same time, it faces enough pressure from the smaller unions that it cannot ignore the grievances of workers if it wants to retain its membership base without an automatic dues check-off (as in the Soviet era) or active government encouragement of union participation (as in China). The result is that FNPR and other Russian unions can at least play an important role in informing workers of national policy debates and encouraging affiliates to participate in public rallies, even if they do not frequently encourage strikes.

Although wildcat strikes and street protests have been more widespread than in Russia, labor militancy in China has been sporadic and confined to particular sectors and locales. The protests do not reflect a foundation for large-scale collective action; rather they are a response to the conspicuous lack of union leadership and adequate institutionalized mechanisms for addressing workers' grievances (Lee, 2002; Wright, 2003). ACFTU not only actively discourages strikes and work slowdowns, but also has not offered even qualified *post-hoc* support for grassroots protest actions. Some larger demonstrations have produced incremental economic gains for participants in particular locales or firms. Yet, without a trade union willing and able to provide material and organizational resources for sustained collective action, labor militancy in China will remain largely local and unorganized for the foreseeable future, with state and business responding *ad hoc* rather than with systematic efforts to address workers' common grievances in debates over economic or social policy. Yet in Russia, the largest unions, although not inclined to encourage labor militancy, have frequently supported local strikes and demonstrations, using the protests as a springboard for promoting more generalized challenges to laws and policies.

In lieu of union membership levels, the degree of fragmentation, or the intensity of labor militancy, we point to two more contextual measures to suggest that the prospects for organized labor mobilization are greater in Russia than in China: (1) how much state and business perceive union activities to be an impediment to the objectives they are pursuing, and (2) how much workers perceive unions to be useful organizations in protecting their livelihoods (see Figure 2). First, while governments in both countries have adopted new laws that enhance managerial flexibility at the expense of job and income security, Russian unions have delayed or amended key pieces of legislation supported by government and business. It is noteworthy that the new labor code was much more difficult to pass in Russia than the government anticipated, representing the most serious challenge Putin faced in his first term (Glinski-Vassiliev, 2001). Moreover, the debates over the code revealed coordinated efforts by union leaders from different regions to lobby Duma deputies to block the original government draft even though business elites were united in support of the code.

By contrast, new labor laws in China have been adopted with very little opposition. While labor politics have become more fluid and contested in recent years, the absence of a legal right to strike and the lack of union autonomy have produced little anxiety among state or business, and unions continue to be regarded as instruments for retarding the spread of labor protest. The recent growth of union membership in China, far from indicating the strength of labor, actually points to how much unions are counted upon by the state and business to maintain labor peace. In

this sense, ACFTU has not moved nearly as far beyond its earlier role as a "transmission belt" as has been the case with even the most cooperative of Russian unions, FNPR.

Second, while workers in neither country demonstrate much confidence in unions, workers in Russia are beginning to understand the new role of unions, and union agendas are beginning to cohere more with workers' grievances. Although membership in Russian unions is now voluntary, the decline in membership has slowed, and unions are beginning to enjoy incrementally greater trust among members. In several instances, unions have begun to embrace publicly the concerns of protesters, even if they initially discouraged the protests. The public debates over the Russian labor code evinced a closer relationship between union leaders and rank-and-file members than seen in the past, as evident at thousands of meetings held nationwide at which union leaders from all the federations sought to explain to their local affiliates and members the significance of key components of the new code. One reason why the leader of a small labor organization such as Zashchita Truda could gain national fame and be elected to the Duma was that workers in his constituency viewed him as a defender of their rights and livelihoods. In China, ACFTU's top leadership may have more visibility than before in national policy discussions, but this has not earned it any points in the eyes of the workforce. Moreover, the strikes and protests in China, while growing in number, not only reflect a relatively low level of coordination given the lack of union participation, but also suggest that workers are increasingly ignoring unions and turning to unofficial channels for voicing discontent (Wright, 2003).

In seeking mechanisms that partially explain this variation, our comparisons suggest three key differences in the character of postcommunist labor politics that we find useful (see Figure 2). First, there is a difference in *how much legal, operational and financial autonomy unions have as they attempt to formulate their preferences and strategies.* While both ACFTU and FNPR, the main descendants of communist-era trade union bodies, have been cooperative, ACFTU's cooperation involves little choice, given its constitutional obligation to support economic production and maintain labor peace. In contrast, FNPR behavior reflects an autonomous strategic choice, calculated to protect its assets and its privileged position within the labor movement. FNPR's substantial material inheritance, valued today at about $6 billion (Ashwin and Clarke, 2003: 90), provides it with the resources to organize meetings, campaigns, and mass actions nationwide. ACFTU's financial resources are primarily from enterprise managers who can, and have, delayed the release of these funds to ensure union cooperation. At the local level, FNPR's affiliates have shown the ability to initiate actions on their own, cooperating with branch affiliates of other federations, and sometimes prodding national FNPR leaders to amend their initial stances. ACFTU's branch and local affiliates are not in a position to act independently or to apply pressure on either enterprises or the central federation. This is also evident in the international arena: although ACFTU is legally prohibited from associating with other trade union federations and supports the Chinese government's position on various ILO conventions, FNPR and two other unions (KTR and VKT) have become members of the ICFTU, and several major unions have invoked ILO

conventions and filed complaints against the government concerning labor standards.

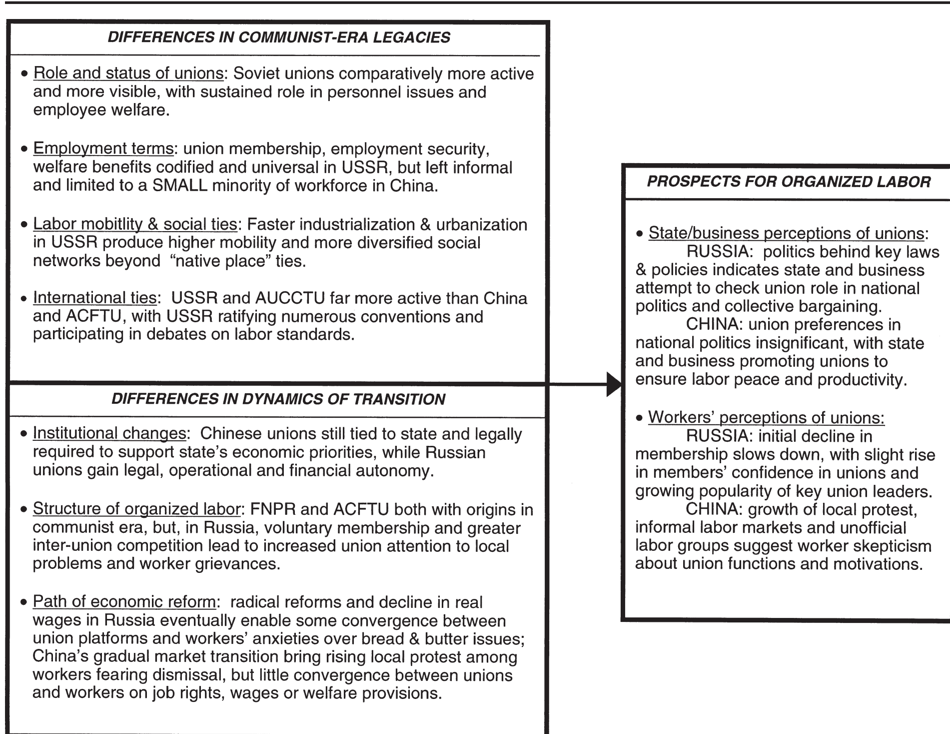
Second, there are differences in *how much the structure of organized labor creates incentives for union leaders to take action on behalf of workers' grievances.* Russian unions, given the lack of automatic membership or government support for unionization, must be proactive in maintaining and expanding their membership base. Moreover, the higher degree of decentralization within organized labor, while contributing to reduced union membership and greater fragmentation, create added incentives for competing unions to demonstrate their credentials as advocates of working-class interests in national and workplace politics. FNPR may have substantial advantages over other unions, but to retain these advantages, it must convince its membership base that it can deliver benefits that workers actually care about. Its competitors not only apply pressure on FNPR through constant public criticism, but also seek to demonstrate their own credentials in sectors or regions where they recruit the bulk of their members. Conversely, ACFTU's monopoly as the sole legitimate union, together with its explicit obligation to support national economic goals, make it unlikely that even with increased autonomy it can play a meaningful role in defending workers' interests vis-a-vis the state.

Finally, we note differences in *how much the pace and character of economic reforms reduce the incentives for the average worker to look to paternalistic managers rather than unions in seeking to protect their livelihoods.* In both countries, the reduction in job security and the shriveling of social safety nets initially created incentives for workers to rely more heavily on enterprise paternalism and informal social exchange. In Russia, the speed of reform and more precipitous decline in living standards made workers more anxious and less likely to take risks by responding to unions' calls for strikes or protests (Javeline, 2003). At the same time, this intensified anxiety and accelerated decline in living standards, combined with the reduced benefits of informal enterprise paternalism as a result of declining resources and restrictions in the labor code, have prodded workers to reconsider unions in their new roles as workers' advocates. The result has been more convergence between union platforms and workers' interests than was the case in Yeltsin's Russia or in China where workers increasingly look to unofficial channels to protect their livelihoods and vent their frustrations.

Postcommunist Labor in Comparative Perspective: Toward Some Hypotheses

Certainly, variation in the extent of organized labor mobilization is partly a function of the extent of democratic consolidation. The existence of civil liberties, most notably the freedom of association, facilitates collective action among labor actors. Yet unions in the more consolidated democracies of East-Central Europe have not consistently secured any more gains than unions in Russia (Kubicek, 2004; Ost, 2000, 2001), and have experienced even sharper declines in union density since 1989. Within Russia, organized labor has become more politically sophisticated and relevant in Putin's Russia, which is significantly less democratic than Yeltsin's Russia (Fish, 2005). To the extent that Russia remains more democratic than China, the existence of some civil liberties and electoral institutions do not explain by

Figure 2
Sources of Varations in Labor Politics in Russia and China



themselves either the behavior and influence of organized labor, or the character of the relationship between unions, workers, business, and the state. Whereas democratization may generally expand the possibilities for autonomous collective action, we need to consider specific mechanisms in accounting for variations in the character and effect of labor action.

The contextualized comparison here is premised on the notion that even small variations can be critical in determining the conditions under which organized labor in postcommunist settings may evolve over time into viable advocates of working-class interests. The comparison suggests that while organized labor may be weak in both Russia and China, the *extent* and *sources* of labor weakness in the two countries reflect fundamentally different kinds of mechanisms and constraints, with significant implications for the prospects of organized labor mobilization (Figure 2). Russian labor, while more autonomous, has been too fragmented to organize sustained and widespread labor protest; Chinese labor, while organizationally unified, is not autonomous enough from the state to even consider challenging it. Whereas neither condition permits labor to wield much influence in national politics for the time being, it is significant that Russian unions have been operating within a more fluid opportunity structure (Tarrow, 1994), within which they have developed diverse and shifting strategies for exerting pressure on government and for competing for membership and influence within the labor movement. Yet Chi-

nese unions, although no longer "transmission belts," are being accorded recognition only on condition that they contribute to economic productivity and industrial harmony. This gives Chinese unions less reason to be attentive to the grievances of rank-and-file workers and reduces the prospects of union-led mobilization in China in the foreseeable future.

At the same time, opportunity structures are too fluid to permit sustained mobilization without adequate organizational and symbolic resources (Tarrow, 1994). This is precisely where particular elements of the communist inheritance come back into play, further strengthening the prospects for labor mobilization in Russia. While Soviet trade unionism provides few "contentious repertoires" (Tilly, 1993), Russian unions have inherited both organizational and symbolic resources that can be directed toward large-scale collective action. The organizational resources—material assets, social and administrative ties across regions and sectors, and membership in international labor bodies—enable the communication and coordination necessary for mobilizing workers across sectors and regions. The symbolic resources—the general status ascribed to industrial labor by the Soviet regime, linkages drawn by Soviet authorities between their employment practices and international labor conventions, and the association between unions and workers' material welfare—allow unions to frame their activities in terms that are familiar to a citizenry that is increasingly nostalgic for the economic security of the Soviet era (Rose, 2002:16–17). Although the likelihood of union-led mobilization in Russia should not be overstated, this combination of the Soviet inheritance and the specific institutional environment in which Russian labor operates points to a much lower threshold for organized labor mobilization in Russia than is the case in China.

These comparisons can be presented as tentative hypotheses that can guide further research into postcommunist labor politics. *The long-term prospects for union-led labor mobilization in postcommunist settings vary with:*

(1) the extent to which specific inheritances of communist-era trade unionism can be adapted to constitute material, organizational, and symbolic resources for postcommunist unions; and
(2) the institutional environment shaping the behaviors of unions and workers, as evident in (a) the legal, financial, and organizational autonomy of unions to pursue interests distinct from the state, (b) the pressures unions face in competing with one another in maintaining and expanding their membership base, and (c) the level of economic insecurity faced by workers alongside reduced alternative opportunities for ensuring their survival.

These hypotheses presume that the apparent docility of organized labor in postcommunist countries are not necessarily the result of the same mechanisms and constraints. The above comparisons suggest that some mechanisms are more malleable than others, allowing for openings where well-organized unions can affect outcomes in ways that surprise, if not scare, state and business. Where the main constraints on labor mobilization are a function of specific policies or political maneuvers rather than of rigid institutional structures, the threshold that unions have to overcome in organizing labor protest is that much lower. This observation is instructive if we are to anticipate where and when slight shifts in the political landscape might suffice to create the conditions for organized labor protest. The 1989

miners' strikes took Soviet authorities and Sovietologists by surprise, precisely because the latent potential for labor mobilization was not anticipated, given the apparent docility of workers for the past several decades. Likewise, while organized labor may have been largely quiescent across postcommunist countries, it would be a mistake to ignore differences in specific historical inheritances and in the institutional environments shaping labor politics, as these differences may constitute mechanisms capable of generating greater variation in the extent and character of labor mobilization over time.

Notes

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1. We use the term *postcommunist* to refer to regimes where (1) market-oriented reforms have been sustained in previously socialist command economies, and (2) there has been significant deviation from the original principles regulating party membership and discipline. This is assumed to be true for Russia since the break-up of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991. For China, the key marker is the 1992 decision to accelerate market reforms marks the postcommunist era, especially as it was followed by decisions to hold village-level elections open to nonparty members and allow private businessmen into the ranks of the party elite.
2. Rudra Sil, interview with Aleksandr Shepel, president of KTR (Confederation of Labor of Russia), June 8, 2002.
3. Rudra Sil, interview with Vitali Budko, vice-chairman of FNPR (Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia), June 6, 2002.

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