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PERMANENT WAGE LABOUR AS A NORM

WORKFARE POLICY AND EVERYDAY EXPERIENCES OF PRECARIOUSNESS IN A SMALL HUNGARIAN FORMER INDUSTRIAL TOWN²

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how the everyday practices of a workfare policy (the Public Work Scheme) are influenced by the concept of “normal life” and “normal labour” among the inhabitants of the small Hungarian former industrial town where I conducted my ethnographic fieldwork. The paper studies the changing roles and functions of the Public Work Scheme during and after the economic crisis. It presents how a typical workfare policy – in our case, the Public Work Scheme – shapes the life strategies of those people who live in precarity. I will argue that the public work scheme can be interpreted as a policy that aims to sustain the norm of stable and permanent wage labour during times when fulfilling these norms is very difficult. The article explores the role that the PWS has played in sustaining the norm of permanent wage labour, during and after the 2008 economic crisis, and how this process affects classed-based ethnic distinctions and the gender division of labour within the nuclear family.

Keywords: workfare, concepts of “normal life and labour,” precarity, class-based ethnic distinctions, economic crisis, gender division of labours

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PERMANENT WAGE LABOUR AS A NORM

WORKFARE POLICY AND EVERYDAY EXPERIENCES OF PRECARIOUSNESS IN A SMALL HUNGARIAN FORMER INDUSTRIAL TOWN INTRODUCTION

This paper explores how the everyday practices of a workfare policy (the Public Work Scheme) are influenced by the concept of “normal life” (cf. Jansen 2015) and “normal labour” among the inhabitants of the small Hungarian former mining town, where I conducted my ethnographic fieldwork. My field research included participant observation for three months between 2017 and 2019 in the small town’s poorest and most stigmatised neighbourhoods where most inhabitants live under precarious conditions and many are involved in the Public Work Scheme. I also conducted 36 semi-structured interviews with public scheme workers, managers and inhabitants, as well as local government officials. Throughout my research I focused on how everyday notions of “normal life and labour” related to real opportunities in this small town called Kallóháza.³ The relationship between “norms and reality” not only defines the everyday practice of the PWS, but also shapes its role and function in the local society. The Hungarian Public Work Scheme is a typical workfare construction, in which unemployed people are expected to perform eight hours of labour a day in order to receive their benefits. However, by operating on a fixed-term employment basis, the scheme is constructed in such a way that it sustains the precarious situation of public workers’.

Before discussing these issues in detail, I would like to discuss briefly the concept of precarity. The paper uses Standing’s concept, according to which – although not definable as a class position – “The precariat has class characteristics. It consists of people who have minimal trust relationship with capital or state (...). And it has none of the social contract relationships of the proletariat, whereby labour securities were provided in exchange for subordination and contingent loyalty, the unwritten deal underpinning workfare states. Without a bargain of trust or security in exchange for subordination, the precariat is distinctive in class terms” (Standing 2011: 1–26). Besides these, as other authors emphasise, precarity is an uncertain and vulnerable situation in which people typically aspire to have a “good and normal life” with reference to stable, permanent wage labour (Allison 2012, Han 2018, Millar 2014, 2017, Muehlebach–Shoshan 2012). It is particularly true in this case, since Kallóháza can be considered a typical product of the industrialisation trends after World War II. It was constructed to provide housing for mining workers and the mine’s staff in the 50’s, so the majority of the working class and the work ethos of permanent wage labour were defining factors in the local society. As a result of the deindustrialisation process after the regime change, the mine was closed down permanently in 2000. It resulted in significant unemployment in the town and a lack of a stable, predictable livelihood for many inhabitants, who fell into a precarious living condition. It is not surprising, therefore, if in Kallóháza the ideas of a “good and normal life” are strongly related to permanent wage labour.

³ I anonymised the town’s name

At the same time, not only the town's special social history makes permanent wage labour a guarantee for a "good and normal life," but, according to a Marxist theoretical framework, capitalism has produced such a hierarchy between the forms of work from the beginning, in which formal, permanent wage labour has the highest value. Nevertheless, capital accumulation requires a cheap and flexible workforce that is not entirely part of the system of formal wage labour, because this way workers' wages do not burden capital (Dunaway 2012, Millar 2014, 2017 Rajaram 2018, Sanyal 2007, Smith 2012, Quijano 2000, Van der Linden 2001 Wallertsein 2000). Many authors have highlighted that permanent wage labour has only been dominant and ubiquitous in Western core societies. In the rest of the world, people have either had to supplement permanent wage labour with other work activities, or their livelihood has entirely depended on the informal economy, which very often means stigmatised and ethnicised/racialised work activities (Boatca 2015, Millar 2014, 2017 Rajaram 2018, Sanyal 2007, Wallertsein 2000, Han 2018:331-43). However, according to this hierarchy, the ideas of a good and "normal life" usually are associated with the so-called "Fordist" permanent wage labour that allows a predictable, linear life trajectory. Han and Millar argue that these ideas are also dominant in contexts where the structural circumstances do not provide the conditions for such understandings of "normal life" to be realised (Allison 2012: 345-70, Han 2018: 331-43, Millar 2014: 32-53).

This argument can be applied appropriately to this case, too, as the above mentioned hierarchy of work forms entails class-based ethnic distinctions in Kalló bánya. In this context, precarity is usually associated mainly with "Gypsyess," while the permanent wage worker situation is rather related to a "Hungarian" position. However, as Han and Millar note, ideas of "normal life" in many cases are not realised in this way. Although the ideas of "normal life and labour" in Kalló bánya strongly relate to permanent wage labour, in fact there are not enough workplaces in the town to could provide stable and predictable life trajectories for the workforce. Consequently, in the small town of Kalló bánya, we can observe a significant contradiction between these "norms" and "structural reality". It was especially true for the years around the 2008 economic crisis, when the PWS was introduced.

This paper analyses the everyday practice of the PWS in relation to this contradiction. The Public Work Scheme can be interpreted as a workfare policy that aims to sustain the norm of stable and permanent wage labour at times when achieving it is very difficult. This phenomenon is very similar to what Stef Jansen writes in his book about the concepts of "normal life" in post-socialist and post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina, where people perceive a gap between normative expectations and their experiences of everyday life. As Jansen suggests, there is a strong tension between "is" and "ought to" (Jansen 2015:33-59). Similarly, in my field, the "is" is very often opposed to the "ought to", and the tension between the two significantly shapes the local society and the everyday practice of the PWS as well. This paper is concerned with how these tensions play out at the locality in the everyday practices of the Public Work Scheme. The article explores the role the PWS plays in sustaining the norm of permanent wage labour during and after the 2008 economic crisis, and how this process affects classed-based ethnic distinction and the gender division of labour within the nuclear family.

“NORMS” AND “STRUCTURAL REALITY”

In Kallóháza, concepts of “normal life” can not only be related strongly to permanent wage labour, but can also be connected to the organisation of the nuclear family. In short, and according to these concepts, what is considered “normal life” is substantiated by income from permanent employment that is capable of supporting a nuclear family. Naturally, it does not mean that everybody belongs to a nuclear family and is employed in wage labour, or that all the inhabitants desire these things, but rather that these “norms” guide people’s aspirations for a “good and normal life”. These concepts frame people’s ideas of how they should live and what they should desire. In this framework, concepts of “normal life” are inseparable from the dual “norm” of permanent wage labour and the nuclear family.

As mentioned above, in my field, while various structural challenges threaten the norms of permanent wage labour and the nuclear family, the norms themselves and the possibilities for realising them are somewhat contradictory. These tensions powerfully shape class-based and ethnic distinctions. Although I conducted a significant part of my fieldwork in one of the poorest districts of the town, my assertion can be applied more generally. The case of this particular neighbourhood can be understood as a symbolically important location, where the above-mentioned tensions are especially present. In the neighbourhood, the unemployment rate is higher compared to the town’s average, as there are few inhabitants who have permanent employment. In many cases, the neighbourhood is the scene of street violence, drug abuse and all kinds of informal businesses on the verge of legality. The inhabitants of the town contrast life in this neighbourhood with the norms of permanent wage labour and the nuclear family and, consequently, the neighbourhood is perceived as a place that threatens “normal life”. In many cases, these fears are presented as the “Gypsy issue”. This not only happens because many Roma people live in the neighbourhood but, more importantly, because in the Eastern European context low-status precarious work conditions are associated with “Gypsiness”, and therefore these social positions become ethnicised. (Petrovici-Rat-Simionca-Vincze 2018, Rajaram 2017, Szombati 2016, Grill 2018, Kovai 2017, Effremova 2012). Consequently, threats to “normal life” are often articulated as the “Gypsy issue”. At the same time, the site of permanent wage labour can override the ethnic distinctions, as was the case in the past when the biggest employer in the town was the mine, where many unskilled Roma people worked together with “Hungarians.” After the mine closed down, the common site of permanent wage labour became less available for unskilled Roma people, but it nevertheless still plays an important role in alleviating class-based ethnic distinctions.

Although to a lesser extent, the town’s inhabitants who live in other neighbourhoods are also confronted with the same problems encountered by the inhabitants of the locality. Only a small number of town’s inhabitants are easily able to lead a “normal life” in the way it is expected in relation to formal wage labour. In Kallóháza, most available work opportunities are low-paid factory jobs in the town or in nearby bigger cities. These jobs typically do not provide sufficient income for a family’s living costs or are so exploitative that they put the operation of the nuclear family at risk. In these cases, the norms of permanent wage labour and that of the nuclear family will be in conflict. For example, for an ordinary nuclear family with a father, a mother and two children, if both parents are factory workers then they can indeed provide sufficient income for their fam-

ily, but as my interlocutors argued that, they would not have the time to raise their children “properly”. The conflict between the norms of permanent wage labour and the nuclear family has deepened in the last decade due to massive circular migration to Western Europe (cf. Váradi 2019). Following the 2008 economic crisis, as a result of severe unemployment and consumer indebtedness, the destination of migration has changed. In the last decade, people have preferred to find work in Western Europe than Budapest or in other regional centres in Hungary. In many cases, this means circular migration: only one adult member of the family works abroad and they usually visit home once a month for a few days. The only ones who are able to move to Western European countries permanently with their family are those who have received sufficiently high levels of education or possess enough financial and social capital to do so. Others are obliged to engage in circular migration which, while proving to be a viable alternative in order to accumulate economic capital and sustain the family, can endanger the family itself as a significant source of emotional stability. Consequently, inhabitants must make considerable efforts to reconcile the norms of permanent wage labour and those of the nuclear family. As a consequence of such “reconciliation” work, precarious working conditions force people into a permanent circulation between different types of work, such as shifting between public work and working abroad, or between working abroad and working in a nearby factory, and so forth. As such, the Public Work Scheme plays a significant role in this reconciliation work. It can be interpreted as one of the pit-stops in this circulation, the direction of which depends on economic cycles (crisis or prosperity) on the one hand, but it is also driven by personal life-cycles on the other.

In the rest of the paper I will first present the main findings of the research on the Public Work Scheme as a workfare policy and the related public discourse. In the following chapter, I will examine how economic cycles have influenced the Public Work Scheme at the local level and the role the programme plays in reconciling the norms of permanent wage labour and those of the nuclear family. I will pay special attention to how the Public Work Scheme has affected ethnic and class-based distinctions, as well as the gender division of labour within the nuclear family.

THE PUBLIC WORK SCHEME AS A WORKFARE POLICY

I will argue that the Public Work Scheme be considered a typical workfare policy response to the 2008 economic crisis. The programme was introduced in 2009 by the socialist-liberal government and was redesigned as the largest public policy of the New Right Orbán government in 2011. By 2016, there were 193,000 public workers in Hungary. While the Public Work Scheme had the ambition of replacing social services, it was also the most important state policy aiming to administer and regulate the poor population in disadvantaged rural areas and small towns (cf. Czirfusz 2015, Csoba 2010b, Koltai et al 2018, Molnár et al 2017).

The Public Work Scheme has invited an ongoing and lively public debate in its ten years. As a policy, it has been heavily criticised for being incapable of reintegrating people suffering from long-term unemployment into the primary labour market, and for being instead an instrument for disciplining the poor population and for pacifying the public sentiment towards people in long-term unemployment (Csoba 2010, Ferge 2017, Kálmán 2015, Scharle 2015, Szikra 2014, Virág-Zolnay 2010). Most social scientists and experts interpreted the

programme as a typical workfare policy, which more or less fits into international trends of neoliberal governance (Asztalos 2014, Kálmán 2015, Kovai 2016, Szőke 2015). In the international context, we have witnessed a shift from relatively protective welfare approaches towards more disciplinary workfare policies. We also view the PWS as part of the above mentioned trends but in our study we follow the arguments of Powell and van Baar, and do not equate neoliberalism with the withdrawal of the state. Instead of looking at it as deregulation, it can be understood as a way of re-regulation (Powell-van Baar 2018:95-115). In this way of governance, local institutional power and the state have a central role similarly to that in welfare systems. At the same time, in the workfare framework, social or structural factors have almost completely disappeared from the interpretation of unemployment and poverty, and have been replaced by problem definitions, such as „welfare dependence”, “decrease in work ethos” or “bad attitudes” of a certain category of people, thus implicitly blaming the poor for their own situation. The mainstream narrative has started to present the poor as failing and immoral citizens. Consequently, workfare policies aim to turn this population into “full value citizens” which they closely link to their participation in the labour market (Clarke 2005, Grill 2018, Muehlebach- Shoshan 2012 Szőke 2015). Thus, workfare policies and schemes strongly depend on the dominant concepts of labour in a given social context.

Similarly to the Hungarian case, “a certain category of people” typically refers to ethnicised groups of the poor. Their disadvantaged situation not only appears as their own individual fault, but something that also derives from the “character” of their ethnicity. Therefore, in many cases, workfare policies implicitly contribute to the ethnicisation of poverty. Since the Roma minority is strongly affected by long-term unemployment in Hungary, the Public Work Scheme has also shaped ethnic distinctions in play and contributed to the ethnicisation of poverty. Most critics of the Public Work Scheme pointed out that it has strengthened the ethnic division between the Roma and non-Roma and has increased the stigmatisation of and discrimination against unemployed Roma people (Asztalos 2014, Kovai 2016, Scharle 2015, Szalai 2009, Szőke 2015).

Another significant element of workfare measures that evidently affect the everyday practice of public work and the surrounding debates is that workfare policies usually go along with decentralisation. As Alexa Szőke writes, “Thus they constitute part of the neoliberal reorganisation of the state, which ‘dumps’ welfare responsibilities and dealing with risks onto the local level and on the unemployed themselves, while advancing welfare retrenchments.” (Szőke 2015:738). Similarly, in the studied case, the Public Work Scheme entrusts local governments with the allocation of workplaces. On the one hand, as local governments became employers, it has put extensive powers into their hands and rendered the subsistence of the public workers highly dependent on the decision of the local authorities. On the other hand, as Szalai underlines, it placed the burden of responsibility for the problem of poverty at the level of the local society, as if wider society had nothing to do with these difficulties. Many critics argued that the situation of the poor strongly depended on local interpersonal power relationships. Consequently, the Public Work Scheme has considerably strengthened hierarchical, paternalistic relationships between the local authorities (mayors) and the poor (Csoba 2010, Scharle 2012, Szikra 2013, Szalai 2002, Virág–Zolnay 2010).

In summary, the Public Work Scheme has not only been highly criticised for failing to reintegrate the long-term unemployed into the primary labour market, but also for keeping them trapped in the locality, often in the most disadvantaged areas, as well as into the subordination of local paternalistic relationships. Furthermore, the programme has strengthened the distinction between those who are employed in regular, permanent jobs and those who are unemployed and carry out the stigmatised public work. In many cases, this distinction overlaps with lines of ethnic division separating the Roma and non-Roma, and thus the Public Work Scheme sharpens ethnic distinctions and the stigmatisation of the “Gypsy” position. For all these reasons, critics of the Public Work Scheme argue that it tends to capture the unemployed in cycles of unemployment and poverty, and deepen exclusionary and discrimination processes (Asztalos 2014, Czirfusz 2015, Csoba 2010, Ferge 2017, Kálmán 2015, Kovai 2016, Scharle 2015, Szikra 2014, Szalai 2009, Szőke 2015, Virág–Zolnay 2010, Scharle 2015, Váradi 2016).

However, there is a different way to interpret the Public Work Scheme, which has been developed by a group of authors who substantiate their work on a particular theoretical stance and who use somewhat distinct research methods, most importantly ethnographic fieldwork. Although these studies share the above critical views, they place greater emphasis on the details of the decentralisation process and the ways in which workfare policy relegates the problems of poverty and long term unemployment to the local level. These authors conclude that the implementation of the programme is highly dependent on the nature of local social relationships, such as the concepts of labour, which are characteristically shaped by the particular history of the locality (Asztalos 2014, Gerő–Vigvári 2019, Kovai 2016, Szőke 2015, Váradi 2016). Szőke highlighted in her paper that, in some cases, such local relations can attenuate the above mentioned disciplinary and exclusionary mechanisms of the workfare policies, while the opposite can happen in other localities. For example, in villages where ethnic and class-based distinctions have traditionally been less constraining, the Public Work Scheme may not only provide an opportunity for reducing poverty or organising village social life, but also for alleviating the exclusionary mechanisms of ethnic and class-based distinctions (Szőke 2015: 734–50). We are not arguing that such cases would negate the statement that the Public Work Scheme tends to strengthen the exclusion and stigmatisation of the poor. Instead, along with other authors, we argue that disciplining paternalism may take on different functions and meanings at the local level. For instance, in some cases, the programme may function as a development activity when rural development projects utilise the resources of the Public Work Scheme. In other cases, the Public Work Scheme strengthens the interpersonal relationships that provide safety to the poor, despite being hierarchical and paternalist. In many cases, mainly in rural local contexts, the boundaries between disciplining and caring are flexible, both from the perspective of the poor and from that of the local authorities. Consequently, local social history and the recent development of social relationships can play a significant role how workfare policy is implemented (Asztalos 2014, Gerő–Vigvári 2019, Kovai 2016, Szőke 2015, Váradi 2016).

Our data seems to confirm David Mosse’s argument on development activities: they can be considered as an interpretation process, in which the “original” meanings can be changed. The “original intentions” of policies cannot be directly traced back from what happens at the local level (Mosse 2005: 1–21). We will argue that local concepts of “normal” labour play a significant role in how the programme is implemented. At the

same time, although they strongly influence the significance and “success” of such programmes, so far neither critical voices nor researchers have thoroughly accounted for the ways in which the Public Work Scheme has been affected by economic cycles (this is partly due to the fact that most research projects were conducted during the crisis). Critics usually focus extensively on state policy and place less emphasis on wider economic constraints that frame the room those making public policies on behalf of the states needed to manoeuvre.

In the next part, I will explore the changing roles and functions of the Public Work Scheme during and after the economic crisis. Then, with a view to the above critical comments and the findings of the ethnographic works, I will examine how the Public Work Scheme has been adapted to the local context of Kallóhánya with a special focus on how it has become a tool for sustaining the “norms” of permanent wage labour. It will be explained how the programme is strongly defined by the conflicting relations between the normative hegemony of permanent wage labour and its „structural realization”. This contradiction guides the strategies of those employed in the public work programme, from work managers to manual labourers. The following section focuses on the ways in which these strategies play out in the everyday practices of the programme.

THE PUBLIC WORK SCHEME AS A WAY TO SUSTAIN THE NORM OF PERMANENT WAGE LABOUR

Kallóhánya provides us with an illustration of how the Public Work Scheme as a workfare policy adapts to economic cycles (cf. Csoba 2010, Koós 2016, Szabó 2015). In 2012, the town employed almost 1,200 public workers, which is an outstanding number considering the town’s population of 25,000 inhabitants. This made the local government the town’s largest local employer. However, the number of public workers has progressively decreased in each year since 2015. In 2019, only 300 workers participated in the programme. Nearby factories, the construction industry and work migration absorbed the “surplus” population that had grown during the crisis. Although these trends have changed the significance and function of the Public Work Scheme, it has remained the basic reference point for the concepts of “normal life” and labour for the people concerned. The Public Work Scheme can be interpreted as a “hybrid” institution, which encompasses different functions and elements such as that of “normal” wage labour, unemployment benefit, and developmental activity. This kind of hybridity allows participants to choose from different interpretations and strategies, yet all of the above are defined by the “norm” of permanent wage labour, which functions as a very strong imperative in the ex-mining town of Kallóhánya.

This suggests that the mayor, the local authorities and even the local middle class consider the introduction of the programme as a favourable turning point, which finally encouraged or forced the unemployed to move out of their decades-long state of lethargy. They have repeatedly interpreted the programme as a kind of developmental activity that aims to cure the mental illness of the poor, which had been caused by long-term unemployment. The unemployed were described as people lacking self-confidence, who were isolated and locked in the isolation of unemployment. So, from this perspective, the programme is believed not only to provide employment and salary to the unemployed, but a sense of community as well, and a reason to get up in the morning. From the local authorities’ point of view, life outside formal wage labour seems to be meaningless and destructive. They typically oversee the variety of informal or semi-formal money-earning activities that the

unemployed perform, as these are not considered “normal jobs” that could provide a basis for “normal life”. They do not notice the shift from a relatively protective welfare policy to a more disciplinary workfare policy, but rather welcome the programme as a measure that is finally starting to address the problem of unemployment, as if the existence of social benefits were the primary cause of the abandonment and neglect of the long-term unemployed population. This makes sense, considering that the resources provided by the Public Work Scheme and especially its cheap workforce have become essential for maintaining the town’s infrastructure, while it also offered them a tool for reorganising the community life of the town.

However, it is indeed curious that, during my last eight years of research, I have never met any unemployed or public scheme workers who shared the social scientist’s critical view on the programme, even though the Public Work Scheme that has replaced social assistance and social benefits and provided a salary far below the minimum wage worked against their best interests. Before the introduction of the programme the unemployed had received only slightly less as social benefits than their current salary on public work, and they didn’t need to work eight hours a day. Nonetheless, I have never encountered any views from the unemployed that would have given voice to these conflicts of interest. Instead, they only complained about low salaries or the scarcity of public work positions. One might ask why these groups fail to recognise their own interests. In my view, the constraining force of the norm of permanent wage labour is so strong that they cannot recognise their own interests: as such, it is a typical example of how subordinated, vulnerable groups internalise the hegemonic concepts of mainstream society. Furthermore, it may offer them something else; a sense of belonging to mainstream society, of being “full-value citizens”, almost living the “normal life” which is strictly associated with permanent wage labour. As Roberman points out, despite post-industrial changes, one’s individual life and sense of belonging to the community continue to depend strongly on participation in the permanent, stable labour market (Roberman 2015: 743–763). In Kallóhánya, where industrial workplaces traditionally dominated the labour market, it means permanent wage labour. In the local context, the programme functions as an institution that represents and demands the work ethos of permanent wage labour, regardless of whether these workplaces are available or not in the given economic cycle. Moreover, this function will be even more important, particularly in crisis periods, when fulfilling these demands is less possible, due to the lack of sufficient work places. Consequently, demanding the ethos of formal, permanent wage labour is an important element in managing the unemployed population, just as formulated in one of the slogans accompanying the programme: “to lead the unemployed back to the ‘world of employment’”.

During the crisis, a stratified system of public work was developed in Kallóhánya: starting from the task of public cleaning, which required only unskilled labour, to jobs requiring more qualified workers, such as the social cooperative that aimed to enhance local production. In addition, local civil society organisations have also mainly been employing more educated public workers. This was made possible by the availability of unemployed people from all strata of the local society during the crisis. In this way, the PWS not only provided a cheap workforce to maintain the town’s infrastructure but also reflected the stratification of local class relationships and stabilised its characteristic hierarchy. Furthermore, it also effectively maintained the hierarchy of ethnic distinctions, due to ethnic and class positions usually overlapping. Low status street-cleaning work was primarily carried out by the unskilled Roma, while only a few Roma workers made it to office jobs and

higher-status activities which were associated with “Hungarians”. Nevertheless, it will be demonstrated below that the acquisition of a work ethos based on permanent wage labour could override any ethnic distinctions.

The question of maintaining or overriding ethnic and class-based distinctions is strongly related to protecting the normative hegemony of permanent wage labour. The everyday practices of the Public Work Scheme are substantially shaped by the tension between the normative hegemony of permanent wage labour and its realisation; in other words “structural reality”. The burden of dealing with this tension falls upon the participants from the town’s administration through the public work managers (street-level bureaucracy) to the public scheme workers themselves. Jan Grill’s concepts of “mock labour” or “pretending” are very useful to help understand how the participants in the Public Work Scheme attempt to deal with these tensions and contradictions (Grill 2018:105-119). All of those involved in the programme have to pretend it is permanent wage labour in the primary labour market, while neither the rate of payment, nor the structure of production measure up to the criteria of permanent wage labour. Local authorities recalled that, at the beginning, the biggest challenge was providing more than a thousand people with meaningful jobs. For example, the concrete element factory was established partly because of the abundance of builders and masons among the unemployed. Hence, the local government had to create quasi-workplaces with tasks, duties, workers, managers and, last but not least, a valid work ethic. Therefore they expected public workers to behave as “normal” employees who earned enough income to sustain their families. At the same time, public workers had to find the time to earn supplemental income from outside the programme, essentially meaning that the system continuously encouraged them to evade the system. The management had to enforce the norm of permanent wage labour in order to ensure its own credibility.

One of the main sets of tools to achieve such credibility includes a strict work schedule and a system of surveillance the controls and disciplines public workers. The workers are requested to gather in front of the Városgondnokság (the town maintenance office) before 6 a.m. in order to start to work on the hour; they have a 20 minute lunch break, and by 2.20 p.m. are finished for the day. The workers are constantly monitored and, although they are scattered across the town, the work managers may appear at any time to check the job sites and see whether they are “just swinging their legs” or whether they have done their job properly. However it not only the local authorities who constantly supervise the workers, but the town’s inhabitants also take part in this continuous surveillance, often making comments on “lazy” workers or on how badly a job is being done. Workers often told me stories of how the inhabitants explicitly humiliated them, for example by deliberately dumping their garbage on the ground and saying: “pick up the trash, public worker, that’s why we pay you!” If someone is not believed to be doing his or her job properly, their pay can be decreased or they can be laid off, making it difficult to be eligible for benefits for up to a year. Such everyday practices of discipline make the streets of the town one big factory, where the local authorities and the inhabitants keep the “norms” of permanent wage labour by exercising control over the public workers. At the same time, all such controlling practices predominantly regulate the low-skilled workers, mainly the Roma who occupy the lowest status jobs in the street. Therefore, efforts to sustain the norms of permanent wage labour go along with strengthening class-based ethnic distinctions.

Although systems of control and surveillance provide an important framework for establishing credibility, they are not sufficient to maintain and manage the Public Work Scheme. In order to make the programme operational, the tension between protecting the norms of permanent wage labour and the structural reality has to be reconciled. On the ground, the street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky) have to cope with these particular tensions in the Public Work Scheme on a daily basis. Street-level bureaucrats are the ones who have to enforce the demands of wider structural constraints in the everyday life of the affected population; in our case it means the implementation of a workfare policy. If we would like to understand better the everyday operation of PWS, it is worth examining the relationship between the street-level bureaucrats and public scheme workers.

MEETING POINTS: STREET LEVEL BUREAUCRACY AND THE PUBLIC WORKERS

As Koster and Lenyseele underline, street-level bureaucrats not only fulfil and mediate the demands of broader structural constraints but they also shape them in their encounters with local inhabitants. Therefore, to understand how the workfare policy is being implemented on the ground, we should take a closer look at the role of street-level bureaucracy and its structural position (Koster–Lenyseele 2018: 803–13).

Work managers are public servants who work for the municipality. They have a permanent job and a “higher salary” than the public workers. However, in many cases their position is also somewhat vulnerable, for they may be indebted, having formerly been public workers themselves, or have found it difficult to secure employment because of their age, for example. Even though it provides limited resources, their employment not only offers minimal financial security, but also implies the responsibility of maintaining a system that “truly” rewards the “appropriate” work ethic, as opposed to the “confusing conditions” of the primary labour market. This “appropriate” work ethic is dictated by the normative hegemony of permanent wage labour which assumes that workers who can make ends meet from their wage can also take responsibility for their work in return for the predictable stability of their workplace. Obviously neither of the above applies to the Public Work Scheme, and therefore the enforcement of the normative hegemony of permanent wage labour is constantly in conflict with the “disappointing” reality. One of the most important features of this “disappointing” reality is that many public workers consider their employment as a kind of transition phase, as a pit-stop in their circulation between work-types, or simply as time to be spent, after which they can do more important things such as more informal means of making money or dealing with family matters. Accordingly, many do not feel much responsibility for their work and, if they do so, they attribute it to their “appropriate” work ethic, and not to the importance of their job. Hence, while most public workers adapt to the precarious nature of public work, the work managers simply expect them to pretend that they were employed permanently with a salary sufficient to make a living. The primary task of the work managers is to resolve this contradiction somehow.

There are some measures at their disposal for this, such as the above-mentioned disciplinary methods, but they also need narratives that make sense of their activities. One of them is the individualistic ideology of the neoliberal workfare policy, which establishes the hierarchy between the work forms referred to earlier and excludes various ways of earning money from the category of “legitimate” and “normal labour”. The work managers employ this narrative to explain the contradiction between the lack of individual skills and when they

interpret the programme as development activity. They simply ignore the public workers' other income-earning activities, and argue that, until they were reintegrated into the "world of labour", they didn't do anything. For example, when the public scheme workers are instructed to carry out forestry work but pick mushrooms instead, the managers proclaim with annoyance that their "workers keep running away" and they do not take responsibility for their work. Sometimes they argue that the number of public workers is decreasing because of recent economic prosperity and the rise of available workplaces, while on other occasions they argue that it is due to the success of the development activity as, after a couple of years, the programme proved to be effective and the unemployed were able to get "normal" jobs. At the same time, neither of the above narratives nor the disciplinary methods seem to be able to resolve the contradictions reassuringly.

The managers must find common ground and identify shared interests with the public scheme workers, either by creating shared narratives or they have to take on a role that ensures their credibility. It is very difficult, mainly because they have only a few ways of rewarding "good workers"; for example, they do not have discretion to give a pay rise. Further than the imperative to justify their position, the limits of such a reconciliation are also very constraining because the work managers might live in the same urban spaces as the public workers, and thus their workplace conflicts can infiltrate into informal spaces in which the managers are unprotected. For instance, one manager found her car tyres punctured one morning in front of the block house in which she lived, and this was repeated three times. Although it is an extreme and rare example, it illustrates why work managers must strive to find common ground with the public workers and their class position.

One of the most common methods of establishing common ground is to take on a paternalistic, caring role, and become a boss who is strict but understanding, makes concessions to their workers and protects them when they need it. As one of the work managers said, "If you do this job, you have to be a bit of a social worker, and a psychologist too; moreover, a doctor, and sometimes a lawyer, because these people turn to me with all kinds of problems. So I have already been in all of these roles here." In other cases, the work managers protect their workers from the inhabitants' denunciations, saying "unfortunately, inhabitants got used to public workers doing everything for them, and they forgot that they were also responsible for their neighbourhood."

There is another strategy that can create a common ground between the work site managers and the workers. Work managers have to present the jobs as tasks, the accomplishment of which is in their shared interest. Usually they create teams dedicated to specific tasks and the teams have to take responsibility for their work so that the achievement appears as being in their shared interest. By this, work managers establish the categories of deserving and undeserving workers and try to reward the former while somehow pretending that the programme could actually offer any opportunities of mobility. "Good workers" are then sent on courses, and are given more serious tasks demanding more responsibility. Many public workers confirmed that the worst position is when one does not have any specific tasks, like Ilona, a Roma ex-public worker in her 30's, who said "you are just dragged around, you have to work with different people and in different places every day". This gives a feeling of being replaceable and disposable, and many argued that it is the most vulnerable situation, and one that lacks any protection. The most protected position is when someone is not employed by the *Városgondnokság*, but works at a civic organisation, although this requires outstandingly strong informal

ties to the organisation, which only a few have. Those without such connections have to seek protection at the Városgondnokság by, for example, being a “good worker”. Ilona considers it to be a turning point in her public worker career when she was identified as a “good worker” by a work manager and was sent on a gardening course, at the conclusion of which she then worked in the gardening team:

“It was better to work there— it is so different when you know the people, there is a little community. It is easier than working in a big group, where nobody knows the others, they are always fighting with each other: “why don’t you do this?” “Why don’t you do that?” Many ran home and the ones who stayed did their job instead. I didn’t like it: why are you going home? Why can’t I do it? It was not good. I was a chicken. I always stayed at the post where I was sent. I was afraid of being caught, that I would be fired and I would only get social benefit, and it’s nothing! Everything became better when I was transferred to the gardeners. It was so different!”

Ilona’s case is a typical example of when one’s “work ethos”, bound to permanent wage labour, overrides the ethnic distinctions. If someone behaves like a permanent wage worker, they can make the ethnic boundaries more flexible. Ilona’s strategy for applying the “appropriate work ethics” is a typical strategy among public scheme workers, because it provides protection for Roma workers against ethnic discrimination.

However, as Ilona’s interview shows, many public workers use a different strategy. They refuse to pretend that they work at a “normal workplace” and receive a normal salary. They strive to spend as little time and energy as possible on public work. Those who follow this strategy are more likely to be confronted with the disciplinary mechanisms of the programme, resulting in more humiliating experiences and generating more conflicts, even with their own colleagues. Consequently, only a few employ this strategy explicitly, and instead many turn to the method that Jan Grill called “mock-labour”, that is, pretending to work (Grill 2018: 105–119). It is much more difficult to control this strategy than open resistance, so work managers pick team leaders from the public workers to oversee the work process. By doing so, they delegate the stressful task of resolving the above mentioned contradiction to the workers themselves.

Team leaders are in a buffer zone, which seem to be the most vulnerable and risky position. Although they get a somewhat higher salary, they have to balance diffuse interests. It is not a simple task, especially if the team leader lives in the same neighbourhood as most public workers, as was the situation in Ilona’s case. Identified as a “good worker”, she was assigned to be a team leader. The appointment was not only the result of the quality of her work, but of “her mentality”: as she said, “I understand their (the workers’) language, but I can stand up for myself and they couldn’t eat me.” In this context the phrase „mentality” refers to her “Gypsy-ness,” meaning that she can handle other “Gypsies” who live under precarious living conditions. “On the front line”, she had to balance the workers’ strategy, driven by their precarious situation, and the work managers’ expectation of maintaining the norm of permanent wage labour. In many cases, this balancing process appeared as a negotiation between “Gypsies” and “Hungarians,” since the social position is ethnicised. Consequently, to be a team leader means a significant extra burden for a public scheme worker. Ilona had to show other workers that she was one of them and not an “informer”, and, at the same time, she had to earn her own authority as a boss. She tried to find shared interests with workers, mediate their needs to the management, and protect them from disciplinary methods in exchange for their cooperation. For example, having done their job, the

workers were allowed to rest, and she always came up with a sensible explanation to the site manager. In this way she aimed to forge a “community” from her team, which shared common interests.

Obviously it is an easier task to forge a community and find common interests when the workers lack any other possibilities of getting a permanent job, and when the Public Work Scheme is the only opportunity for work. After the crisis, this was no longer the case. Two years later, Ilona, like many others, left the Városgondnokság because she found a job at a nearby factory. Ilona’s work trajectory shows how economic cycles direct the workers from one work-type to another. After the crisis, in recent years, a significant number of former public workers have acquired jobs in the primary labour market. Changing economic conditions have not only modified public workers’ strategies, but have also changed the roles and the function of the programme.

The Public Work Scheme has become a viable option for those who cannot or do not want to meet the expectations of the primary labour market, which is not a simple task in this local context. Experts identified some typical reasons for “being trapped” in the Public Work Scheme, which fit Kallóhány’s case, too. The main factors raising the probability of staying in the programme are the employees’ age (over 50), long-term illness, low level of education, individual life circumstances (e.g. childcare duties, caring for the elderly or sick relatives), In addition, the experts mention “lacking competencies and skills” to reintegrate into the primary labour market, which usually comes along with how the long term unemployed adapt to their precarious situation. However, experts underline that, in many cases, staying in the programme seems to be the most rational choice for the unemployed (Koltai et al 2019). In Kallóhány, such decisions are closely linked to the protection of the nuclear family. Recently, many public workers, mainly women, chose public work to protect their nuclear family, since, as one of the work managers put it: “it is a family friendly workplace”, perhaps the only one in the city and the whole region. After the crisis, the Public Work Scheme has become one of the main tools for reconciling the norm of permanent wage labour and that of the nuclear family. Although this function of the programme was important during the crisis too, it has recently become one of the main reasons for staying in the programme.

THE PUBLIC WORK SCHEME AND THE PROTECTION OF THE NUCLEAR FAMILY

The public workers’ labour trajectories show that the programme has become one of the pit-stops in their circulation between different work-types. As we discussed above, while the direction of this circulation depends on economic cycles (crisis or prosperity), it is also driven by personal life cycles, which are often connected to the rhythm of the life of the nuclear family, especially child-rearing. In Ilona’s case, how economic cycles influenced the direction of circulation could be traced, but the latter aspect played an equally important role. Now that her children are teenagers capable of taking care of themselves, Ilona is considering working abroad. Earlier, the Public Work Scheme offered a good solution for her, as she had more time to raise her children than she had as a factory worker. Ilona’s case is a typical example of how circulation can be interpreted as an attempt to reconcile the tension between the expectations of permanent wage labour and maintaining a nuclear family.

Kathleen Millar, writing about the inhabitants of the Rio de Janeiro favela, explains that the normative hegemony of permanent wage labour generates a desire in the workers for autonomy. In our context, working conditions at the available wage labour are often so exploitative that, despite its normative hegemony, it also creates a desire for autonomy (Millar 2018: 3-23). Circulation between labour forms- including the stopover at the Public Work Scheme- can be a half-solution towards realising this autonomy. In many cases, public work is perceived as a protected and legitimate “resting place” for the inhabitants within storming structural constraints. Other researchers also drew attention to this phenomenon, and argued that public work is an “inclusive workplace” that does a better job of tolerating workers’ difficulties, being more informal, flexible and offering easier jobs than the primary labour market (Kolati et al 2019). This is particularly true after the crisis, due to the increasing number of workplaces. Public workers’ bargaining power has significantly improved since end of the crisis, as it is not easy to fill public worker positions. These statements are true in this case as well: if the managers identify someone as a “good worker” or they are on good informal terms with their superiors at an NGO, for example, they have a good chance of negotiating more flexible hours, ones that are more appropriate for the demands of a nuclear family. For reasons outlined above, the work managers have become more lenient since the end of the crisis, so public scheme workers can negotiate better condition for themselves, which can rarely happen in the primary labour market. The interpretation of public work as an “inclusive workplace” implicitly assumes that most workplaces in the primary labour market completely ignore the needs of the workers and even work against them. My interlocutors not only complained that they cannot leave their workplace if their child is sick, but also stated that they risk their own health at their workplace. Under these circumstances in the primary labour market, the Public Work Scheme still offers a “resting place”.

Obviously, as many experts underline, public work is an option mainly for those who struggle with a physical or mental illness, which is not tolerated in the primary labour market (Koltai et all 2019). However, most typically public work provides a “resting place” for single mothers with small children or for those whose husbands work abroad or in a factory operating three shifts. They believe that they cannot take care of their children appropriately if they have a “normal” job. As we have seen, work migration and the shift times of the jobs available nearby poses serious challenges to child rearing, even for a household with two earners, and therefore structural constraints threaten the organisation of the life of the nuclear family. As child rearing is considered the duty of a woman, they are the ones who are especially expected to reconcile the expectations of permanent wage labour with the demands of the nuclear family. Public work offers a solution to their balancing efforts. It is therefore not a coincidence that women are overrepresented amongst those who are “stuck” in the Public Work Scheme. Importantly, although this is not a local phenomenon, as the research study by Anikó Gregor and Eszter Kováts reveals, one of the greatest challenges that Hungarian women face continues to be the double burden of formal work and informal care (Gergor–Kováts 2018). According to Csányi, Gagyí and Kerékgyártó, this is a structural continuity which is mainly typical of semi-peripheral countries where wage income either fails to guarantee the family’s subsistence or can only provide it at the expense of the family itself (Csányi-Gagyí-Kerékgyártó 2018:5-31). All these do not mean that men do not have to balance between the norms of permanent wage labour and those of the nuclear family, only that another semi-peripheral phenomenon plays an important role: circular migration to the western countries. In this local context, it is

primarily men who work abroad. Two irreconcilable views dominate the discourse among inhabitants on working abroad: “you do that only for your family, for your children!” and “it is only worthwhile if you don’t have a family, if you don’t miss anyone, it is not for men with a family!” These irreconcilable views show how difficult it is to reconcile the norms of permanent wage labour and those of the nuclear family.

The Public Work Scheme seems to be a “semi-solution” in the reconciliation process, mostly for mothers with small children, as it allows them more time for child rearing duties while their husband works abroad or in a nearby factory. The constraints to reconciling these expectations are stronger when the family lives in the town’s poorer neighbourhood, which is considered a “dangerous” place, where neglected children and teenagers can more easily get into trouble, for instance, becoming drug users or criminals. These problems are especially threatening for single parents (mainly single mothers). In the case of single parents, the reconciliation seems to be a difficult choice between the family’s earnings and the expectation of caring for the child/children: if a mother chooses the Public Work Scheme, although she will have more time to take care of her child/children, she will not earn enough money to support the family. At the same time, if she goes to work in a factory then they will earn more, but she might not be able to protect the child/ren from such dangers.

To sum up, the function and relevance of the Public Work Scheme in the local context can be better understood by examining the relationship between work and family, and by studying how they relate to other types of work available locally to those living in precarity. People’s circulation between different work types is driven by their aspiration to live a “normal life”, and in order to achieve this they have to reconcile the norms of permanent wage labour and those of the nuclear family.

CONCLUSION

This paper studied how the everyday practices of a workfare policy (the Public Works Scheme) are influenced by the concept of “normal life” and “normal labour” among the inhabitants of the small former industrial Hungarian town of Kallóbánya, where I conducted my ethnographic fieldwork. I mainly concentrated on inhabitants who live under precarious conditions. We have seen that the concept of “normal” life is strictly related to permanent wage labour, even though these kinds of workplaces are hardly available locally or cannot provide enough income for people’s livelihood. Consequently, we can observe strong tension between the norms and the likelihood of realising them. I interpreted the Public Works Scheme as a workfare policy in the context of this contradiction, for it aims to sustain the norm of permanent wage labour at times, such as the economic crisis, when achieving this norm is very difficult.

I presented how this tension directs the everyday practices of the Public Works Scheme. Public scheme workers are expected to pretend that they are taking part in permanent wage labour in the primary labour market, although neither the rate of payment nor the structure of production measure up to the standards of permanent wage labour. The local authorities expect public workers to behave like “normal” employees who earn enough to cover their living costs, while public workers have to arrange their schedule and their workforce so that they can earn money outside of the programme, and thus they are being continuously encouraged to evade the system. So while most public workers adapt to the precarious nature of public work, the work

managers essentially ask them to behave as if they were working with a permanent status that ensures their livelihood.

In my paper, we can observe how PWS, as a typical workfare social policy, controls and manages the unemployed population through local power at a time of crisis. Primarily during the economic crisis, the Public Works Scheme mirrored the stratification of local class relationships which it stabilised with its own specific hierarchy. However, all of this reinforced the status quo of the hierarchy of ethnic distinctions, as ethnic and class positions often overlap. In the programme, low status street cleaning work was primarily carried out by the unskilled Roma, while only a few Roma workers made it to office jobs and higher-status activities which were associated with “Hungarians”. Ethnicising the hierarchy of statuses, however, precisely reflects local social relations.

However, in Kallóháza, concepts of “normal life” strongly relate not only to permanent wage labour, but also to the institution of the nuclear family. The work available rarely provides enough income for a family’s livelihood, or is so exploitative that it threatens the security of the nuclear family. Consequently, the expectation of permanent wage labour and the nuclear family will have a contradictory relationship, and inhabitants need to make considerable efforts to meet all the expectations. As a consequence of this expectation of “reconciliation”, precarity results in the permanent circulation of workers between different work-types: for example their movement between the public employment programme and working abroad, or between working abroad and working in a nearby factory, and so forth. The public employment programme therefore plays an important role in the reconciliation. It can be interpreted as one of the pit-stops in this circulation, the direction of which on the one hand depends on economic cycles (crisis or prosperity), but on the other hand is driven by personal life cycles, which in many cases relate to the rhythm of nuclear family life, particularly child-rearing.

After the crisis, although the significance and function of the Public Works Scheme has changed, it has nonetheless remained an important basic reference point in the concepts of “normal life” and labour among Kallóháza’s inhabitants. The programme has become one of the main tools for reconciling the norms of permanent wage labour and the nuclear family. Although the unemployment rate has decreased significantly, the available workplaces have remained as exploitative as they were during the crisis. Under these labour market conditions, the programme can be considered a “semi-solution” in the reconciliation process, mostly for single mothers with small children, or for women whose husbands work abroad or in factory shift-work. In many cases, they choose the Public Works Scheme so that “normal life”- which is based on the nuclear family and income from permanent wage labour- can be at least approachable, even if not entirely feasible. In my paper I have attempted to show the strong tension between the “norms” and “structural reality” in my field. Furthermore, I presented how this tension influences the implementation of a workfare policy in the local context, which not only shapes class-based ethnic relationships and the gender-division of labour within the nuclear family, but also defines the life strategy of those who live in a precarious situation.

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