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Working out Socialism. Labor and Politics in Socialist Autobiography in 20th-Century Poland

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This paper examines socialist workers' autobiographies as inscriptions of the self unfolding from illicit political militancy in tsarist times to the accomplished subject of actually existing socialism. I scrutinize workers' writing in state socialism as pinning together workers' strivings for a better life, as well as their intellectual pursuits and negotiating the relationship between work and making political claims. The argument is informed by an analysis of more than one hundred biographical narratives of workers entering mass politics during the 1905 Revolution. However, I zoom in so as to scrutinize, in detail, four typologically interesting cases. Autobiographical writings are seen as multi-layered narratives recollecting the change of the self and carrying along accumulated transformations and experiences up to the state-socialist figuration of biography. These texts are seen as performative interventions, for this or other reasons uttered because of an inner need but also to convince the assumed reader of a particular, subjectively lived experience developing in time. Most of the analyzed socialist autobiographies are very loaded "time-vehicles," written as gestures to legitimize the actually existing state socialism. However, they are embedded in earlier experiences such as proletarian autodidacticism, learning via socialist printings and pre-war socialist memory. At the same time, such life writing bore witness to real and imagined continuity between past socialist militancy and actually existing socialism. Not only is the politics of writing necessary to understand the socialist autobiography but the prior life course of the writing workers is equally crucial to understanding state socialism. Its legitimization built strongly on the actually existing working-class sentiments, while its ideological mold resulted from organically growing socialist class culture.

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