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Work as Moral Authority: The Hungarian Central Workers' Council and the Crisis of Socialist Legitimacy in 1956*

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In memory of Mark Pittaway

This article examines the Greater Budapest Central Workers' Council as a crisis of socialist legitimacy after the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. Focusing on the closed-door assembly of workers' delegates on December 8, 1956, it asks how work-based contributions became the foundation for claims to moral and political authority. Delegates disagreed over whether labor entitled workers primarily to a voice in negotiation or also to define the legitimate political order and withhold work when that order was deemed illegitimate. Mining delegates linked indispensable labor to claims for protection and recognition; moderates defended production and negotiation; the restored Kádár government sought to separate work from autonomous political judgment. Investigation and trial records later recoded representation, injury, and legitimate refusal as conspiracy, agitation, sabotage, and counterrevolution. The article therefore treats the Council not as a model of council democracy but as a diagnostic case in which competing moral economies of work became unusually visible. It argues that state-socialist legitimacy depended not only on securing production but on controlling what claims to political authority could legitimately be made on the basis of work.

Keywords: Hungarian Revolution of 1956, Central Workers' Council, moral economy, socialist legitimacy, workers' councils, labor history, state socialism

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Introduction

This article examines the Hungarian Greater Budapest Central Workers' Council (Nagy-budapesti Központi Munkástanács, KMT) in late 1956 as a crisis of socialist legitimacy. It argues that the Council's significance lay not solely in its organizational role during the final phase of the Hungarian Revolution, nor in its capacity to coordinate strikes after the second Soviet intervention. Rather, the Central Workers' Council became a potential threat to the restored Kádár government because it transformed the world of work into a source of moral authority and political entitlement. In a regime that claimed to rule in the name of the working class, autonomous workers' councils argued that workers themselves, not party officials, state administrators, or trade union functionaries, had the authority to define socialism, represent labor, judge political power, and determine the legitimate conditions under which work could resume. The article therefore asks how contributions through work became the foundations of moral claims and how these claims could be converted into political authority.

This challenge has been variously interpreted as an experiment in council democracy, a possible workers' revolution, and a socialist alternative to party rule. Workers' councils have long held a distinctive place in interpretations of the Hungarian Revolution. Hannah Arendt situated them within a recurrent tradition of council-based political freedom, while Bill Lomax and other left-wing interpreters saw in them the possibility of an autonomous workers' revolution and a socialist alternative to both Stalinism and capitalism. The source publications and historical studies by István Kemény, Bill Lomax, and László Varga subsequently established the councils as a major field of empirical research.[1] This article builds on these traditions but asks a different question. Rather than deciding whether the councils constituted council democracy or a workers' revolution, it shifts attention from institutional form to mechanism: how did claims grounded in work acquire moral force, how were they were, and when did they become claims to legitimate political judgment?

1 For a concise overview of the main interpretive and historiographical traditions concerning the Hungarian workers' councils, see Rainer and Valuch, *Munkások '56*, 9–10. For the councils as a recurrent institutional form of revolutionary freedom, see Arendt, *On Revolution*, 254–67, especially 256–59. For an interpretation of the Hungarian uprising as a workers' revolution and a socialist alternative to Stalinism, see Lomax, *Hungary 1956*. For the documentary and historical reconstruction of the councils, see Kemény and Lomax, *Magyar munkástanácsok 1956-ban*; Hegedűs, *Ötvenhatról nyolcvanhatban;* Varga, "A Nagybudapesti Központi Munkástanács irataiból"; Varga, *Az elhagyott tömeg*, 199–235.

Yet the historical label "workers' council" should not be treated as a fixed or stable institutional category. Éva Standeisky has shown that the lack of a central authority during the 1956 revolution led to overlapping terms for workplace, occupational, local, and territorial organizations, while the word "worker" could serve not only as a sociological label but also as a positive synonym for "the people." By claiming to speak as workers, actors also claimed the authority to define what "proper" workers were entitled to by virtue of their labor and who could legitimately speak in labor's name. The Central Workers' Council was therefore not simply a larger factory council. It was a territorial coordinating body whose authority to speak for labor had to be established, defended, and recognized. The changing meaning of "worker" was itself political. Workers' council members appropriated a category long dominated by the party-state, redefined it through a populist language of communal justice, and, in doing so, claimed the right to define both what counted as work and who could legitimately speak as a worker.[2] In a state that grounded its legitimacy in the working class, control over these definitions was itself a claim to political authority.

The article's empirical focus is the assembly of workers' delegates, held behind closed doors at the headquarters of the Hungarian Building Workers' National Trade Union (MÉMOSZ) in Budapest on December 8, 1956.[3] The meeting was organized in secret after earlier attempts to convene a broader council assembly were blocked by Soviet troops. It brought together more than one hundred delegates from Budapest factories and provincial industrial and mining regions.[4] The decision to call a forty-eight-hour general strike for December 11–12, despite hunger, unpaid wages, arrests, and the obvious risk of repression, offers a concentrated moment for an analysis of the moral economy

2 Standeisky, "A forradalmi szervek és a munkástanácsok," 8–9; Standeisky, *Népuralom ötvenhatban*, 361–62.

3 MÉMOSZ was the Hungarian Building Workers' National Trade Union (*Magyar Építőmunkások Országos Szakszervezete*). Its modernist headquarters at 84/a Dózsa György Road was made available to the Central Workers' Council in early December 1956 at the initiative of the official trade-union leader Sándor Gáspár. The Council occupied seven rooms on the fifth floor and had access to the building's large assembly hall. The move was politically ambiguous: the larger premises made a national gathering possible, but association with an official trade-union building could also make the Council appear more closely connected to the emerging post-revolutionary institutional order and the Kádár government.

4 ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-11804/1, 64–72, minutes of the December 8, 1956 meeting; ÁBTL, 3.1.9. V-141797/4, 135–60, copy of the same minutes and related materials; "Rácz Sándor és társai perének vádirata," 150–51, 172–74. Attendance estimates vary. Sándor Rácz later gave 1,000 in his memoir, 150–200 in a 1957 interrogation, and approximately 200 at trial in 1958; the indictment recorded more than one hundred. Rácz, *Parázsló szándék*, 67; BFL, XXV.4.a, B. 7110/1957, Sándor Rácz and Co-defendants, 386. d., 37; 390A. d., 2907, testimony of Sándor Rácz.

of labor under state socialism. The question is not only why vulnerable and recently defeated actors still chose to act collectively, but also why the government feared them and how a strike that many participants knew might fail nevertheless became a politically meaningful act.

The central argument is that the strike vote cannot be adequately explained by the standard interpretive frameworks that have shaped much of the historiography of 1956: anti-Soviet resistance, the revival of a pre-communist workers' aristocracy, or the emergence of council democracy as a third way between capitalism and Stalinism.[5] Each of these perspectives captures an important aspect of the workers' councils. National and anti-Soviet claims remained central to the actors themselves. The question, however, is how work-based claims reshaped those political languages without presupposing "the workers" as a pre-existing, coherent category. This article instead approaches "worker" as a dynamic, contested moral-political position in the making. The Council's delegates themselves were socially heterogeneous and occupied different workplace positions, including shopfloor workers, technicians, engineers, and administrators. What joined their claims politically was the authority of workplace mandates rather than occupational sameness. To speak as a worker in 1956 did not simply mean belonging to a fixed occupational group. It meant claiming the authority to define what counted as justice, dignity, recognition, and legitimate rule from within the world of labor in a state-socialist regime.[6]

The conceptual framework draws on the moral economy of work, understood not as a narrow theory of subsistence or redistribution but as an approach to historically embedded expectations of fairness, reciprocity, entitlement, and

5 For an overview of the historiography of 1956 and the changing interpretive frameworks through which the 1956 Hungarian revolution has been understood, see Gyáni and Rainer, *Ezerkilencszázötvenhat az újabb történeti irodalomban: Tanulmányok*. The volume surveys both the dominant narratives of 1956 and newer approaches that moved beyond political and institutional accounts toward conceptual, social, local, and memory-oriented histories. On the competing categories through which 1956 has been interpreted, including revolution, national uprising, anti-totalitarian revolt, and civil conflict, see Gyáni, "Revolution, Uprising, Civil War," 519–31. On the interaction between historical interpretation, political discourse, and competing memories of the revolution, see Gyáni, "Memory and Discourse," 1199–1208.

6 On class as a historical relationship and process rather than a fixed sociological category, see Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 9–11; Joyce, *Visions of the People*, 1–24; Joyce, "The Historical Meanings of Work," 1–30; Lampland, *The Object of Labor*; and Varga, "Munkás – munkásság – munkástanácsok," 13–31. On labor language and worker identity as historically produced, see Sewell, *Work and Revolution in France*.

obligation.[7] Under state socialism, the moral economy of labor was especially consequential because the regime had made labor central to political language and social membership. Work was officially tied to dignity, citizenship, welfare, status, and usefulness. These promises were not merely ideological decorations. They shaped everyday expectations in factories, mines, workshops, and households. The Central Workers' Council briefly gained authority by converting such expectations into political claims. Work was not only what people did; it supplied a moral language with which questions could be posed concerning what workers deserved and who had the right to judge power.

I use "moral economy" specifically when actors refer to shared expectations of reciprocal obligations in work to determine whether a demand is legitimate. It does not represent all economic interests or political claims. "Recognition" is considered here in an empirical way: it means acknowledgement that a contribution, mandate, or injury granted an actor the right to make a claim, not a full theory of recognition. This usage is deliberately narrower than approaches that treat every normative statement as evidence of a moral economy: here, a claim counts as such only when actors connect it to reciprocal expectations attached to work and use those expectations to assess legitimacy. Thus, demands for multiparty elections or Soviet withdrawal enter the analysis as moral-economy claims only when actors link them to obligations, contributions, or workers' standing.

Mark Pittaway, a friend with whom I discussed many of these questions (and who died far too young), explains why such claims could become politically volatile. The regime's authority was secured not solely by coercion; it relied on conditional working-class acceptance and its capacity to present itself as the official representative of workers' interests. However, the alleged aspirations of the state's imagined "Communist working class" frequently diverged strikingly from the hopes and actions of real industrial workers. The language heard in December 1956 therefore did not suddenly arise from revolutionary turmoil. Demands for fair wages, genuine participation, protection from managerial overreach, and acknowledgment of skill had already made the workplace a battleground where socialist legitimacy was scrutinized.[8]

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7 On the concept of moral economy and its extension from subsistence and exchange to work, see Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," 76–136; Thompson, "The Moral Economy Reviewed," 259–351; Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*; Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*; Palomera and Vetta, "Moral Economy," 413–32; and Yalçın-Heckmann, *Moral Economy at Work*.

8 Pittaway, *The Workers' State*, 1–23, 174–201; Pittaway, *From the Vanguard to the Margins*, 159–72.

While Pittaway reconstructs the longer-term workplace conflicts that made such claims possible, this article asks what happens when those accumulated expectations are compressed into a single decision-making scene. The primary sources concerning the December 8, 1956, meeting allow competing claims about work to be heard simultaneously, claims that were then answered by other workers and converted into a collective decision. It also shifts the focus from worker-state relations alone to conflict within labor representation itself: work-based moral authority could be used not only against the state but also against the Council's own leaders. This is the article's main analytical departure from Pittaway.

Yet the argument is not that there was a single, coherent moral economy of the working class. The sources instead reveal competing moral economies of work. For some Council leaders, responsible work meant resuming production, preserving essential services, and maintaining a negotiating organization capable of withstanding state pressure. For some mining and other delegates, responsible work could mean the opposite: refusing production when coercion, arrests, and broken promises had destroyed the moral conditions under which labor could be demanded. For the Kádár government, responsible work meant discipline, order, and acceptance of the restored state's claim to workers' power. The December 8 assembly makes the work-morality-politics relationship unusually visible: the same contribution to production could justify negotiation, refusal, or discipline, depending on what the actors in question believed work entitled workers to demand. The question was not only whether workers should work. It was who had the authority to define the meaning of work and what political claims could be legitimately derived from it.

Methodologically, the article treats moral language not as transparent evidence of inner belief but as a historically situated form of framing, claim-making, state classification, and retrospective memory. Moral language is analytically significant when it frames an entitlement, expectation, judgment, or refusal directed toward another actor or institution. The analysis therefore follows a recurring sequence: a claim grounded in work, the moral language used to justify this claim, the response elicited by the claim, and the consequences for recognition or political standing. Legitimacy is not inferred from compliance; it becomes visible when actors accept, contest, or withdraw an institution's right to define work or speak in labor's name. Following Portelli, the oral-history interviews are used here not to reconstruct December 1956 independently of contemporary records, but to analyze how participants later restored or reshaped

the moral meaning of action. Police interrogations are used differently depending on the kinds of claims they support: biographical and procedural details are treated as reported facts to be cross-checked where possible, while statements about motive, responsibility, and political intention are read as products of coercive questioning rather than as transparent testimony.[9]

Because the December 8 records are the primary sources on which the article is based, their provenance requires separate caution. The minutes survive today in police and state-security files, but their archival location does not mean that the texts were produced by the police. The record survives in overlapping fragments and copies in court and state-security files, including materials confiscated from the Central Workers' Council and later reused in the investigation. These sources differ in extent, and none of them clearly identifies the note-taker. The most plausible reconstruction is that participants or Council staff took contemporaneous notes, probably in shorthand, and typed them up before the document was seized. Later testimony also shows why the texts cannot be treated as verbatim transcripts: participants challenged omissions and particular formulations while accepting other passages as accurate. I therefore read the minutes neither as a transparent transcript nor as a police reconstruction, but as a contemporary Council-produced record the wording of which must be checked against duplicate copies, interrogations, and its later prosecutorial use.[10]

December 8 is therefore treated as a diagnostic case: a source-rich decision-making scene in which the sequence from workplace mandate to claim, response, and collective decision can be closely followed. It makes visible how the same work-based moral authority could justify negotiation, refusal, or discipline and could also be turned against the Council's own leaders as well as the state. First, the closed-door protocol, the checking of letters of mandate, and the insistence

9 Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County*, 9–10.

10 The minutes of the December 8, 1956, assembly (hereafter, "Minutes of the KMT Assembly, December 8, 1956") survive in overlapping fragments and copies. See BFL, XXV.4.a, B. 7110/1957, Sándor Rácz and Co-defendants, 390. d., 1926–39; Karsai's report is preserved in the same file, 1920–25. In ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-11804/1, selected passages appear at 54–57 and a more continuous sequence at 64–72; a substantially fuller witness survives in ÁBTL, 3.1.9. V-141797/4, Rácz Sándor és társai [Sándor Rácz and Co-defendants], 135–60. The same dossier preserves delegates' letters of mandate, 161–221. These materials formed part of Council records seized and subsequently reused in the investigation, alongside resolutions, circulars, mandates, and other documents generated during the Council's activity. For later testimony indicating that the December 8 record was incomplete but that much of what it contained was accurate, see BFL, XXV.4.a, B. 7110/1957, Sándor Rácz and Co-defendants, 390A. d., 120. For published documentary selections, see "A Nagy-budapesti Központi Munkástanács három ülésének jegyzőkönyve," 11–19; Varga, "A Nagybudapesti Központi Munkástanács irataiból," 142–55, 79–93.

that only delegates could enter created a specific political order. The Council's authority did not derive from state institutions but from making visible a line of continuity among the workshop, the mine, and the meeting room. Representation was therefore not merely formal. It had to be morally credible: delegates had to show that they spoke from and for workplace communities. Second, the speeches held by mining delegates from the major mining areas, Nógrád and Tatabánya, cast local violence, arrests, and intimidation as national claims about the broken moral order of work. These speakers did not simply demand better material conditions. They argued, implicitly and explicitly, that labor could not be demanded by a government that denied security, recognition, and voice to those whose work kept the country functioning. Third, the debate over the strike exposed the moral logic of work stoppage. The question was not simply whether production should resume but what kind of work remained acceptable under conditions of occupation, coercion, and broken promises. Even decisions about maintaining hospitals, water supply, and mines during stoppages were framed as moral calculations about duty, fairness, and responsibility. Together, these moments show not a single work ethic but a dispute over how contribution could serve as grounds for a legitimate voice, justification for refusal, and the foundation for a claim to political authority.

The December 8 meeting condenses conflicts that were widely present but not easily observable: the tension between work and strike, production and recognition, discipline and voice, and state-defined labor and labor's own claims to political authority. The Kádár government's response can be read as an attempt to reclaim legitimate working-class authority. The regime did not confront the councils solely as a security threat. It sought to restrict them to economic functions, divide moderate and radical members, criminalize their political claims, and redefine them as alien to the working class. Kádár's language of order, work, and "workers' power" was therefore not external to the councils' claims; it was part of the same struggle over who could speak in the name of labor. The repression of the Central Workers' Council was accompanied by an effort to distinguish loyal workers from "alleged" workers, "déclassé" elements, and persons said to have no authentic ties to the working class.[11] In this sense, repression not only destroyed the councils. It also helped stabilize an official distinction between authentic workers and politically disqualified claimants to

11 ÁBTL, 3.1.9. V-141797/7, 305-6, summary of the investigation of the Central Council case; "Rácz Sándor és társai perének vádirata," 150–51.

workers' representation. The assembly also met three days after the Provisional Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt, or MSZMP) had formally classified the October events as a "counterrevolution" and set out an authoritative party interpretation of their causes. This did not end the semantic conflict, but it means that later official language should be read as the enforcement and application of an already articulated party line rather than as the first emergence of the category.[12]

By focusing on December 8, the article shifts attention from workers' councils as institutional models to the process by which work became a source of political authority. The Central Workers' Council exposed the vulnerability of a regime that based its legitimacy on work yet could not tolerate autonomous workers defining the political meaning of work. The alternative at stake lay not only in council democracy as an institutional form but in a rival claim to socialist authority: those who worked claimed the right to judge and represent.

December 8, 1956: Mandate, Voice, and the Moral Authority of Labor

In the early hours of Saturday, December 8, 1956, while it was still dark, workers' delegates from across the country began traveling to the MÉMOSZ headquarters on Dózsa György Road in Budapest, near the site where Stalin's statue had been pulled down on October 23. The fighting had ended weeks earlier, but political and industrial life remained unsettled under the Soviet military presence and the restored Kádár government. Soviet power was clearly visible throughout the city. The restored government still lacked social authority, and most industrial production remained uncertain. The building to which the delegates were traveling mattered. It had been associated with organized labor, but on that morning, it became a place where a different question was posed: who could legitimately speak in the name of labor after the party's claim to represent the working class had collapsed? The meeting was staged as a delicate ritual in which procedural order made the relation between work, morality, and politics concrete: workplace credentials grounded a claim to moral standing, and that standing, in turn, authorized political speech.

The meeting remained undisclosed to the public. A failed November 21 attempt to convene a broader workers' council gathering had been blocked by Soviet troops at Budapest's Sports Hall. Against that backdrop, the vague

12 "Az MSZMP Ideiglenes Központi Bizottságának 1956. decemberi határozata," 13–23.

December invitation, short notice, partial secrecy, controlled access, and verified mandates suggest an effort to reduce the risk of intervention.[13] This was not purely conspiratorial; it reflected the reality that workers' representation could only occur under such conditions in a city where the state, which claimed to be a workers' state, could physically prevent workers from convening.

The entry of the delegates into the building transformed the assembly into more than a meeting. János Dénes, the delegate from the Kőbánya pharmaceutical factory, later recalled that he was "checked to death" before he was allowed into the hall: he was stopped, made to wait, and repeatedly delayed before he was permitted to enter the meeting room. The surviving minutes confirm the concern with representation. Before opening the debate, the chair of the meeting, József Balázs, a thirty-five-year-old foreman and head of the workers' council at the Hungarian Steel Ware Factory (Magyar Acélárugyár), asked speakers to state their names and the workplaces they represented.[14] This was a procedural detail, but it was also a claim about authority. The right to speak was not derived from rank, party membership, or office. It came from being able to present oneself as the delegate of a workplace community. The Council was socially heterogeneous, but engineers, administrators, technicians, and shopfloor workers could all claim a voice as "workers" when their authority rested on workplace mandates rather than occupational sameness.

The closed doors therefore not only protected the delegates from intervention but also established a clear political boundary. Inside the room were representatives of factories, mines, and district councils; outside stood the party, government, state security, and others whose authority no longer stemmed from labor's trust. The Council's legitimacy was established through recognition procedures. Mandates, workplace credentials, and access control transformed the room into a moral-political arena where only labor-approved individuals could speak on labor's behalf.

The first substantial speech articulated one version of this work-based political framework. Sándor Karsai, a mechanical engineer and a representative of Budapest's Tenth District workers' councils, delivered a lengthy prepared

13 ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-11804/1, 64-72; ÁBTL, 3.1.9. V-141797/4, 135-60. For the earlier blocked attempt to convene an all-national council, see the November 21 materials summarized in Kemény and Lomax, *Magyar munkástanácsok 1956-ban*, 71–72.

14 OHA, interview with János Dénes, OHA 093, conducted by László Varga, 1987, 59–60; ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-11804/1, 64. For Balázs's biographical details, see ÁBTL, 3.1.9. B-89408, Balázs (Barna) József, 10–15, report, February 20, 1957, and autobiography, March 14, 1957, 53–54.

report. While mainly emphasizing the importance of resuming industrial production, it also conveyed broader ideas about the role and purpose of workers' councils. The speech asserted that the future of the Hungarian people depended on restarting economic activity, particularly in industry. Karsai warned that it would be a grave mistake to ignore this.[15] However, he did not merely echo the government's stance; he connected the revival of work to institutional reform and stressed that workers' councils should advocate for workers' interests in the new order. For Karsai, recognition was achieved through work, legitimate representation, and negotiated reforms, which also carried an obligation to sustain economic vitality.

The audience in the room did not accept this position as self-evidently responsible. János Dénes, a radical delegate also from Kőbánya, the tenth district of Budapest, later recalled that Balázs and Karsai sought to moderate the meeting and avert a strike, but he also recalled that the majority was outraged and already inclined toward a work stoppage. Because Dénes himself introduced the strike proposal, his retrospective account cannot independently establish the balance of opinion before the vote.[16] It suggests that the conflict was not between work and politics. It was between two conceptions of political responsibility within the world of work. For Karsai, Balázs, István Ring (a chemist-engineer and one of the Council's more moderate leaders), and other moderate members of the Central Council, the Council's survival depended on demonstrating that workers could govern production responsibly. For many delegates, especially those from mining regions, responsibility required demonstrating that the government had forfeited its right to command labor by violating the moral conditions on which that authority depended.

The Miners Speak: Essential Labor and Political Entitlement

Mining delegates made the next link between work, morality, and politics explicit. They turned grievances about the dignity, safety, and recognition owed to indispensable labor into a broader challenge to the government's authority to command work. The first delegate to speak after Karsai's report was Ernő Kollár from Nógrád County. Kollár represented one of the most determined groups in the room: the mining councils. The minutes record his self-introduction

15 BFL, XXV.4.a, B. 7110/1957, Sándor Rácz and Co-defendants, 390. d., 1920–25, typed report by Sándor Karsai; ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-11804/1, 64; ÁBTL, 3.1.9. V-141797/4, 135–36.

16 OHA, interview with János Dénes, OHA 093, 60.

in unusual detail. He identified himself as a mining engineer and immediately added that he had previously been a manual worker.[17] This was not incidental biographical information. It established credibility across the boundaries that state socialism itself had blurred and politicized: engineer and worker, expert and manual laborer, intellectual competence and physical labor. Kollár could speak as a technical specialist, but he grounded that authority in a worker's past.

Pittaway's reconstruction of mining communities makes this longer history especially visible. A 1951 dispute at a Tatabánya coalface shows an experienced hewer calling himself a "good worker" deserving of a position that matched his skills, while another miner accused him of wasting work time by protesting. The dispute condensed questions of skill, effort, fairness, discipline, and entitlement into a single workplace conflict. Even before December 1956, the mine was already a place where claims about proper work shaped judgements concerning who deserved recognition and who had the authority to judge the organization of labor.[18]

In line with this tradition, Kollár declared that Nógrád County "joined the workers of all Hungary." In doing so, he turned a regional grievance into a claim of national working-class solidarity. He then described the dissolution of workers' committees in Nógrád, the activities of an officer detachment, and the fact that he alone remained free to move between the mines. He appealed to miners across Hungary for help, arguing that a small armed group of the Kádár regime could not be allowed to terrorize the local mining communities.[19] The speech did not ask the assembly to pity Nógrád. It used the county's experience to raise a broader question: could workers be expected to keep the country running while being denied political voice and protection?

Kollár emphasized the importance of coal, describing it as the backbone of all industry. He argued that without coal, industrial activity would halt entirely.[20] Kollár used this economic indispensability to frame mining as a question of political entitlement. Those who supplied the country's energy could assert that the conditions of coal production were a matter of legitimate governance, not merely a technical issue. Kollár thus presented miners not simply as workers in one sector, but as indispensable economic actors whose ability to hold strikes

17 ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-11804/1, 64; ÁBTL, 3.1.9. V-141797/4, 136.

18 Pittaway, *From the Vanguard to the Margins*, 61–62.

19 ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-11804/1, 64; ÁBTL, 3.1.9. V-141797/4, 136.

20 Ibid.

exposed the socialist economy's reliance on a labor force that the state could not simply command or control.

József Kindli from the Tatabánya mining company continued this line of reasoning. The minutes record his opening with a somewhat clumsy phrase: "Today's meeting begins with the miners' conversation." Because the surviving record is not verbatim, the awkward wording should not bear interpretive weight; the surrounding passage nevertheless makes the substantive point clear. Speaking after Kollár, Kindli connected his remarks to a broader mining voice, conveying greetings and the determined stance of Tatabánya miners. He explained that all mines in Tatabánya and the neighboring region had ceased operations three days earlier, after workers demanded the removal of armed forces from the town. [21] The message was clear: they had warned that if the forces did not withdraw, they would strike; and since the forces remained, they stopped work.

The Tatabánya case demonstrates that mining radicalism should not be dismissed as mere spontaneous anger. The Tatabánya coal basin had already become a testing ground for the Kádár government's attempt to reassert control over the labor force. On November 30, Kádár visited Tatabánya and spent hours negotiating with the combined workers' council of the coal trust. This was his first visit outside Budapest in November. The record of the meeting shows a politically insecure government leader still seeking recognition from workers while trying to limit the councils' political influence. Kádár acknowledged the significant rights and responsibilities of workers' councils, stated that the government needed their support, and expressed his confidence that most council members were honest workers. At the same time, he stressed the importance of maintaining order and restoring acceptable working conditions before full confidence could be regained. [22] The negotiations concluded without an agreement. The sequence is unusually clear here. The miners grounded a claim in indispensable and dangerous work; trust, protection, and recognition supplied its moral language; the government answered with partial assurances while coercive conditions persisted; and renewed stoppage signaled that

21 ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-11804/1, 64–65; ÁBTL, 3.1.9. V-141797/4, 136–37.

22 Germuska, "Kádár János Tatabányán," 77–85; Germuska publishes the surviving minutes from Komárom-Esztergom Megyei Levéltár [Komárom-Esztergom County Archives], Esztergomi Megyei Bíróság 664/1957, Sólymos Mihály és társa, perkötet [Esztergom County Court 664/1957, Mihály Sólymos and Co-defendant, trial volume], 471–80; the archival reference is therefore cited here through Germuska rather than as a file consulted directly by me. The same document notes that the Tatabánya trust workers' council had decided on November 23 to resume work and that subsequent stoppages were tied to distrust, the Imre Nagy question, Kádár's November 26 speech, and the issue of the use of armed force.

recognition had not been restored. The government could demand coal, but it had not restored the conditions that made such a demand legitimate.

Pittaway's account also cautions against reading the miners' political vocabulary as either simply socialist or simply anti-socialist. In Tatabánya, young miners and apprentices marched under the old socialist slogan "Bread! Work!" while others sang the national anthem. The juxtaposition mattered: material security, productive labor, national sovereignty, and political freedom could belong to the same repertoire. After the defeat of the strike, miners sometimes adopted the official term "counterrevolution" but continued at times to refer to the events of October and November 1956 as a revolution; many compressed their expectations into the demand for an "honest wage." Such language did not mean that the miners had abandoned their political claims. It showed how political defeat could redirect claims for voice and recognition into the moral vocabulary of wages, provision, and fair treatment. The government responded in the same register. It invoked the effects of coal shortages on schools, hospitals, and food provision, using moral coercion alongside material concessions and selective repression. The miners' refusal to work and the state's appeal to social necessity were therefore competing claims within the same moral economy of work.[23]

In the December 8 meeting minutes, Kindli's speech attributed moral significance to the government's failure to restore acceptable conditions for work. The issue was not just that work had not resumed; it was that work had been demanded under conditions of armed intimidation, broken promises, and challenged authority. The indictment later described the Tatabánya speeches as provocative exaggerations, highlighting claims about the dead and wounded and suggesting that the miners' accounts had immediately radicalized the meeting.[24] That prosecutorial interpretation is crucial. It demonstrates how the state tried to turn a mining claim about violated moral standards into evidence of political agitation. However, the indictment's hostility also underscores why the speeches were significant: they enabled the assembly to view local violence as part of a national issue concerning the conditions under which labor could legitimately be demanded. The miners' actions thus turned injury into a claim to authority. They combined three elements: the strategic importance of coal, the moral injury caused by coercion, and the claim that workers could decide whether labor remained legitimate. This was recognition through work in its most politically

23 Pittaway, *From the Vanguard to the Margins*, 156–60, 175.

24 "Rácz Sándor és társai perének vádirata," 174.

volatile form: the miners' contribution was indispensable, but the authority they derived from that contribution was not accepted by the state. In a self-declared workers' state, this contradiction became a crisis of legitimacy. If the state ruled in the name of workers and depended on miners to keep industry running, the miners could claim to be not only producers but also legitimate judges of the political order.

The violence Kollár described in Nógrád County was not merely a remembered grievance. Earlier that day, after the arrest of local workers' council leaders, a large crowd of miners and workers gathered in Salgótarján, the county's administrative center, where armed forces opened fire. Contemporary records list more than forty deaths and more than a hundred wounded, while later estimates vary. During the meeting, a call from Salgótarján reached the Council's offices. Imre Kerekes, who took the call, later testified that the caller reported that people were being shot in front of the council building and asked for urgent help. After Kerekes gained access to the locked meeting room and relayed the message to the Nógrád delegate, someone announced to the hall that "they are shooting the people in Salgótarján." The radical Council leader, Sándor Rácz, then intervened and arranged for four men to go to the Soviet command to establish contact and clarify what had happened.[25]

The timing matters, but the surviving sources do not permit a firm reconstruction of the causal sequence. The report from Salgótarján clearly threw the meeting into turmoil. Dénes later remembered that a pro-strike majority already existed, while later trial testimony linked Rácz's call for a strike more directly to the news. Given the incompleteness of the minutes and the retrospective interests behind the two accounts, the safest conclusion is that the shootings intensified and may have precipitated an existing movement toward a strike rather than that they either created or merely confirmed it. What had already been argued as a broken moral condition of work now acquired the force of an immediate report that the state demanding labor could not guarantee the bodily security of workers and their representatives.

25 On the Salgótarján shootings and contemporary lists of the dead and wounded, see Á. Varga and Pásztor, *Az 1956-os forradalom Nógrád megyei okmánytára II/2*, docs. 523a–b and 524, 496–508. For the telephone report reaching the KMT meeting, see ÁBTL, 3.1.9. V-141797/6, 39–45, testimony of Imre Kerekes, May 6, 1957. A later trial testimony offered a more direct causal account, claiming that after the news Rácz himself called for a strike; BFL, XXV.4.a, B. 7110/1957, Sándor Rácz and Co-defendants, 390A. d., 120. The precise sequence of events, and especially the causal relationship between the news from Salgótarján and the decision to strike, therefore, remains uncertain.

Responsible Work or Moral Strike? Ring, Dénes, and the Split within the Council

The December 8 meeting can also be read as a simple contrast between moderates and radicals. The sources support this distinction, but they also add layers of nuance. The central divide within the Council concerned not whether work carried moral authority, but what kind of political authority could be derived from it. Moderates treated contribution through work as a basis for voice, representation, and negotiation: workers were entitled to be heard and to negotiate the terms under which work would resume. Radicals went further, treating the moral authority of labor as a basis for defining and controlling the legitimate political order itself, including the right to withhold labor when that order was judged illegitimate. The disagreement therefore concerned the political reach of labor-based moral authority: whether this moral authority entitled workers to participate in political decision-making or to claim the political authority to define the legitimate terms of decision-making. The more useful distinction, therefore, is between the politics of responsible work and that of moral strike. This disagreement helps explain why the Council was both powerful and fragile.

There is a relevant distinction between the revolutionary crowd and the workplace councils. In many factories, skilled workers and engineers initially used councils to protect production, reform management, and establish authority from below, while crowds in the streets claimed legitimacy as the embodied "will of the people" and pressed workplace bodies toward more radical positions.[26] On December 8, these two sources of authority were brought into the same room. Ring's emphasis on competence, organization, and continuity reflected the council tradition of responsible workplace government. Dénes's proposal drew on the demonstrative authority of collective refusal. Their disagreement was therefore not only between moderation and radicalism, but between two ways of converting work-based moral authority into public legitimacy.

István Ring's career helps explain the moderate position. When he was later interrogated, Ring described himself as a chemist-engineer of working-class origin. He was born in 1926, trained at the Technical University, and later became

26 Pittaway, *The Workers' State*, 202–29; Pittaway, *From the Vanguard to the Margins*, 173–81.

the head of the laboratory at the Aluminium Factory in Budapest. His career embodied the upward social mobility of the early state-socialist period.[27]

In April 1957, during a police investigation, Ring explained how he became a member and subsequently chair of the factory's workers' council after a large factory assembly in late October 1956. He stated that the provisional council had been elected at a meeting attended by 750–800 people, which he said represented more than two-thirds of the factory's total workforce.[28] His authority was therefore neither solely professional nor solely based on class. It stemmed from the combination of expertise, workplace reputation, and public support.

Ring's own account of his early council activity also demonstrates a strongly pragmatic view of workers' power. He described reviewing the issue of management, suspending the factory director, confirming other technical staff, and later suggesting a reorganization of the enterprise through a small expert committee.[29] This was a politics of work rather than insurrection. It aimed to correct management, reorganize production, and assert workplace competence. Ring's later moderation at the Central Workers' Council becomes clearer from this perspective. He did not reject politics; he saw legitimate politics as rooted in work organization, technical skill, and negotiated control.

His interrogations also reveal the instability of this position. Confronted with the minutes of the Aluminium Factory workers' council meeting on November 2, Ring insisted that he had not personally opposed the resumption of work. He claimed that he had merely corrected an inaccurate radio announcement and had waited for a decision from a broader committee formed by workers' delegates. When the investigator pressed him, Ring maintained that he had not opposed an eventual resumption of work, but he acknowledged supporting continuation of the strike until a broader workers' decision had been reached. The distinction is important: his moderation concerned the authority and timing of a return to work, not an unconditional rejection of the strike. Waiting for a legitimate workers' decision effectively meant continuing the strike. Demanding an immediate return to work meant submitting to the government's insistence on urgent action. Ring tried to find a middle ground, but the logic of the crisis made that position increasingly limited.[30]

27 ÁBTL, 3.1.9. V-141797/2, 27–28, interrogation of Ring István, April 11, 1957.

28 Ibid, 33–36, interrogation of Ring István, April 24, 1957.

29 Ibid, 48–50, interrogation of Ring István, April 18, 1957.

30 ÁBTL, 3.1.9. V-141797/2, 51–54, interrogation of István Ring, April 18, 1957.

A later statement attributed to Ring clarified the boundary still further. It indicated that the Central Workers' Council might have been viewed favorably had it stuck to its main role: helping restart work, channeling workers' demands, and mediating economic issues. Its mistake, in this view, was having turned into a political body and thus having made the government its enemy.[31] Whether this statement was made freely, defensively, or under pressure is less important here than the conceptual line it draws. It is the line that the regime itself also sought to draw: councils could exist as economic organs, but not as autonomous political representatives of labor.

The more radical János Dénes represented a different moral logic. As the minutes show, he spoke as the delegate of the Kőbánya Pharmaceutical Factory and the Tenth District delegates. He did not deny the suffering caused by strikes. Indeed, he acknowledged that strikes hurt workers, not the government, and he noted that not every factory enjoyed the same favorable financial situation as his own plant. Yet he insisted that something still needed to be done. The Tenth District's proposal was a two- or three-day protest strike intended to show the unity of the working class and the strength of Hungarian national resistance.[32]

Dénes's proposal was radical because it turned refusal to work into a moral statement. He argued that the denial of services should extend to all parts of life; electricity should be cut off, there should be no gas, and nothing should operate. At the same time, he carefully emphasized that the action should not endanger human life, noting that hospitals had batteries and could continue functioning for two days. He also suggested a silent demonstration lasting one or two hours. The goal, he said, would be to show force, even if the ultimate aim could not be achieved; it would express the revolutionary spirit and the unity and political awareness of the workers, forcing those in power to acknowledge the importance of labor and ponder their next step.[33] In his later oral history interview, Dénes recalled the same point in remarkably similar terms, explaining that he used the harsh words "total" and "nothing" because they concisely expressed what he wanted to say: the government in its parliamentary seats and the Russians in their tanks had to know they were confronting the entire

31 ÁBTL, 3.1.9. V-141797/2, 200–201, statement attributed to Ring István on the Central Workers' Council and the December 8 decision to hold a strike.

32 ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-11804/1, 66; ÁBTL, 3.1.9. V-141797/4, 138–39.

33 Ibid.

Hungarian working class and society.[34] The unusually close verbal continuity should not be treated as independent corroboration of the minutes. Instead, the later interview shows how Dénes had come to remember the strike: as a collective act of refusal that nevertheless respected humanitarian limits.

The moral logic of this proposal is often overlooked if it is viewed only as tactical escalation. Dénes did not present the strike as a guaranteed path to victory. He explicitly acknowledged that the goal might not be achieved. Its instrumental purposes did not exhaust its meaning: Dénes also framed the strike as a moral judgment. It conveyed the ethical message: a government demanding work while denying security, voice, and recognition had lost its right to command labor. The difference between work that could be stopped and work that had to go on was part of this moral judgment. Hospitals were not to be harmed; basic human dignity remained essential. However, normal production, electricity, gas, and transportation could be halted because the social order itself had become morally unacceptable.

Ring's intervention after Dénes shows that the split was not simply personal or ideological. The minutes record Ring acknowledging that he was often accused of pursuing a mild policy. He referred to government negotiations of the previous day, which he described not as negotiations but as speeches delivered by Marosán and Kádár. According to the minutes, Ring reported that the style of the speeches itself indicated an intention to resolve the question through the politics of force. He then stated that the delegates themselves had to decide whether it would be worthwhile even seeking further negotiations.[35] This was a crucial moment. The moderate did not merely oppose the strike. He perceived the collapse of negotiations as a significant political development. Moderation persisted, but it was losing its institutional support.

The final debate over timing and responsibility confirms this. Balázs asked whether the meeting was a mass gathering driven by waves of emotion or an assembly of responsible individuals who understood they were answerable for workers. He suggested renewed contact with the Soviet command and the government, separate from the total strike, and emphasized that the delegates should consider proposals calmly rather than acting on impulse.[36] The moral language is revealing. Responsibility here meant restraint, continuity, and avoiding

34 OHA, interview with János Dénes, OHA 093, 60; compare "Rácz Sándor és társai perének vádirata," 174. Dénes's Hungarian terms were "totális" and "semmi."

35 ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-11804/1, 66–67; ÁBTL, 3.1.9. V-141797/4, 139–40.

36 ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-11804/1, 70; ÁBTL, 3.1.9. V-141797/4, 143–44.

panic. But by that point, to many in the room, restraint itself seemed morally compromised. If miners were being shot, if arrests continued, and if the government would not negotiate as an equal partner, then sober responsibility might appear to be a form of evasion.

The final vote made this tension visible. After a recess, the revised strike resolution was read to the meeting. The surviving minutes record an overwhelming majority in favor, one vote against, and a news embargo until Sunday morning at 8:00. The decision was therefore not simply an order issued by Rácz or the Central Council leadership. It emerged from a delegate assembly in which several leading Council figures had argued for restraint, renewed negotiation, or a more controlled form of action.[37]

The decision also had an immediate institutional consequence. On December 9, the government outlawed the Greater Budapest Central Workers' Council, together with the Budapest district and provincial territorial councils. The forty-eight-hour strike of December 11–12 nevertheless took place, although unevenly. The prosecution later claimed that production stopped again in many factories. Dénes recalled that workers at his own pharmaceutical plant voted unanimously to join, while Mester later remembered that the "total" strike did not unfold as fully as planned. The uneven outcome places an important limit on any interpretation of the strike. It had enough practical effect to be treated as a serious political threat, but its incomplete execution means that its political meaning should not be inferred from operational success alone. It was also a collective judgment about whether work could legitimately continue under the restored political order. On December 11, the first day of the strike, Sándor Rácz, Sándor Bali, Endre Mester, and Vilmos Farkas were arrested; Rácz was interrogated that same day. Summary jurisdiction was also introduced on December 11.[38]

The conflict between Ring and Dénes, moderation and strike, responsible work and moral refusal to work, strengthens the central argument of the article. Work was not a single moral language; it was a contested field. The Council's authority rested on the notion that the moral standing attached to work was

37 ÁBTL, 3.1.9. V-141797/4, 143. After the revised resolution was read, the minutes record a very large majority in favor, one vote against, and a news embargo until Sunday morning at 8:00.

38 "Rácz Sándor és társai perének vádirata," 177; OHA, interview with János Dénes, OHA 093; OHA, interview with Endre Mester, OHA 407. The indictment records the December 9 dissolution of the Greater Budapest Central Workers' Council and other territorial councils and claims that production again stopped in many factories during the forty-eight-hour strike. ÁBTL, 3.1.9. V-141797/7, 38, report on the arrests, December 11, 1956; "1956. évi 28. számú törvényerejű rendelet a rögtönbíráskodásról," 591, summary/martial-law jurisdiction (statarium) allowing immediate trial and execution.

a solid foundation for a claim to political authority, but this in turn made it impossible to control the political meanings (and ambitions) that labor could sustain. When delegates claimed the right to judge power from within the realm of labor, they could also judge the Council's own leaders. December 8 was not just the triumph of radicalism over moderation. It was the point at which a shared moral claim grounded in work produced incompatible political alternatives and the moral authority of labor exceeded the authority of the organization that had tried to speak in its name.

From Moral Judgment to Criminal Evidence

When Council delegates converted contributions through work into claims to voice and political authority, the post-revolutionary state sought to reverse that movement from work to politics. It accepted that work could be the foundation for wages, welfare, discipline, and limited workplace representation, but it denied that contributions through work authorized autonomous judgment over government or the political order. The Kádár government therefore responded not only with repression but also with reclassification: the moral language of representation, injury, and legitimate refusal was recoded as conspiracy, agitation, sabotage, and counterrevolution. Later investigation and trial materials make this process especially visible, showing how claims articulated as legitimate consequences of work were detached from labor and redefined as political deviance. Repression thus did not merely punish actions; it narrowed the forms of recognition and political authority that could be derived from work.

The February 1957 summary report on the Central Workers' Council already framed the issue in this way. It noted that the Central Workers' Council was formed on November 14 from delegates of existing provisional workers' councils and districts, with many of its members being workers. However, the report immediately argued that the Council had taken the wrong path because it did not begin by ending the strikes and restarting work. Instead, it claimed, the Council focused on political questions, fostered mistrust toward the government, and allowed hostile elements to infiltrate.[39] This was more than a factual recount. It was a normative division between legitimate and illegitimate forms of workers' representation: a legitimate workers' council would focus on restarting

39 ÁBTL, 3.1.9. V-141797/7, 58–60, "Tájékoztató jelentés a Nagybudapesti Központi Munkástanács ügyében" [Information report on the case of the Central Workers' Council of Greater Budapest], February 1957.

production; an illegitimate one would discuss sovereignty, parties, armed force, Imre Nagy, and Soviet troops. At stake was what political entitlement could legitimately follow from proper work. Workers might be entitled to wages, welfare, workplace representation, and even a recognized voice in matters affecting production. What the government denied was that contribution through work could authorize workers to judge, constrain, or redefine political rule itself. Recognition was therefore not simply denied but redirected. Labor could confer social worth and limited voice, but not autonomous authority over the political order.

The same report also preserved one of the Central Workers' Council's most revealing claims. A Central Council circular insisted that if the government recognized an all-national workers' council as the workers' only negotiating body and negotiated on the basis of the November 14 demands, it would thereby recognize the Central Workers' Council. The circular also stated that the workers had resumed work solely in the interest of the people and not as an endorsement of the government. It protested against the idea that workers' councils should be accepted only as economic organs and asserted that in Hungary, the true interests of the working class were represented by the workers' councils, which were the strongest political power in the country.[40]

This statement strikes at the core of the crisis. The workers' councils did not challenge socialism from an explicitly anti-socialist position. Instead, they claimed to represent the true interests of the working class more legitimately than the government, the party, or the official unions. The state's answer was to deny the labor-based premise of that claim. Once the state denied that these political demands legitimately followed from the contributions made by workers, it could treat them as evidence that the councils had ceased to act as authentically representative workers' bodies. Official accounts increasingly claimed that hostile elements had infiltrated the councils and that, as a result, the councils no longer authentically represented the working class. Their political claims could thus be reclassified as illegitimate and dangerous rather than as expressions of legitimate concerns expressed by a body that represented workers' interests.

The argument that the Council members were not "real workers" became more explicit in the later investigative and judicial materials. The indictment described the Central Workers' Council as having departed from its economic tasks and become a political center hostile to the government. It quoted the

40 ÁBTL, 3.1.9. V-141797/7, 65–67; "Rácz Sándor és társai perének vádirata," 166.

Council's own statement according to which workers' councils represented the true interests of the working class and that there was no stronger political power in the country than the power of the workers' councils; it then interpreted this statement as proof that the Central Council wished to set itself up as a power opposed to the government.[41] What had served within the workers' council movement as a claim to democratic representation was thus turned in the indictment into evidence of usurpation.

The same pattern emerged with the December 8 strike debate. The indictment described Karsai's moderate report as being received with dissatisfaction by reactionary elements, then depicted the Tatabánya speeches as exaggerations of violence and Dénes's proposal as the immediate consequence of provocation. It quoted Dénes's call for a nationwide protest strike (covering electricity, gas, and all aspects of life) while overlooking the moral logic shown in the minutes and Dénes's later recollection: the distinction between public force and humanitarian limits.[42] In the indictment, the strike was no longer a debated moral question of whether work could legitimately continue. It was cast as an act of hostility, aimed at crippling social life. Even more revealingly, the indictment described Kerekes's report that workers were being shot in Salgótarján as another "provocation" that produced a panic atmosphere and led to the strike vote. Here prosecutorial recoding went beyond assigning a hostile motive: it absorbed a report of actual shooting into a narrative of manufactured provocation. The meeting sequence does not securely establish the prosecution's causal account. The surviving evidence is compatible with a pro-strike movement already under way, but it does not allow us to determine clearly whether the shootings intensified that movement or precipitated the final decision.[43]

This translation of the moral claims also required a transformation of the category "worker." A later summary of the police investigation noted that the accused argued in their defense that, as democratically elected members of workers' councils, they had represented the working class and that their demands aimed at correcting past errors, expanding democracy, and realizing "pure democracy." The report rejected this defense. It claimed that their election had failed to meet democratic requirements, that the twenty-two-member committee had arbitrarily declared itself the Central Workers' Council, and that the group

41 "Rácz Sándor és társai perének vádirata," 166–67.

42 "Rácz Sándor és társai perének vádirata," 174; compare ÁBTL, 3.1.5. O-11804/1, 66.

43 "Rácz Sándor és társai perének vádirata," 175. The indictment described Kerekes's report from Salgótarján as a new "provocation" that produced a panic atmosphere and led to the strike vote.

lacked both moral and legal standing to make political demands on behalf of the workers.[44] Here, the language of authority did not simply accuse the defendants of crimes. It denied that their contributions, workplace election, or claim to represent the working class entitled them to political standing. In the terms used here, the report therefore denied the moral validity of their claim to speak politically in labor's name.

The regime did not abolish the working class as a legitimating category; it monopolized the authority to define it. The working class remained the official political subject of socialism, but workers who claimed autonomous authority in its name could be expelled from that category as hostile or infiltrating elements. What was denied, therefore, was not the existence of the working class but its capacity to constitute itself as an autonomous political subject.

A distinction between real and imagined working-class identities renders more vividly clear the outlines of this strategy. The socialist state had built its legitimacy around an idealized worker who was disciplined, productive, class-conscious, and politically represented by the party. The mobilized workers of 1956 did not fit that image, yet their social location made them difficult to dismiss. The regime resolved the contradiction by describing them as misled, contaminated by alien elements, or simply no longer authentically working class. Criminalization was thus also a struggle to restore the state's imagined worker against the claims of workers who spoke and acted for themselves.[45] Criminalization was therefore also a denial of recognition: the state could acknowledge workers as productive subjects only by refusing to recognize the autonomous political authority they claimed on the basis of their work.

The January 1957 police proposal to close the case shows that this criminalizing logic had not been fully established from the outset. The proposal recommended the release of several former leaders of the Central Council (including Rácz, Karsai, Nemeskéri, and Szelvényi) after additional measures had been implemented, along with a press release stating that these individuals had not committed capital or serious offenses, had acknowledged major mistakes, expressed regret, and had been given the opportunity to engage in productive activities in the future in the interests of the working class.[46]

44 ÁBTL, 3.1.9. V-141797/7, 305–6.

45 For this distinction, see Pittaway, *The Workers' State*, 13–23, 230–56.

46 ÁBTL, 3.1.9. V-141797/3, 8–10, "Javaslat Rácz Sándor és társai ügyének lezárására" [Proposal for closing the case of Sándor Rácz and co-defendants], January 30, 1957.

The wording is striking. At this point, the authorities still envisioned a scenario in which some Council leaders could be reclassified as mistaken but redeemable workers. However, by July 1957, a later proposal on workers' council cases described the former Central Workers' Council as openly counter-revolutionary, anti-democratic in origin, and infiltrated by elements with fascist or hostile backgrounds.[47] The shift was not from a neutral interpretation to an interpretation of the events as counterrevolutionary, which the party had already formally adopted in December 1956. Rather, it marked the increasingly rigid and systematic application of that interpretation to the Council's members and claims. The January proposal still allowed some leaders to be recast as mistaken but redeemable workers; by July, the space for their productive reintegration had narrowed sharply as political exclusion hardened.

This is why the trial materials should be read not only as hostile evidence but also as involuntary "ethnography." The files preserve minutes, speeches, mandates, circulars, interrogations, and retrospective interpretations produced or collected during the investigation, allowing the historian to reconstruct how a body called a workers' council was cast as a threat to a regime that claimed to rule in the name of workers. But they also show the state's effort to master that threat by recoding it. Strike became sabotage. Representation became conspiracy. Moral judgment became agitation. Speaking as labor became pretending to be labor.

Reclaiming Labor: Recognition, Containment, and Semantic Struggle

Kádár's struggle against the Central Workers' Council was therefore a struggle over language as well as institutions. His strategy was not to abolish labor's moral authority, but to reclaim the language of workers' power and control the political claims that could legitimately follow from it. The government needed workers to return to factories, mines, transport, and public utilities, but it also needed to prevent their indispensable contributions from becoming a basis for autonomous political authority. Because the regime's own legitimacy depended on speaking in the name of workers, it could not abandon the language of labor. It had to redefine who could speak in labor's name and what claims could be legitimately authorized by appeals to work as grounds for moral and political voice.

47 ÁBTL, 3.1.9. V-141797/3, 18–21, "Javaslat a munkástanács ügyek lezárására" [Proposal for closing the workers' council cases], July 4, 1957.

The Tatabánya negotiation of November 30, 1956 illustrates the ambiguity of this effort. Kádár told the coal-trust workers' council that the councils had serious rights and serious duties, that the government had to rely on workers' councils, and that most council members were honest workers. At the same time, he tied legitimacy to order and work discipline, complained about forces hampering work by blocking factory gates, and suggested that some members would, in time, be replaced by the working people themselves.[48] Kádár also acknowledged that workers could not be expected to support the government until their basic demands and concerns about living standards began to be addressed, even as he insisted that no external assistance could be a substitute for work. This was recognition redirected rather than simply withdrawn. Workers' councils could represent workers in matters of production, articulate economic claims, and receive a limited political voice, but the government reserved for itself the authority to define workers' power and the legitimate boundaries of national politics. Containment thus operated through a language of recognition: the councils could speak in labor's name only if their claims remained within the political limits defined by the government.

The interrogation and report materials show the same pattern at the level of individual cases. Party and security organs were interested in individuals such as Ring because they occupied the unstable border between workers' representation and governmental containment. Notes on conversations about Ring presented him as someone who tried to win over the factory director, prevent the re-establishment of communist authority inside the plant, and influence managerial appointments.[49] According to other testimony, Ring's speech had helped keep the strike going and noted that, by December, he had spoken of possibly entering MSZMP.[50] These hostile sources cannot be taken at face value. I.E., they cannot be read as transparent descriptions of Ring's intentions. But they reveal what the authorities were trying to isolate: the figure of the technically competent, workplace-elected, worker-origin representative who could either mediate the return to work or keep an autonomous political claim alive.

Kádár's later internal speeches confirm that the struggle over 1956 also had to be fought in the semantic field. At the Pest County party active meeting on February 17, 1957, Kádár emphasized the importance of correctly classifying

48 Germuska, "Kádár János Tatabányán," 77–85.

49 ÁBTL, 3.1.9. V-141797/2, 190–91, note of conversation with Németh and Mészáros about Ring István, February 15, 1957.

50 ÁBTL, 3.1.9. V-141797/2, 132, testimony concerning Ring István.

the autumn events as a counterrevolution. As Tibor Takács has shown, this insistence shows that the official classification adopted in December still had to be enforced and reproduced within party organizations.[51]

This matters for the history of workers' councils. If the regime needed to enforce its 1956 classification among its own activists, it also had to define who *counted as a worker* and what political rights could legitimately follow from that status. The Central Workers' Council could not be allowed to present itself as a workers' organization proposing a democratic socialist alternative. It had to be recast as the political voice of hostile elements hiding behind labor.

The indictment performed precisely this semantic operation. The Central Workers' Council's statements about democracy, national sovereignty, workers' councils, and socialism were quoted not to clarify their political meaning, but to prove their counterrevolutionary nature. The prosecution's narrative distinguished "honest" workers from those who allegedly misled them; it viewed political demands as a deviation from legitimate economic tasks; and it portrayed the Council's claim to represent labor as an attempt to elevate itself above the government.[52] The indictment did not simply describe the defeat of the Council. It helped produce the official meaning and memory of that defeat.

This semantic struggle is crucial to a broader history of state socialism because it shows that legitimacy cannot be inferred from the return to work alone. The government could compel or induce production even when its right to define work and speak in labor's name remained contested. It acknowledged the importance of work, honest workers, production, and a bounded role for councils, while denying that workplace grievances could generate or justify an autonomous political mandate. The central issue was therefore not whether work resumed, but whether contribution could be converted into independent political standing. The state depended on labor's moral authority while denying workers the right to define the political meaning of that authority for themselves.

Conclusion: Work as a Moral Claim

The Central Workers' Council did not create a fully institutionalized alternative state. It lacked an army, bureaucracy, stable finances, and secure means of communication. Its authority was therefore unstable from the outset. However,

51 Takács, "'Mert megijednivaló most már nincs,'" 188–91.

52 "Rácz Sándor és társai perének vádirata," 150–51, 166–67, 172–74.

for several weeks after the second Soviet intervention on November 4, 1956, it posed a challenge that the Kádár government could not ignore. Its significance lies in a more specific mechanism: delegates translated contributions through work into claims to recognition and then into claims of legitimate political authority. The Council asserted that the individuals operating mines, factories, transportation, and essential services had the right not only to produce but also to judge, represent, and influence the political order.

December 8 was the most intense scene of that crisis. The meeting's closed doors and letters of mandate created a boundary of credible representation. Karsai's and Balázs's moderation articulated one moral economy of responsible labor: work had to resume so that the councils could survive and the country could function. Kollár and Kindli, representing the miners, articulated another: work could not be demanded from miners and workers whose committees were broken up and whose communities faced armed intimidation. The radical Dénes transformed the strike into a moral judgment. The moderate Ring revealed the tension between technical responsibility, negotiation, and political refusal. The meeting did not simply decide on a strike. It staged a conflict over the question of what political authority could follow from work. The delegates disagreed about whether labor entitled workers primarily to a negotiated voice or also to define and withhold the terms of work themselves, but they shared a premise the government could not concede: those whose labor sustained society were entitled to judge the authority that commanded it. The Central Workers' Council therefore challenged the post-revolutionary government's claim to command labor without first securing the recognition, dignity, and trust of those whose work sustained society.

The value of this case lies precisely in this compression. It shows recognition through work not as a fixed doctrine but as a relational process. Contributions generated claims to dignity, fairness, protection, voice, and authority. Other workers and state institutions could recognize, redirect, or deny those claims. Their consequences became visible in negotiation, strikes, criminalization, and political exclusion. Investigators translated these contested claims into categories of guilt, while later memories reshaped the moral significance of participation. This dynamic also helps explain the plausibility of Arendt's and Lomax's interpretations of the workers' councils as forms of autonomous political power. When contributions through work generated claims not only to voice but also to the authority to define legitimate political authority, the councils could appear as

more than workplace institutions, even if that possibility remained contested and institutionally fragile.

The category "worker" remained politically powerful precisely because it was not sociologically uniform. Its positive resonance allowed heterogeneous delegates to present workplace mandates, injuries, and obligations as a common claim to popular legitimacy. The Central Workers' Council therefore did not express an already unified class will; it temporarily assembled different occupational positions and moral vocabularies under a shared claim to speak for labor. The cases examined here show that this claim could bridge distinct occupational positions. Council leaders and representatives included skilled workers, technicians, engineers, clerks, and first-generation graduates from working-class, peasant, or lower-middle-class backgrounds. "Worker" thus functioned less as a fixed occupational identity and more as a situational moral-political claim grounded in contribution, workplace representation, and expectations of fairness.

The Kádár regime's response clarifies the limits of that claim. It needed labor and could acknowledge economic grievances, workplace competence, and even a bounded role for councils. What it could not accept was the conversion of recognized contributions into autonomous political authority. It therefore negotiated, redirected, divided, criminalized, and renamed. The trial and investigation files show this process hardening into a denial of recognition, as labor-based political claims were recast as criminal evidence.

This is why the Greater Budapest Central Workers' Council matters for broader histories of state-socialist labor. The article shifts attention from workers' councils as institutional models to the mechanism by which work-based claims became claims to legitimate rule. The councils were occasions when labor became a language of moral authority, enabling workers to claim not only representation but also the right to judge political power. The crisis of 1956 was therefore not merely a struggle over what workers wanted; it was a battle over who could be considered a worker, who could speak for labor, and what political authority could legitimately derive from work. More broadly, the case suggests a way to study state-socialist labor by tracing when claims grounded in contribution were recognized, redirected, or denied and how those responses shaped the legitimacy of political authority. The history of state-socialist labor can begin here: not with the worker as a fixed category, but with work as a moral claim.

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