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“WHO IS FOR US NOW, OR WHO WE
ARE FOR?”

HUNGARIAN AUTOMOTIVE
WORKERS ON THEIR ROLE IN
THE GLOBAL VALUE CHAIN

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“WHO IS FOR US NOW, OR WHO WE ARE FOR?” HUNGARIAN AUTOMOTIVE WORKERS ON THEIR ROLE IN THE GLOBAL VALUE CHAIN

The study examines the perceptions of Hungarian automotive industry workers regarding their own roles within the global value chain. It is based on extensive in-depth interviews conducted with 20 employees of a sectoral plant. In the discussion, I aim to shed light on the experiential aspects of the German automotive industry's expansion into Central and Eastern Europe and the emerging East-West division of labor from the perspective of the interviewed workers. During the examined period, work overload and one-sided internal communication intensified employees' sense of uncertainty and job insecurity. At the same time, however, disillusionment with the presence of the multinational company also emerged. In light of the worsening working conditions, the majority of workers began to question the assumed positive impacts of the automotive investments, as exemplified by the quote in the title, and increasingly viewed their presence as a case of regional exploitation. In the concluding section, I frame my findings within the contextual findings of political economy and regional studies, complementing them with insights from labor sociology and anthropological research on precarious employment, with particular emphasis on the experiential aspects of the low-road work model.

Keywords: labor, perceptions of work, uneven development, regional economies, low road work model, semi-skilled labor, precarity

I. Introduction

The aim of this anthropological study is to provide insight into how workers at a Hungarian automotive manufacturing plant evaluate their role within the global value chain (GVC) and the European economy. The eastward expansion of Western European multinational corporations has resulted in a distinctive division of labor within the regional economic system's production chains. In the Hungarian automotive industry, beyond regional wage differentials, this division of labor has led to a preference for standardized, technology-based semi-skilled labor and the application of the low road work model¹ by employers.

The relocation of production by German automotive companies to Eastern Europe occurred in two phases: after 1989, the emerging post-socialist markets and cheap labor primarily attracted industry investments, with the intensification of this relocation accelerating after 2001 (Jacobs 2017: 17-33). After the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the regime change, Hungary and Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) reintegrated into the European and global economic system. To provide context for my qualitative research, I primarily rely on literature related to

¹ Low road work model favours employee efficiency and compliance, the high road model emphasizes employee engagement and development. Following Pyke and Sengenberger (1992), Jürgens and Krzywdzinski (2008, 2009a-b) used the concept to describe employment models of the Central-Eastern European automotive industrial subsidiaries, defining a limited high road model. (Which was mainly attributed to the shortage of labor in the centre.) According to Geröcs, Pinkasz (2019a-b) and Meszmann (2021), automotive investments continued to deploy standardized operations requiring semi-skilled labor for the most part, and the characteristics of the low road model came to the front. (See later discussion in the paper.)

political economy and world-systems theory. I focus on the westward expansion of Western European multinational corporations and its effects, particularly on the historical relocation of the automotive industry to the CEE countries of the semi-periphery. Following Gerőcs (2021), I frame the process as the German neomercantilist model's eastward expansion, which resulted in the post-Fordist flexibilization of labor relations in Hungary and the neomercantilist transformation of the Hungarian labor market.

The crisis of Fordism in the 1970s paved the way for the (globalizing) post-Fordist transformation, during which, through efforts to make capital more flexible, labor supply is secured through deregulatory and flexibilizing state measures. These labor “reforms” are introduced by peripheral and semi-peripheral states to attract operations that are to be relocated from the center, aimed at attracting FDI, which leads to the decentralization of labor market processes and the development of “disembedded” labor relations (Gerőcs 2021: 83). In the case of CEE, labor flexibilization efforts can also be interpreted as the peripheral adoption of the German neomercantilist model, as the transformation of the economy and related institutions takes place along the lines of foreign trade openness, export, and foreign exchange production pressures. However, a crucial aspect of the region, including Hungary, is that exports are dominated by foreign companies. In this way, labor market flexibilization becomes a compulsion arising from economic dependency: after the attraction of FDI, the host states must continuously secure labor supply for the industrial plants established, which is clearly reflected in the legal transformation of Hungarian labor relations, coinciding with the intensified eastern expansion of the German automotive industry after 2008.

As part of this process, labor relations undergo synchronous transformations in both the center and the periphery, closely interconnected with each other. Although cross-border connections were strengthened following the EU accession in 2004, which allowed for the free movement of labor, we cannot yet speak of a unified EU labor market (Ibid.: 81-82). The forming East-West division of labor was shaped and reproduced by these processes: high- and low-value-added production processes induce the application of the high and low-road work models (Pyke – Sengenberger 1992; Jürgens – Krzywdzinski 2008). However, these models, as they arise within the common interconnectedness of production chains, presuppose and complement each other (Gerőcs – Pinkasz 2019a-b). As a result, their role within the production chain, as the two poles of work organization models, becomes entrenched in relation to each other, and as a consequence, regional inequalities are reproduced (Gerőcs – Meszmann – Pinkasz 2021).

In case of Hungary, the intensifying automotive industry investments after 2008 and the transformation of labor relations and the legal-institutional framework of the labor market strongly reflect these semi-peripheral tendencies. The adaptation of the neomercantilist model (Gerőcs 2021) resulted in labor changes that began with the 2010 amendment to the strike law (Gerőcs – Meszmann – Pinkasz 2021), which served to limit the actions of trade unions, including through the obligation to guarantee “minimum sufficient services”. This required consultations with employers and led to interpretative legal problems: Laki et al. (2013) viewed the amendment as a form of intimidation, preventing collective action by inducing trade unions to fear undefined legal consequences. The neomercantilist mindset, supplemented by the post-Fordist flexible labor regime, led to the introduction of the new Labor Code in 2012. One of the features of the new Labor Code, reinforcing the copying of the neomercantilist model, was the extension of the scope of works councils:² this became particularly significant in the absence

² “*Üzemi tanács*” is an institution that performs a complementary role in representing employee interests. Through the exercise of participatory rights, it consults on the employer's decisions. Its functions (serving as a forum for

of collective bargaining and works council representation, as in such cases the works councils could influence not only wages but also other aspects of employment relationships (Ibid.: 179). The characteristic result of workplace-level (often informal) negotiations following the establishment of global production chains is part of the post-Fordist trends that have taken root, although post-socialist labor relations in Hungary were traditionally determined by the activities of workplace-level trade unions and the local primacy of collective bargaining after the regime change (Tóth 2020).

The changes brought about by the new Labor Code have, however, resulted in a rather uneven balance of power in the absence of collective agreements. This is further reinforced by the expansion of the institution of worktime accounts through the new code: the extension of the working time account³ from 3–4 months to 12 months allows the employer to extend it up to 4 months without consultation with the works council after 2012. The extended worktime account serves the flexibility of employment and payroll accounting in the neomercantilist model, accommodating business cycles and market fluctuations. This flexibility was further increased by the 2018 amendment, which allowed for the extension of the working time account to 36 months by collective agreement. The 104/2020 government decree allowed for the extension of the account to 24 months without signing or modifying a collective agreement.⁴ Since this system calculates overtime payments on a quasi-daily basis, in contrast to a defined time frame, making wage payments distinctly flexible from the employer's perspective, but distinctly opaque from the employee's perspective (Geröcs 2021: 179–180; Gagyí – Geröcs 2019). The rise of precarious employment is also a crucial element in the post-Fordist trend of labor market flexibilization. The legal framework for temporary employment agencies was first established in 2001 and was subsequently revised in 2012, largely to cater to employer demands. The legal status of those engaged in temporary employment is marked by the partial, often absent, preventive measures and guarantees against abuses, which makes the formal equality emphasized in directives between temporary and “permanent” employees somewhat ambivalent. Nonetheless, the situation of agency workers was positively influenced by ownership restrictions, which stipulate that the leasing agency and the using company cannot be under the same ownership (Gyulavári – Kártyás 2012; Meszmann 2016).

The largest portion of the post-2010 industrialization period took place through the establishment of automotive production plants, whose labor force supply was legally ensured by the Hungarian government via labor market flexibilization, not to mention the generous

employer-employee consultation), operational conditions (such as employee numbers, membership levels, etc.), and regulations are more stringently legislated, in contrast to the relative freedom enjoyed by trade unions within fundamental legal frameworks.

³ “Allocated cumulative working time” or “working time bank”: “Working under allocated cumulative working time means that the employee should accrue the same amount of working hours as a standard work week, but across an extended period. If the employee has accrued more hours worked than the standard working time by the end of the established period, that will be counted as overtime. If the working time of an employee is only distributed unevenly (so that sometimes the person works for more than 12 hours) but at the end of the established period the employee has not accrued more working hours than the standard working time, then no overtime is counted.” (see https://static.eurofound.europa.eu/covid19db/cases/HU-2012-27_2741.html for more legal details)

⁴ “Under the government decree 104/2020 which contains details on decree 47/2020 laying out the main economic COVID-19 defence measures, employers can raise the period of allocated cumulative working time (working time banking) to 24 months during the period of the COVID emergency. The measure was designed to make working arrangements more flexible for the employer to help protect jobs in companies where business has shut down or work reduced due to the pandemic.” (see https://static.eurofound.europa.eu/covid19db/cases/HU-2020-17_722.html for more legal details)

subsidies provided to multinational companies (Czirfusz et al. 2019: 156-157). The cheap and legally tractable labor and attractive conditions increased the intensity of automotive industry expansion, while workers' opportunities for interest representation weakened, and the previously common imbalance in employment relations once again tilted the balance in favor of employers.

II. The Scope of Research and Methods

The aim of research was to examine the evaluations of Hungarian automotive industry workers regarding their work and social position, with particular attention to their perceptions of foreign employment and East-West wage disparities of Europe. I sought to focus on the notions that emerged through their assessments of recent and contemporary developments in work and livelihood, thus, I applied an actor-centred approach, proposed by Terpe (2018). The approach seeks to uncover the interrelations of spheres of life, according to their experiential quality and relation to morality, to provide a tool to analyse the every-day reproduction of social and moral orders – on the actor's level.⁵ One of my initial assumptions was the relative novelty of the factory as a socio-economic phenomenon in the region, both in terms of the scale of investment and the working conditions (work environment and wages). Evaluating the present inherently involves a comparison with the past, which made the history of workers' experiences at their previous jobs and workplaces, as well as the broader exploration of their life stories, highly relevant. For this reason, I opted for a combination of open-ended and narrative biographical interview methods. Between 2019 and 2020, I conducted 20 in-depth interviews with workers of a sectoral plant.

Following Schweizer (1998), I regard “*empathic understanding*”, marked by hermeneutics as the method of the human sciences, as “*a procedure for finding out what other people think and feel and how their subjective (and to an extent, shared) beliefs structure meaningful action*” (61). I sought to allow spontaneity during discussions with workers on current issues. Especially in the early stages of the research, workers often guided the direction of the conversations, even though I worked with a quasi-identical set of questions for all participants. Allowing space for topics that my participants deemed most relevant to “emerge” was justified by the chosen method, as the actor-oriented approach seeks to examine individuals and their environment in their particularity, emphasizing their individual priorities and significances. As I will show in section IV., the East-West European division of labor indeed appeared to be a thought-provoking concept for workers, mediated through various views and opinions, strongly shaped by their actual, every-day experiences of being part of it.

III. Field

The manufacturing complex in question is a German automotive production facility that has been manufacturing mid-range passenger cars since 2012. The facility consists of four main production departments. The press shop is where sheet steel is pressed, cut, and measured. The

⁵ The article focuses on workers' evaluation of their role in the European political-economic system, and it is based on the findings of a doctoral research, which discusses value-orientations and moral commitments of workers extensively. (see Vangel 2025)

next department on the assembly line is the body shop, where car bodies are assembled. These bodies are then transported to the highly automated paint shop before reaching the final assembly department, where the remaining parts are attached to the car bodies.

The conditions and speed of task completion for line workers may vary greatly on different stages of different sections in different departments, despite the standardized assembly-line structure of the plant, though a general view prevailed among workers of tasks becoming harder and time for their completion getting shorter as the manufactured car proceeds until the end of the line. I do not have precise information regarding the proportion of semi-skilled workers within the physical labor force, however, it can be stated that in a work organization system based on standardized processes, the vast majority of employees fall into this category. Machine operators, maintenance workers, and other physical workers who can be classified as “skilled labor” are employed in significantly smaller numbers and receive higher pay. Workers in the former category typically work in three 8-hour shifts, while those in the latter category work in four 12-hour shifts (and then rest for 4 days). For those on the three-shift schedule, compensating for work breaks is crucial, which is achieved by scheduling an extra night shift every third Sunday. The direction of shift rotation was reversed at the union’s initiative because starting the morning shift immediately after a week of night shifts made it difficult for workers to recover. Three-shift workers are given 40 minutes of break time per day, including a 25-minute lunch break, with the remaining 15 minutes generally divided between restroom use and one or two shorter breaks (for smoking, eating, or coffee). During these breaks, the team leader temporarily takes over the worker’s position on the line, so shift changes need to be planned in advance depending on the group size to ensure everyone gets their turn on time. To avoid monotony and excessive unilateral physical strain, workers rotate among different production line stations.

According to the company’s annual report, the complex employed an average of 4,772 people throughout the year 2019. Of these, 3,607 were physical workers, showing an increase in the assembly line workforce compared to 3,291 in 2018. Based on the EUR 60,756,696 paid wages, using the annual average exchange rate, this amounts to HUF 456,195 per worker per month, which includes annual bonuses (vacation and Christmas/end-of-year bonuses). The figure from the 2017 report was HUF 353,298. A significant wage increase took place just before the data collection period, with active involvement from trade unions. Wage agreements (except the most recent one) continued to be successful: in 2022, for the first time outside Germany, the company introduced a profit-sharing bonus, and in 2023, the amount per employee reached 1 million HUF gross. The company also provides each employee with an “employee card”, which can be used to access various services (sports facilities, baths, etc.) for free or at a discount. In addition, employees can apply for a “test drive”, during which they are not testing the manufactured vehicles in the strict sense but borrow a car for a short period (for a weekend trip or up to a week). The test drives are decided by lottery, and only a few employees are selected compared to the large workforce.

Three wage categories have been defined for the physical workforce: unskilled assembly workers start in the first category and can advance to the second if their performance (and attendance) meets the standards. The third category is reserved for skilled workers or those in positions requiring qualifications, which results in the wage differences between the two groups.⁶ Due to

⁶ I do not have official data on the difference: two of my informants working in skilled labor positions within the third wage category estimated the difference between the second and third categories to be approximately HUF 80,000.

the nature of the working time account-system, it is fundamentally difficult to estimate the exact wage levels. As I learned from the union representatives, workers frequently consult them about difficulties in interpreting their payslips, and the lack of transparency in wages is reflected in errors made by both workers and payroll clerks during its interpretation and preparation.

Finally, I would like to address certain characteristics of the data collection period that had a significant impact on the themes and tones of the interviews conducted. The year 2018 was marked by high employee turnover and the extensive use of temporary labor in response to increased demand, which, according to employees, resulted in confusing conditions in production: difficulties in training, frequent overtime, and a decline in worker appreciation were noted. (Meszmann 2019: 6-15) Following successful year-end wage negotiations, early 2019 saw the announcement of the postponement of the second plant unit. Concurrently, according to consistent reports from employees, the company implemented a hiring freeze and largely reduced the number of temporary agency workers. According to annual reports, the number of cars produced remained around 190,000 between 2017 and 2019: in 2017, the cost of temporary labor increased to EUR 6,730,640 from the previous year, then significantly decreased to EUR 4,026,247, and in 2019, it dropped to approximately one-quarter of the previous year's amount, EUR 1,150,475. The average number of physical workers was 3,291/3,607/3,156 between 2018 and 2020, marking a more than 300-person increase during 2019, which is likely partly due to the absorption of some temporarily employed agency workers, suggesting a general growth in ancillary tasks requiring permanent positions. However, these figures are somewhat reinterpreted by the consistent experiences of the informants, who reported that cost-cutting considerations became a priority in 2019 (the hiring freeze itself was attributed to this): one of the main consequences for the line workers was the merging of positions and job roles, which increased individual workloads. Despite the emphasis on rationalization and simplification efforts, workers primarily experienced an intensification of work. Since the annual average number of workers cannot serve as a stable starting point for conclusions about workforce utilization adjusted to production cycles, I would only note at this point that the decrease in temporary labor costs and the increasing number of core workforce employees indicate a preference for workforce regulation during this period. In light of the decrease in market demand and cost-cutting measures (which otherwise became company-wide directives), this strategy would have been justified following the overuse of temporary labor. The plant maintained the average production volume of the previous two years, while costs were redistributed, and in the period burdened with austerity measures, the role of permanent workforce became prominent in work organization.

V. Workers' Views on the East-West Division of Labor

The following section focuses on workers' evaluation of their role within the global production chain and the broader European political-economic system, which, apart from limited and partial experiences of working abroad, were largely based on a comparative evaluation with an imagined, presumed "West". Furthermore, the tones of the evaluations differed significantly between the two separate relational systems. Explanations concerning the evident dominance of monetary-market logic were much more frequent, with a central element being the perception of "collective regional" secondary status and the recurrent loss of "human" values in favor of power-economic interests. Accounts commonly highlighted the promises of something better and the disillusionment arising from the worsening conditions. This disillusionment was

shaped not only by the experiences of factory work but also by the general experiences of employment in Hungary, structuring the reactions to the changed situation. Although working for multinational corporations continued to be seen as the best available option, an increasing element in the explanations was the emphasis on the responsibility of Hungarian managers, implicating a comparison with the Hungarian economic and political elite. German companies and the once-present German managers frequently appeared as positive counterexamples to Hungarian ones. However, over time, continuous disillusionment led to a form of suspicion and skepticism towards them, which, in some cases, resulted in distinctly negative connotations for a few informants who had, if one may say so, already passed through the phase of disillusionment. Below, I will illustrate the specific evaluative characteristics of employment in Hungary, particularly from the perspective of a semi-peripheral position, with selected excerpts.

M.G.: “I feel that what I have is enough – I have an apartment, [corrects] I have a house. Now I really just need to focus on maintaining this standard of living and helping my child. But I don’t believe that going abroad would be a solution. [...] Those who have roots, who value them, they won’t leave. My family is very important to me, my friends are important, and I will do this job for this amount of money. I’m not going to travel 1,000 km to the factory in Germany to do the same job there. [...] That’s how it is, Germany has a strong economy. Germany can afford to move, say, an [automotive] factory to Hungary, and Hungary is happy because there are jobs for the people. So, it’s likely that the economic and legal conditions need to be created to make it attractive for a multinational. But it’s also good for us because we have places to work. I haven’t been unemployed much, but I have been, and I wouldn’t wish that on anyone, when a person is just aimlessly drifting through life. I’ve always had work, and it’s always been important to me to have a job. I think this can be viewed from multiple perspectives – whether it’s good for us or not, because there has been this [public discourse], about us being an “assembly country”. But anyone who knows history understands why this is the case. I don’t have a big problem with a multinational coming here and working for them, as long as I receive my salary every month. I also have other experiences, where I worked for two months without getting paid, and that was with a Hungarian entrepreneur who completely disregarded the laws. Now, a multinational comes here, and they ensure everything that the law requires. I don’t have much of a problem with that.

V.M.: And in this region or around here, you won’t find a much better job. [I was reflecting on his previously expressed opinion]

M.G.: Not currently. Especially if the German managers had stayed.”

In response to one of my questions regarding foreign employment (which was not quoted), M.G. (M/45)⁷ explicitly demonstrated the absolute primacy of commitment to his family. My subsequent questions shifted the focus to the financial benefits of foreign employment, i.e., the potential gains: while M.G. acknowledged the “benefits” in financial and work-intensity terms (which he perceived as valuable in its own relational context), he immediately made it clear that social connections embedded in family and friend networks, had a far more significant impact on his decisions than financial considerations or additional comfort. The statement “*I will do this job for this amount of money*” reflects that the job and the financial aspects served the family: they acted as a means for further social embedding (such as mortgage and settlement).

According to M.G., the concept of job creation through multinational companies is thus seen as legitimate (“*Hungary is happy because people have jobs*”): in the final part of his explanation,

⁷ I provide the age of all informants as per 2019.

elements of the values associated with work that stem from his individual life path become clarified, serving as a form of justification. Regarding the primacy of social relations established and maintained through embedding, M.G.'s views align with those of all the informants on foreign (primarily long-term) employment, and on employment under relatively worse conditions but still better than those in the embedded context. The elements of M.G.'s perspective related to his life path are rooted in the unemployment experienced in the years following the regime change: M.G. became half-orphan in the year of the regime change and, lacking a father, learned the profession of a lathe operator by following an older friend, even though he never actually worked in that field. Due to the factory closures at that time, he could not find employment in this technology- and location-bound profession, and thus worked for small businesses until 1995. During this period, he had only negative experiences with Hungarian employers in terms of wages, job security, and adherence to laws. This individual aspect of M.G.'s opinion was also observed in a different account from another informant, D.U. (F/56): she humorously remarked, when recalling his previous workplaces, that practically since the regime change, she had changed jobs each time because the current factory or the company she was working for had shut down. During our conversation, she frequently used the phrase *“Let’s be happy that we at least have a job!”* mostly as she concluded discussions about problems related to working conditions and terms of employment. Among my informants who were adults at the time of the regime change, the other two individuals experienced relative financial and job security during that period, so in their cases, the disillusionment was mostly shaped from an external observer's perspective. Undoubtedly, M.G. and D.U. valued their current positions the most among all the informants – though negative feelings towards „Hungarian entrepreneurs” and experiences of factory closures and relocations while working for certain smaller multinational companies were also present among the younger informants. These factors were seen as crucial in assessing job security.

The final sentence of M.G.'s interview excerpt also reflects a variation of the “collective” perspective: the preference for German managers, primarily due to their humanity (*“humaneness”*), communication with employees, and their overall treatment of workers. M.G. attributed the stagnation of his in-plant mobility opportunities to the supposed nepotistic connections and self-proving drive of Hungarian managers who replaced the Germans. L.T. (M/25), a young team leader, attributed significance to both his diligence and his friendly relationship with his supervisor regarding his early career advancement. Although L.T. was not transferred to the logistics sector through his shift manager, he emphasized the importance of maintaining a good relationship in the success of his transfer, which was facilitated by the supervisor's approval. According to L.T., before taking up his job at the factory, he harbored a dislike for the *“Germans”*, primarily due to their *“tunnel vision”*, and although his aversion did not completely dissipate, it has largely subdued since then. L.T. found the Germans working around him to be reliable and helpful, and he communicated more with them than his colleagues, due to his good German language skills. (He even noted that some managers preferred to call on him for translations during basic shop-floor negotiations.) Overall, L.T. held a contradictory opinion of the Germans but exhibited the strongest commitment to both the brand and the managers. At one point in our conversation, he expressed a viewpoint similar to that of the others, reinforced by the experienced helpfulness and reliability: at that time, he was still working as a team leader in final assembly.

L.T.: “Yes, they are a bit more correct in this regard. Always. They just say that it’s their factory. Even if it’s not in Germany, but in Hungary, I think they’re the ones who still try to make things

better, not the Hungarians. Well, the Hungarians just get by. Those in a good position enjoy it, while those who are in a less favorable position just endure. And they wait for something, redemption, or I don't know."

L.T.'s account reflected the same picture as the others, albeit often in a different tone: those in higher positions are seen as passive and complacent, while those in lower positions are viewed as employees enduring a constrained situation. L.T. did not assume that the "*Germans*" were present for any reason other than to ensure the proper functioning of the plant to gain profit. He believed that the factory primarily belonged to them, which is why they strive for its success, while "*the Hungarian*" merely "*gets by*" – whether at lower or higher levels, which can signify both a lack of motivation and a limited scope of action. The issue of embedding arises again: who owns the factory, who operates it, who can influence its operation, and whose goals it serves? At the same time, there is an element of idealization of the "*Germans*", despite L.T.'s previous aversion.

V.O.: "Well, quite often, people came from Germany to train us. [...] They always laugh. They always ask how much we earn, and they always laugh. [...] German management was much better. They brought their German culture and practices with them. Of course, they are also performance- and money-oriented, so they realized that we can be pushed harder than the colleagues in Germany because, out there, they would have stopped the factory long ago if they introduced the 37-hour workweek. They need to produce 28 or 27 cars per hour. We have to produce 10 more, and we're doing the same thing for, say, a tenth of the money. So, German management was better. [...] If you did your job, they left you alone. But they don't; they don't. I don't know, I haven't seen it, but I heard that in Germany, there's much more leniency. It's not the case that you can't go out to pee or things like that. It's different there. [...] Within the [company], we are the best. Our paint shop is a model shop. They are using it as a template for all others they build. [...] Despite this, they still earn more than we do."

L.S.: "We have discussed this several times, and we don't understand why we have to be pushed so hard. [...] We took over 5,000 cars from Germany. Twice. [...] We don't understand why we have to be pushed. Are the standards better? Are our percentages better? Do we bring more profit? I don't know. But we always end up with this, and we also get feedback from management that our quality rates are better. And yet, we receive less. We want an answer to this."

The unpaid expertise and the unpaid effort are exemplified in the quotes above. Both V.O. (M/37) and L.S. (F/37) would have considered themselves worthy of internal mobility within the factory: due to starting a family and raising mortgage, they were willing to plan long-term at their workplace. The differing tone of the two examples is due to the fact that while L.S. remained a line worker on the final assembly and unsuccessfully applied for positions, V.O. started in a machine operator position at the beginning of the factory's operation. Both – like the other informants – saw the lack of appreciation in the salient wage disparities, which reinforced their sense of insignificance. The disappearance of the "*Germans*" and the impacts of increased work intensity (lack of information, overload, one-sided, partial communication) led to questioning the factory's social embedding, as independent forces began to dominate their work, affecting other areas of their daily lives as well. The disparity between the invested effort and the received wage, as well as the evaluation of the gap between Western and Eastern European wages undoubtedly had a negative impact on their long-term planning intentions,

commitment, not to mention the scarcity of mobility opportunities. Engineers and robot operators from Germany, as well as representatives of the German trade union, laughed at the wages during conversations, and another informant, K.V. (F/24), experienced something similar during a one-month company assignment in the German factory: when a German colleague found out how much the Hungarian workers were earning, he pointed to the company logo sewn onto the workwear and suggested that K.V. should tear it off and stamp on it.

Like V.O. and L.S., D.U. was also proud of her performance at the factory, even though she was relatively more satisfied with her salary – after all, as I mentioned earlier, she primarily appreciated *having* the job, and it paid better than her previous ones. Shortly before our first interview, she was also on a business trip and remarked with a laugh that local colleagues humorously told them not to “*work Ungarn*” when they saw their lightning-fast task completion. It was in this context that I asked her about wage differences.

V.M.: “And what do you think, U., about what we discussed, this “work Ungarn”? [we laugh] Plus, the wage difference – why is that?”

D.U.: It’s not... It can’t even be compared.

V.M.: Who is it up to, the employer, the employee, who is responsible for this situation being the way it is?

D.U.: I think it’s up to the employer. They know that in Hungary... You can push people here! “Come on, slaves!” In Germany, it’s a completely different story. [...] They know that Hungarians can be pushed; they will do everything. Even now, with the virus, when there were no parts coming [from suppliers] – [our factory] wasn’t shut down; first, they shut down the factories in Germany, and they brought those parts to us from there! Because we are cheaper, and on top of that, we work much [harder], not just better! Faster. But I also think we do it better, we produce quality here, seriously.”

D.U. later talked about one of her acquaintances who moved to Germany with her whole family. The husband went first, and according to D.U., he convinced the wife to follow with their two children, hoping that they will receive benefits for settling down as a family:

D.U.: “A few months later, he told them to come after him because they would get benefits, and they could live wonderfully from that – no need to work in Germany because they would live better from the benefits than from the salary here in Hungary! So... Well. [...] I also heard that when [the company] moved here, the management wanted to give people the same salary as in Germany. And the Hungarian government didn’t allow it because of the competition; it would have meant raising salaries at other companies as well, because everyone would have wanted to work at [the factory]. And they didn’t allow it... So, the problem here is that people work for such low wages.”

For D.U., proving oneself through performance was extremely important. She generally evaluated product quality through her pride in her own performance, a sentiment also present in another older female worker’s account, but not common among other informants, with the exception of L.T. (whose commitment, as described, was closely tied to higher management). The latter half of D.U.’s life was spent in constant financial uncertainty, driven by the necessity of earning a living. The wage gap and the experiential image she developed of how Hungarian

workers are perceived by multinational companies simultaneously reinforced the sense of secondary status, even though she grew accustomed to this situation over the long term. In the case of other informants, the sense of insignificance and disillusionment appeared much stronger, as exemplified by M.H. (M/42), who had nearly 20 years of overall experience as a semi-skilled automotive line worker, and who has been present since production began in the factory.

V.M.: [Is the enthusiasm for the company still present among the local population?]

M.H.: “Well, I think that’s pretty much faded. At the beginning, there was a lot of excitement; you could see how rent prices were rising, and everyone wanted to work for the [company]! Anyone you met, who you ran into: “You work at the [factory]?”, with big wide eyes, like “Wow, you’ve hit the jackpot working there!” – Bullshit, it’s not like that anymore! In fact, there are more and more bad news about it, so... Well, 12 years were enough to show its true colors, what it’s really like. [...] Listen, when I left my [previous car manufacturing job], it was like, “Wow, because it’s German!” Wow, the mindset is different there; really, it was always like, if you see it on TV, “German quality”, this way and that way – I thought maybe the quality is truly there, and they really pay attention to it, not just focusing on the quantity, but on quality... Bullshit! Bullshit. It was one of my biggest mistakes in life. These also focus only on piece rate! [...] No, that was a big mistake...”

When I asked him about his thoughts on changing to another automotive factory job, he bitterly referred to the emission scandal starting in 2015, mediating his disillusionment of the potential he formerly attributed to his job and his shifting opinion on the benefits of automotive investments:

“These are big buddies! They only appear as competitors from the outside. It’s no coincidence that there was a cartel scandal back then, and they were all involved, including [a German car brand], and everyone else, so let’s forget it! Now the [Chinese car brand] is coming, and again... Is there a difference? [...] I mean, I did it once, do I want to start over again? I already know how it will end!” [laughs]

M.H. indeed arrived at the company with high hopes due to its German ownership, but the disappointments he faced during his employment, including the circumstances surrounding his demotion from his team leader position, completely disillusioned him – not only with regards to the German employer but also regarding the potential for better conditions and employer attitudes within the industry. While he attributed his dissatisfaction partly to his own personality, he also noted, in connection with the cartel scandal, that industry players act according to jointly defined interests, naturally affecting their current and future Eastern European employees as well. M.H. felt that Hungarian workers – though not exclusively through their work in the automotive industry – are constrained into their situation by societal operational issues (e.g., educational attitudes) and political-economic power structures. He pointed out the “*servility*” of Hungarian workers, which he identified as one of the main reasons for the prevailing situation. Despite this, he did not see realistic prospects for collective organization or political action. M.H. spent most of his working life in automotive factories and, observing the industry's expansion, expressed doubts about the societal impacts of this growth compared to his experiences.

K.J.: "So, the way I see, everyone is completely burned out. [...] There are already a lot of defective [pieces], and now we need to make new models, which will be just as bad. People can't handle it, especially because they know that the reason there are so many defects is because we're being pushed so hard. It's a vicious cycle that feeds back into itself. We're exhausted, the cars are crappy, and they need to push us to further into exhaustion to meet the numbers. And these production numbers are a joke. We produce 280 cars per shift. Who the hell needs almost 900 [brand] cars a day in this world?! Especially since this isn't the only factory! And these cars cost 30 million each! Everyone stands there confused, wondering why this is necessary. [...] People can't handle this pace. And now it's starting again with the seven-night shifts, come in early, stay late, etc. This is a factor that eventually becomes a higher priority than the money. I'd say, yes, it pays well, but to this extent? Then I'd rather sweep streets if I'm that fed up. A lot of people feel the same way. So, generally, it's a burnt-out, jaded environment. The ones who are always positive and cheerful are the management. They have good pay, fixed working hours, and such. They're perfectly happy. For them, it's great."

In the case of K.J. (M/29), the concept of secondary status was also seen as being "deliberately" maintained through the "greed" of political and economic elites. K.J. perceived a ruthless dedication to corporate interests and an inability to collaborate as serving to exploit and preserve the status of physical laborers and other employees at the bottom of the social hierarchy, reflecting a utilitarian and amoral attitude. According to K.J., the political-economic elite, like the factory management, was also a secondary beneficiary, but not less actively involved in regional exploitation. The pronounced political skepticism and total loss of trust in the political-economic elite were present not only among the highly disillusioned workers but also among those who saw the main feature of secondary status as the lack of any representation. Regardless of the content of the slogans articulated by various parties and politicians, workers thought that their interests simply did not form part of the actions of political-economic decision-makers. In these accounts, the deterministic role of the hierarchies of global production chains and markets typically emerged. Material gain and the pursuit of self-interest appeared as the most defining driving forces behind social processes. This dynamic led to accumulation on the part of the elite, while lower social strata faced a struggle for subsistence and, consequently, subordination to the decisions and will of the elite.

The predominantly party-independent political skepticism and the total loss of trust in the political-economic elite were not only present among the highly disillusioned workers: the main characteristic of secondary status was precisely seen in the fact that they lacked any representation, and regardless of the content of the slogans expressed by various political parties and politicians, their interests simply did not form part of the actions of political-economic decision-makers. In these reports, the determining role of global production chains and markets usually became evident: the pursuit of material gain and self-interest emerged as the most defining driving force of social processes, which on the elite side resulted in accumulation, and on the lower social strata's side, signified the struggle for subsistence, and through this, subordination to the decisions and will of the elite.

L.G.: "It's so interesting that there's no profit in it, and nothing good either. For the country, as it's said, the profit, the gain, gets taken out. So, it won't be reinvested here. And then, what's good for the country? Well, nothing. If we look at these connections, how should I put it, this East-West friendship, no matter how I try to view it loyally, I just can't! Because if I look over there, they kick us, and if I look over here, they take advantage of us."

L.G. (M/59) was highly skeptical of the benefits of the company's presence in Hungary, experiencing yet another phase of disillusionment with the developments of recent times. As noted in the quote above, due to the mere fact of capital flight, he could not view the company's presence as a generally positive phenomenon for the country (or the population).

L.G.: "I'm 63 years old, so I've had experience from both parts, unfortunately. And I can say that it's probably fifty-fifty.⁸ Márk! You know what's striking? That there's no difference. [...] How do they⁹ win continuously? [...] "Brussels", "Soros", "migrants,"¹⁰ and... And what saddens me is that, you know, if we look at it realistically, of course, there's truth in it. But! What the hell does it influence in our lives? I mean, how does it directly affect – it depends on him!¹¹ That's what sets off my fuse, because right, left, liberals: practically everyone did the same thing, just with smaller steps or bigger steps. And now, we've reached the point where, honestly, no one even knows what the beginning of this process was. And that's the sad part, you know? I'm one of those who say, specifically, that this wasn't a regime change. It was just a gangster change.¹² Literally, the regime change was a pillage. Essentially, a political system with economic dominance was built, and from that point on, no one cared about the country anymore, everyone just stuffed their own pockets. To this day, they're still stuffing them."

During our conversation, his doubts about the European Union and the "*East-West friendship*" resurfaced: L.G. felt that the "clash of words" between the President of the European Commission and the Prime Minister, occurring in the public discourse, was nothing but a mere "*comedy*" from both sides.

L.G.: "If euro billions disappear, have disappeared, and still disappear today, through various channels – how come Brussels can't stop [this]? Hold them accountable? Why not? So, what's this comedy, that he is shouting "Ursula"¹³ and "Brussels" here, and the other shouts "Orbán" over there, while punishing the Hungarian people? What is this? Let's be serious! So, [if] someone thinks this through with common sense, they'd see that something-is-definitely-wrong-here. Something else is happening here, with different intentions, and different will. Something is happening here that's simply fooling people. [...] As for the left and the liberals [in opposition], they don't care what to say, they just want to get closer to the bowl, because that's their biggest problem. For us, the citizens, our biggest problem is that this type of political elite has been in this damn country for 33 years. That's our problem. [...] Everything was thrown in the trash, and it's all about material profit..."

The "East-West friendship", however, speaks to the moral aspect of the region's integration into the European division of labor: the actors within the economically driven system, shaped by material interests, are not committed to the well-being of the region's inhabitants – whether it concerns corporate management or the domestic economic-political elite. According to L.G.,

⁸ He means that he lived half of his life during socialism, and the other half during what came after.

⁹ I.e. the governing party.

¹⁰ L.G. is listing political campaign slogans of the last two decades.

¹¹ I.e. the prime minister.

¹² "*Rendszerváltás*" (regime change) – "*Gengszterváltás*" (gangster change): wordplay suggesting that the heads of state and the name of the positions they take might have changed, yet affected most of the Hungarian citizens' lives quite similarly.

¹³ Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission.

the workers “caught in the cross-fire” can only put hope in their own strength: as he elaborated, as long as employees are unwilling to partially forgo the material benefits offered by multinational corporations (e.g., through more substantial strikes) in order to represent their own interests, they cannot expect any change from political or economic actors. Foreign employment, in L.G.'s view, appeared to be a poor and valueless venture, demanding too much due to the forced dissolution of “roots”. On the other hand, he was the only informant who, despite the significant financial gain, did not consider leaving the country an alternative. He would have preferred active resistance instead – at either the workplace or the public level.

L.G.: “He says he's feeling down.¹⁴ I said, you know what I'd be down about? I know everyone needs money, and I know why would you feel down [about it]. I know how much everyone needs it. But kids! I said, I don't believe it, and it's impossible that you couldn't last a week. For that one week's wage, you're sucking for your entire life. Because it would only be a week's wage that you'd lose. [...] But I told him, what you dream about, working abroad,¹⁵ I said, do you think this is good for you? I said, they're still recruiting for Germany – do you think this is good for anyone? And why is it good? Is there a surplus of people? No. There isn't. So I said, what's going on? I said, the thing is, my friend, that the company will definitely meet the quotas, one way or another, at the cost of negative hours, and those they send abroad will do the work for the salary of the Eastern Bloc workers. I said, how does this story go? Do you want to go for three months, six months, a year? So, this isn't about a one-month sudden help, this is about planned work for the future, for years ahead, potential opportunities. Which, obviously, when you look at the EUR 4-5,000 salary [earned by the same company in Germany], then obviously with your 1,000 euros, you're the Jolly Joker for the company!”

Inability to act was also an inherent element of the workers' accounts, not only in relation to their position within the European economy but also through their employment uncertainty. The more disillusioned informants regarded the chances and opportunities for resistance as negligible, but they saw the need for collective intent as indispensable.

L.G.: “There's a lot of talent there, and for the most part, aside from maybe the middle-level managers, everyone here is here out of necessity. [...] So it's becoming more and more clear that there will be no opportunity – the problem is, there won't even be a chance to switch! There won't be anywhere to go.”

Another worker, A.T. (M/63), based his further opinion on a shared worker experience, which was partly rooted in price increases related to the company's presence and the relatively slow improvement of wages. At the same time, it incorporates a critical evaluation of the

¹⁴ This detail emerged later in the conversation when L.G. recounted how a former colleague had reached out to him with some labor-related questions. By the time of our second conversation in late 2023, L.G. was no longer employed at the factory. However, as a former union representative, he continued to be frequently contacted by his former colleagues from the area where he had been active, seeking his advice or opinion. The colleague in question was disheartened because the ongoing negotiations between the employer and the union regarding an increase in the working time account appeared to be at an impasse. L.G., in turn, could offer no other recommendation than engaging in active resistance – through strike action or by deliberately slowing down production by making mistakes.

¹⁵ He refers to the in-company working trips to the German factory. Workers were recruited for few months periods (or shorter, to provide backup personnel while German workers go on holidays).

development of the host-town, often emphasizing issues such as traffic overload, capacity shortages, and the lack of quality changes.

A.T.: “By the time the Germans arrived, [the town’s] main square was completely renovated. That rundown station park, which was empty, that no one knew what to do with, has been turned into a liveable children’s playground. [...] And the city leadership of [the town] votes positively on all the [infrastructural] issues concerning the [company]. [...] [The town] is beautifully developing and becoming wealthier, the mayor and her husband can’t complain either, they live well, they are getting richer. I wouldn’t harm them, because they are good people, it’s just that somehow everything is slipping away, falling apart. Who is for us now, or who we are for? With a great deal of enthusiasm, they demolished the camping area next to the swimming pool, the [town’s] camping. No one in the world could say what would be built in its place, just that it needed to be demolished. What’s being built there? The bath, the impressive glass palace building. Why? Because we know how to butter them¹⁶ up. [...] And they’re not taking the profit out of [the country]! They turn it back into charity.¹⁷ You know what the problem is? That they haven’t helped a single disabled person.¹⁸ Isn’t that a [company] project? They haven’t bought a wheelchair for anyone, they haven’t helped someone finish their house if they had a condition, and I could continue the list.”

In relation to the local elite, the remark “*I wouldn’t harm them, because they are good people*” serves as a mitigating motif, attesting to the subordination of these individuals, specifically their subordination to a developmental path defined by the factory’s requirements. (“*Because we know how to butter them up.*”) Just like the wages and work conditions, the local advantages stemming from the factory’s presence were also subject to relativization: along its benefits, it also represents a path of necessity.

The question in the above quote, which also serves as the title of the paper, precisely encapsulates the workers’ skepticism towards their roles in the European economic system: “*Who is there for us now, or who are we for?*” Assumptions generally present in the workers’ reports were: “the social order does not serve me”, “the social order feeds off me”, and the heightened loss of trust in the social entities influencing their fate isolated them from any relevant organizational discourse, especially considering their broader socio-political roles, political parties, or the European Union. This is because, in their eyes, political events and messages, both domestic and European, have degraded into mere elements of the exploitation “*comedy*”. The absence of political representation and the factory’s perceived shaping force in forming local processes and society significantly impacted their perceptions of work, degrading and devaluating their jobs.

¹⁶ I.e. the company.

¹⁷ He refers to the company’s local charity acts communicating social responsibility.

¹⁸ He refers to an earlier subject of our discussion, namely, the issue of those workers who developed a physical condition related to their overburdened job (like A.T. himself, for that matter). He continuously addressed that once people “*ruin*” themselves with work, the employer does not care about them anymore, they just “*let go*”. For A.T., the most painful part of this attitude was that he viewed those workers as people who proved their commitment and loyalty by “making sacrifices” of health: yet, the company showed no commitment in exchange.

VI. Findings

These changes reflect a new phase in the “*long downhill*” of the Hungarian working class (Czirfusz et al. 2019): through increased work intensity and reduced labor costs, the plant in question reached a peak performance during the research period – both in terms of intra-company competition, sheer capacity, and workers' experiences of labor intensification. In the “Global North”, precarity is a phenomenon deeply rooted in the workers' fear of falling out of permanent employment or facing unemployment (Kalleberg 2009). It exerts its influence through the visible experience of potential downward mobility, such as the spread of flexible employment forms, which revalues otherwise worthless work and makes its performers more manageable (Bourdieu 1998). For the interviewed workers, being part of the core workforce, the experience of “*on-the-job insecurity*” (Standing 2011; Morris 2012; Morris – Hinz 2017, 2018) was defining. This insecurity manifested as a component of a life-order: the relentless pursuit of financial resources for subsistence and the repetitive cycle of the “*hamster wheel*” were integral parts of their well-paying jobs, as well as other available means of livelihood, even if the high wages and contractual job security elevated their position compared to other forms of subsistence.

The fundamental preference for multinational companies stemmed from the significantly more uncertain conditions experienced in other forms of employment, which rendered any idealistic preferences regarding work secondary. It is clear that *precarity* is less about the *quality* of work or the job itself and more about the mere *existence* or *non-existence* of employment, which indeed makes other evaluative criteria secondary. In wage labor, the conditions of employment – its existence or non-existence – determine the extent to which one has access to wage-based income (earnings) – its existence or non-existence. Precarity lies in the *persistent sense of potential instability or termination of access*. The alienating nature of wage labor fundamentally rests on the relinquishment of control, which is compensated by the identity-forming power provided through the income which secures the future through planning, that is, by *predictability* (Wallman 1979; Schwimmer 1979). Therefore, for my informants, their situation could at most be seen as a form of “labor aristocracy” based on the external evaluation of attributed privileges, such as salary and other perceived perks and benefits (e.g., sports cards) (Ivanova 2022: 163-165; Kasmir 2014; Mollona 2014). Despite their efforts to retain their jobs, their disillusionment led them to view their current positions as less exceptional. In other words, the compensating power of wages and benefits proved insufficient to counterbalance the effects of labor intensification, and the erosion of employer-employee relations.

The labor market flexibilization efforts following the 2008 crisis and the restriction of the maneuvering space for trade unions were partially intended to secure the workforce supply for foreign automotive companies. The ideological shift towards a work-based society led to institutional and legal transformations, which created fractures in Hungarian employment (Geröcs 2021; Czirfusz et al. 2019; Meszmann 2016). Workers of the investigated plant represented the “normative” side of these fractures, characterized by permanent employment. However, most of them had also worked as temporary or contracted workers throughout their careers and had experienced the growing prevalence of these employment forms in their environment. Due to their employment intentions and economic pressures, they had to confront the reality of the low-road work model characteristic of CEE (Pyke – Sengenberger 1992), despite initially harboring broader expectations from their employer, the multinational giant (e.g. self-fulfilment through work, balanced labor relations, better working environment

and conditions, in-plant mobility, training or gaining skills via work, etc.). The decades-long process of relocation has also led to spatial fragmentation in production and regional workforces, and has perpetuated the East-West wage difference, which motivated eastern expansion in the first place (Gerőcs – Pinkasz 2019b; Jürgens – Krzywdzinski 2008, 2009a-b). The relocation of low value-added production operations fundamentally enabled the concentration and dominance of high value-added production operations in the economic center, along with the application of the associated high-road work model (Krzywdzinski 2011). In this sense, the two models assume each other and manifest as two poles of a production system, which are quasi-complementary in terms of systemic connections. This relationship makes the possibility of transitioning peripheral labor to a high-road work model ambiguous (Gerőcs – Meszmann – Pinkasz 2021). The transfer of the German work model was fundamentally selective and presupposed a different relationship and balance between local labor and management (Krzywdzinski 2011). As discussed, while the features of this “*work culture*” were initially experienced by informants, they attributed its neglect and loss to the Hungarian management, further highlighting the structural limitations of transferring work models.

Regardless of the relative value assigned by workers to their jobs in light of available opportunities, doubts regarding the concept of the “*assembly country*” are hardly unfounded. Gerőcs and Pinkasz (2019b) analysed the systematic relocation of low value-added operations, suggesting that standardized processes offer limited potential for value creation, and the “anticipated” positives associated with automation or research and development are not necessarily clear-cut. One significant lesson from semi-peripheral industrial production in CEE is that high-tech, automated production operations can employ a substantial number of semi-skilled workers (Krzywdzinski 2017). The minimal technological transfer towards the semi-periphery means that incoming research and development activities mostly aim at technological adaptation by suppliers and maintaining seamless production: the overlap with genuine product development and technological innovation R&D is far from straightforward. (Gerőcs – Pinkasz 2019a: 173, 182) I believe that the suspicion held by some of my informants – that the company replaces machines with cheap human labor – resonates with these findings, even if only at a conceptual level, not to mention the career and creative prospects of skilled workers who felt to be stuck in their professional roles within the factory: standardized technological and work processes generally require intensive labor, maintenance, and adjustment of production. The involvement of specialized skills and potential added value strongly depends on the production form of the given plant, which in turn is a function of its role in the production chain and the regional division of labor. Interestingly, more profound embedding was observed precisely in operations employing a large number of semi-skilled workers: the provision of labor replacement involving numerous local connections has led to more positive developments regarding some companies' embeddedness and bargaining power. (Gerőcs – Pinkasz 2019b: 26)

The mitigation of regional inequalities, which have been reinforced and reproduced through the development of global value chains, does not seem likely in the near future. The transition to electric vehicle (EV) production, which is on the horizon, will undoubtedly impact labor organization in the semi-periphery, but it will not significantly alter its status, as it will occur within the same structural constraints that characterize the East-West division of labor. According to Pavlínek (2023), the transition will also be dictated by the decisions of parent companies, and a new wave of the legislative “race to the bottom” (see Parry 2018: 12-14) among semi-peripheral states may once again intensify competition for incentives, deepening the institutional and legal frameworks of labor division.

From a technological perspective, a significant aspect is that the phase-out of internal combustion engine (ICE) vehicles has been relocated to the plant in question as well as other semi-peripheral plants, which will likely result in a delayed and slow adaptation due to the technological obsolescence of local production. Moreover, the expected impact of this transition on the global automotive industry is also unpredictable: Pavlínek suggests that it will be primarily suppliers and their workers who will bear the brunt of the transition, not to mention the prominent issue of battery manufacturing. Hungary and, to a lesser extent, Poland have successfully attracted such operations, whereas most battery mass-production supply plants are located in the core. In this sense, competition driven by incentives is already hinting at new emerging fractures, specifically within the semi-periphery. (Pavlínek 2023: 65-66) The promotion based on cheap labor will remain crucial for the region, and the transition will largely continue to be driven by foreign investments. Consequently, it may at most represent a new phase of “*dependent development*” (Gerőcs 2021) but is unlikely to substantively alter the semi-peripheral position. Pavlínek also highlights that the European energy crisis arising from the war could fundamentally disrupt the balanced process of transition and the optimistic forecasts associated with it: if the crisis deepens, the semi-periphery may only hope to maintain its current position, with little prospect for further development. (2023: 67) In the case of the plant in question, labor relations already appear to be becoming strained: the previously relatively balanced negotiating relationship with the trade union were disrupted by the unilateral wage increase implemented in March 2024. A critical point in the prolonged wage negotiations was the expansion of the working time account to three years, which the trade union rejected, demanding the maintenance of the one-year frame. However, the news only presents the percentages of the wage increase: there is no public information available regarding changes to the working time account.

I argue that the emergence of a fundamental sense of insignificance and of a secondary status in workers’ accounts stemmed from the historical experience of the reproduction of inequalities. The political struggle, which rarely reaches the level of formal politics, has given rise to “*negative class consciousness*”, driven by their transparent and directly experienced exploitation and the persistent lack of political representation. (Burawoy – Lukács 1992: 134-135; Morris 2012: 229) For them, the “best available job” equated to the best available wage, and in the relativization of this wage level, the consciousness of exploitation is reflected. This attitude is not solely structured by the employment security of socialism or the uncertain period following the regime change: most of the interviewed workers were born around or after 1989, and their first work experiences can be placed in the period of early re-industrialization of the region during the 2000s. In their accounts, regardless of age or life history, a collective social image has emerged: that of secondary status and dependence, which reduces work to mere labor, life to a struggle for subsistence, family households to consumption pressures, and human values to economic interests. Morris (2012) articulates this as follows: “*Security’ is understood in a complex way relating to wages allowing more than poverty-level consumption, some degree of autonomy and recognition of status at work, as well as a general acknowledgement within enterprises of the dignity of blue-collar work. Most workers’ understandings of formal work as insecure relate to their access to mnemonic and lay normative resources that allow comparison, both with the past, and with a putative ‘normal’ working class existence, to which post-socialist reality does not measure up.*” (229) regarding Russian workers, providing a highly accurate description of my informants’ experiences as well, which were brought to life by historical, political, and above all, everyday struggles of making a living at the bottom of the social hierarchy. My informants undoubtedly exhibited the historical characteristics of the “*flexible*” Hungarian assembly line worker: performing flexibly, even exceeding their job description, and being able to meet the

expected level despite unfavorable conditions (Czirfusz et al. 2019: 155). Despite these characteristics, they continued to experience no formal recognition; on the contrary, their subordination not only persisted but appeared to intensify. This was evident, among other things, through the condescending treatment by managers and the normalization of overperformance. However, self-subordination, beyond a certain point, begins to undermine identity and self-respect, and the increasing tension arising from this threat affects workers' decisions and actions. General political disillusionment seems to be no less of a 'biographical problem' (Mrozowicki – Trappman 2021) than the sense of insecurity experienced by workers themselves: alongside a healthy working identity, a healthy social and civic identity also suffers. The negative class consciousness that developed during the historical struggle was also constituted through the hopelessness of political representation: expectations regarding political activity and trust, and the political enforcement of collective interests, are products of naïve perspectives outside their life circumstances and everyday realities. Workers did not leave their disheartening workplaces for the same reason they do not renew their trust in the politically suspicious actors and discourses: due to their life experiences, they simply did not see a realistic chance for the improvement of their position, as past promises and "proclaimed" advocacy have repeatedly proven to be false, hypocritical, and serving the interests of groups outside of their own, with their own interests being ignored – in other words: neither politics, nor work, nor the company "is for them".¹⁹

"I was thinking about it, you know, that we are always being persuaded here, continuously, about how the German culture, work culture, is so good for us, that the Germans come here, and they bring the... culture! So... You know, it often crosses my mind whether there is anyone in this country who doesn't just listen to the mainstream, average talk, but tries to organize it and look behind it to understand how things really happen and what is actually going on. What are the expectations, and what are the expectations here, there, and elsewhere? So, if we are such a big family within the EU, does this culture equally apply to me as well, or am I expected, am I defined to have a different work ethic and work culture?" (L.G.)

¹⁹ "In post-socialist Hungarian politics, political parties in opposition tend to ally with workers' claims, and then continue the flexibilization trend when they come to power." (Gagyí – Gerőcs 2019)

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