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The treacherous trade unionist: Paraschiva B. Ion and labour activism in the Romanian tobacco sector, 1920s to 1940s

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ABSTRACT

What did it mean to be a woman labour activist in a state-owned industry in Romania before 1945? In this article, I construct a political biography of Paraschiva B. Ion, a worker and trade unionist in the “Belvedere” tobacco factory in Bucharest during the interwar period. P. B. Ion led factory- and national-level social democratic trade unions and served as an elected delegate to factory-level and municipal-level workers’ representative bodies. At the same time, she participated in labour control practices, including during the Second World War. I argue that P. B. Ion’s career illustrates how, in the interwar period, women labour activists in social democratic trade unions in Romania could become more prominent participants in labour governance on the shop floor, municipal, and national levels while not being involved in labour governance at the international scale. Like other trade unionists in Europe, at times, P.B. Ion supported certain claims made by women workers (including through expert knowledge production) and at other times restrained them. I position P. B. Ion’s activism in a domestic context marked by competing labour agitation and organizing in the tobacco sector, activities shaped by a legal framework that hindered labour organizing.

KEYWORDS

women’s labour activism;
interwar; Romania; trade
unions; tobacco

This article constructs a “union work” biography of Paraschiva B. Ion, a controversial labour activist in the state-owned “Belvedere” Tobacco Factory (Belvedere) in Bucharest and in the reformist Union of Workers from Match and Tobacco Factories in Romania (UWMTR) during the interwar period. I argue that P. B. Ion’s career illustrates how, in the interwar period, women labour activists in social democratic trade unions in Romania could become more prominent participants in labour governance on the shop floor, municipal, and national levels while not being involved directly in the internationalization of labour governance (unlike male colleagues of similar national prominence). Also, this biography shows how women’s labour activism in reformist trade union structures could help co-produce forms of labour governance that did not always lead to better outcomes for workers. I suggest that P. B. Ion’s trajectory illustrates that although the interwar period has been characterized heretofore as an era defined by increased political polarization,

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a seasoned activist's choices and tactics could be shaped by pragmatism and ideological drift as much as her allegiance to a specific trade union organization and its internationally shaped agendas. In constructing my argument, I uncover the specifics of women's trade union work in interwar Romania.

Admittedly, interpretative challenges are posed by the combination of many easily accessible press sources with the limited number of archival sources about this activist, the latter of which makes it difficult to reconstruct how P. B. Ion's specific life experiences shaped her political choices. To overcome these challenges, this article homes in on Paraschiva B. Ion's professional trajectory to identify the gendering of interwar trade unionism in Romania and beyond; it does not seek to reconstruct personal motivations..

Recent research on interwar Romanian labour history reveals that labour organizing in industry was difficult because of political divisions and distrust among workers within the context of both trade union competition and state repression. Adrian Grama's monograph on post-war labour regimes emphasizes that industrial work in interwar Romania was marked by low salaries, paternalist managerial practices, physical violence deployed by foremen, the sexual harassment of women workers, and distrust of labour organizers (Grama 2018, 39–55). Dan Alexandru Săvoaia's work shows that the revolutionary General Union of Revolutionary Trade Unions (UGSR) competed with the reformist General Confederation of Labour (CGM) in the 1920s. These trade unions engaged in tense and mutually suspicious cooperation during the "popular front" era of the 1930s (Săvoaia 2022, 138–140). Additionally, in 1919 and 1920, the government (especially through the Ministry of Internal Affairs) encouraged the creation of "national trade unions," pejoratively termed "yellow" unions by radicalized workers. "National trade unions" were meant to channel workers away from revolutionary organizations and towards acceptable goals (Dragne 1977, 77). Violent exploitation, trade union competition, and employer-controlled trade unions were not unusual at the time in Eastern as well as Western Europe (Millan et al. 2021). However, in Romania, state-of-siege measures, in force throughout the country or in certain areas for shorter or longer stretches of time between 1916 and 1928 and again from 1933 to 1938, further increased distrust and divisions in labour activism (Săvoaia 2022, 72).

Discussing the 1950s "politics of productivity" in Romania, Grama argues that the (by-then communist-dominated, state-integrated) General Confederation of Labour was primarily interested in defusing labour conflict to shore up productivity (Grama 2018, 106). According to Grama, post-war labour conflict was also neutralized through labour law, thus prolonging the pacification function that collective bargaining mechanisms had had during the interwar period and into the period after 1945 (Grama 2020). In part, by prioritizing legalistic trade union practices, interwar social democratic trade unionism had similar pacification effects, especially in state-owned industries. Some of Paraschiva B. Ion's actions and stances in the Belvedere factory in Bucharest and on the national political stage illuminate the complex and seemingly contradictory politics of CGM trade unionists in the interwar period. At least some workers at Belvedere perceived Ion's actions as driven by narrow self-interest.

The post-World War One internationalization of labour governance created new political arenas for some trade unionists from and in Romania. The CGM was affiliated with the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU, "the Amsterdam International") and interacted with International Labour Organisation (ILO) specialists and representatives

(Săvoaia 2022, 72). Throughout the interwar period (as after), the ILO was a key technical and norm-producing body and forum for negotiations on labour issues between employers, government representatives, and workers (Plata-Stenger 2020). Through participation in the ILO's annual International Labour Conferences (ILC), social democratic workers' representatives from Romania, always men, shaped policy but especially spoke out about the obstacles to labour organizing in the country. By participating in ILO fora, delegates from Romania gained informal access to key actors and information they could use when strategising at home (Mirescu Ion 1933–1969, 588).

One the national level, CGM trade unionists were often as much pacifiers, diffusing workers' discontent, as they were representatives of their interests. The CGM was committed to legalistic, procedural trade unionism. For instance, the Confederation welcomed the 1927 modernization of laws on collective bargaining even as it decried the general delay in the actual implementation of labour laws, particularly those relating to ratified ILO Conventions (CGM 1931, 29). However, as Ralph Darlington points out for the British case before the First World War, the development of complex bargaining mechanisms, decodable by trained and "responsible" officials reluctant to strike, brought unions closer to government interests and increased the distance between unions and (especially) unskilled workers (Darlington 2023, 18–21). In a 1924 telegram, communist trade unionists from Romania complained that social democratic trade unionists speaking at the 1924 ILC did not represent revolutionary unions and were only present in Geneva on account of their "friendship" with the Romanian government (Radu 2012, 162).

In the wider European context of the 1920s and 1930s, small but growing numbers of women labour activists from social democratic unions were playing similarly complex, scale-dependent roles as their male comrades. The period saw the emergence of a thin layer of ILO and IFTU women experts on gendered labour issues, who had been drawn from the ranks of trade union educators and organizers from Central and Western Europe (Scheiwe and Artner 2018; Zimmermann 2021). While fully committed to gender justice, some labour activists-turned-international-experts nevertheless fell in line with the gendered labour politics of their national organizations. For instance, Jeanne Chevenard (1876–1944), from the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT), supported women's access to the professions and promoted wage equality for women and men in France and in the (international) IFTU Women's Committee. Yet in the mid-1930s, she repeatedly acquiesced to the CGT's collective bargaining agreements, which enshrined gendered wages – lower for women (Zimmermann 2021, 48). In doing so, she contributed to "co-producing unequal pay" for women workers despite her open commitment to them (Zimmermann 2021, 45–46).

Integration in expert and activist labour networks posed challenges for women from Eastern European countries. Poorer labour movements in the region trained fewer cadres and produced less independent research than their counterparts elsewhere. Arguably, unless they came from the lands of the former Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy, working-class women in the region were unlikely to speak German or any other "international" language. In the 1930s, women in the Social Democratic Party and middle-class women experts from Romania were increasingly linked to women from the Labour and Socialist International and those who worked at the ILO (Botez [1937] 2006; Ghiț 2021). But Bucharest-based CGM trade union women do not seem to have been part of these networks. As shown here, their politics tended to be local and, at most, national.

Perhaps more than activists with international networks,, women labour activists in Romania were more strongly dependent on local and national goodwill and on local level actors other than the workers they represented.

The stability of the Belvedere factory was essential for state revenues and for managing the Romanian kingdom's image abroad. Founded in 1864, the Belvedere Tobacco Manufactory produced cut tobacco packages and hand-rolled thin cigars (*țigări de foi*) and cigarettes in a dedicated building starting in 1888. The Belvedere was controlled by the *Regie* (Directorate) of State Monopolies (RMS), which was itself subordinate to the Ministry of Finances; indeed, the press often referred to the Belvedere factory as "the Regie." It employed around 2,000 workers, mostly women (Duțu and Duțu 2000, 40–43). In state-socialist historiography, Belvedere appears as an important site of women's labour activism starting in the early 1900s (e.g. Marian 1965). In a volume on the General Strike in late October 1920, the women workers from Belvedere are mentioned as key revolutionary participants in the events. The volume records the layoff of five hundred women, multiple evictions from company housing, and the military trials of strike leaders (Goldberger 1970, 150, 346). In 1924, when ILO president Albert Thomas visited Romania, he was taken on an official tour of the factory so he could witness the "order that reigns in this state enterprise"—the only tour of an enterprise Thomas took during his stay in the country (Universul 1924a). From 1929 on, the Belvedere and other tobacco manufactories in Romania were controlled by the Autonomous House of the Monopolies (CAM); all profits were directed towards the payment of a sovereign loan (Enciclopedia României 1938, 630).

The state-owned tobacco industry, and especially the flagship Belvedere factory in Bucharest, were at the centre of CGM unionization efforts from the mid-1920s to the mid-1930s. Arguably, this focus was because a state employer could more easily be made to live up to its own legal commitments. At the same time, state authorities may have preferred social democratic CGM organizing to defuse women workers' communist or radical left sympathies. After all, the factory's workforce had been linked to the local socialist movement since 1906 (România Muncitoare 1906; Socialismul 1920).

Paraschiva B. Ion was one of the main trade union workers' representatives at Belvedere throughout the interwar period. She became the most nationally prominent woman CGM trade unionist, with an activist career that spanned from the mid-1920s to the early 1940s. However, she has so far been missing from both the state-socialist and the post-socialist historiography of labour in Romania. Ion's ambition and her ability to navigate changing political circumstances while engaging in labour activism in interwar Romania might explain, in part, her neglect in post-1945 historical research by researchers and erstwhile participants alike.

In 1944, Paraschiva B. Ion was denounced as an "axe handle" ("*coadă de topor*"), a collaborator with management, by communist workers at Belvedere (Scînteia 1944). Subsequently, a 1955 booklet on labour struggles at the Regie neither mentions P. B. Ion nor discusses the factory trade unions she led (Teodorescu 1955). In the three volumes of astonishingly detailed memoirs and supporting documents recorded and transcribed in 1968 by the "Collective for Memoirs and Memories" of the Institute for Historical Studies of the Romanian Communist Party, Ion Mirescu, the interwar Secretary of the General Confederation of Labour (CGM) and social democratic MP, mentions P. B. Ion's name only once – as a co-speaker

at a 1931 protest meeting against the government's economic policies (Mirescu Ion, 1933–1969), 519). This oversight seems intentional given that the two had shared the podium on many occasions before the Second World War, as press sources attest.

An almost illegible, damaged document microfilmed from a file of the court martial trials of the 1920 strike leaders provides one clue for the reason there is such silence surrounding P. B. Ion during the state-socialist period: she was proposed (but eventually, not heard) as a witness for the prosecution in the trial of one of the leaders of what the existing historiography considered a “red” (revolutionary) strike (Proces Verbal 1921). From the 1930s to 1941, Ion and her trade union colleague Sultana Călin are recorded as representing workers during nationwide “cultural propaganda” activities organized in other tobacco factories across Romania that had begun in 1927. They were led by a priest tasked and subsidized by the management to create or run paternalistic institutions (a neighbourhood church, the management of the factory creche) and plan cultural events (Șarpe 2018, 135–147; Curentul 1932; Universul 1941). Additionally, P. B. Ion may have been perceived by colleagues as an enthusiastic participant in extremely harsh labour control practices, especially if she helped enforce the militarization of Belvedere in February 1941 (Săvoaia 2022, 188). Perceived acts of treason and complicity might further account for P. B. Ion's invisibility in post-1945 published accounts discussing workers' memories of Belvedere (Femeia 1976; Teodorescu 1955).

At this point it is impossible to know whether Ion's name was obscured in state-socialist memory because she was considered a traitor or because she was seen as someone who collaborated eagerly with fascist or fascist-allied management, going above and beyond the attitude of accommodation to the Hitler-allied Marshal Antonescu regime adopted by some other reformist trade unionists between 1941 and 1942 (Săvoaia 2022, 189; Radu 2012, 228). Notably, the above-mentioned Jeanne Chevenard was recruited into the administration of Vichy France because she had enthusiastically led anticommunist purges in the CGT; considered a main collaborationist figure in Lyon, Chevenard was killed by the French Resistance in June 1944 (Moissonnier and Davranche 2022). In P. B. Ion's case, evidence about her exact wartime activities is limited; a similar depth of collaboration can neither be ruled out nor implied based on the sources available.

Information about Paraschiva B. Ion and labour activism at Belvedere included in this article comes from archived trade union publications and police records, oral history interviews with trade unionist and social democratic MP Ion Mirescu, and from recently digitized newspaper articles. Each of these types of sources has major limitations. Among others, the archived documents of the UWMTR consist of only a handful of files, including a microfilmed issue of the *Muncitorul RMS* gazette – briefly printed by the union – in which Paraschiva B. Ion is mis-named as the masculine Paraschiv B. Ion (*Muncitorul RMS* 1929). Detailed oral histories of leading (especially male) interwar labour activists collected by Romanian historians starting in the 1950s include little information about women other than partners and relatives. As feminist historians have pointed out, leading male activists – the preferred interlocutors for most social movement history projects until recently – tended to misremember women comrades or failed to mention them at all in oral histories (see Guglielmo 2010, 134). This omission seems to be the case in Mirescu's interview as well. Finally,

newspaper articles, a type of source I draw on extensively for this article, are intrinsically unreliable sources as they are products of a “vast, complex machinery of literary production and layered social networks” (Vella 2008, 218).

The quickly expanding availability of digitalized collections of Eastern European newspapers are enabling research into hitherto obscured topics. Using the keyword search (especially proper nouns), it is increasingly possible to retrieve articles and stray mentions of a specific person across a wide array of publications along the political spectrum. The depth of this digital landscape opens new possibilities for gathering information about people and institutions who were mentioned in newspaper articles but rarely, if ever, made the front page or were the main subjects of articles, i.e. information that might escape the attention of even the most systematic non-digital research into periodicals. Yet digitized newspaper collections can create a false sense of completeness and a loss of context, with keyword search results best used as starting points for “where to look” further rather than as the main method for constructing a corpus of sources (Ehrmann, Bunout, and Clavert 2023). In seeking to reconstruct P. B. Ion’s activities, I draw on digitized newspapers as key sources and as starting points for archival research from scattered fonds. The resulting combination of unreliable but diverse and polyphonic sources enable the construction of a preliminary portrait, one that might be starkly revised as more sources become available and especially once the archives of the Autonomous House of the Monopolies and the Belvedere factory become accessible to researchers.

Despite these source- and interpretation-related challenges, P. B. Ion’s trade union career helps illuminate how women labour activists were included (or included themselves) in the reformist, procedural, institution-building trade unionism of the CGM in the late 1920s and early 1930s in Romania. Furthermore, Ion’s career reveals how trade unionists shaped interwar labour governance in the state-owned tobacco sector as mediators between workers and management.

In the next section of this article, I discuss P. B. Ion’s transition from the 1924 workers’ delegate in labour arbitrations to a key member of the CGM-affiliated Belvedere factory trade union in 1928–1931. I argue that through her labour activism, Ion helped to construct a national-level framework for labour governance in which social democratic trade unions could do more sophisticated trade union work even if only minimal concessions were demanded and/or obtained. I place her evolution in the context of a growing number of adherents to the CGM and an increased interest in bringing women workers into trade unions, but also in a setting in which women workers were marginalized or (mis)represented as politically unsophisticated. I show how, as a member of the executive committee of the Union of Workers in Matches and Tobacco Factories in Romania, P. B. Ion co-coordinated a national-level campaign against the 1931 so-called “sacrifice curbs”—drastic wage and public spending cuts – and lobbied politicians for concessions for workers in various state enterprises. Ion considered the campaign and concessions achieved as both a practical and symbolic victory for women unionized within the CGM. Then, in the third section, I discuss P. B. Ion’s identifiable activities in the years after the campaign against the 1931 “sacrifice curbs,” charting her growing involvement in labour activism as a specialist on labour issues and a shop floor organizer in the context of deteriorating labour conditions, increasing communist agitation around the factory, and a mid-1930 slander campaign linked to the rivalry between Ion’s trade union and a new union initiated by her former ally at the Belvedere factory.

A woman trade unionist rising through the ranks

Paraschiva B. Ion spent over a decade of her lifelong employment at Belvedere as a leading member of a CGM-affiliated trade union. In this position, especially between the late 1920s and early 1930s, she helped define what successful reformist trade unionism looked like in a state industry in Romania. In the process, she sought to forge a different symbolic position for women tobacco workers within the local labour movement. At the same time, together with other social democratic trade unionists, she worked to associate the Belvedere factory with legalistic, procedure-oriented trade unionism.

Ion was first an executive committee member (in 1929) and became the president (by 1935) of the Union of Workers from Match and Tobacco Factories in Romania (UWMTR), the trade union for the industry. The UWMTR was a sectoral union federation, itself part of the General Confederation of Labour (CGM). In the late 1920s, the CGM was a labour body bruised by both its ongoing clashes with the communists since the 1920 strike as well as by the surveillance of the political police. When the UWMTR was created, the confederation was in the process of reconstructing itself, emboldened by the small but encouraging inroads made by social democrats in the 1927 parliamentary elections (Radu 2012, 166–195). As discussed earlier, Ion was a workers' representative in the mandatory arbitration process that in 1920 replaced the right to strike in state enterprises (Monitorul Oficial 1921).

Labour conditions in the tobacco and matches sector had steadily declined since the defeat of the 1920 strike. At Belvedere, men with skilled jobs and supervisory positions were frequently violent towards their women colleagues and/or subordinates. In 1928, a centre-left newspaper reported how, at the Bucharest tobacco factory, a "machine supervisor had beaten a pregnant woman so badly that the factory doctors prescribed her a twenty-five-day leave. The kind-hearted factory director laid off the woman for good. The unfortunate [woman] miscarried" (Dimineața 1928). This report shows how deeply gendered shop-floor violence was. Although physical violence was not uncommon on interwar shopfloors elsewhere (see Koenker 1995), the intensity of the violence coupled with the lack of repercussions for the aggressor at the Belvedere factory give pause. Further, the pace of work intensified in the 1930s as well, and with that came greater shop-floor level pressure on workers. In 1932, the Filaret match factory – a monopoly like tobacco, its sister industry – was undergoing a brutal rationalization process (Dimineața 1932b) after it had been concessioned off to the Swedish trust Svenska Tandsticks AB Group in exchange for a large state loan (see Partnoy 2010). Like match production, tobacco production was embroiled in the repayment of sovereign debt by the Romanian government. The Autonomous House of the Monopolies (CAM) became the entity that issued bonds, negotiated external market loans, and repaid loans from House proceeds on behalf of the Romanian government (Enciclopedia României 1938, 1:630).

Like most women workers in the factory, Ion would have joined Belvedere around the age of 18 (possibly earlier) as an unskilled, piece-rate worker. As mentioned earlier, Ion was linked to the trial of the leaders of the 1920 Belvedere strike. However, she remained sufficiently popular to be repeatedly elected a workers' delegate in negotiations and a factory trade union leader, especially when social democratic unions were organizing the factory. She would have been in her late thirties or early forties during

her most active period as a trade unionist if we consider that she was at least 25 years old, as legally required, when first serving as a workers' delegate in arbitration proceedings in 1924 and had not yet retired in 1944. A short report about a blackmail attempt by a journalist reveals that by 1933, Ion, like many of her factory colleagues, lived in company housing in the Grant-Belvedere neighbourhood that surrounded the factory (Curentul 1933a). By that point, she was reportedly a "supervisor," a semi-skilled position that was paid somewhat better than the typical piece-rate worker in RMS factories (Adevărul 1933).

In her capacity as workers' delegate in 1924, P. B. Ion signed an arbitration agreement to settle a labour conflict between the Ministry of Finance (head of the Regie Belvedere factory) and Belvedere workers (Universul 1924b). As a result of the arbitration, which was presided over by the Ilfov County Court of Justice, both skilled and piece-rate workers received a 25 percent salary increase along with guarantees concerning paid holiday leave, medical leave, and maternity leave. However, the piece-rate system, seemingly a point of contention, remained in place (Buletinul Muncii 1924). Ilie Șerbănescu, the confirmed head of a "national" ("yellow") trade union of skilled workers and clerks, is also listed as a workers' representative for this 1924 arbitration. Although Ion's trade union colour is not clear at this point, her subsequent affiliations suggest that she was already connected to social democratic organizations supporting Belvedere workers.

Between 1924 and 1928, coverage of the Belvedere factory in newspapers consulted for this article declined sharply. The factory and P. B. Ion's name reappear in press reports in 1928. This was the same year the previously "yellow" trade union at RMS Belvedere asked to be reaffiliated to the CGM. The reaffiliation meeting was described by CGM Secretary General Mirescu as boisterous for the almost two thousand workers present, but especially for the around 130 workers who had refused to join the yellow trade union (Mirescu Ion 1933–1969, 388).

By 1929, Ion was elected one of the secretaries of the UWMTR. The UWMTR was a branch trade union for all employees of tobacco and match factories; it was affiliated to the CGM, with ties to the small Social Democratic Party in Romania. Whereas Ion's leadership and visibility as a woman trade unionist was unusual, the social democratic drive to unionize women tobacco workers at the time was not. As discussed elsewhere, social democratic trade unionists had begun organizing women in the Cluj Tobacco Manufactory already in 1928 (Ghiț 2020), albeit in the context of less intense trade union competition in that factory.

Appearing alongside social democratic leaders, Ion spoke as the representative of workers employed by the Regie of State Monopolies at the 1929 May Day rally in Bucharest. She argued that all women (around two thousand workers) at the Regie tobacco factory were trade union members affiliated with the General Confederation of Labour and represented in Parliament by several social democratic MPs. "This is how we women from the Regie went about it, and we did well," she declaimed. "Through this, we gave you men an example. We are ahead of you! Follow our same path!" (Dimineața 1929). This early statement, which she made as a nationally visible trade unionist in a confederation decidedly dominated by men, suggests that Paraschiva B. Ion displayed a certain willingness to challenge hierarchies – or was perceived to by certain journalists. By 1931, the union's headquarters were housed in the factory where Ion and an increasingly vocal male colleague named Eftimie Patraulea worked.

Ion's claims that Belvedere women had taken the lead in unionizing workers in Romania can be considered an attempt to represent women positively and to associate them with "responsible" trade unionism. In contrast, male colleagues and sometimes other trade unionists represented women tobacco workers as politically volatile. In August 1922, a worker wrote to a major Bucharest newspaper to protest long working hours, arguing that women employees made angry by the overwhelming heat and overwork were liable to declare "a general strike" just as they had done in 1920 (Lufta 1922). Writing as a (self-appointed) workers' representative, he called for shorter working hours, warning that if these demands were not met, a new strike could not be held at bay. Ion's 1929 May Day portrayal of women as advanced workers challenged the association of Belvedere workers with volatility, but it also distanced them from their history of labour radicalism.

P. B. Ion's work in the UWMTR was quickly scaled up, moving from shop-floor to national-level organizing and to government-oriented advocacy. In 1930, Ion and other representatives of the RMS Belvedere Workers' Union made a crucial and timely intervention, challenging the inclusion of tobacco workers' salaries in the "sacrifice curbs"—major wage cuts applied to all public sector employees. That same year, the government planned to cut wages by 10 to 20 percent (Bucur 2011).

On 1 March 1930, while the curbs were being discussed by the Council of Ministers, a "large delegation of working men and working women from Regie Belvedere arrived, composed of Mrs. Paraschiva B. Ion, Tinca Badea, Sultana Călin, Mr. Eftimie Patraulea, and others, headed by Mr. Ion Mirescu, secretary of the General Labour Confederation" (Dimineața 1931a). Whereas one newspaper report portrays the government as attentive to the situation of CAM workers, the "ample discussions" about the status of CAM workers were the result of a month of pressure and organizing by the UWMTR. On 31 January 1930, the executive committee of the UWMTR examined a memorandum on sacrifice curbs freshly issued by the CAM and decided to send a circular to all affiliated organizations "with the necessary guidance to protest as energetically as possible against these [CAM] intentions" (Dimineața 1931b).

At the headquarters of the Council of Ministers, the delegation requested that the sacrifice curb not be applied to employees of tobacco factories and salt mines. The state undersecretary who received the delegation communicated that only the base (guaranteed) salary of piece-rate workers could be cut according to sacrifice curb demands, and the cut would be applied only to base wages higher than 3,000 lei. The undersecretary explained that since such high salaries were rarely achieved by workers at the CAM, 85 percent of the workers in CAM enterprises would not be affected by the wage cuts (Dimineața 1931a). This was a rather small assurance.

For her part, Paraschiva B. Ion considered the concession made by the government to CAM workers during sacrifice curb discussions in 1931 a victory for the trade union she represented. She also saw it as a victory for the type of reformist trade union organizing she supported. In a speech she gave at a meeting for the social democratic party's unionization drive, which took place in the hall of the Railway Trade Union (CFR), Ion reportedly spoke about the "sacrifices made by the railway workers because of lack of solidarity. They had the sacrifice curb applied, there were layoffs, etc" (Universul 1931). By "lack of solidarity," Ion meant the tensions between reformist and revolutionary organizing in the Romanian railways. In CFR workshops, the communist-influenced General

Council of the Unitary Trade Unions (CGSU) still had many sympathizers (Kovács 1977, 11, 16).

By arguing that the cuts were applied because of the lack of solidarity, Ion conveyed the same message as she had during the May Day gathering two years before. She was claiming that women workers from a union willing to work within the existing legal framework, such as it was, set an example for men workers. In reality, the railway men enjoyed higher wages and more benefits that could be legally cut in the sacrifice curbs. That organizing skill had been necessary to protect women workers' much lower wages from the cuts is clear; however, what is less clear is whether the CFR could have negotiated a better outcome for their better-paid industry. White-collar workers with similar earnings were seeing their wages cut, and unlike tobacco manufacturing, the railway industry was less important for debt repayment.

In a 1933 action organized by the communists, the railway men occupied their workshops. This was a reaction to a second, even more stringent round of "sacrifice curbs." The soldiers surrounding the workshop shot at the workers, killing 20. Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej, the communist leader of the strike, spent the next decade in prison, later becoming head of state in the Popular Republic of Romania.

Trade union practices and contested expertise in the context of trade union competition

Knowledge production and a self-fashioned, tobacco-industry-specific kind of expertise were increasingly important elements of Paraschiva B. Ion's repertoires as a labour activist on the national level. Yet in the 1930s, as the economic situation worsened in Romania, Ion found herself increasingly on the defensive about the effectiveness of CGM practices specifically, and moderate trade unionism in general. This was because social democratic trade unions could no longer obtain even minimal concessions.

Several months after her 1931 Grivița union hall speech, P. B. Ion was part of a two-person delegation the UWMTR appointed to investigate labour conditions at the Regie of State Monopolies tobacco factory in Chișinău, a city located in what was then north-eastern Romania (currently the capital of the Republic of Moldova). The two UWMTR delegates drew up a report about the "horrifying" labour conditions in the factory, where workers were required to produce as much as their colleagues in Bucharest or Cluj – without the same machinery and the trademark protective white coats and kerchiefs tobacco workers wore in the other tobacco manufactories in Romania – yet for much lower pay (Adevărul 1931). A lengthy memorandum based on the report was forwarded to the CAM.

Ion's work as an organizer and, increasingly, an expert on labour issues in the tobacco industry made her a suitable candidate for the Labour Chambers (Adevărul 1933), consultative bodies on labour issues in interwar Romania. In April 1933, after almost a decade of failed attempts, the existence of the Labour Chambers was finally authorized (Țuțuianu 2012; Săvoaia 2022, 150–166). In 1933, Ion was one of the 27 candidates on the national list proposed by the social democratic trade unions affiliated to the General Confederation of Labour. She was the only woman on the CGM list and was one of only a handful of women candidates on the lists of the other professional organizations eligible to propose candidates. In the election, the social democratic list won 16 mandates,

a result that qualified Ion (fifteenth on the list) for a seat in the Bucharest Chamber dedicated to industrial workers' interests (Curentul 1933b).

Whereas in the 1930s Ion seems to have been increasingly trusted within the CGM, her trade union work met with increasing opposition from colleagues at Belvedere during the same period. As the trade union president at Belvedere, Ion steered the preparatory work and negotiations for collective labour contracts and the annual "price pact" beginning in 1929. The role required meeting with and persuading colleagues about the kinds of demands to submit to management, for instance when it came to the so-called "price book" (*caietul de preturi*) – the rates that would be paid to piece-rate workers for various tasks (Dimineața 1930). She repeatedly advocated for "responsible" demands.

As a union leader, Ion also spent a good deal of time reminding and trying to convince colleagues of the value of union membership. In 1931, MP Mirescu, Ion's frequent collaborator, attended one of the Belvedere workers' meetings and advised those present "to carry on with their claims peacefully, and once their claims were won to not cease being part of the union" (Cuvântul 1931). Trade unions, Mirescu argued, had both a material and moral purpose. During the same meeting, Ion herself talked to colleagues about the low-quality of medical care in the factory as well as the brutality of several foremen. But she shared Mirescu's moderate, reformist views. At the time, she was probably struggling with conveying the utility of a reformist, so-called "slow train," union in a factory and city where crises abounded.

During a meeting with colleagues in September 1932, Ion argued that "In the Bucharest factory, it was not as bad as in other factories in the country; still it is worse than in the past – 'a worsening of the regime, the lack of consumption [of tobacco products] gets worse every day, but the salaries are nevertheless not so low" (Universul 1932). Ion claimed the comparatively better situation was because of the care shown by the trade union committee when drawing up the contract and the price book.

By February 1932, however, the situation had worsened considerably at RMS Belvedere as well. By that point, it was increasingly difficult to negotiate collective labour contracts. On 22 February 1932, 2,100 workers gathered in the meeting room of the trade union to protest the recent decision by the management of the CAM to include the salaries of Regie employees in the second, harsher, "sacrifice curbs." This time, it does not seem to have been possible to agitate against the curb through the CGM.

In a union meeting held at Belvedere on a bitterly cold winter's day, P. B. Ion reported that discussions with management had been stalled for two months; the director intended to cut salaries by 15 percent and apply other taxes, which would result in a 30 to 40 percent decrease in net wages; and that money provided by management to subsidize the meals of 250 workers could be better used to help sick workers. Finally, notably, she condemned the unwillingness of the head of the factory's storehouse to allow to work several workers who had been arrested for spreading communist manifestos and then released due lack of evidence. Even in this demoralizing meeting, her speech still was met with "unanimous applause" (Dimineața 1932a).

By this point, as the large number of participants in trade union meetings show, workers at Belvedere were very interested in what their trade union did and what their trade union representatives had to say. Certainly, the situation changed often enough that workers felt compelled to attend meetings to stay informed. But as one mention in a report about such a meeting suggests, trade union gatherings were dialogic, involving

more than Ion's grave announcements about new and worse changes to the labour regime. Thus, a report on a 1932 meeting explained that "pensioner Maria S. associates herself with what Mrs. Paraschiva B. Ion had just said" (Universul 1932).

Meanwhile, communist publications and ideas continued to circulate among the workers at Belvedere despite a ban on communist agitation that had been in force since 1924. In 1932, clandestine manifestos were spread several times in the factory yard, but not by people employed there (Siguranța Section IV 1932). That same year, Siguranța officers (the interwar political police) monitoring the Belvedere factory underscored to their superiors that the trade union and trade unionists Paraschiva B. Ion and Sultana Călin had nothing to do with communist organizations and were "limiting themselves to economic claims" (Referat 1932).

In 1929, a clandestine newspaper called *Femeea Muncitoare* (Working Woman) was circulated among Belvedere workers. The newspaper had been put together once, possibly twice, by an energetic woman activist of the Unitary Trade Unions (Sindicatelor Unitare, otherwise CGSU). The (first) issue contained an intriguing piece about a meeting in a small house in "commune B. that surrounds a tobacco factory"—most likely a veiled reference to the Belvedere neighbourhood (*Femeea Muncitoare* 1929). The piece is written from the perspective of a woman activist. It describes the atmosphere and discussions in a meeting that preceded a speech to be given by the unnamed young and energetic communist activist. In the large but stuffy home where the meeting took place – with "beds and colourful pillows, a stove, a table with the well-known crochet cover" but also with pictures of Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, and Karl Liebknecht displayed "instead of knick knacks and tasteless seashells"—older workers welcomed the young communist activist who was to speak. Workers introduced the activist to "our Maria," a woman whose speeches, the workers claimed, used to make them cry, "once quite heavily." Maria herself claimed to no longer be able to speak loudly due to her lung condition. But the veteran activist described how salaries of 500 to 600 lei in the cigarette factory were, by then, barely enough for food; how some cigarette makers had begun making cigarettes at home to earn extra money; and how that type of home-based work still paid better than cigarette-making in the factory because there were fewer fines.

This *Femeea Muncitoare* article might be entirely fictional, or it might be only slightly embellished for propaganda purposes. Or, in fact, it might be quite true to events but written in a way that protected everyone involved from legal repercussions. If not a piece of fiction, the piece may be read as a rare, late 1920s portrait of a 1920 Belvedere strike leader (possibly a woman named Maria Tănase). It might also be understood as a quiet celebration of the kind of firebrand women's activism that characterized the 1920 strike. Compared to either an existing or even to a fully invented or somewhat idealized person – "our Maria"—presented in the *Femeea Muncitoare* article, Paraschiva B. Ion in the late 1920s and early 1930s appears as a somewhat stodgy orator and activist.

In the mid-1930s, Ion and the effectiveness of the trade union she led were increasingly and directly questioned. Ion became the target of a slanderous press campaign organized by her former trade union colleague in the factory Eftimie Patraulea. Like Ion, Patraulea had been one of the key members of the UWMTR in 1931. Now, in 1934, he was beginning to agitate for the creation of a competing union. This union would eventually call itself "The Union of Craftsmen, Working Men, Working Women, and Pensioners from Belvedere" (UCWP-Belvedere) (Curentul 1935a). In their meetings, the social democratic branch union

UWMTR referred to this new Belvedere union as a “yellow nationalist” union. This term was applied even though in its press releases, the UCWP-Belvedere tended to stress its attachment to law and order but not to patriotism – unlike the yellow trade union functioning at Belvedere in the mid-1920s that had called itself “national” (GPDB 1935).

In a series of newspaper articles that appeared in the right-wing daily *Curentul* (see Clark 2015, 159–163) between 1935 and 1936, Ion and the Belvedere director Ion Râpeanu, an alleged protector of Ion, were repeatedly accused of incompetence. Ion was accused of nepotism, embezzlement, fraud, trading influence, and of having betrayed the interests of her colleagues. But the insults became increasingly gendered. In the first article, Ion was termed an “amateur worker” (*muncitoare-amatoare*), an “undignified agitator who betrays her colleagues,” and a “professional agitator” (Curentul 1935c). In a second article published that same month, she was called Mr. Râpeanu’s “fatal inspirer” (a derogatory play on *femme fatale*) or his “muse” (Curentul 1935d). By contrast, Mr. Patraulea was praised in these and similar articles for his upstanding character and the union’s utmost commitment to legal and orderly activism. For his part, director Râpeanu sent a press release to multiple papers in which he argued that management had nothing to do with the press campaign, and that the spate of recent press articles was linked to “the competition between the two workers’ trade unions at Belvedere, that are, in this way, trying to win new members” (Curentul 1935a). The two trade unions in question were the UWMTR- and CGM-affiliated trade union led by P. B. Ion, whereas the competing union was the newly established UCWP-Belvedere led by Patraulea.

The clash between the two trade unions was taking place within a European and domestic political landscape that had shifted decidedly to the right, and one in which tobacco workers had fewer and fewer avenues for negotiating with factory management. Still, the 1920 general strike and its utopian left-wing threat continued to cast a long shadow over the unions’ conflict even 15 years later. Certainly, the main point of contention between what the press called “Trade Union No. 1” (affiliated to the UWMTR) and “Trade Union No. 2” (UCWP-Belvedere) was whether tobacco workers ought to try to have the 1934 collective labour contract extended to prevent the further loss of rights (P. B. Ion and her union’s stance), or whether they were to proceed with negotiating a new collective contract (Patraulea and his union’s stance). But the second most contentious issue was that of CAM pensions and pensioners, in particular the status of pensions of the 1920 strikers who had been dismissed.

In 1935, when workers were switched from the CAM’s dedicated pension fund to the general state-budget Insurance House, Ion filed a formal complaint against a clerk named Marinescu. She accused Marinescu of having forged pension certificates to show inaccurately high contributions for certain persons. *Curentul* retaliated by arguing that Ion had launched a formal inquiry against an upstanding clerk simply because Marinescu had strongly opposed the granting of pension rights to women involved in the 1920 general strike (Curentul 1935b). The paper accused *her* of having tried to sneak in among legitimate pensioners the women strikers from 1920. It is unclear whether Ion did indeed seek to help those workers excluded in 1920 regain their pension rights or whether this remained merely an accusation.

In February 1935, P. B. Ion reached a new level in her career as a trade unionist. In a general extraordinary congress of the UWMTR branch trade union, she was appointed president of this national organization (Dimineța 1935). But in her own

factory in the spring of that year, P.B. Ion's union lost majority, with many workers switching to Patraulea's union (Curentul 1935c). In 1936, P. B. Ion was the trade union leader of the less popular union. In September and October 1936, Ion criticized newly introduced regulations for workers at Belvedere and then in CAM establishments throughout the country (Dimineața 1936a, 1936b). Ion pleaded to have the regulation applied only starting in 1937, as the 1936 collective labour contract (technically) still applied. Members of "Trade Union No. 2" considered such stances evidence of P. B. Ion's willingness to compromise with management (Curentul 1936). For her part, P. B. Ion argued that the new rules were the result of the "exaggerated demands" of Trade Union No. 2, which had provoked the CAM's ruthless reaction (Dimineața 1936a). After a failed arbitration procedure in which Ion was not involved, throughout 1937, CAM workers in Bucharest and the rest of the country were governed neither by collective contracts nor the new regulation (Lumea Nouă 1938b). The new rules, considered by social democratic newspapers as a dangerous suspension of labour law (because they permitted a 60-hour work week, made it very easy to dismiss workers, and suspended labour contracts), were applied from 1938 onwards (Lumea Nouă 1937, 1938a).

Paraschiva B. Ion remained in the factory after her union lost most of its members; her activities between 1937 and 1940 could not be established at this point. In 1941, she was again speaking on behalf of men and women workers at Belvedere during a "cultural sitting" organized by a certain priest called Șerpe (Universul 1941). In 1942, she was promoted to the position of production head in the factory, which gave her a leadership function in the factory. In October 1944, when the reconstructed CGM came under the direction of the communists, Paraschiva B. Ion was branded an "axe handle," i.e. a tool of management, in the main communist paper. *Workers, Scinteia* reported, had called for her to be dismissed (Scinteia 1944). P. B. Ion's existence after the war is not revealed in any of the available sources.

Conclusion

This article has focused on reconstructing the biography of Paraschiva B. Ion, a trade union activist for the Union of Workers from Tobacco and Match Factories at the CAM Belvedere factory in Romania and in Labour Chambers. I argued that her trade union career illustrates how social democratic labour activism contributed to the co-construction of a fragile labour governance framework in which moderate claims could be advanced but radical claims were kept at bay in a domestic context in which even modest gains could be easily overturned. I showed that P. B. Ion's activism occurred in the long shadow of the 1920 General Strike and in the broader context of competition between various kinds of trade unions and the professionalization of trade union work in Europe. The fact-finding mission to Chișinău in which P. B. Ion participated as the delegate of the UWMTR exemplifies the avenues for professionalization available to trade union women who could not engage in extensive international travel. At the same time, the negative press campaign that targeted Ion between 1934 and 1935 illustrates the challenging environment in which she operated as a woman in a male-dominated political environment.

P. B. Ion's involvement in repressive actions and in labour control practices deserves a fuller account, one that fully contextualizes her political and personal alignments and collaborations. However, this biography of P. B. Ion offers an entry point for understanding the various repertoires of action woman trade unionists engaged in at the factory and the national levels in interwar Romania. I showed how, until 1936, P. B. Ion negotiated the setting of piece rates in arbitrations and collective agreements, and how she coaxed and hounded colleagues to accept the results of negotiations, persuaded them to remain loyal to their CGM union, and helped advance labour discipline, even by participating in cultural propaganda activities. Within the national branch union UWMTR and as a member of the Bucharest Chamber of Labour, P. B. Ion sought to decrease the negative effects of the damaging labour and welfare policies of tobacco workers and used her expertise to shape the pension scheme of the CAM. In addition to revealing Ion's contributions to the development of labour governance and organizing and labour control practices in the Eastern and Central European context, this article also serves as a critical exploration of newer and older types of sources available to labour historians in post-socialist spaces.

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