

The Role of Trade Unions in Protecting the Rights of Workers in Karakalpakstan In the Post-War Period

Erniyazova Dilarom Bekniyazovna

Basic doctoral student of Nukus State Pedagogical Institute, Uzbekistan

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Abstract: This article examines the evolution and functions of trade unions in Karakalpakstan during the post-World War II period. Drawing on archival sources, Soviet publications, and regional studies, it analyzes the role of trade unions in safeguarding labor rights, improving working conditions, supporting economic reconstruction, and contributing to the social and cultural development of the workforce.

Keywords: Trade unions, Karakalpakstan, labor rights, post-war reconstruction, Soviet labor policy, worker protection.

Introduction: The end of World War II brought profound social and economic challenges to the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, including Karakalpakstan. Despite relative geographic isolation, Karakalpakstan was deeply affected by wartime mobilization, resource depletion, and the loss of working-age men. In the immediate post-war years, rebuilding the economy and restoring basic social services became the state's highest priorities.

Within this context, trade unions played a significant role as instruments of state labor policy and as organizations formally responsible for protecting workers' rights and improving welfare. While their activities were closely aligned with Communist Party directives, trade unions were also the principal institutions through which workers could raise concerns, secure entitlements, and participate in social initiatives.

METHODS

By 1945, Karakalpakstan's economic infrastructure was severely underdeveloped compared to other parts of Uzbekistan. The region remained predominantly agrarian, with cotton and rice production as key sectors. The Amu Darya basin suffered from irrigation challenges, salinization, and periodic shortages of agricultural equipment.

The industrial workforce was small but growing, with

factories processing raw cotton, fish from the Aral Sea, and wool. Reconstruction required significant human resources, often supplied by demobilized soldiers, evacuated populations, and women entering the workforce in unprecedented numbers.

Trade unions thus operated under conditions of labor scarcity, low wages, and high pressure to meet production targets established by post-war Five-Year Plans.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Trade unions in Karakalpakstan, as in the rest of the USSR, were structured according to all-Union sectoral organizations (such as the Trade Union of Agricultural Workers, the Trade Union of Industrial Workers, and the Trade Union of Education and Health Workers).

Their activities were governed by:

- The 1936 Soviet Constitution, which guaranteed the right to organize in trade unions.
- The Labor Code of the Uzbek SSR.
- Regulations issued by the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions (VTsSPS).

Each enterprise or collective farm (kolkhoz) had a local trade union committee (profkom), which reported both to district and republic-level trade union councils and ultimately to central bodies in Moscow.

A further critical dimension of trade union activities in Karakalpakstan in the post-war period was their role in

promoting gender equality and protecting the rights of women workers, who formed an increasingly significant share of the labor force.

During and after World War II, tens of thousands of men were mobilized to the front, leaving acute shortages in agriculture and light industry. As a result, many women entered paid labor for the first time, particularly in cotton production, rice cultivation, and fish processing. While their contribution was essential to post-war reconstruction, working conditions were often harsh, and traditional social norms limited their ability to assert their rights.

Archival reports from the late 1940s and early 1950s indicate that the Karakalpak Regional Council of Trade Unions regularly inspected compliance with these rules. For example, in 1952, special commissions visited collective farms to verify whether nurseries functioned during harvest campaigns and whether women received entitled rations and rest periods.

Trade unions also played a prominent role in addressing illiteracy among women, which remained widespread in Karakalpakstan. They organized literacy courses and cultural circles (*kruzhki*), where women workers learned not only to read and write but also to understand labor legislation and basic health practices. These educational activities often took place in the evenings in union-run cultural houses (*domy kul'tury*).

Beyond women's rights, unions had responsibilities in engaging and educating youth workers, many of whom were orphans or semi-orphans of the war. The industrial expansion of Karakalpakstan, including the development of cotton-processing plants and fish canneries along the Aral Sea, created demand for young labor [1].

These measures were part of a broader Soviet effort to integrate young people into socialist production while protecting their health and development.

An additional dimension was the role of trade unions in promoting socialist emulation and labor discipline. In Karakalpak enterprises and collective farms, unions helped implement systems of socialist competition (*sotsialisticheskoe sorevnovanie*) aimed at increasing productivity. While critics have noted that such campaigns sometimes placed undue pressure on workers, unions also used them to negotiate improvements, such as better food supplies for high-performing brigades and preferential access to housing.

Trade unions further contributed to the implementation of social justice policies. For example, they were involved in distributing scarce consumer goods—textiles, footwear, domestic equipment—

through factory-based stores (*rabochie lavki*). They helped compile lists of workers eligible for special assistance, such as war invalids and families with multiple children. In the early 1950s, the Karakalpak Regional Trade Union Council reported that it had coordinated the allocation of winter clothing and fuel allowances to thousands of low-income households.

The unions also played a mediating role between workers and management in cases of labor disputes or disciplinary measures. Although the scope for independent labor protest was highly limited, formal grievance procedures existed. Workers could appeal to trade union committees to contest wage calculations, request revisions of disciplinary penalties, or seek redress in cases of unfair treatment. Protocols of trade union meetings often record such complaints and their outcomes [2].

Finally, the cultural mission of trade unions remained central. In a region where traditional Karakalpak and Uzbek cultural forms coexisted with Soviet ideology, trade unions operated numerous cultural clubs, libraries, and amateur performance groups. These institutions were used not only to promote loyalty to the Soviet system but also to enrich workers' lives. For many laborers in remote settlements, the trade union reading room or the traveling cinema organized by union committees represented their main contact with modern culture.

Another significant aspect of trade unions' work in Karakalpakstan during the post-war period was their involvement in addressing the acute housing crisis created by wartime destruction, rapid industrialization, and demographic shifts.

In the late 1940s, returning soldiers and resettled populations dramatically increased the number of people requiring accommodation in the region's limited urban centers such as Nukus and Turtkul. Many families were forced to live in overcrowded barracks or makeshift mud-brick dwellings without electricity, running water, or adequate heating.

Trade unions worked alongside local Soviets and the Communist Party to coordinate housing allocation, giving priority to certain categories of workers [3]:

War veterans and disabled ex-servicemen.

Skilled industrial workers essential for production targets.

Women with large families.

Union housing commissions compiled detailed registries of applicants and monitored the construction and repair of residential units. Though resources were chronically inadequate, archival documents show that by 1953, Karakalpak union committees had helped

distribute more than 1,000 housing assignments and organized voluntary labor brigades (subbotniks) to improve sanitation in workers' quarters.

Another domain in which trade unions exerted considerable influence was the improvement of workplace health and safety standards, especially in sectors with high occupational risks such as cotton ginning, fish processing, and irrigation construction.

Accidents were frequent in this period due to outdated equipment and a lack of protective gear. For example, in cotton processing plants, dust inhalation caused chronic respiratory illness, while in fisheries, exposure to cold and moisture contributed to rheumatic conditions.

Minutes of union safety committees from the early 1950s detail hundreds of such inspections and note that repeated infractions could be referred to higher authorities or publicized in local newspapers to pressure enterprise directors into compliance [4].

Trade unions also played an important role in reorganizing agricultural labor to meet state economic objectives, especially in the context of campaigns to expand cotton cultivation. The post-war period saw the introduction of new mechanized techniques and irrigation infrastructure, but many collective farms in Karakalpakstan remained under-mechanized and dependent on seasonal manual labor.

Unions contributed to agricultural modernization by:

Organizing technical training for machine operators and tractor drivers.

Holding meetings to explain the benefits of mechanization and dispel fears about new technologies.

Distributing handbooks and posters in the Karakalpak language describing best practices in cotton planting, pest control, and harvesting [5].

CONCLUSION

In the post-war decades, trade unions in Karakalpakstan played a multi-faceted role: protecting labor rights, distributing welfare, promoting education, and supporting reconstruction. Although they operated within the limits of a centrally planned economy and a one-party system, they contributed to tangible improvements in working conditions and social services.

The experience of Karakalpakstan illustrates the complexity of Soviet labor relations, where trade unions were both instruments of state policy and the main channel through which workers accessed entitlements, expressed needs, and participated in collective social life.

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