

Workers' paradise misses the point

Russia, like Europe, is obsessed with organizing society around work. Russia still follows the European idea based soundly in Marxist thought: The primary purpose of people's lives is to work, and it is in that capacity that society ought to be organized.

As an American living in Russia, I watch the country from the sidelines. But as America's ship of state sails toward Eurosocialism, set on its course years ago by the utter contempt of the Bush administration for limited government, I wonder if people who are "pro-labor" understand what is wrong with focusing their politics on how people work. I and millions of Russians live with the consequences of this bad idea every day.

For example, it might be seem appealing to give workers a break in the middle of the day. It seems perfectly reasonable to allow stores to close their doors for a lunch break, kiosks to close for tea time, restaurants to open later so their employees don't have to get up early, and so forth. Unless, of course, you want to buy something at the store, get a ticket at the kiosk, or grab an early lunch.

Managing your life in the presence of the unpredictable work hours and behavior of employees is one of the biggest challenges of Russian life. It seems quite common for workers to take time off during the day just so they can run errands, hurrying to get back in time for work. Many times I've had people ask to cut in front of me in a line because they were "at work."

Naturally, I let them. What else could I do?

Employees can shut down their work simply because they want to.



OPINION

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Four times (yes, I do count these things, you never know what you might need for a column), I have stood in a line to get something, only to have whomever I'm waiting for close it for a "technical break" and force us all to queue up somewhere else.

Similarly, posted business hours and signs like "24/7" are

not the promises they would be in America. They're simply ideals that employees may or may not adhere to, depending on how they're feeling that day. For those of us who believe integrity is the cornerstone of civil society, these little everyday betrayals are quite disturbing. Disturbing, and sad.

These all add up. For one, they encourage the production of inferior, low-quality goods. I've changed eight light bulbs in my apartment since I moved in, an average of one a week. This of course means that I have to spend even more time shopping for replacements.

But in a workers' paradise, light-bulb makers' jobs and the quality of their 9-to-5 life are believed to be more important than my desire to have a well-lit apartment.

Worker entitlements also promote a bitterness and hostility for both parties in even the most basic economic transactions. In a country that promotes a "workers-first" mentality, producers and consumers may have very different expectations regarding quality and service. Arguments that

in America would have me looking for a police officer scarcely draw attention here.

"Pro-worker" policies make life more stressful and society worse off. They miss a key point: Obsessing about workers ignores consumers. It is our needs as consumers, I would suggest, that are more important.

America is now engaging in wholesale bailouts of entire industries. Such "pro-worker" actions will in the long run do nothing but produce inferior consumer goods, turn people against one another, keep people in jobs they shouldn't be in, and make the country poorer. Just like in Russia, Europe, and everywhere else. We would do well to remember what everyone seems to have forgotten: Human beings do not consume in order to work. We work in order to consume.

No one works for wages. We work for what our wages will buy. Instead of 9-to-5, we need to think more about 5-to-9. The best thing for workers is to live in a world where the things they work for, from diapers and dishes to health care and housing, get better and cheaper.

In order to do this, resources need to be allocated based on our wishes as consumers. Not on the wishes of the politically powerful, whether in Moscow or Washington, D.C. Sure, it's not paradise. It just beats everything else.

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