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József – happy birthday. Wishing you good health and contentment in your personal life. You have influenced me as a thinker and writer more than I can tell – I still consult you in my head, even about things I wish I didn't! ☺ Again, happy birthday. –Alena

From the Field to the Factory Floor: Vietnamese Government's Defense of Migrant Workers' Interests in State-Socialist Czechoslovakia

Labor training and exchange programs that Vietnam maintained with the Soviet Union and several European state-socialist countries between the late 1960s and the end of the 1980s are largely missing from labor migration studies, and as, Christina Schwenkel has recently pointed out, also from Vietnamese Studies.¹ They, and initiatives similar to them (i.e., other cooperative schemes between state-socialist countries that unfolded under the umbrella of what was then called socialist internationalism), also still occupy a fairly marginal place in the historiography of European 20th century state socialism, although research on these encounters and projects seems to be gaining momentum.² Yet, as Schwenkel argues

¹ Christina Schwenkel, "Socialist Mobilities: Crossing New Terrains in Vietnamese Migration Histories," *Central and Eastern European Migration Review* 4, 1 (2015):13-25.

² See, e.g., Alena K. Alamgir, "Recalcitrant Women: Internationalism and the Redefinition of Welfare Limits in the Czechoslovak-Vietnamese Labor Exchange Program, 1967-1989," *Slavic Review* 73, 1 (2014): 133–155; Łukasz Stanek, "Miastoprojekt goes abroad: The transfer of architectural labour from socialist Poland to Iraq (1958–1989), *The Journal of Architecture* 17,3 (2012):361-386; Young-Sun Hong, "'The Benefits of Health Must Spread Among All': International Solidarity, Health, and Race in the East German encounter with the Third World" in Katherine Pence and Paul Betts, eds., *Socialist Modern: East German Everyday Culture and Politics* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008).

elsewhere³, the mobility that resulted from these labor exchange programs is crucial to our understanding of not just Vietnam's transnational *past* but also is transnational present, and, I would add, its role in the case of the erstwhile European state-socialist societies is similar.

The literature on the four state-sponsored labor migration programs that Vietnam maintained in the 1970s and 80s – those with the Soviet Union, the GDR, Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria respectively – is still rather modest, although, comparatively, the GDR program has received most attention so far.⁴ One aspect that is, however, largely absent from the existing literature is the active role that the Vietnamese state played in advocating for its workers' interests and rights. Rather, it is often assumed that Vietnam, just like other sending states dispatching their workers into Eastern Europe (in the Czechoslovak case, mainly Cuba, in the GDR case, major sending states included also Mozambique and

³ Christina Schwenkel, "Rethinking Asian Mobilities: Socialist Migration and Post-Socialist Repatriation of Vietnamese Contract Workers in East Germany," *Critical Asian Studies* 46, 2 (2014):235-258.

⁴ E.g., Jonathan R. Zatlin, "Scarcity and Resentment: Economic Sources of Xenophobia in the GDR, 1971-1989," *Central European History* 40,4 (2007): 683–720; Mike Dennis, "Working under Hammer and Sickle: Vietnamese Workers in the German Democratic Republic, 1980–89," *German Politics* 16, 3 (2007):339-357; Damian Mac Con Uladh, *Guests of the socialist nation?: foreign students and workers in the GDR, 1949-1990* (PhD dissertation, University College London, 2005); Dagmara Jajeśniak-Quast, "Proletarische Internationalität' ohne Gleichheit: Ausländische Arbeitskräfte in ausgewählten sozialistischen Großbetrieben" in Christian Müller and Patrice Poutrus, eds, *Ankunft – Alltag – Ausreise: Migration und interkulturelle Begegnung in der DDR-Gesellschaft* (Köln, Weimar, Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 2005); Ann-Judith Rabenschlag, *Völkerfreundschaft nach Bedarf: Ausländische Arbeitskräfte in der Wahrnehmung von Staat und Bevölkerung der DDR* (PhD Dissertation, Södertörn University, 2014).

Angola)⁵, colluded with the host governments to facilitate the exploitation of migrant workers through conducting surveillance and the curtailing of their rights.⁶ Echoing Cold War language, such as that of Radio Free Europe's *Background Reports*, or of a 1982 hearing of the US Senate's Subcommittee on International Finance and Monetary Policy, overseas migrant workers in state-socialist Eastern Europe before 1990 have been described as "slave labor."⁷ In this article I argue that this view is fundamentally incorrect as it, among other things, completely obscures the agency of the sending governments, that of the migrant workers themselves, and, importantly, the changes achieved through these efforts.

This erasure of this agency is possible due to a lack of focus on the fact that the shape that these programs assumed and the concrete ways in which they unfolded and were implemented in each of the receiving countries were the result of intense bilateral negotiations in which both the sending and the receiving governments vigorously pushed for their interests. These negotiations did not occur only when the programs were initially formulated, but took place throughout the schemes' entire duration. The representatives of the two governments, usually labor ministers or deputy labor ministers and their respective staff, met at least once every year to evaluate the program. In addition, numerous other formal as well as informal talks took place between the Czechoslovak

⁵ Damian Mac Con Uladh, op.cit.

⁶ Zatlin's, Dennis's and Mac Con Uladh's pieces cited above all articulate this stance forcefully.

⁷ "Human Rights Consequences of the Proposed Trans-Siberian Natural Gas Pipeline: Hearing Before the Subcommittee on International Finance and Monetary Policy," June 18, 1982.

administrators of the program and the officials from the Vietnamese Embassy, who were responsible for the day-to-day management of the program from their side, i.e., were the first point of contact for both Vietnamese workers and the Czechoslovak administrators whenever an issue “on the ground” (in factories, hostels and so forth) needed to be addressed. Czech (Czechoslovak) archival evidence shows clearly that Vietnamese officials advocated fiercely on behalf of the workers, whose trips and labor abroad they had arranged for and sponsored. The lack of attention to this aspect of the programs in the existing literature constitutes a form of blindness that is the logical corollary of the still dominant misreading of the relationship that existed between the Soviet Union and its allies in developing countries as one in which “Third World leaders seeking help from the USSR were typically considered Soviet puppets, and Third World countries themselves functioned only as a backdrop to Soviet–American confrontation.”⁸ Such a reading neglects the active role that these countries and their leaders played in the relationships. Somewhat ironically, this framing also leads to a failure to fully appreciate the significance that the USSR, as well as other countries of the former European socialist camp (as they called themselves at the time⁹), held for Vietnam due to the strong ideological – rather than purely geo-political – bonds between the states.¹⁰ As Engerman notes, recent scholarship

⁸ David C. Engerman, “Second World’s Third World” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 12, 1 (2011):183-211.

⁹ Whereas in the West, during the Cold War (and to this day), these countries as a whole were referred to as a “bloc,” not a “camp.” Since I am attempting to reconstruct what could be called an overlooked history of the Cold War, I prefer to use the emic approach and use the terminology, where possible, formerly employed by these states (or their representatives) themselves.

¹⁰ Tuong Vu, “Dreams of Paradise: The Making of a Soviet Outpost in Vietnam” *Ab Imperio* 2 (2008): 255-285.

has shown that “Third World clients shaped Soviet foreign-policy decisions through persistence, manipulation, and pleading” and describes “the ways in which superpower competition created leverage for the Third World nations they were wooing,” so that, “in case after case, Soviet leadership was responding to demands, however divergent from Soviet ideas and interests, from Third World leaders.”¹¹

In this paper, I document this process “close to the ground,” so to speak, and in relation not to the Soviet Union but rather to one of its allied countries, Czechoslovakia. I detail the ways in which the representatives of the Vietnamese government pushed for the interests and rights of migrant workers thus clashing with the interests of Czechoslovak companies, and hence the Czechoslovak state, who was formally, the companies’ owner. By doing so, I argue against the portrayal of the Vietnamese state as a whole as helpless and at the mercy of a more economically powerful country on the one hand, and against the portrayal of Vietnamese officials as primarily agents of surveillance and exploitation of their own workers. I do this by retracing the history of one particular issue that became a bone of contention: Vietnamese workers’ resistance to being assigned to jobs in agriculture, forestry, and construction. On one level, the source of this squabble was rather prosaic. These jobs entailed large amounts of outdoor work, which, due to drastic differences between the Southeast Asian and Central European climates, felt intolerable to Vietnamese workers for the better part of the calendar year. However, careful reading of the archival record reveals that what may appear at first glance to be a relatively mundane (though no

¹¹ Engerman, *op.cit.*, pgs. 184, 194.

less important for that) issue was actually entwined with two other issues – wages and the acquisition of qualifications. As such, the contention over job assignments was at the very core of the political economy of this labor exchange scheme.

Before I proceed, a methodological-theoretical note is in order. First, all my primary source material comes from various Czech archives. This means that I am writing about the actions of the Vietnamese state and workers as they were *perceived* and *processed* by the Czechoslovak state. This, in turn, means, that I do not have much to say about the internal decision-making processes that led to the actions taken by the Vietnamese state representatives. On the one hand, this can be seen as a limitation of this case study, and simultaneously an invitation to scholars working with Vietnamese archival sources to fill this gap. On the other hand, my sources allow me to assess in detail the impact and efficacy of Vietnamese government representatives' actions and measures when interacting with their foreign counterparts in defense of their workers', and arguably the state's, interests.

Secondly, a few words on the Vietnamese state in the context of my work. Recently published literature on Vietnamese state tends to explore questions such as its strength, its degree of centralization or alternatively decentralizing tendencies, the role it plays in economic reforms, or the levels and forms of corruption within it.¹² As I already signaled

¹² E.g., Martin Gainsborough, *Vietnam: Rethinking the State* (London: Zed Books, 2010), Ken MacLean, *The Government of Mistrust: Illegibility and Bureaucratic Power in Socialist Vietnam* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press: 2013), Dang Phong and Melanie Beresford, *Authority Relations and Economic Decision-Making in Vietnam: An Historical Perspective* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 1998).

above, my focus here is rather different: the capacity and efficacy of the Vietnamese state in pushing for the rights of Vietnamese migrant workers. This means that, in contrast to much of the literature on the Vietnamese state, I deal with (a) Vietnamese state *abroad*, and (b) only a sliver of that state, namely the embassy staff and the staff at the Vietnamese Labor Ministry in Hanoi that was involved in the administration and coordination of labor export into the CMEA¹³ countries. Thus, this article does not, and cannot, speak to the nature of the Vietnamese state in the 1980s *in toto*, either theoretically or empirically. Instead, I conceptualize the state as embedded and embodied in the actions of the relevant administrators. While the officials working at the Vietnamese Embassy in Prague did not exactly qualify as “low-level cadres,” in the sense that Ken MacLean uses the term (for one thing, they were much better educated, many of them, in fact, graduates of Czechoslovak universities¹⁴), they shared with these cadres one crucial feature: namely, that they were located and worked from a position in which “the party/state and ‘the people’ visibly [met].”¹⁵ As such they were able to shape policies on the ground, not least by acting as intermediaries between the workers abroad and the government, particularly the Labor Ministry, back home. The latter then, as Gainsborough argues, if it felt “so moved, it [could]

¹³ The Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, CMEA, also known as Comecon, was founded in 1949 as an economic organization and platform to coordinate and facilitate international trade between and among state-socialist countries. In addition to its European members, three non-European countries became members: Mongolia in 1962, Cuba in 1972, and Vietnam in 1978. The organization was disbanded in 1991. (Duncan Townson, *A Dictionary of Contemporary History*, Blackwell Publishing, 1999).

¹⁴ Based on anecdotal information from my conversations with a few of the former embassy staff.

¹⁵ MacLean, *op.cit.*, p.17.

act decisively and effectively”¹⁶ in its capacity as the official partner in inter-governmental negotiations with its Czechoslovak counterpart, and push for Vietnamese migrant workers’ rights on the highest level.

Background: A Brief Overview of the Vietnamese-Czechoslovak Labor Exchange

Scheme

Although during the last phase – which is the phase during which the dispute over job assignments arose and which I will therefore focus on in this article – the Vietnamese-Czechoslovak labor training and exchange program started to resemble in some respects guest-worker schemes as we know them from Western Europe, its beginnings were very different. The program grew out of and was originally a part of complex developmental as well as military assistance that Czechoslovakia was providing to Vietnam from the mid-1950s onward. As all other state-socialist governments, Czechoslovak leaders did not use the term aid to describe the effort, but rather “spoke either of solidarity measures, especially in the case of assistance to national-liberation movements, or of technical assistance. Socialist aid was presented as a clear alternative to Western practice, fostering independence and granting equality.”¹⁷ Thus, the labor training and exchange program, which was born in the midst of the war with the United States, was conceived of, by both

¹⁶ Gainsborough, op.cit., p. 19.

¹⁷ Sara Lorenzini, “Comecon and the South in the years of détente: a study on East-South economic relations,” *European Review of History: Revue européenne d’histoire* 21, 2 (2014): 183-199.

sides, as a preparation for the rebuilding of the country once the war was over, and a means of Vietnam's economic development more generally.

First Vietnamese trainee-workers arrived in Czechoslovakia for 3- to 5-year stays that were to start with training and end with skilled factory work in 1967. Depending on the source, between 2,146¹⁸ and 2,400¹⁹ Vietnamese citizens arrived to Czechoslovakia between 1967 and 1972, in five separate batches. Reportedly, most blue-collar trainees could be "considered skilled only in very exceptional cases despite the fact that their personal files. . .[said] that they [were] trained."²⁰ During the initial phases, the companies paid the trainees untaxed monthly stipends subsidized by the Czechoslovak state. The Czechoslovak state provided 6-month subsidies for unskilled workers and 3-month subsidies for skilled ones; technicians and engineers were subsidized for a whole year. The idea was that after these differently-calibrated training periods, the trainees would become integrated into regular production and receive wages according to the same rules as Czechoslovak workers. However, only about 30% of the trainees were able to transition to

¹⁸ Czech Foreign Affairs Ministry Archive, henceforth MZV:145/112, 1973-74: "VDR – přehled styků" letter from Dr Josef Šiktanc, the head of international relations department at the Federal Labor and Social Affairs Ministry, to the Federal Foreign Affairs Ministry's 3rd territorial department, dated 14 March 1973.

¹⁹ MZV, 3rd territorial department, 1970-74, Vietnam T, 2, 145/112, 1973-1974, "Informace o vztazích mezi ČSSR a VDR" part of "Informační materiál k přijetí delegace NS VDR v ČSSR," dated 7 May 1974.

²⁰ Czech National Archive, henceforth NA, uncatalogued holdings: "Zpráva o příjezdu II. turnusu vietnamských praktikantů do ČSSR – pro operativní poradu předsednictva vlády," report by the SPK chairman (and deputy prime minister) to prime minister, dated 14 December 1967.

the status of regular workers in the second year of their stays,²¹ which meant that the remaining 70% continued to receive stipends rather than make wages (and contribute to Czechoslovak economy). As a result, the costs to the Czechoslovak state were greater than anticipated, and the officials decided to treat these costs as an “irrecoverable loan” (*nenávratný úvěr*). I elsewhere call this first phase of the Czechoslovak-Vietnamese labor exchange program the period of *paternalist internationalism*²² to reflect the fact that, at this time, the Czechoslovak state put a lot of resources and effort in the care for the incoming Vietnamese trainee-workers, and did so explicitly as an act of socialist solidarity. For instance, the Czechoslovak Institute for People’s Nutrition (*Ústav pro výživu lidu*) was tasked with creating a menu for the incoming trainee-workers, in which “the food would at first correspond more to the Vietnamese culinary customs, and only later would switch to our food so that trainees do not experience difficulties when they transition to companies and eat in company cafeterias.”²³ Subsequently, the trainee-workers’ physical wellbeing was monitored and the conclusion was reached that the trainees were satisfied with both the quantity and quality of the meals, and “in three months their physical condition

²¹ MZV, 145/112, 1973-74: “VDR – přehled styků,” letter from Dr. Josef Šiktanc, the head of international relations department at the Federal Labor and Social Affairs Ministry, to the Federal Foreign Affairs Ministry’s 3rd territorial department, dated 14 March 1973.

²² Alena Alamgir, *Socialist Internationalism At Work: Changes In The Czechoslovak-Vietnamese Labor Exchange Program, 1967-1989* (PhD Dissertation, Rutgers University, 2014).

²³ NA, “Informace o průběhu příprav k zajištění přijetí vietnamských praktikantů v ČSSR,” report by the SPK chairman (and deputy prime minister) to prime minister, dated 20 June 1967.

improved and their body weight increased [on average] by 2 to 4 kilograms.”²⁴ That is to say, the Czechoslovak state marshaled its resources in order to provide the best care, according to the state-socialist standards and ideas of wellbeing, to citizens of a country fighting “on an advanced outpost of socialism in Southeast Asia.”²⁵ At this stage, the Czechoslovak state was also firmly focused on training of Vietnamese workers according to the developmental interests of the Vietnamese state, as that state communicated them in the inter-governmental meetings.²⁶

The second phase of the labor migration program, or what I call *mutually advantageous internationalism*, was set in motion by a treaty signed in April 1974. Through this treaty, some 5,500 Vietnamese citizens first attended vocational schools – following largely the same curriculum as Czechoslovak pupils – and then worked in Czechoslovak factories during the 1970s.²⁷ Most of them were channeled into fields related to mechanical engineering, construction, energy and chemical industries, and radio technology, as these were the fields in which the Vietnamese state wished to have its workforce trained. The Czechoslovak state again covered all the costs (with the exception of the initial train journey to Czechoslovakia), including all the living and educational expenses incurred

²⁴ NA, “Zpráva o průběhu přípravy vietnamských praktikantů k zaškolování v československých podnicích” report by the SPK chairman (and deputy prime minister) to prime minister, dated 29 September 1967.

²⁵ NA, fond 02/1, sv. 123., ar. j. 123, b. 6., “Záznam z přijetí delegace Národního shromáždění Vietnamské demokratické republiky ve Federálním shromáždění ČSSR dne 16. května 1974,” presented at the 6 June 1974 meeting of the ÚV KSČ.

²⁶ For details, see Alamgir *Socialist Internationalism At Work...*, op.cit.

²⁷ NA, “Dohoda mezi vládou Československé socialistické republiky a vládou Vietnamské demokratické republiky o odborné přípravě občanů Vietnamské demokratické republiky v československých organizacích” signed in Hanoi on 8 April 1974.

during the 2.5-3 years of vocational school training, only expecting to be partially compensated by the productive work that the Vietnamese citizens were engaged in for 2-2.5 years upon graduation. One feature of this phase was that, on the Czechoslovak side, the concern over the costs of the program, which seemed virtually absent during the first phase, started surfacing. However, the program was still conceptualized as an essentially internationalist project, in which the Vietnamese state's needs ultimately trumped the concerns over the costs accrued by the Czechoslovak economy.²⁸ Oral history interviews reveal that this phase was seen by both the Vietnamese and the Czechoslovak officials as something of a "golden age" and the most successful form of the program – the Vietnamese received excellent technical training during the first half of their stays and worked productively in Czechoslovak companies in the second half (or longer as many asked to, and had, their contracts extended).

A treaty signed in November 1980²⁹ ushered in a qualitatively new period, one that, due to the structural changes introduced into the scheme, I call the period of *beleaguered internationalism*. During this phase, the rules of the program departed in important ways from the earlier phases. In contrast to the previous emphasis on training, the guiding principle here was to be that of "economic acceptability" (*ekonomická přijatelnost*) as far as

²⁸ NA, "Zpráva o stavu zabezpečení odborné přípravy občanů Vietnamské demokratické republiky v československých organizacích a k návrhu příslušné mezivládní Dohody," September 1973.

²⁹ Czech Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, henceforth MPSV, "Dohoda mezi vládou Československé socialistické republiky a vládou Vietnamské socialistické republiky o dočasném zaměstnávání kvalifikovaných pracovníků Vietnamské socialistické republiky spojeném s další odbornou přípravou v československých organizacích."

the Czechoslovak state and enterprises were concerned. On the basis of this treaty, some 50,000³⁰ Vietnamese citizens arrived to Czechoslovakia for work between 1981 and 1989.³¹ The treaty stipulated that the workers be between 18 and 40 years of age, and that they be not only physically capable of performing assigned jobs but also already skilled to perform said jobs. While the first two conditions were observed, the last one often was not. Although this latest iteration of the program, in which blue-collar workers (of whom roughly a quarter were women³²) arrived on 4-year contracts was still formally framed as an act of socialist internationalism, this time, the needs of the Czechoslovak industrial companies and the state took precedence when it came to the industrial areas into which the workers were channeled. In the second half of the decade, the program also started to become decentralized, with ministries and even individual companies forging direct ties with their Vietnamese counterparts. The first mention of these types of cooperation in the Czechoslovak-Vietnamese context comes from the reports on talks between the two sides, each led by their respective deputy labor ministers, in July 1986 in Hanoi. During these talks, the Vietnamese side noted that the Vietnamese State Committee for Technology (which was under the purview of the Vietnamese Defense Ministry) had already held talks directly with the Czechoslovak Ministry of General Engineering (rather than going through

³⁰ This is my best estimate based on my compilation of various partial statistics produced at the time by the Czech and Czechoslovak (federal) Labor Ministries.

³¹ The 1970s apprentice-worker model did not disappear with the onset of the 1980s contract worker model, however, their number was significantly lower than the number contract workers. Thus, the apprentice-workers can be considered paradigmatic for the second phase of the labor exchange program, and the contract workers play the same role in the program's final phase.

³² The proportion is calculated from information contained in Czechoslovak Federal Labor Ministry's annual tabular summaries of the numbers of foreign workers, usually called "Přehled zaměstnanosti zahraničních dělníků podle krajů a resortů ke dni..."

the Labor Ministry, which until then served as a clearinghouse of sorts for all labor agreements), and that the Vietnamese Ministry of Metallurgy and Engineering had done the same with the Czechoslovak Ministry of Metallurgy and Heavy Industry about arrivals of Vietnamese workers to Czechoslovak companies in these industrial sectors.³³ Similarly, in 1987, the Ministries of General Engineering of the two countries held direct negotiations.³⁴ In some cases, agreements were forged even below the ministerial level. For instance, in 1987, the talks between the Czechoslovak construction company Konstruktiva with the Hanoi-based Institute for Transport Design and Construction, led to the signing of a direct collaboration agreement by the higher-level managerial units of which the companies were part, Pozemní a montované stavby Praha (Ground and Prefabricated Buildings Construction Prague) on the Czechoslovak side and the general directorate of the Transport Civil Engineering Construction Company No. 1 in Hanoi on the Vietnamese side.³⁵ What matters is that, while socialist internationalism doesn't completely disappear, as I show in this article, the Czechoslovak state, instead of pursuing internationalist policies on its own initiative, had to often be compelled by its Vietnamese counterpart and the migrant workers to act in internationalist, and indeed socialist, manner. In other words, it can be argued that, during this period, by pushing for its workers' rights, the Vietnamese state held the Czechoslovak state accountable to the internationalist pledges it has made,

³³ MPSV, "Záznam z jednání delegace federálního ministerstva práce a sociálních věcí ČSSR a ministerstva práce VSR," dated 1 July 1986.

³⁴ MPSV, Letter from federal deputy labor minister, Milan Kyselý, to Czech deputy labor minister, Václav Karas, dated 5 February 1987.

³⁵ Private archive of Mr Pham Xuan Ha, "Dohoda o přímé spolupráci, technické pomoci, výměně zkušeností a zvyšování kvalifikace pracovníků VSR, uzavřená mezi n.p. Pozemní a montované stavby Praha, dále jen PMS, resort ministerstva stavebnictví ČSR, VHJ Stavební závody Praha, generální ředitelství Dopravních staveb č. 1 v Hanoji na léta 1988-1992."

and based, in part, its legitimacy on. Also, in that sense, the Vietnamese state became, at this point, the guardian of socialist internationalism, at least in relation to its Czechoslovak counterpart.

Job Assignments as a Bone of Contention

During the first two phases, that is from 1967 till 1980, the program was structured as a training scheme first and a labor exchange second. This meant two things: One, that the Vietnamese citizens first received training (during the 1967-1972 phase on the shop floors of factories and during the 1974-1980 phase in Czechoslovak vocational schools) and only once the training was completed did they become incorporated into regular factory production. Second, the fields in which the Vietnamese citizens trained and later worked were determined by the requests, and thus interests, of the Vietnamese state. That is to say that the proposals as to which industrial areas Vietnamese workers would be assigned to came from the Vietnamese side and the Czechoslovak side tried to accommodate them to the extent that it was able to do so (lack of housing, for instance, was one stumbling block sometimes thwarting the plans).

This, however, changed with the November 1980 treaty, which introduced the contract-worker form of the program. Not only was formal training reduced to a minimum – mere three months – but the requests now came not from the Vietnamese state but from Czechoslovak companies (via the ministries under whose purview they fell). Starting in 1981, the Czechoslovak Labor Ministry compiled the requests, complete with numbers of

workers and their job positions the companies were asking for, and forwarded these requests to its Vietnamese partners (thus reversing the previous practice during which the initiative and proposals for training and job assignments came from Vietnam). Only in very rare cases did the Czechoslovak branch ministries or companies' management use the language of training at all.³⁶ In a vast majority of cases, they talked specifically about "requests" for certain number of workers.³⁷ At times, the letters from companies read almost like recruitment leaflets – touting the possibility of wage increases and the quality of the company's housing and cafeteria facilities, and even the cultural facilities in nearby towns.³⁸ Although in some cases, mostly when the workers would be working on specialized machinery, the ministries' or companies' letters combined the "request language" with "training language." For instance, a letter would start out by saying that the enterprise, in this case a sugar company, "requests 10 women and 10 men from the SRV," but later on would go on to note also that the workers would acquire skills in the operation of specific types of machinery, and – once again adopting the style somewhat reminiscent of a recruitment leaflet – noting that since the organization houses an entire "research-development-production cycle, the workers from the SRV will have the opportunity to

³⁶ E.g., MPSV, letter from Industry Ministry of the Czech Socialist Republic to the Labor Ministry of the Czechoslovakia from 26 March 1981.

³⁷ E.g., MPSV, letter from Federal Ministry of Electrical Engineering to MPSV, 17 July 1981; letter from Středočeská Fruta, fruit canning company, to MPSV 4 August 1981; letter from the Ministry of Agriculture and Nutrition to MPSV from 24 August 1981; letter from Paper and Cellulose Industry Headquarters to MPSV dated 11 June 1981, and many others.

³⁸ E.g., MPSV, Letter from Sempra, fruit and forest tree nursery company, to MPSV from 21 May 1981; Letter from Crystalex to MPSV from 1 September 1982.

become acquainted with new, modern machinery, which is now being tested in the experimental branch of the company.”³⁹

At yet other occasions, Czechoslovak companies tried to anticipate the needs of the Vietnamese government officials in their effort to win the allocation of Vietnamese workers for their production lines. This is evident, for example, from a letter by the director of a major shoe company, who, after sending an original request for 45 male workers and 70 female workers, anticipated further negotiations with the Vietnamese side and therefore sent a follow-up letter to the Czech Labor Ministry, supplying the ministry with arguments to boost his case. In the letter, the company director explained in detail all operations involved in all the jobs that the Vietnamese workers would be performing, and then proceeded to offer to change the placement of the workers to the branches producing rubber footwear arguing that this production is “traditional in Vietnam given the abundance of the raw material.”⁴⁰ The director must have been either prescient or well informed: only a year later, the Czechoslovak government approved a “Program for Long-Term Cooperation With Vietnam,” which anticipated the involvement of “Czechoslovak experts in the launching of rubber footwear production” in Vietnam.⁴¹ Through their mixture of “request language” and “training language” these letters capture well the shift in

³⁹ MPSV, Letter from the Research and Development Base of Sugar Industry (Výzkumná a vývojová základna cukrovarnického průmyslu) to MPSV dated 18 August 1981.

⁴⁰ MPSV, Letter from Svit Gottwaldov to MPSV dated 2 September 1986.

⁴¹ NA, “Program dlouhodobé hospodářské a vědeckotechnické spolupráce mezi československou socialistickou republikou a Vietnamskou socialistickou republikou na období do roku 2000,” presented to the presidium of the Czechoslovak Communist Party’s Central Committee at its 2 November 1987 meeting.

the nature and definition of the program in the 1980s, and concomitantly, the changes in the way Czechoslovak employers conceptualized Vietnamese labor at this time.

Of direct relevance to the issue I am addressing in this article is the fact that there was some disconnect between the Czechoslovak requests and the Vietnamese interests. In 1981, the Czechoslovak Ministry of Agriculture and Nutrition requested, compared with other branch ministries, the greatest number of Vietnamese workers, whom it wanted to place primarily to work in agricultural cooperatives in the Czechoslovak countryside. However, the “Vietnamese side was consistently rejecting these jobs.”⁴² The clues as to why this was the case can be found in two reports written at around the same time. One report listed average wages earned by Vietnamese workers in Czechoslovak enterprises. While workers employed in the companies under the purview of the Transport Ministry made 18.32 Czechoslovak crowns (Kčs) per hour (the highest average wage for Vietnamese workers in Czechoslovakia at that point in time), those working for enterprises under the purview of the Ministry of Agriculture and Nutrition made almost 62% less – mere Kčs11.34 per hour.⁴³ This was, indeed, the lowest average wage for Vietnamese workers employed in Czechoslovakia in 1981. Another report noted that Vietnamese workers often refused to work outdoors in “wintry conditions,” even when “equipped with special protective garments.” Reportedly, the workers were reluctant to perform these jobs due to

⁴² MPSV, “Záznam: Zaměstnání a odborná příprava občanů VSR v r. 1982,” drafted by Czech Labor Ministry, dated 16 July 1981.

⁴³ NA, “Komentář k vývoji stavu a pohybu vietnamských pracovníků v I. pololetí r. 1981,” dated 20 October 1981.

“concerns about their health.”⁴⁴ As it turned out, the outdoor assignments during “wintry conditions” were also the only times when unexcused absences were recorded. At this early point (the new contract-worker form of the program had only just been launched), the Czech Labor Ministry asked the relevant companies to secure indoor work for Vietnamese workers during winter, or, if that was not possible, to temporarily transfer them to other companies. In other words, the Czechoslovak Labor Ministry clerks showed some sympathy to Vietnamese workers’ plight, but rather than addressing the problem in a systematic way, they left the solution up to the discretion of the companies employing them.

Accordingly, sometimes Vietnamese workers adopted “misbehavior” as a method of grievance procedure. For instance, an undated (but likely written in or around 1983) document reported the following about Vietnamese workers at one particular farm: “Average wage Kčs 9.86/hour [thus even lower than the lowest average], same as Czechoslovak workers; working activity in agriculture very low, low work performance, careless and bad quality work; if left without supervision, they knit sweaters, disregard and [even] refuse to follow foremen’s orders.”⁴⁵

The dissatisfaction felt by the workers employed in the agricultural, forestry, and construction sectors is thrown into sharp relief by the fact that they were the most likely

⁴⁴ Ibid. (NA, “Komentář k vývoji stavu...”)

⁴⁵ MPSV, “Odborné školení vietnamských pracovníků v MZVŽ [Ministerstvo zemědělství a výživy] /výňatky z komentářů podniků ke statistice /,” undated document, likely written circa 1983.

among all Vietnamese laborers to resort to the most serious industrial action: strikes. Evidence is scattered but by compiling mentions in various Czech archival documents,⁴⁶ I estimate that Vietnamese workers organized some two dozens strikes in Czechoslovakia in the early 1980s. Of these, according to a Czech Labor Ministry clerks' own accounting, the largest proportion of strikes – 56.5% – took place in agriculture, construction industry and forestry. The proportion is even more startling if we take into account that only 30% of Vietnamese workers worked in these sectors.⁴⁷ The Czech Labor Ministry clerks ascribed the higher incidence of strikes in these economic sectors to the fact that the employees were “primarily men from Vietnamese countryside who arrive to perform unqualified jobs [but] are not used to working without interruption for eight hours a day, which is why they find the work to be excessively demanding and the remuneration for it too low.”⁴⁸ In this report, the Czechoslovak administrators showed less understanding for Vietnamese workers, in fact, largely shifted the blame to them. Even the mention of low remuneration is not presented as an objective reality, despite the fact that that is precisely what the figures in other reports indicate, but rather depicted as a subjective evaluation by the workers.

⁴⁶ MPSV, “Informace o některých incidentech vietnamských pracujících v ČSSR,” undated, likely written in 1982; “Přehled o stávkách a další závažné protispolečenské činnosti vietnamských pracovníků v čs. organizacích”; “Informace o současných problémech spojených se zaměstnáváním vietnamských pracovníků v čs. organizacích,” MPSV, September 1982.

⁴⁷ Op. cit. (“Informace o současných problémech...”).

⁴⁸ Ibid (“Informace o současných problémech...”).

However, the workers were not the only active players in the dispute. As I mentioned in the introductory passage, the representatives of the two governments met regularly to assess the program. Accordingly, in late April 1983, the two countries' deputy labor ministers and their delegations met in Prague. The Vietnamese side "expressed the opinion that the sending and receiving of such a great number of Vietnamese workers in such a relatively short period of time led to certain difficulties for both sides. On the Vietnamese side, in regard to the selection and preparation of Vietnamese citizens for departure, [and] on the Czechoslovak side in regard to the preparation of conditions for the reception of Vietnamese workers and their employment."⁴⁹ The Czechoslovak officials criticized Vietnamese government's selection procedures and the failure to procure sufficient number of quality interpreters, group leaders, and organizers. The Vietnamese officials, on the other hand, criticized their Czechoslovak counterparts for not making sure that the companies were ready to receive Vietnamese workers, and for not addressing some of Vietnamese workers' specific requests "on time and in accordance with the terms of the treaty." At the meeting, the Vietnamese side presented a number of demands, twelve altogether. The first one was the request that the workers currently employed in agriculture, forestry, and partly also in construction be transferred to industrial enterprises. Before describing the response of the Czechoslovak officials to this demand, I want to pause and list the rest of the demands raised by Vietnamese representatives at this

⁴⁹ MPSV, "Zpráva delegací Federálního ministerstva práce a sociálních věcí ČSSR a Ministerstva práce VSR o výsledcích realizace mezivládní Dohody ze dne 27.11.1980 a o návrzích na zlepšení další spolupráce, která se předkládá předsedům obou částí Československo-vietnamského výboru pro hospodářskou a vědeckotechnickou spolupráci," 27 April 1983.

meeting. I wish to do so in order to demonstrate the variety and breadth of the issues on which they sought to provide support to their workers employed abroad. The complete list of the demands makes it possible to appreciate the depth of Vietnamese officials' involvement and advocacy on behalf of their workers. The rest of the demands consisted in: (2) the request that workers work in groups of at least 50 persons; (3) a guarantee "that Vietnamese workers make at least Kčs1,200 monthly in net wages" (in 1979, average wage of industrial blue-collar workers was Kčs2,008⁵⁰) ; (4) that the wages of Vietnamese workers be indexed twice a year to keep up with the increases in the cost of living; (5) that the salaries of interpreters be increased to Kčs1,900 to 2,400; group leaders' salaries to Kčs2,200 to 2,700, and organizers' salaries to Kčs2,700 to 3,000; (5) that group leaders of all groups larger than 50 people (rather than 100 as originally agreed) be freed from any other work, and that group leaders of smaller groups (who must hold factory regular job in addition to their leadership duties) receive bonuses in the amount of 40-50% of their base salaries; (6) that female workers who become pregnant be allowed to stay in Czechoslovakia, continue working, and be eligible for the same benefits as those received by Czechoslovak women; (8) that the survivors of all workers who die in on-the-job accidents receive damages in the same amount as those paid to workers with three children; (9) that the right to vacation in Vietnam (with a return ticket to Hanoi paid by the Czechoslovak state) be extended to all workers, regardless of their marital and family status (originally, only married workers with children were eligible once they completed two years of their four-year contracts); (10) that the time during which an interpreter stays

⁵⁰ *Statistická ročenka Československé socialistické republiky, 1980*, p. 362.

with a group be extended to 12 months (from original six); (11) that organizers be allowed to bring spouses and one child under 5 years of age, and finally, (12) that the Vietnamese government be allowed to use the fees it receives from the Czechoslovak government for each workers, as well as the money it gains from transfer (which discuss below), for the purchase of materials and goods in Czechoslovakia. Explaining the meaning and significance of each these demands is beyond the scope of this paper. The point of the list is to appreciate the scope of Vietnamese officials' involvement in the matters concerning the interests of their workers employed abroad. However, before moving on, I will note that the nature of the demands suggests that while some seems to have stemmed from the desire of the government (such as those having to do with organizational structure of the program and the size of the groups, and the request that Vietnamese government be able to use money collected from Czechoslovakia for the purchase of goods there), others seem to have workers' complaints as their basis (primarily the requests for higher wages and the demand that pregnant women be allowed to finish their contracts), even if their potential fulfillment would benefit the Vietnamese government as well (in the form of higher taxes, called *transfer*, that it was collecting from its migrant workers, discussed bellow, and not losing money on prematurely canceled contracts in the case of the pregnant workers).

During the meeting, the Vietnamese side also announced that it was changing one of its own policies, specifically its rule on what in Czech was called the "transfer." Transfer was a system of compulsory remittances carried out in the form of direct paycheck deductions. It was instituted at the request of the Vietnamese government, and described in the treaty as

the “sum that the workers donate for the development of the SRV’s national economy.”⁵¹ Originally, the Vietnamese government set the transfer amount at 15% of workers’ wages. The deduction seemed to have been unpopular among Vietnamese workers as it lowered their take-home wages. As such, it became one of the motors behind a number of strikes and other protests.⁵² At the meeting, besides presenting demands on the Czechoslovak side, the Vietnamese officials also informed their counterparts that, from then on, they were freeing workers making less than Kčs1,200 per month from the transfer obligation. Additionally, for all other workers (i.e., those whose wages exceeded this minimum threshold), the transfer obligation would be lowered to 10% of their net monthly wages.⁵³ This change in policy is significant because it is evidence of the responsiveness of the Vietnamese officials to their workers’ demands and discontent. That is, in addition to speaking on workers’ behalf in their negotiations with their Czechoslovak counterparts, Vietnamese state representatives also made adjustments to their own policies in order to appease the workers.

⁵¹ MPSV, “Dohoda mezi vládou Československé socialistické republiky a vládou Vietnamské socialistické republiky o dočasném zaměstnávání kvalifikovaných pracovníků Vietnamské socialistické republiky spojeném s další odbornou přípravou v československých organizacích,” signed on 27 November 1980.

⁵² For instance, one of the documents reporting on strikes cited above (“Přehled o stávkách a další závážné protispolečenské činnosti vietnamských pracovníků v čs. organizacích”) listed dissatisfaction with transfer, usually jointly with a complaint about low wages, as the cause of the strike in four cases out of 16 cases of industrial action it recorded.

⁵³ MPSV, “Záznam z jednání delegací Federálního ministerstva práce a sociálních věcí ČSSR a Ministerstva práce Vietnamské socialistické republiky, které se konalo ve dnech 18.-27. dubna 1983 v Praze, o některých otázkách vyplývajících z realizace mezivládní Dohody o dočasném zaměstnávání kvalifikovaných pracovníků VSR, spojeném s další odbornou přípravou v československých organizacích ze dne 27.11.1980,” 27 April 1983.

Nonetheless, on this occasion, the Czechoslovak side assumed a negative stance to the arguments put forth by the Vietnamese side, stating that “in receiving and employing Vietnamese workers, the conditions of the treaty as well as of the yearly protocols have been respected.”⁵⁴ But it did acknowledge that “certain problems have occurred, particularly in agriculture, forestry and the construction industry.” Nevertheless, once again, it ascribed these problems to the “work morale infringements, lack of interest in allocated work, and so forth.” It then pointed, as one source of the problems, to workers being selected without regard for the type and demands of jobs, and their not being informed about the type of work they would be expected to perform. Consequently, it called upon the Vietnamese side to decide as soon as possible on the professions and companies in which Vietnamese workers *could not* work in Czechoslovakia. Overall, the Czechoslovak negotiators concluded the meeting by stating that, in their opinion, most of the demands required modifications of the existing treaty, and as a result needed to be discussed by the relevant Czechoslovak authorities before a definitive answer could be given to the Vietnamese partner.

Hence, within a month, a meeting was called at the Czechoslovak Federal Labor Ministry to discuss the Vietnamese proposals. Based on the attendance list, the meeting was attended by the representatives of almost all ministries and a number of other organizations from both parts of the Czechoslovak federation, including: the Central Trade Council (URO), the Central Committee of the Socialist Youth Association, the Construction Ministry, the

⁵⁴ Ibid. (“Záznam z jednání delegacy...” 27 April 1983); all quotes in this paragraph come from the same document.

Federal Ministry of Electro-Technical industry, the Federal Ministry of General Engineering, the Ministry of Forest and Water Management, the Federal Transport Ministry, the Labor Ministry, the Federal Ministry of Fuels and Energy, the Ministry of Agriculture and Nutrition, and the Federal Ministry of Metallurgy and Mining.⁵⁵ The federal deputy labor minister, who presided over the meeting, acquainted all present with the content of Vietnamese demands and asked them to express their positions on them. In the discussion, the various Czechoslovak officials and administrators rejected some of the Vietnamese demands outright but decided on compromise counteroffers to others. The Czech deputy labor minister informed his Vietnamese counterpart of the outcome of the meeting in a letter.⁵⁶ In the letter, he offered a compromise in regard to the workers employed in agriculture, construction, and forestry. After first noting that the workers could not be transferred to other industries “since they [were] already included in the work plans for the years 1983 and 1984 and thus their departures would threaten the meeting of the goals set by the companies employing them,” he then proceeded to promise that the workers would not be assigned to outdoor work in winter. This was a compromise measure that sanctioned, on the highest political level, the ad hoc solution that was, as we saw, originally devised by the clerks at the Czech Labor Ministry who administered the program and dealt with day-to-day issues as they arose and were brought to their attention (either by Czechoslovak companies’ management or the Vietnamese Embassy). The

⁵⁵ MPSV, “Zápis z porady na federálním ministerstvu práce a sociálních věcí k projednání výsledků jednání s delegací ministerstva práce VSR v dubnu 1983,” dated 19 May, 1983.

⁵⁶ MPSV, Letter from deputy labor minister Ing Milan Kyselý to SRV Deputy Labor Minister Nguyen Van Diep, dated 24 October 1983.

compromise addressed the climate and health concerns of the workers, but not the economic part of their discontent, i.e., the low wages common in these sectors.

In January 1984, the Czechoslovak deputy labor minister met with the Vietnamese ambassador to Czechoslovakia in order to agree on the issues that would be discussed during an upcoming trip by the Vietnamese labor minister to Czechoslovakia.⁵⁷ One of these was the question of the workers assigned to work in agriculture, forestry, and construction. It seems likely that the issue was raised again since the earlier response of deputy labor minister – which, as we just saw, consisted in the offer to secure indoor jobs for these workers during winter months – was not satisfactory to the Vietnamese side. The Czechoslovak side continued to resist the suggestion that these workers be completely transferred out of these sectors, arguing that the transfer would mean that the Czechoslovak “industrial factories would gain, for all practical purposes, unqualified labor force, while the workers had already gained some qualifications in those sectors.” Still, the Czechoslovak administrators did not exclude the possibility entirely. Instead, they insisted that such transfers “should take place only in exceptional cases and to a limited extent.” In other words, the Czechoslovak officials were reluctant to make a wholesale policy change, but they were receptive to the Vietnamese side’s demands and accommodated them in a piecemeal fashion.

⁵⁷ MPSV, “Stanovisko k jednotlivým otázkám projednávaným mezi s. nám. Ing. Kyselým, Csc. a velvyslancem VSR v Praze 4.1.1984 v Praze,” 11 January 1984.

Preparing for this new round of talks with the Vietnamese labor ministry representatives, which were to take place in March 1984, the Czech Labor Ministry prepared a document with the issues its representatives wanted to discuss. Attached to the document was a list of the main concerns put forth by the Vietnamese side.⁵⁸ The concerns were identical to those the representatives of the two countries already discussed, and as such included the request to transfer the workers *doing simple unqualified jobs, particularly in agriculture, forestry, and construction*, to jobs in which they could gain qualifications in technical production skills. What is significant about this is that the question of transfer out of these jobs was now, for the first time in official Czechoslovak documents, tied directly not to just concerns over weather, climate, and health but also to the question of training and qualifications, and thus indirectly to wages. In other words, the agriculture etc. matter was now officially tied to the core issues animating the training and labor exchange program as it was originally conceived. That is to say, to issues upon which the identity of the program – as a program of cooperation between two state-socialist countries aiming at mutually beneficial economic development projects – rested.

The record⁵⁹ of the meetings that took place during the first two weeks of March 1984 opened with the declaration that “the cooperation is advantageous to both sides and it is

⁵⁸ MPSV, “Otázky k jednání -- K jednání s delegací vietnamského ministerstva práce,” 5 March 1984.

⁵⁹ MPSV, “Zápis z jednání delegací ministerstva práce a sociálních věcí ČSSR a Ministerstva práce VSR o výsledcích realizace mezivládní Dohody ze dne 27. listopadu 1980 a o návrzích opatření na zlepšení další spolupráce na úseku dočasného zaměstnávání kvalifikovaných pracovníků VSR spojeného s další odbornou přípravou v československých organizacích,” 15 March 1984.

being implemented based on the principles of socialist internationalism,” and that “both sides evaluate it positively.” A slight shift in the positions on some issues occurred at the meeting. Most relevant to the argument I pursue in this paper is that the Czechoslovak side promised to “gradually reassign” the workers without any formal qualifications but demonstrating that they had what it took to more complex jobs so that they would acquire some qualifications during their time in Czechoslovakia. Czechoslovak officials also agreed to transfer at least some workers out from agriculture, forestry, and construction in the course of 1984. However, the Vietnamese side’s request for minimum wage, now raised to Kčs1,300, was met with the same reasoning as before: “if Vietnamese workers observe work discipline, they achieve wages even higher than that.” To further bolster their argument, the Czechoslovak officials showed the Vietnamese delegation tables with average earnings of Vietnamese workers as well as those with average earnings of Czechoslovak workers in the same positions, which, reportedly showed that “there is not any marked difference between the two.” The Czechoslovak side, nonetheless, promised to “look into the cases in which the wages of Vietnamese workers are low, and, in justified cases, to see to it that the situation be rectified.” Once again, while formal policy was not revised, compromise, piecemeal and ad hoc solutions were sought and implemented.

The representatives of the Czechoslovak branch ministries in charge of the companies employing Vietnamese workers met again in the middle of April 1984 to discuss the

proposals presented by the Vietnamese side at the March meeting.⁶⁰ Along with the other demands, the request that Vietnamese workers not be assigned to simple and auxiliary jobs – which, as we saw, was connected with the problem of the agricultural, forestry and construction jobs – was discussed as well. The response from the Czechoslovak officials was that since most arriving workers lack qualifications, they must be classified in the 2nd qualification class during the first two years, which are understood as a training period, and only once this training period is completed can they be reassigned to qualified work. At the same time, however, it was emphasized that this reality notwithstanding, the workers “must not be assigned to simple jobs, which do not contribute to their future qualifications.” A subtle but important shift also took place in regard to the agriculture etc. jobs. On the one hand, the representatives of the Czechoslovak ministries expressed their opposition to a “mass transfer” of Vietnamese workers from agriculture, forestry, and construction into industrial enterprises. At the same time, however, they allowed for individual transfers of “up to 250 people.” In addition, their position was that the workers assigned to these sectors had to fulfill the entire 4-year contract, and only *then* could be assigned to new jobs in industrial companies for additional two years. So, while the piecemeal approach to accommodation continued, there was now a shift from moving workers occasionally and on a case-by-case basis to actually coming up with a figure, as well as specification of more formal rules as to how the Czechoslovak side would like to see this happen (i.e., through the signing of additional work contracts).

⁶⁰ MPSV, “Zápis z porady k výsledkům jednání s delegací ministerstva práce VSR ve dnech 1.-15. března 1984, konané na federálním ministerstvu práce a sociálních věcí dne 12. dubna 1984,” dated 13 April 1984.

Still, this pressure from the Vietnamese side notwithstanding, Czechoslovak agricultural enterprises – plagued by labor shortages and difficulty to recruit local labor force due to the combination of low wages and hard work – continued to covet Vietnamese work force. In October 1984, for example, the Czechoslovak Agriculture Ministry – i.e., the ministry in charge of the companies providing precisely the jobs that the Vietnamese workers and officials did *not* want – requested 2,775 Vietnamese workers.⁶¹ Agricultural companies, cooperative farms, and food-processing factories (whose production processes and targets were directly linked to those of agricultural companies) were putting pressure on the Labor Ministry as, according to a report, starch plants, fat-processing factories, bakeries, canning factories, and distilleries saw themselves as unable to proceed with regular production without foreign workers.⁶² A subsequent report, in part reacting to the earlier one, argued that the agricultural and food-processing companies had mostly themselves to blame for running into trouble, as they had to be ready for the fact that foreign workers' contracts would run out and were supposed to take that expectation into account in their planning.⁶³ Nonetheless, this report, too, described the negotiations, either already completed or in progress, aiming at securing labor force for these companies.

⁶¹ Letter from Agriculture Ministry to the Czech deputy labor minister, dated 9 October 1984.

⁶² MPSV, "Informace pro soudruha ministra Ing. Vladislava Třešku, CSc ve věci zahraničních pracovníků, v resortu MZVŽ ČSR (jak pro zemědělské podniky, tak pro potravinářský průmysl," dated 24 February 1986.

⁶³ MPSV, Informace pro soudruha ministra Dr. Hamerníka ve věci zahraničních pracovníků, v resortu ministerstva zemědělství a výživy ČSR,"dated 27 March 1986.

The following case illustrates the predicament in which the Czechoslovak Labor Ministry found itself as it was scrambling to accommodate Vietnamese side's requests for transfer of its workers into industrial enterprises. After the Labor Ministry arranged for a transfer of a group of 24 Vietnamese workers from a construction company to a glass factory, it received a rather upset response from the Construction Industry Ministry, in which the head of the labor force department expressed frustration about the glassworks company "poaching" the Vietnamese workers, claiming that the actions of the company "violate norms of normal behavior, by any definition."⁶⁴ From the correspondence it ensues that after being first notified about the impending transfer, the Construction Industry Ministry protested, and got the Labor Ministry to rescind its decision to move Vietnamese workers out of construction. However, the Vietnamese Embassy, for its part, did not accept the rescission, and insisted on the transfer of the group out of the construction industry,⁶⁵ arguing that the workers were used to work only in unskilled or auxiliary jobs, which did not provide them with qualifications, and "most of the transferred workers were former members of Vietnamese Army for whom the Vietnamese side wants to secure qualifications."⁶⁶ To pacify the Construction Industry Ministry, the Labor Ministry scrambled to transfer some 100 workers into some of the companies under its purview. Also, the Ministry asked the Embassy to wait with transfers until the end of the original four-year contracts.

⁶⁴ MPSV, Letter from Ing. Vladimír Rudolf, the director of the Department of Labor Force Reproduction at the Construction Industry Ministry, to J. Šretr, the head of the Labor Force Department at the Czech Labor Ministry, dated 21 March 1986; Letter from Pavel Měchura, deputy construction industry minister, dated 8 April 1986.

⁶⁵ MPSV, Letter from Václav Karas, the deputy labor minister of the Czech Socialist Republic, to Pavel Měchura, deputy construction industry minister, dated 18 April 1986.

⁶⁶ MPSV, "Převod vietnamských pracovníků z rezortu MSv ČSR," MPSV, 17 July 1986.

Thus, the Czechoslovak Labor Ministry, the main administrator of the program on the Czechoslovak side, was under pressure from two sides: On the one hand, from the Vietnamese partners, who urged the transfer of their workers out of certain companies, and, on the other hand, from Czechoslovak companies, or their respective ministries, which kept pushing for *their* interests and making requests for the allocation of Vietnamese workers due to the labor shortages they were facing. Hence, the Czechoslovak Labor Ministry found itself between a rock and a hard place, as the saying goes: pressured on the one hand by its Vietnamese partners not to assign Vietnamese workers to agricultural, forestry, and construction jobs, and simultaneously under pressure from the Czechoslovak companies precisely in these sectors asking it to recruit Vietnamese labor for them. This simultaneous pressure in opposite directions probably goes a long way toward accounting for the piecemeal method the Labor Ministry used to deal with the problem.

Vietnamese officials' activity was not limited to official talks and to pushing for measures that would apply to entire groups of workers. Sometimes, they took up cases of individual workers. In November 1984, for example, the Vietnamese Embassy in Prague informed the Czech Labor Ministry that its staff made trips to two work sites from which workers had repeatedly asked for transfer elsewhere.⁶⁷ The Embassy officials reported that "a majority of workers there [were] only engaged in . . . arduous and unskilled labor with low wages. . . In

⁶⁷ MPSV, Letter from Dr. Nguyen Phuc Loc, CSc., the head of the Department for Workers' Care at the Vietnamese Embassy in Prague, to Ing. Karel Kozelka, the head of the Foreign Workers Secretariat at the Czech Labor Ministry, dated 12 November 1984.

addition, the housing conditions are not good or comfortable either.” To make their case more convincing, the Embassy staff added, similar to the case above, that “the workers. . .are for the most part former soldiers, who fought for peace and socialism on the front lines. They came to Czechoslovakia with the greatest goal to acquire skills for their future during their four-year stay. That is why we ask you, comrade department head, to transfer these workers [to other companies].” Judging by hand-written comments on the margins of the letter, this appeal was successful. A Czech Labor Ministry clerk wrote: “Please, discuss with comrade Pospíchalová, and make the transfer possible – the reasons are skill-related. . .they are doing unskilled work and risky one at that; we have to accommodate the Vietnamese side!” In another case, in 1987, the Embassy was asked to approve a transfer of its workers between companies belonging to the same concern.⁶⁸ The Embassy agreed, but with conditions. It noted that in one of the companies to which some of the workers were to be moved “work is more demanding but wages are lower. . .Moreover, [the skills acquired in] some of the jobs the workers would perform [in the new company] will not be likely applicable in Vietnam in near future, whereas the jobs [in the current company] have comparable counterparts in Vietnam’s construction industry.”⁶⁹ The Embassy eventually did issue its approval, acknowledging the dire need for labor force communicated to it by the Czech Labor Ministry, but conditioned this approval on the workers receiving the same wages and social benefits in the new company as they did in their old jobs. This may

⁶⁸ MPSV, Letter from JUDr. Miloš Brunclík, the head of the Foreign Workers' Secretariat at the Czech Labor Ministry, to Do Tan Xua, the head of the Department for Workers' Care at the Vietnamese Embassy, dated 26 March 1987.

⁶⁹ MPSV, Letter from Do Tan Xua, the head of the Department for Workers' Care at the VN Embassy, to JUDr. Miloš Brunclík, the head of the Foreign Workers' Secretariat at the Czech Labor Ministry, dated 14 April 1987.

indicate that, by this point in time, the concern over workers' immediate interests, i.e., their wages, trumped, for Vietnamese officials, the larger concerns over development of Vietnam, which was tied to the question of qualifications.

Documents suggest that the pressure of the Vietnamese Government for the improvement of Vietnamese workers' living and working conditions may have borne fruit also in the form of a more systematic monitoring by the Czechoslovak Labor Ministries of those conditions. Czech archival collections contain reports from inspections carried out by the Czech Labor Ministry in Czechoslovak enterprises employing Vietnamese workers. The first such record comes from 1985 (there are others from subsequent years, but none earlier). The evidence is not conclusive since we cannot be sure that the archival record is complete, nonetheless, the introduction of these inspections would make sense in the light of the Vietnamese Government's vehement criticism in May 1984, which led to a temporary suspension of the guest worker program. The 1985 inspection took place in a company manufacturing television sets.⁷⁰ It was probably also not by coincidence that of the 202 Vietnamese citizens that this company employed, 128 joined it after being transferred there from their earlier job assignments in agricultural companies. Performing the inspection (*prověrka*) in this organization would thus address at least two of Vietnamese side's concerns: the working and living conditions of its workers, and their transfer out of agriculture, forestry, and construction. According to the report, the results of the inspection were by and large positive. The workers in the company belonged to the 4th,

⁷⁰ NA, "Záznam z prověrky zaměstnání zahr. prac. v k.p. TESLA Rožnov," dated 18 November 1985.

5th, and 6th (i.e., higher) salary brackets, thus making decent wages (especially in the context of the Vietnamese Government's demand for Kčs1,300 monthly minimum) – the averages being, depending on production line, between Kčs2,057 to Kčs3,630, with the lowest individual wage being Kčs1,909 and the highest one as much as Kčs5,817. That being said, the wages were clearly boosted by the substantial number of overtime hours – an average of 23 overtime hours per worker per month. The report also noted that the Vietnamese laborers worked in “the sections of production not characterized by excessive noise levels or toxicity. Their working environment [was] clean, spacious, well lit, and air-conditioned.” Reportedly, the company even engaged the services of a psychologist when making the decisions about assigning Vietnamese workers to “special sections” in terms of work safety, or the level of danger of on-the-job injuries, and the report deemed the overall percentage level of injury rate “low.”

In October 1984, the Czechoslovak Labor Minister advised his Vietnamese counterpart in a letter⁷¹ of the stances that the Czechoslovak side assumed to the request raised at the March meeting (that were debated by the representatives of the branch ministries). The letter said that 315 workers would be transferred out of agricultural, forestry and construction companies into industrial enterprises; this was 65 more people than the number that was given as the upper limit during the talks. This shows the efficacy of the pressure mounted by Vietnamese officials and their ability to mold how the labor exchange scheme was unfolding in practice. At the end of March and in the beginning of April 1985, a

⁷¹ MPSV, Letter from Czechoslovak Labor Minister Miloslav Bod'a to Vietnamese Labor Minister Dao Thien Thi, dated 12 October 1984.

delegation led by the head of the Labor Department at the Czechoslovak Labor Ministry flew to Hanoi to meet with its counterpart.⁷² During the subsequent meeting, the Vietnamese representatives expressed “positive appreciation”⁷³ for the transfer of 315 workers from agriculture, forestry and construction into industrial companies, and at the same time asked that other workers are similarly transferred in the course 1985. The Czech Labor Ministry put forth an effort to comply but, as we just saw, it was a difficult terrain to navigate.

At the end of June 1986, a delegation from the Czechoslovak Labor Ministry traveled to Hanoi to meet with the representatives of the Vietnamese State Committee for Technical Training to discuss further development in the apprentice-worker form of the program.⁷⁴ During the same trip, the same Czechoslovak delegation also met with the representatives of the Vietnamese Labor Ministry to discuss the contract worker form of the program.⁷⁵ To begin with, each side expressed general satisfaction with the program but both also, as before, pointed out “certain shortcomings.” For the Czechoslovak side, these meant “certain,” unspecified “negative phenomena that have appeared in the groups of Vietnamese workers.” The Vietnamese side directed its criticism at the cases when

⁷² MPSV, “Zápis o jednání delegací expertů Ministerstva práce a sociálních věcí ČSSR a Ministerstva práce VSR o spolupráci při provádění vládní Dohody ze dne 27. listopadu 1980 o dočasném zaměstnávání kvalifikovaných vietnamských pracovníků spojeném s další odbornou přípravou v čs. organizacích,” the meeting took place from 28 March 1985 through 3 April 1985.

⁷³ Ibid. (“Zápis o jednání delegací expertů . . .)

⁷⁴ MPSV, “Zápis z jednání delegací federálního ministerstva práce a sociálních věcí ČSSR a Státního výboru pro odbornou přípravu VSR,” dated 1 July 1986.

⁷⁵ Ibid. (“Záznam z jednání delegace federálního ministerstva práce. . .)

Vietnamese citizens were employed in jobs through which they acquired skills “that they [could not] use upon their return to Vietnam.” It also expressed the wish that *all* the remaining workers engaged in “simple work” in agriculture, forestry, and construction be transferred to industrial companies.

From 1987 on, the issue of transfers from agriculture, forestry, and construction disappears from the list of requests presented by the Vietnamese side to its Czechoslovak counterpart during the regular meetings. Since other demands continue to be raised – indeed, some new requests are added (for instance, the request that Vietnamese workers receive “separation allowance,”⁷⁶ normally a sum of money paid to Czechoslovak workers if they worked temporarily far away from home), it is reasonable to assume that the issue of transfers out of agricultural, forestry, and construction jobs was resolved to the Vietnamese side’s satisfaction. Indirect evidence of the satisfactory resolution is the *Executive Protocol*⁷⁷ signed at the meeting between the representatives of the Czechoslovak Federal Labor Ministry with the Vietnamese Ministry of Labor, War Invalids and Social Affairs, in December 1987. The protocol specified that a total number 2,945 Vietnamese citizens would arrive for work in Czechoslovakia, and that they would arrive based on cooperation between, respectively: the Czechoslovak Federal Ministry of Metallurgy and Heavy

⁷⁶ MPSV, “Záznam z jednání delegací federálního ministerstva práce a sociálních věcí ČSSR a ministerstva práce, válečných invalidů a sociálních věcí VSR,” record from the meeting that took place between 7 and 14 December 1987 in Prague.

⁷⁷ NA, “Prováděcí protokol o spolupráci mezi Československou socialistickou republikou a Vietnamskou socialistickou republikou v oblasti dočasného zaměstnávání kvalifikovaných pracovníků Vietnamské socialistické republiky spojeného s další odbornou přípravou v československých organizacích v roce 1988,” signed 14 December 1987 in Prague.

Engineering and the Vietnamese Ministry of Engineering and Metallurgy; the Czechoslovak Federal Ministry of General Engineering and the Vietnamese Ministry of Transport and the Central Technical Authority of the Vietnamese Ministry of National Defense, and finally, between the Czechoslovak company ČKD Praha and the Vietnamese Railway Authority. The Ministry of Agriculture was notably missing from the list.

Conclusion

To the extent that the existing literature on state-socialist labor migration programs considers the role of the sending government, it tends to limit its focus on the “intense and intrusive surveillance” and “rigorous control”⁷⁸ the state maintained over its workers abroad.⁷⁹ It also tends to reduce the programs to their 1980s contract-worker phase and dismisses the internationalist impulses that motivated their introduction two decades earlier as a “fig leaf.”⁸⁰ In this article I provide a more complex picture of one of these schemes, the Vietnamese-Czechoslovak training and labor exchange program. The reconstruction of the program’s history based on Czech archival material provides us with robust evidence that the activity of the Vietnamese government went far beyond surveillance and control of its workers; it also included a strong advocacy for the workers’ interests, rights, and working conditions. This is not to deny that the Vietnamese

⁷⁸ Zatlin, *op.cit.*, p. 712. See also Dennis, *op.cit.*, p. 344.

⁷⁹ For an exception, see Schwenkel, “Socialist Mobilities...” *op. cit.*

⁸⁰ Konrad H. Jarausch, “Beyond Uniformity: The Challenge of Historicizing the GDR” in *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR* (New York, Berghahn Books, 1999).

government *also* made an effort to keep control over its workers for its own purposes. It did this by using information about the behavior of the workers conveyed to its representatives at the Vietnamese Embassy in Prague by group leaders, interpreters and organizers, whose job it was to, among other things, act as liaisons between the workers and the Vietnamese officials and administrators of the program. However, my claim is that the very same channels that the Vietnamese state used for controlling its workers played a dual role. These channels were also used as by workers to communicate their discontent and grievances to Vietnamese officials and administrators. In the right circumstances, that is to say when the higher-ups found the complaints warranted, these communication channels were the means through which the workers were able to mobilize the officials' active support for their interests and rights. As I have shown here, this turned out to be an effective strategy for pushing for workers' interests, especially when those interests coincided with the interests of the Vietnamese state, as articulated and understood by the officials involved in the program's administration. In other words, the agency and the repertoires of action available to the three main groups of Vietnamese actors – the migrant workers, the staff at the embassy in Prague, and the staff of the Vietnamese Labor Ministry in Hanoi responsible for the labor scheme – were each different. The workers used two main means to push for their interests: (1) engaging in industrial action, and (2) communicating their discontents and complaints through the channels established by the Vietnamese state (the network of group leaders and organizers reporting to the embassy). The principal way the Vietnamese Embassy staff used their capacity to act was through informal and semi-formal talks with the clerks responsible for the running of the program at the Czech (and presumably Slovak, due to the federal structure of the country) Labor

Ministry when addressing specific situation and incidents as they arose. The embassy staff also reported to government authorities in Hanoi. I do not have access to these communications but the materials and minutes from the meetings between the Czechoslovak and Vietnamese Labor Ministries' representatives make it clear that such communication, one in which the case was made for workers' demands and complaints, must have taken place. These Vietnamese governmental administrators then used the power they had as high-level state officials to push for more comprehensive solutions to the issues first identified by the workers. Because the state played such a crucial role in state socialist economy, it was vital that these high-level officials get involved in the workers' disputes. Indeed, one could argue that this very fact – the state's heavy involvement in the economy – often treated as one of the main drawbacks of the planned economy, was, in fact, one of the most important resources that the workers could (indirectly) tap into in their efforts to push for their interests and rights.

The history of the contention over and negotiations about the demand that Vietnamese workers be transferred out of jobs in agriculture, forestry, and construction also provides us with a productive way of reading and conceptualizing the last phase of this labor exchange program. Specifically, it highlights the tension that existed between, on the one hand, the altruistic and internationalist elements of the scheme, which provided an ideological anchor for the project during its inception, and the emphasis on economic advantageousness, which came to be seen as the dominant rationale for the labor exchange during its last phase, in the 1980s. This focus on economic advantageousness was the motor behind Czechoslovak companies' seemingly unquenchable requests for the

allocation of Vietnamese labor power, as well as, on the other side, the reason for Vietnamese government's efforts to dispatch as many of its citizens for work overseas as it could manage (a Czechoslovak report written in late 1980s noted that "the Vietnamese side puts practically no limits on the numbers of its citizens who could be sent to work in Czechoslovakia"⁸¹). However, the verve with which this utilitarian framing of the project was gaining dominance in the 1980s should not make us blind to the role that the internationalist impulses continued to play in it. These impulses are evident in the language of the arguments used by Vietnamese embassy officials (referring to the debt to the Vietnam war veterans to be repaid in the form of fair wages and good working conditions during their stints in Czechoslovakia) and, perhaps even more importantly, in the responsiveness to this language on the part of the Czechoslovak administrators of the program at the Czechoslovak Labor Ministry. Yet, sometimes, the vernacular of internationalism was insufficient during tough bargaining sessions at the negotiating table, and during those times, Vietnamese government representatives, resorted to other strategies.. A former Vietnamese embassy official told me that, on at least one occasion, he obtained figures on Vietnamese workers' wages at a particular company and the extent to which their productivity contributed to the productivity of the enterprise and then presented these figures to the Czechoslovak administrators with whom he and his colleagues were negotiating higher wages for Vietnamese workers at the company.⁸² Using the figures, the official argued that the benefits of the workers' productivity should be

⁸¹ MPSV, "Zpráva o současném stavu odborné přípravy a dočasného zaměstnávání zahraničních občanů v československých organizacích a o výhledu této spolupráce do roku 1990."

⁸² Interview, 17 April 2011.

shared fairly by all sides (the company, the workers, and the two states). According to this official's account, this was a fruitful approach that helped in reaching a mutually agreeable solution to the case at hand. This anecdote embodies the tensions and complexities of the 1980s phase of the program as it showcases the way in which economic rationality and rationales were sometimes intertwined and other times in conflict with the ideals of fairness, and thus the spirit (and letter) of socialist internationalism. It may be one of the more poignant ironies of the program that it was the increasing quasi-marketization and economization of the program that spurred the representatives of the Vietnamese state to behave as the guardians of socialist internationalism and principles.