

Unemployment in State Socialism: An Insight into the Understanding of Work in 1950s Poland

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"I've always heard and read in newspapers that there are workforce shortages. But there are many unemployed women in this small town—Gostyń—and especially us, young women. I am twenty-one, I've been looking for a job for a year now. I go from one firm to another, and I can't find any."

This letter was sent to the Polish Radio at the beginning of 1953, the fourth year of the rapid industrialization program called the Six-Year Plan. At that time, letters like this one were still rather rare. Although some listeners were reporting queues at the employment offices, the general situation on the labor market was one of intensive recruitment campaigns, country-to-city migration, and a policy of the "productivization" of women. Yet two years later the radio, press, and party-state institutions were experiencing a wave of such complaints. Unemployment was growing every month.

This chapter explores the unemployment problem faced by Poland in the second half of the 1950s. How was "joblessness" described, defined, and perceived by workers, economists, and policy-makers, and what measures and policies were taken against it by the party-state? How unemployment was experienced by (male and female) workers and explained by experts, journalists and the party-state offers an insight into the understanding of work in state socialism and the so-called "socialist economy." In so doing, the chapter contributes to one of the main issues in new labor history, which is the conceptualization of work.¹ My research shows that the conceptualization of work was a dynamic process in state socialism, and that although framed by Marxism, after 1956 discourses on labor and labor policies were shaped by complex cultural and economic factors.

¹ Christian G. De Vito, "New Perspectives on Global Labor History: Introduction," in "Global labor history" special issue, *Workers of the World: International Journal on Strikes and Social Conflicts* 1, no. 3 (2013): 7–31.

Unemployment is usually believed to be a nonexistent problem under state socialism. Instead, as a consequence of policies of full employment, so-called hidden unemployment or overmanning was widespread.² In Yugoslavia, due to its peculiarities in political and economic development, open unemployment became a serious matter.³ Poland, also burdened with overmanning,⁴ experienced open unemployment as well, although estimates are truly difficult to make. Moreover, there existed a widespread concern and even panic over the issue of joblessness, which manifested itself most evidently in the second half of the 1950s.⁵

Post-1989 historiography on workers in postwar Poland has flourished, mainly focusing on worker-state relations.⁶ Nevertheless, several studies have explored other important aspects of labor relations during state socialism, such as workers' agency, labor policies, gender, and workers' expectations towards the party-state as an employer.⁷ Still, the problem of the conceptualization and values attached to work needs more attention. How did social actors (like decision-makers, workers, and party officials) experience so-called "full employment"? How was "work" conceptualized and experienced?

Research on the unemployment problem in Poland reveals the importance of age, class, and gender as categories of analysis while discussing work in state socialism. Here I focus on gendered aspects of unemployment in the

People's Republic of Poland. While gender is known as a key category in understanding labor relations in postwar Poland,⁸ this chapter elaborates on the gendered conceptualization of work.

I argue that workers, economists, and the party-state perceived work as a citizen's right that could not be denied. Work was understood above all in moral terms and in the context of social justice. At the same time, these opinions about work reveal that their authors' views were not entirely egalitarian, and some of the strongest inequalities and discriminatory practices had to do with gender. Social justice was used as one of the arguments against women's employment, which reveals a deeply rooted exclusion. Moreover, the party-state and workers often shared these exclusive attitudes. Women's right to work was sometimes defended, and in other cases denied, which contributed to their generally ambiguous position in the job market.

I focus on Poland in the late 1950s for two reasons. First, discussions among state officials, economists, and workers took place at a very specific moment in the postwar history of Poland: the Thaw. In the years 1955–1958, and especially in 1956 and 1957, expression of public opinion was relatively free. The fear of Stalinism had dissipated, and the new rule of Władysław Gomułka (which lasted until the workers' protests of December 1970) had not yet established control over the activity of journalists and workers. In 1956 it was not extraordinary to find Marxism criticized in a newspaper, or to ask openly about unemployment in a communist party meeting. Discussions of the "errors" of Stalinism and the Six-Year Plan provided an occasion to reflect on the principles of the political, social, and economic system. This particular situation gives an insight into how work, rights, social justice, and gender were understood in a society that had already experienced communist rule for about ten years.

Moreover, Poland had experienced severe unemployment during the interwar period, and difficult and destructive labor policies during the two occupations of World War II. These experiences were still fresh in the 1950s and had an impact on the discourses on unemployment and the policies that were debated or initiated.

The analysis and conclusions presented here are based on a variety of historical sources. The most important among them are the documents of the party-state institutions (the Parliamentary Commission of Labor and Social Care, the Economy Department of the Central Committee, etc.), which include stenographic records of discussions and reports, as well as letters sent

² Josef L. Potker, *Unemployment in Capitalist, Communist and Post-Communist Economies* (New York: St. Martin's Press and Palgrave Macmillan, 1995).

³ Susan L. Woodward, *Socialist Unemployment: The Political Economy of Yugoslavia, 1945–1990* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995). Unemployment rates grew from 5.8 percent in 1959 to 16.9 percent in 1989.

⁴ In the 1980s, Józef Nowicki estimated hidden unemployment at six million. Interestingly, he included two million women whose work—assumed—was "economically unreasonable." His analysis is another example of the gendered understanding of work in socialism. Józef Nowicki, *Paradoxy pełnego zatrudnienia w Polsce* [Paradoxes of full employment in Poland] (Warsaw: Polskie Wydawnictwo Ekonomiczne 1990), 70.

⁵ Recent historical studies open up the question of unemployment in state-socialist Poland: Natalia Jarska, "Gender and Labour in Post-War Communist Poland: Female Unemployment 1945–1970," *Acta Polonica Historica* 110 (2014): 49–85; Michal Zgłobica, "Czy naprawdę w Polsce Ludowej nie istniało bezrobocie?" [Did unemployment in communist Poland really exist?], *Przebieg historii* 107, no. 4 (2016): 619–56; Jerzy Kochanowski, *Rewolucja międzywojennokomunista: Polska 1956–1957* [Revolution between Two Octobers: Poland 1956–1957] (Kraków: ZNAK, 2017).

⁶ For a recent discussion on pre-1989 historiography of the working class, see Natalia Jarska, "The Periphery Revisited: Polish Post-War Historiography on the Working Class and the New Global Labour History," *European Review of History* 25, no. 1 (February 2018): 45–60.

⁷ Especially the works of Jędrzej Chumiński, Małgorzata Fiedlis, Dariusz Jarosz, Patrycja Kenney, Katherine Lebow, Małgorzata Mazurek, and Hubert Wilk.

⁸ See Małgorzata Fiedlis, *Women, Communism, and Industrialization in Postwar Poland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) and Natalia Jarska, *Kobiety z marmuru: Robotnice w Polsce w latach 1945–1960* [Women of marble: Women workers in Poland, 1945–1960] (Warsaw: IPN, 2015).

by workers to these institutions and to the radio. The unemployment problem was well represented in newspaper articles. Sociological research carried out in the late 1950s is also significant, not only because it brought interesting results. Extensive in-depth research on unemployment in 1957 was carried out by a newly founded institution, but was related to an important interwar research institute and shows key historical dimensions of the perception of unemployment. In this chapter I also included some conclusions from my research in Kraśnik, a small town in eastern Poland where in 1948 a metal factory was reopened and employed many peasant women.⁹

First, the chapter explains the genealogy of mid-1950s unemployment in Poland. In the second part, reactions to unemployment are presented through public discussions and the attempts of the party-state to deal with the issue. The third part is dedicated to interpreting how discourse and policies related the right to work with principles of social justice. The last section addresses the gender dimension of the unemployment problem.

Genealogy of the Problem of Unemployment in Poland

In interwar Poland (1918–1939) unemployment was one of the most important economic and social problems. It included both urban and rural unemployment (the second often described as agrarian overpopulation or hidden unemployment) and had a structural and cyclical character. Interwar unemployment was attributed to the demographic situation (a rapid postwar increase in the birth rate), a backward economic structure, and economic crises. During the Great Depression, which severely affected Poland, employment decreased by about 22 percent. The official statistics are misleading, since they include only registered unemployment, and this varied according to policies of public works and unemployment benefits; for example, the 1931 census showed that there were about 680,000 unemployed. In the 1930s unemployment in cities and towns was estimated at one million (two million residents without income, or 22 percent of the urban population).¹⁰ Interwar problems in the job market mainly affected men,

for various reasons: for example, unemployment affected “male” branches of industry more severely.¹¹ The unemployment rate grew to 43 percent in 1933 in the case of blue-collar workers, and 31 percent in the case of white-collar workers in 1934. The superfluous workforce in agriculture was estimated to be at least 2.4 million.¹² Unemployment as a social problem was intensively researched by sociologists; among the most important and original studies were the “Memoirs of the Unemployed” gathered and edited in the 1930s.¹³

The post-World War II economic situation of Poland was different. In the immediate postwar years of rebuilding and political and social chaos, still large (although unknown) numbers of unemployed searched for jobs and contributed to social unrest.¹⁴ Unemployment affected many thousands of women who became sole breadwinners due to war casualties, postwar migration, and population losses. However, the new economic model—with nationalization of industrial plants and central planning—soon softened this problem. The Rebuilding Plan (1947–1950), and especially the Six-Year Plan (1950–1955) characterized by rapid industrialization, quickly created hundreds of thousands of jobs, absorbed a large portion of hidden unemployment in agriculture, and even caused workforce shortages. Moreover, the communists who took power after the war believed in the “full employment” principle. In the economy they attempted to build there was no place for unemployment. State socialism attempted to eliminate unemployment through social ownership and economic planning. As Susan Woodward has noted, “full employment was portrayed by supporters as one of the primary achievements of socialism. Even critics saw it as the basis of socialism’s political legitimacy.”¹⁵ In Poland, full employment was stated as an aim of the Rebuilding Plan. As Eugenia Pragierowa, a high functionary of the Ministry of Labor and Social Care, put it in 1947, this principle could be realized only in a planned and non-market economy.¹⁶

During the Six-Year Plan employment grew rapidly, by over 400,000 a year. This was possible not only because so many people searched for work; during this period, institutions and factories searched for workers.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹² *Ibid.*, 18–29.

¹³ *Pamiętniki bezrobotnych nr 1–57* [Memoirs of the unemployed, nos. 1–57], preface Ludwik Krzywicki (Warsaw: Instytut Gospodarstwa Społecznego, 1933).

¹⁴ See Marcin Zaremba, *Wizjka Trwoga: Polska 1944–1947: Ludowa reakcja na kryzys* [The Great Fear: Poland, 1944–1947: Popular reaction towards the crisis] (Kraków: Znak, 2012).

¹⁵ Woodward, *Socialist Unemployment*, 10–11.

¹⁶ Eugenia Pragierowa, “Drogi rozwoju polityki pracy w Polsce” [Employment policy development in Poland], *Praca i Opiekna Społeczna* 3 (1947): 200.

⁹ This case study has been presented in Natalia Jarska, “Rural Women, Gender Ideologies, and Industrialization in State Socialism,” *Aspasia: The International Yearbook of Central, Eastern and Southeastern European Women’s and Gender History* 9 (2015): 65–86.

¹⁰ Krystyna Mlonck, *Bezrobocie w Polsce w XX wieku w świetle badań* [Unemployment in Poland in the twentieth century in the light of research] (Warsaw: Krajowy Urząd Pracy, 1999), 28.

Propaganda encouraged young people to travel to new industrial plants, peasants to take up jobs in the cities, and women to become workers. Graduates of vocational schools and universities came under “work prescriptions”: administrators decided where the graduates were sent to work for three years. Local employment offices organized recruitment campaigns, seeking workers for particular enterprises. The problem of unemployment had apparently almost disappeared.

However, as early as 1953, people started to complain about a lack of jobs. From 1954 many towns suffered from constant job shortages, especially small towns without significant industrial plants. The politics of the destruction of private craftwork and trade also contributed to the unemployment problem. By 1955 queues at employment offices in large cities were getting longer and longer. There were 35,000 people registered as unemployed in February, but real unemployment was estimated by the Ministry of Labor and Social Care to be as much as ten times greater.¹⁷

At that moment state institutions noticed the problem and started to discuss remedies throughout the years 1956–1958. These discussions were part of a wider debate about labor and employment policies, held in the context of rethinking the economic model (for example the role of central planning). Meanwhile, unemployment was affecting more regions and the numbers grew, though nobody knew exactly what they were; in 1957 estimates ranged from 180 to 300 thousand unemployed (with total employment at seven million). According to Antoni Rajkiewicz, newspapers published numbers as high as two million unemployed.¹⁸ Historians that try to estimate the unemployment rates in state-socialist Poland argue that it was low (around 2 percent), but these estimates do not take into account unregistered jobseekers.¹⁹ Leaving behind those uncertain statistics, nevertheless the problem was clearly serious. The very popular women’s magazine *Przyjaciółka* (Girlfriend) received 1,000 letters daily, among which 600 reported difficulties in finding a job.²⁰ According to many different sources, unemployed people invaded employment offices. A young journalist de-

scribed the situation: “A visit to the department [of employment] is depressing. One meets hundreds of dispirited people who find themselves without means of subsistence, deeply disappointed, sometimes wronged.”²¹

What were the reasons for the mid-1950s unemployment? Explaining all the circumstances in which unemployment appeared is an economic question that is beyond the scope of this chapter. Economists at the time did not fully agree while trying to understand the phenomenon. However, it is important to note that the most important reasons—and how they were perceived by contemporaries—were part of the context of opinions and policies applied that are discussed in this chapter.

First, industrialization slowed down at the end of the Six-Year Plan, so the economy needed fewer new workers. Moreover, rapid industrialization did not absorb all those who searched for regular employment. The influx of the rural population, who came despite the fact that there was no work for them, continued to pressure the cities and factories. Another large group of jobseekers were the so-called repatriates: the 130,000 Poles from the formerly Polish lands annexed by the USSR during the war, who moved to Poland during the political thaw.

Among those new arrivals on the job market (were they unemployed? I will come back to the definitional problem later) there were large numbers of young people, both skilled (graduates of vocational and technical schools) and unskilled. Many could not find jobs despite their qualifications. Economists pointed to the fact that the job market was saturated, and that in the coming years youth unemployment would be even higher. Moreover, many retired people still worked because their pensions were extremely low. Indeed, postwar Poland experienced the largest baby boom in history; natural increase reached 18 per thousand at the beginning of the 1950s. Economists and politicians spoke of overpopulation and the “demographic problem.”²² However, it is striking that in 1956–1957 this phenomenon was associated with unemployment; at that moment hundreds of thousands of potential new workers were still children or even babies.

The end of the Six-Year Plan coincided with the inauguration of de-Stalinization policies and discussions. In the second half of the 1950s the economic model, and especially state management of the economy, was seriously revised. One aim was to raise productivity. The party-state challenged hidden unemployment, especially in administration; the Economic Coun-

¹⁷ Archiwum Akt Nowych [Central Archives of Modern Records, hereafter AAN], Komitet Centralny Polskiej Zjednoczonej Partii Robotniczej [Central Committee of the Polish United Workers’ Party, hereafter KC PZPR], 237/XXV-13, “Notatka z Ministerstwa Pracy i Opieki Społecznej” [Note from the Ministry of Labor and Social Care, hereafter MPIOŚ], 1955, p. 180.

¹⁸ Antoni Rajkiewicz, “Bez koncepcji” [Without concept], *Zycie Gospodarcze* 9 (1957): 1.

¹⁹ Zglobica, “Czy naprawdę?” Nevertheless, the author agrees that the late 1950s and 1960s were the period of highest unemployment.

²⁰ AAN, MPIOŚ, 42, “Notatka dla kolegium MPIOŚ w sprawie zatrudnienia kobiet” [Note on women’s employment for MPIOŚ], 1956, p. 40.

²¹ Zofia Krzyżanowska, “Problem, którego nie ma” [A problem that does not exist], *Do Przeszłości* 24 (1956).

²² Mieczysław Kabaj, “Teorii zatrudnienia—próba rewizji” [Theory of employment—an attempt at revision], *Zycie Gospodarcze* 20 (1957).

cil estimated “overemployment” at 10–15 percent in 1956.²³ It is interesting to note that in this case the word “unemployment” was not used; the decision-makers and journalists spoke of “redundancies” or “surpluses.” The term “unemployment” was even eliminated through censorship.²⁴ In the years 1955–1958, a few policies were issued by the party-state in order to combat these “redundancies.” The first bill was issued by the government in June 1955; consequently bureaucracy decreased by over 6 percent that year, and by the same amount the following year. The next decision was made in 1958, after a discussion at the Central Committee plenum; in this case the reduction policy included not only white-collar, but also blue-collar workers.²⁵ Dismissed workers swelled the ranks of the unemployed.

Another problem—this time a structural one—was the uneven economic development of regions and cities. In general, there was enough work for all, but it was concentrated in several regions (mainly western parts of the country) and branches (especially mining). While some local employment offices had to organize recruitment campaigns, others remained helpless in dealing with unemployment: they did not have any jobs to offer to the hundreds of registered workers. Migration was impossible due to the housing shortage. According to Lech Sobczak, this geographical disproportion in the job market was one of the three most important problems. The second was a disproportion in qualifications: industry searched for skilled workers, and the majority of the unemployed were unskilled.²⁶

The last disproportion had to do with gender. There was high and unsatisfied demand for male workers, while for women there were always more jobseekers than job offers. The system of recruitment was not genderless: job offers specified the sex of desired workers. This fundamental division in the job market did not disappear even during Stalinism (the Six-Year Plan), when the party-state formally abolished the gender division of work.²⁷ During the Six-Year Plan, women were strongly encouraged to take up jobs; it was a part of the regime’s emancipation policy. Indeed, women made up the

majority of new workers, and women’s employment doubled in five years. When the plan finished, women were no longer needed in such great numbers. Moreover, they were the first to be dismissed when the reductions policy was applied. “You called us to work and we do work. Today there is not enough work for us. The Moor has done his duty the Moor can go,” wrote one of the readers of *Przyjacielka* complaining about the shift in valuing women’s professional work.²⁸ Irrespective of the hostile opinions towards women’s employment that were expressed during the thaw in the press and among workers, women still searched for jobs. Studies on local unemployment revealed that the opening of a new plant encouraged women to register as jobseekers, which raised unemployment numbers.²⁹ Consequently, in the mid-1950s women comprised the majority of officially registered, as well as real unemployed.

Moreover, sometimes geographical and gender disproportions were combined. In those places where there was a factory representing a “male” branch of industry (e.g. mining, steelworks, metal) women found it harder to get a job even if the factory actually needed new workers. This was the case in Kraśnik.³⁰ Meanwhile, in Zambrow where the job market was dominated by one big textile factory, men were refused employment.³¹

All these causes of unemployment were discussed by politicians, economists, and journalists in the context of economic policy. Was the job market situation a consequence of poor decisions during the Six-Year Plan? Or were the problems structural? They pointed to erroneous and chaotic planning (while defending the central planning principle itself), and incorrect investment policies. They criticized the “productivization” of women, but also extra-economic circumstances like overpopulation.³² Their perception of the reasons and character of unemployment shaped their reactions and the policies they applied.

²³ Mieczysław Kabaj, *Elementy pełnego i racjonalnego zatrudnienia w gospodarce socjalistycznej* [Elements of full and rational employment in the socialist economy] (Warsaw: Książka i Wiadza 1972), 233.

²⁴ Zglobica, “Czy naprawdę,” 631.

²⁵ Jarska, *Kobiety z marmuru*, 210. Members of the Committee engaged in a heated discussion over the reductions as a threat of increasing unemployment loomed. Zglobica, “Czy naprawdę,” 634–35.

²⁶ Lech Sobczak, *Rynek pracy w Polsce Ludowej* [The job market in People’s Poland] (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe 1971), 68–69.

²⁷ For more on Stalinist policies towards women’s employment, see Fidelis, *Women, Communism, and Industrialization*, and Jarska, *Kobiety z marmuru*.

²⁸ The author of the letter, invoking a Polish aphorism, referred to slavery and discrimination.

²⁹ Sobczak, *Rynek pracy*.

³⁰ In the 1960s, the metal factory in Kraśnik started to train women in skilled professions, usually regarded as male, in order to meet the need for skilled workers.

³¹ Andrzej Zawistowski, *Kombinat: Dzieje Zambrowskich Zakładów Przemysłu Bałuchianego—wielkiej inwestycji planu sześciolletniego* [The Works: The history of the textile factory in Zambrow—A big investment of the Six-Year Plan] (Warsaw-Białystok: IPN 2009), 160.

³² For references, see the footnotes in the following part of the chapter.

From Disbelief to Ideological Revisionism: Combating Unemployment

From 1955, party-state institutions slowly began to realize that they had to deal with unemployment. Since the numbers of registered unemployed were not high, they had not anticipated the problem. The *Państwowa Komisja Planowania Gospodarczego* (State Commission for Economic Planning) was collecting detailed information about “registered jobseekers” and “job offers.”³³ Nevertheless, the Commission avoided the term “unemployment.” The party and Ministry of Labor and Social Care documents also spoke of “local surpluses” and “jobseekers.”

This reluctance to name the problem “unemployment” came from the fact that in state socialism unemployment was something unthinkable. Party-state functionaries and economists were convinced that unemployment simply cannot happen in a system of “social ownership of production means” and central planning. In 1957, an economist trying to understand the phenomenon cited a Soviet political economy manual: “the right to work is conditioned by social ownership of the means of production which gives all citizens equal access to work on land and in industrial plants.” In theory, he argued, under socialism only an excess of work was possible, not a redundant workforce.³⁴ This conviction, founded on the main principles of Marxism-Leninism, was reflected in the Constitution of the People’s Republic of Poland issued in 1952. Article 58 stated: “The right to work is guaranteed by the social ownership of the main means of production . . . planned growth of productive forces, removal of sources of crisis, and of unemployment.”

Sometimes the existence of unemployment was denied by definition. “The excess of labor force is unknown in our country,” wrote a journalist (ironically): the title of her article was “Unemployment: A problem that does not exist.”³⁵ As, in theory, unemployment could not exist in socialism, there was no precise definition that could be used in debating or formulating social policy.

³³ AAN, Państwowa Komisja Planowania Gospodarczego [State Commission for Economic Planning], 3328, “Poszukujący pracy a wolne miejsca pracy” [Jobseekers and job offers], 1955, p. 6.

³⁴ Kabaj, “Teoria zatrudnienia.”

³⁵ Krzyżanowska, “Problem.”

Unemployment was sometimes explained by excluding some of the groups of jobseekers. It was “unreal.” Władysław Daszkiewicz, one of the department directors in the Ministry of Labor and Social Care, wrote that “unemployment here is not widespread; it does not include the basic part of labor force—skilled and unskilled blue-collar workers. It includes women, young people, and white-collar workers.”³⁶ Such a statement downplayed the importance of the problem. At a session of the Parliamentary Commission of Labor and Social Care, a member said that “unemployment in our country does not exist. The problem is only how to move jobseekers to areas where there are job offers.”³⁷ A journalist describing women’s problems with finding a job concluded that “actually they are not unemployed,” because these women had never worked before.³⁸ “Unemployment is not related to the political system and is not structural, it has appeared because of low wages which make it impossible for [male] workers with families to earn enough for their living,” a council member argued in a ministerial meeting in 1956.³⁹ Those who had to work and at the same time were redundant on the job market were women.

Economists seemed to feel freer to name the problem as “unemployment.” Moreover, some of them soon recognized its structural implications, which led them to revise their theories. Mieczysław Kabaj argued that the idea that overpopulation does not happen in an economy founded on Marxist principles was wrong—because the assumption about unlimited production growth was wrong too. “Theorists of Marxism-Leninism,” he wrote, “did not predict relative overpopulation.” He therefore concluded that unemployment in Poland was permanent.⁴⁰ By recognizing that unemployment really existed, the economists had to revise the Marxism they knew. “Marxism is a living science,” argued a journalist.⁴¹

Finally, needing to face the problem, economists tried to define the term “unemployed.” One asked: “Is the unemployed only a person who has

³⁶ Władysław Daszkiewicz, “Uwagi o problemie zatrudnienia” [Comments about the employment problem], *Nauka Drogą* 6 (1957): 82.

³⁷ AAN, Sejm [parliament], 146, “Protokół posiedzenia Sejmowej Komisji Pracy i Opieki Społecznej z 15 maja 1957” [Protocol of the session of the Parliamentary Commission of Labor and Social Care, May 15, 1957], p. 314.

³⁸ Krzyżanowska, “Problem.”

³⁹ AAN, MPIOŚ, 42, “Notatka stenograficzna z posiedzenia kolegium MPIOŚ” [Transcripts of the session of MPIOŚ council], June 1956, p. 71.

⁴⁰ Kabaj, “Teorii zatrudnienia.”

⁴¹ Lech Frolich, “Fantasyjny przyczynek do kwestii równouprawnienia kobiet czyli o problemie dodatków rodzinnych słów kilka” [A fantasy contribution to the issue of women’s equality, that is, the problem of family allowances, a few words], *Życie Gospodarcze* 1 (1957).

lost his/her job? Is the unemployed a peasant-worker's son, or a daughter of a worker who, after finishing school, is still dependent on their parents?" He then offered an inclusive definition of the unemployed as "a person who is able to work, wants to work, but remains without work."⁴² Others proposed a more precise definition: the unemployed is a person who is registered as a jobseeker, but cannot find a suitable job (taking into account his/her skills and life conditions) for a long time (two weeks for blue-collar workers, three months for white-collar workers).⁴³

Unemployment—whether recognized as such or not—was treated seriously by the party-state too. Some measures were applied to combat women's unemployment as early as the end of 1955. The Ministry of Labor and Social Care suggested that local administrations should find work for unemployed women—especially the breadwinners—by transferring men to other positions. Women were engaged in temporary jobs. The Ministry planned to limit migration from the countryside, to establish new cooperatives, and to develop cottage industries. Plans also included means of positive discrimination: in some areas special quotas for female workers were to be introduced.⁴⁴ Combating female unemployment was included in the new policies towards women's employment. In 1956 and 1957, these new policies were shaped by two main goals: creating job positions for women who sought employment, but simultaneously slowing down women's pressure on the job market. The party-state wanted to discourage women, especially mothers, from starting professional careers by raising family allowances for working men.⁴⁵

Two of the most important measures taken against unemployment were the creation of an intervention fund and the raising of pensions. The first was established by a bill issued in January 1956. Government funds were to be spent by local administrations on organizing new job positions. This policy was not efficient, and by the beginning of 1957 only 10,000 unemployed had found jobs thanks to it.⁴⁶ In many places funds were spent on temporary and maintenance works, such as raking leaves and cleaning cemeteries and streets.⁴⁷ These activities could not change the situation in the long run.

⁴² Mieczysław Kabaj, "Problem bezrobocia" [The problem of unemployment], *Życie Gospodarcze* 7 (1957).

⁴³ Rajkiewicz, "Bez koncepcji."

⁴⁴ For more on the policy of combating women's unemployment, see Jarska, "Gender and Labour in Post-War Communist Poland."

⁴⁵ Jarska, *Kobiety z marmuru*, 226–28.

⁴⁶ AAN, Sejm, 146, "Informacja dla Sejmowej Komisji Pracy o działalności MPiOS" [Information for the Parliamentary Commission of Labor and Social Care about the activity of MPiOS], March 1957, p. 20.

⁴⁷ Kabaj, "Problem bezrobocia."

Funds were treated by local administrations and by the unemployed—as was soon realized—as a kind of allowance.⁴⁸ The government set aside additional funds to develop small industrial plants.

Since an official definition of unemployment did not exist, unemployed workers did not have special status. In 1956 and 1957 some of them received allowances. The industrial plants were obliged to help dismissed workers find new jobs (which they rarely did), and some of them paid three or four-month indemnities.⁴⁹ In 1957 the party-state discussed introducing regular unemployment benefits for dismissed workers, but only to those who had worked at least twelve months and lost their job through no fault of their own. Unemployed workers would be paid 60 percent of their last wage, for either six months (white-collar workers) or twenty-six weeks (blue-collar workers). The motivation for introducing this system of benefits came from the fact that many plants were reluctant to dismiss workers who were not needed. The party-state—which held both salary funds and benefits funds—estimated that it would simply be cheaper to pay benefits instead of normal salaries to "unproductive workers." This policy would in effect transform hidden unemployment into an overt and visible condition. Preparing this project for the Politburo, the Ministry gathered information about unemployment benefits in interwar Poland, as well as in several Western countries.⁵⁰ It is not clear why the project was ultimately not carried out.

The measures taken against unemployment were rather ineffective and were openly criticized as "partial and humiliating" for unemployed people.⁵¹ Employment fell within the competence of many state institutions, but their attitude towards problems on the job market was indecisive and chaotic. According to some economists, they simply did not have enough knowledge about the problem.⁵² There was no definition and no reliable data.

As interest in employment issues was growing, and there was a need for effective policy, in 1957 the Economy Council—a governmental institution incorporating some excellent professionals—ordered broad-based research on unemployment. It was carried out by the *Instytut Gospodarstwa Społecznego* (Institute of Social Economy), an institute that had just been revived. It is symbolic that this interwar institute was one of the two most

connected with interwar

⁴⁸ AAN, Sejm, 146, "Protokół posiedzenia Sejmowej Komisji Pracy i Spraw Socjalnych," May 14, 1957.

⁴⁹ AAN, Sejm, 146, "Informacja dla Sejmowej Komisji Pracy," p. 22.

⁵⁰ AAN, KC PZPR, 1684, "Tęzy do dyskusji w sprawie ustawowego zabezpieczenia materialnego osób czasowo pozostających bez pracy" [Thesis for discussion on the bill on benefits for people temporarily without work], 1957.

⁵¹ Kabaj, "Problem bezrobocia."

⁵² Rajkiewicz, "Bez koncepcji."

important organizations that carried out research about unemployment, focusing on its social aspects. In 1957, in the wave of de-Stalinization and political openness, referring to such traditions was still possible. Yet, the results of the research were presented only in internal reports or published in very limited collections.

As it was probably unique in the Soviet bloc, this research merits a brief comment. Carried out in selected towns and cities, the aim of this research was to learn about unemployment numbers and living conditions of the unemployed, as well as the economic structure in the years 1938–1957. The researchers also examined the activity of employment offices. In the first town, Kolo (with a population of 10,000), they interviewed 119 families that experienced unemployment (the report included quotations from the interviews). The problem was sketched in a broad context that included economic structure, birth rate, and housing problems. In interwar Kolo there were 800–1,000 unemployed; in 1957, about 600. Although women comprised 30 percent of registered jobseekers, in 1957 there were no job offers for them. Unemployment in Kolo was caused by typical problems: economic recession (during the Six-Year Plan no factory was constructed in the town) and the pressure of the rural population on the job market. Low wages forced many women to seek employment.⁵³

Although employment policy was chaotic and most of the measures taken only partially effective, it seems that the party-state was deeply concerned about the problem. There were two reasons for this concern. One of them was the “full employment” principle. When the party-state realized that unemployment was real, it was determined to fight it: “Our society cannot be named socialist, moral, as long as we fail to solve the problem of people looking for work. There is no economic and moral basis for the existence of unemployment in our country.”⁵⁴ Despite the unemployment problem, the decision-makers were convinced that the economic system they managed was essentially different from capitalism. The constitutional right to work was frequently referenced as an appropriate argument. In the de-Stalinization process (1955–1957), many principles of the political system were questioned, and many policies changed (for instance, the party-state accepted individual farming and abandoned forced collectivization). “Full realization of the right to work”⁵⁵ was a goal that could not be abandoned.

The second reason for common concern about unemployment was social reactions. The party-state feared social unrest caused by job shortages. “Employment matters have become of great importance—economically, socially and politically,” stated economist Antoni Rajkiewicz at a session of the governmental Commission of Labor.⁵⁶ While discussing benefits it was suggested that they should be introduced through a parliamentary bill, not an act of lesser standing, “because the problem has a great political and social importance.”⁵⁷ “No graduate can remain without work, otherwise there will be a youth revolt,” threatened a press account.⁵⁸

Those fears were realistic. Social reactions towards problems with finding a job (or towards the possibility of being dismissed) were strongly negative. The policy of reducing employment caused “panic,”⁵⁹ as well as multiple conflicts between different groups of workers.⁶⁰ People asked about unemployment at election meetings in 1957.⁶¹ Low-level party activists were concerned too, “not seeing any solution.”⁶² Letters sent to party-state institutions and the media reflected their emotions, as well as their understanding of the situation.

In these letters (that would ultimately remain unpublished⁶³), the problem with finding a job was associated with the interwar experience or unemployment in capitalist countries. “They have created unemployment like I’ve heard on the radio there is in America,” complained a blue-collar worker. To a reader of *Przyciółka* overcrowded employment offices reminded her of “photographs from the capitalist world.” “It reminds me of interwar times when workers’ children were dying of hunger,” confessed another woman. Letters contained even proposals like this one: “People in Kalisz [a town in central Poland] have to take a banner with the word ‘unemployment’ and go to the town hall, there is no other solution.”⁶⁴ Workers and unemployed feared that the situation would get worse. People who feared being

⁵⁶ AAN, Urząd Rady Ministrów [Council of Ministers, hereafter URM], 22/133, “Stenogram konferencji na temat aktualnej sytuacji w dziedzinie gospodarki siłą roboczą—prof. Rajkiewicz” [Transcript of the paper on the current situation in workforce management—prof. Rajkiewicz], January 1957, p. 1.

⁵⁷ AAN, KC PZPR, “Tezy do dyskusji.”

⁵⁸ Rajkiewicz, “Bez koncepcji.”

⁵⁹ Krzyżanowska, “Problem.”

⁶⁰ Such conflicts divided skilled and unskilled workers, young and old, men and women, and rural and urban dwellers. Kochanowski, *Revolucja międzypaździernikowa*, 126–31.

⁶¹ Rajkiewicz, “Bez koncepcji.”

⁶² AAN, KC PZPR, 237/VII—3835, “Informacja nr. 18/3292,” March 6, 1956, p. 37.

⁶³ The party-state institutions and official media that received letters prepared thematic reports quoting them, to inform the high party functionaries about “public opinion.”

⁶⁴ All letters quoted in Jarska, *Kobiety z marmuru*, 222.

⁵³ Krzyżanowska Mlonck, *Sytuacja na rynku pracy, struktura i warunki życia poszukujących pracy w Kolo w 1957 roku* (Warsaw: Zakład Problemów Zatrudnienia Instytutu Gospodarstwa Społecznego, 1958).

⁵⁴ Kábaj, “Problem bezrobocia.”

⁵⁵ AAN, MPROS, 42, “Notatka dla kolegium MP:OS,” p. 41.

dismissed "don't see any solution for themselves. They felt that the first step towards an unemployment crisis, which they remember from *sanacja* times [1926–1939], has been taken. . . . I just can't imagine the moment I will be dismissed from my work." Workers demanded the fulfillment of the constitutional right to work.⁶⁵

Sometimes interventions were more decisive than writing letters. In Ozorków "a group of sixty people, mainly women, went to the Provincial Committee [of the PZPR] and demanded employment. . . . They threatened that if they did not get jobs, they will carry a slogan: 'We want bread and work.'" Desperate people attacked employment offices and smashed windows.⁶⁶

The party-state and workers felt the same about unemployment, though they expressed it in different ways. Workers did not hesitate to use the proper word, whereas the decision-makers felt uncomfortable admitting that unemployment was real. However, for everyone unemployment was illegitimate in a socialist state. The right to work was recognized and "full employment" was its only realization. Some measures that were taken clearly disadvantaged some groups on the job market. What was the sense of these hierarchies?

The Right to Work, Social Justice, and Gender

As I explained above, the experience of unemployment in state socialism made economists and decision-makers revise the Marxism they knew. Now they were aware of the fact that "social ownership of the means of production" was not enough to forestall the unemployment threat. However, they still thought that current problems on the job market were essentially different from those in capitalism: "It is not a capitalist type of unemployment which is caused by labor shortages, but is a result of low wages."⁶⁷ The goals in employment policy remained the same: full realization of the right to work and full employment. It was a complex matter because it had political, economic, and also moral meaning.

Nevertheless, ideas began to appear in economic and party-state discourses about employment policies, the implementation of which would lead to deep inequalities in this apparently egalitarian society. These ideas were shared by great numbers of workers too. When both the party-state

and workers realized that there was not enough work, the decision-makers tried—within the ideological framework of full employment—to establish hierarchies in access to job offers. The decision-makers thought that since it was not possible to give work to every citizen, they had to limit the supply of the workforce. These hierarchies were based on moral grounds and were founded on a specific social justice principle. Workers were classified according to their "need" to work as well as their "productivity"; both categories divided society by class, age, and gender. Policies applied, or at least discussed, while dealing with unemployment discriminated against the rural population (among them the category of peasant-workers), elderly people (the retired), and women.

Both economists and workers detected that there were groups whose work was unproductive. Rajkiewicz, for instance, spoke of a "worse ability to work."⁶⁸ This category included women, especially mothers. Such an attitude was expressed by many social actors. A ministerial report suggested that married women with children should not work for wages.⁶⁹ Arguments in favor of this opinion were mainly threefold: firstly, work was detrimental for mothers (if they were economically forced to work); secondly, they were less productive than men (because of their extra-professional roles); and thirdly, there was not enough work for them while there were young people and men who were unemployed. One female journalist explained this vicious cycle: women started to search for jobs because wages declined, but their work was less productive (and the "workplace is not a charity organization"), which made it impossible to raise overall production and wages. She concluded that women's work was a "double evil."⁷⁰ "For women burdened with children, work is only a bother," agreed almost everyone who participated in policy-making in ministries and parliament.⁷¹

Mothers "forced" to work were not the only group of women that should not be employed, according to widespread opinion. A reader of *Trybuna Ludu* (People's Tribune, the party-owned daily) wrote: "In our office . . . there are five women whose husbands earn more than two thousand a month. . . . Meanwhile, people who have families are dismissed, and dismissal is a tragedy for them. There is something wrong. . . . I talk to people and we all agree that if married women whose husbands can afford a decent

⁶⁵ AAN, URM, "Stenogram koreferatu," p. 5.

⁶⁶ AAN, Sejm, 146, "Wiśniości Sejmowej Komisji Pracy i Spraw Socjalnych" [Conclusions on the Parliamentary Commission of Labor and Social Care], 1957.

⁷⁰ Krzyżanowska, "Problem."

⁷¹ AAN, Sejm, 23, "Protokół z posiedzenia Komisji Pracy i Opieki Społecznej, wypowiedź Leona Chajna" [Protocol of the session of Commission of Labor and Social Care, statement of Leon Chajin], October 18, 1956, p. 405.

⁶⁵ AAN, KC PZPR, 237/XXV—21. Letter by Józef Hecht to the newspaper *Trybuna Ludu*, 1957, p. 82.

⁶⁶ Jarska, *Kobiety z marmuru*, 223.

⁶⁷ Daszkiewicz, "Uwagi o problemie zatrudnienia."

living are dismissed, unemployment would decrease."⁷² Work should be denied to women who—as many believed—worked only to afford entertainment and clothes. Employment was a right but also a benefit for those who needed it most.

Such opinions were shared by many. In 1958, a recently funded Centre of Public Opinion Research carried out a survey about people's opinions on the policy of job reductions. Surprisingly, nearly 75 percent of respondents were convinced that it was needed (in spite of unemployment). Among groups that should be dismissed in the first place, they pointed to peasants, and—nearly half of them—to "wives of husbands with good salaries." However, another group of women was expected to be specially protected against dismissal, and that was the breadwinners.⁷³ Family status was important in realizing women's right to work. The party-state met workers' expectations: a bill issued by the government in 1957, dedicated to "principles of employing and dismissing workers," stated that "in case of equal skills, age, family situation, number of working people in the family, and owning of a farm should be taken into account."⁷⁴

As such, social justice was, apart from the right to work, a very important value. For women it was combined with the traditional model of the male breadwinner. Husbands and fathers should be privileged where employment was concerned, because their work is the most important (apart from being more productive). This also implied another moral aspect: men felt ashamed of not being able to earn a living for their families.⁷⁵ It is characteristic that in their letters, dismissed women pointed usually to their difficult life conditions (and therefore to social justice), rather than to their constitutional right to work. A blue-collar worker from the Lenin steel-works wrote: "I've got six children. My husband's earnings are not enough to afford modest clothing and food... In our plant many women from the countryside who have farms work there. Their husbands also work. They have a life like in paradise."⁷⁶

Instead of the notion of "value," a journalist proposed to talk about the "social utility of work." This interesting concept helped him to exclude housewives from professional labor. Women who do housekeeping in their families are, in his view, not unproductive; their effort is socially useful.

⁷² AAN, KC PZPR, Letter by Jozef Hecht.

⁷³ Archiwum TNS OBOP, "Ankieta o stosunku do redukcji (opracowanie częściowe)" [Survey on attitudes towards reduction (a partial elaboration)], red. Wesolowski, 1958.

⁷⁴ "Uchwala w sprawie zasad zwalniania, przeskalanania i zatrudniania pracowników w związku z reorganizacją administracji," *Monitor Polski* 6, 1957.

⁷⁵ Lech Froelich, "Fantastyczny przyczynnik."

⁷⁶ AAN, KC PZPR, 237/XXV—21, *Biuletyn* no. 8/176, 1957, pp. 89–90.

What they do can be called work too, and should be remunerated. If their work is recognized and paid, they don't have to take up regular jobs, and their husbands don't have to receive family allowances.⁷⁷ This concept was rather "exotic" in mid-1950s Poland, and probably highly unrealistic, but is worth mentioning as an attempt to discourage married women from professional work without denying them their right to work. According to the author, equality meant the possibility to choose work; one person should have only one "job." He referred to justice and equality as important values. Everyone would be happier, he argued: "women would raise children better, men would be better workers, complaints about working women would end, and there would be more job positions. The productive forces of society would be better distributed."⁷⁸

In the mid-1950s, when unemployment appeared as a problem, women started to become unwelcome on the job market. However, opinions about women's employment (and unemployment) were diverse, and not only negative. A female blue-collar worker wrote: "there are women who have qualifications, love their professions, and want to work."⁷⁹ In 1957, the League of Women declared: "We cannot permit challenging women's right to work. Those who want to work and are skilled cannot be dismissed from their workplaces."⁸⁰ General opinion about women's work varied depending on local traditions where gender and class are concerned. Peasant women who had entered industry during the Six-Year Plan did not perceive their jobs as being in conflict with their gender; that was also the case in Krasnik. The model of the male breadwinner and female housewife was new for the peasants who took up jobs in industrial plants for the first time. Attitudes towards women's employment were also diverse in the urban milieu: the working class had essentially inherited the dominant interwar model of the male breadwinner, whereas the middle class was more likely to accept women's professional work. Still, after 1955 hostile attitudes towards women's employment—probably also because of the unemployment experience—were much more strongly represented both in the media and in internal party-state debates.

Policies applied to women's employment also show ambiguity. On the one hand, the party-state tried to limit women's pressure on the job market

⁷⁷ Lech Froelich, "Fantastyczny przyczynnik."

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ośrodek Dokumentacji i Zbiorów Programowych TVP [Center of Documentation and Program Collections of Polish Television], 1050/22, *Biuletyn* no. 3, January 5, 1957, 5.

⁸⁰ "Wybory a nasze sprawy" [Elections and our issues], *Kobieta i Życie* [Woman and life] 2 (1957), 2.

by discouraging them, accounting for the increase in family allowances. On the other hand, it put a lot of effort—even if not effectively—into reducing women's unemployment by creating job positions for them.

Gender shaped unemployment, employment policies, and the very understanding of the most important values of the “socialist” labor market. “Full employment” and even the “right to work” had different meanings for male and female workers. Nonetheless, these meanings were debated and evolving. Even if the majority of social actors actually questioned women's right to work, it was possible to express other opinions.

Conclusion

Unemployment, which appeared in Poland in the mid-1950s, reveals how the party-state understood wage work. It was a good received by citizens, conceived by the state which (it was believed) represented the workers' interests, and was a kind of manager of the “social ownership of means of production.” Citizens had the right to work, and the realization of this right was part of the legitimization of the “socialist” state. In Poland, where the party-state lacked legitimization, and where the memory of interwar unemployment was still vivid in the mid-1950s, “full employment” gave the communists a chance to build a kind of consensus with workers. The party-state realized that unemployment in socialism was a real threat, but they refused to accept its existence.

Work had, of course, its economic dimension, but was also a social and political issue. Socially, one of the most important values was social justice. For the unemployed, social justice—meant to ensure equality—in fact produced discrimination against some social groups which came to be limited in their right to work.

Work—understood as employment—was situated in the context of class, age, and gender. In discourses about unemployment in the 1950s, male urban residents and young people were privileged. Women were discriminated against on the job market: by the party-state and its policies, by factory managers and employment offices, and by workers. On the other hand, the party-state understood it had a moral duty to ensure work for some women, even if they were unwelcome as workers. It shows that gender, the right to work, and social justice could also act in favor of women, but only if they were included in the category of unemployed and workers.

The intersection of categories of class, age, and gender in relation to work in state socialism should be further researched. Labor relations in state socialism included many conflicts that involved various different social actors. Conceptualizations of work should be researched as the background

for those conflicts. The up-to-date concentration on political conflicts, seen in the party-state versus society perspective (especially in Polish historiography), should be complemented by advanced studies in social history.

The research on unemployment in mid-1950s Poland confirms the importance of cultural, political, and economic contexts in the conceptualization of work stressed by global labor history.⁸¹ In state socialism, labor relations were defined by the principles of the Marxist economy implemented by the state institutions, but they were not static, being related to—among other factors—labor shortages, gender norms, memory of prewar (capitalist) relations, and the party-state's search for legitimization. It is also interesting to observe how, by defining work and employment, social actors tried to find a remedy that would save Marxist principles (and how it was done through exclusions of peasants and women).

Research on unemployment in state socialism can deepen our understanding of labor relations in this type of economic and political systems. It demonstrates the importance of values such as social justice and the right to work in shaping opinions and policies. These values were taken seriously by workers, economists, and state officials. Moral concerns, believed to be fundamental for Marxism and the socialist state, were shared by workers. They were not the “ruling class,” despite the propaganda, but were also not only passive objects of the party-state policies.

*Wnio o lepsze warunki pracy
o produkcję - wyprodukować work
a jej' lepiej & do. węgier
produkcji*

⁸¹ “The process of conceptualization of work and labor is located at the very crossroads of politics, economy, and culture and proves therefore a fundamental way to contextualize labor history in the broader field of social history.” De Vito, “New Perspectives on Global Labor History,” 29.