

CHAPTER II

Compulsory Labour Before 1921

Compulsory labour a liability under the Soviet constitution—Decrees enforcing it 1918 to 1920—Lenin's New Economic Policy, 1921—Free labour restored—The Labour Code of 1922.

SUCH scanty information as is available in regard to the history of Soviet Russia shows that compulsory labour is no new feature of her rule. Article 3 of the first constitution of the Soviet Republic, drawn up in 1918, decreed that 'every member of the population may be called on to perform compulsory labour service,' and this principle was embodied in Section 1 of the First Labour Code issued in the same year. Only persons under sixteen or over fifty, or mutilated, were to be permanently exempt. Temporary exemptions were to be granted to invalids 'until they recover,' and to women for eight weeks before and after confinement.¹

A decree dated October 5th, 1918, established a special form of compulsory service for non-working elements (i.e. 'persons not dependent on their work, or without fixed occupation, and unemployed workers not registered at the employment ex-

¹ A. E. Raine and E. Luboff, *Bolshevik Russia*, 1920, p. 71.

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changes').¹ A decree issued a year later, in October 1919, instituted compulsory labour in the form of 'ordinary manual work and transport duty.'² Finally, a decree signed by Lenin on January 13th, 1920, as Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars, made all able-bodied citizens liable to temporary or periodical compulsory service, such as heating, 'rural economy,'³ house building, work on the roads, food supply, the removal of snow, and the 'consequences of the general state of pressure of the country.' All unoccupied persons were to be placed on permanent work.⁴

Though 'general pressure,' in other words, civil war, may have been the most immediately compelling reason for the promulgation of these decrees, the policy itself was proclaimed by Trotsky in 1920, when Commissar both for War and for Transport, as 'the basic principle, without which there can be no question of successfully reorganising industry. We must establish a system whereby the worker will feel himself to be a soldier of labour and will be unable to dispose freely of his services; if he is ordered to go to a certain post, he must go or be punished as a deserter.'⁵

A resolution of the Communist Party published after the 1920 Decree endorsed it with the declara-

¹ *Industrial Life in Soviet Russia, 1917-1923* (International Labour Office, League of Nations, Studies and Reports, Series B, No. 14, 1924), p. 78.

² *Ibid.*, p. 78.

³ i.e. agriculture.

⁴ *Bolshevik Russia*, p. 76.

⁵ Speech at the 9th Congress of the Communist Party, quoted in *The Trade Union Movement in Soviet Russia* (I.L.O., Studies and Reports, Series A., No. 26, 1924), p. 132.

tion that 'the Socialist régime repudiates categorically the principle of freedom of labour proper to the Liberal Capitalist régime,' and proceeded to prescribe methods by which 'general compulsory work,' both of men and women, could be made immediately effective.¹

We are told that the Decree of 1920 was not carried out in full. Transport workers were conscripted, but trade unions secured that industrial workers should only be called up after other sources of labour had been tapped.² Its main weight, therefore, fell on the peasants, who might be sent from home without any limit of time or distance. No regard was paid to the needs of their own holdings, and compulsory labour had often to be carried on without 'foodstuffs, forage, money or the necessary machinery.'³

The first period, therefore, of Soviet rule, a period in which private trade and industry became almost completely eliminated, and peasants were required to surrender to the State all surplus production over their own minimum requirements, synchronised with a universal, though not completely enforced, scheme of compulsory labour.

The system was so unpopular that it is said to have been one of the reasons for the introduction of Lenin's New Economic Policy in March 1921. This limited the amount of produce which might be exacted from the peasants, allowed private trade and small cottage industries under licence, and re-

¹ *Bolshevik Russia*, pp. 81-2.

³ *Industrial Life in Soviet Russia*, p. 80.

² *Ibid.*, p. 134.

quired State factories to work on commercial principles.¹

Some free recruitment of labour was a necessary sequel, though it came more slowly. A decree of July 1921 substituted a tax and spells of local compulsory duty for the general compulsory service of the peasants, and during 1922 and 1923 this 'tax in kind' was gradually transformed into a money tax.² A decree of November 3rd, 1921, freed the workers in State undertakings from compulsory work.³ Their employment was henceforth regulated by collective agreements negotiated by employers with trade unions, or by individual contracts.

Under a Labour Code of 1922, however, the power was retained 'in exceptional cases (fighting the elements,⁴ or lack of workers to carry out important State work)' to call up citizens of the Soviet Union with certain exceptions, 'for work in the form of compulsory labour service.' The obligation applied to all men between eighteen and forty-five, and all women between eighteen and forty. The only persons exempted were (a) those temporarily incapacitated by illness or injury, during the period requisite for their recovery; (b) women for eight weeks before and after confinement; (c) nursing mothers; (d) men disabled in employment or in the war; (e) women with children under eight years of age, if no

¹ Häensel, p. 37.

² *Industrial Life in Soviet Russia*, p. 81.

³ *The Trade Union Movement in Soviet Russia*, p. 136.

⁴ i.e. fire, flood, or obstruction by snow.

one were available to take care of such children.¹

It will be noticed that no exception is made for expectant mothers, except in the last stages of pregnancy, and that the mother of any child of a few months old might be sent to compulsory labour on any 'important State work,' provided some State nursery or children's home was available.

The expression 'important State work,' moreover, seemed to offer a loophole to a very wide application in a country where all transport and mines, nearly all banking and large-scale industry, and much internal commerce, were nationalised, and all foreign trade was controlled and carried on by the State.

In other respects the Code appeared favourable to the worker. It required employment to be regulated by collective agreements negotiated between employers and trade unions, or by individual contracts not less favourable than these; and protected the worker against transfer from one undertaking or locality to another without his consent,² and against dismissal except under specified conditions. If dismissed even for 'obvious unfitness' he was to receive a leaving grant.³ On the other hand, if engaged for an indefinite period, the employee might give up his work at a day's notice if paid weekly, or on a week's notice if paid by the month.⁴

¹ *Labour Code of the R.S.F.S.R.* (i.e., The Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic = Russia proper, exclusive of Ukraine, White Russia and the other Republics). 1922 Edition, with amendments up to April 20th, 1930. Cmd. 3775, p. 17.

² Article 37.

³ Articles 47 and 88.

⁴ Article 46.

A normal eight-hours' day was also established, except where a seven-hours' day was already in force; eight national holidays were fixed¹; every worker was to have a fortnight's leave annually with pay; overtime was forbidden, save in an emergency and with consent of disputes committee or trade union; and women and young persons were not to be employed in particularly heavy or unhealthy work, or in work underground or at night. Every undertaking or institution was to have its committee of workers, elected under trade union rules, whose duty it was to safeguard the interests of those they represented.

The Code also included social insurance, providing benefits for sickness, injury, maternity, nursing of children, funerals and unemployment; old-age pensions² and pensions to dependents of employees in case of death or 'total disappearance' of the breadwinner. The system was to cover 'all employees' whether employed by the State or private individuals.³

An ominous note, was, however, struck in Article 56, which required the manager of each undertaking or institution to fix a 'standard of output,' though the agreement of the appropriate union was necessary. An employee who failed 'through his own

¹ Six extra holidays might be given annually, to conform to local conditions or popular festivals. This allowed for some religious festivals.

² Old-age pensions only began to be introduced in 1927-8. They were to be extended gradually from one industry to another. *Industrial and Labour Information* (International Labour Office, Weekly Bulletin), October 6th, 1930, p. 18.

³ Article 175.

fault' to attain the prescribed standard was to 'receive wages proportionate to the work done, but not less in any case than two-thirds of the scheduled rate due to him.'¹ Pay, it was further decreed, could be either by time or piece rates.

Article 168, moreover, required labour disputes to be settled by conciliation or arbitration in one form or another; and as years passed by the influence of the all-powerful Communist Party was definitely used to discourage strikes.²

And in 1926 a Decree³ of the Central Committee of the Party deprived seasonal and temporary workers of the protection of the Code, a pronouncement which affected some 70 per cent. of the total. By 1928 no less than 85 per cent. were being engaged for short periods, broken by intervals of dismissal,⁴ a practice which effectively cut them out of the benefits of what appeared to be a generous system.

¹ Article 57.

² Resolution of the Fourteenth Congress of the Party, 1926 (Baikaloff, p. 237).

³ Dated November 18th, 1926. MS. Study by Professor Jékouline, of Prague, 1930. In a MS. study of September 1931 he says that the following were also excluded from the Code: State officials, domestic workers, workers in war industries, postal and telegraph employees, employees in agriculture, 'and other categories of workers.' The labour of these, he says, was regulated by special ordinances which were 'far from corresponding' to the Code.

⁴ Baikaloff, p. 97, quoting *Trud*, July 6th, 1928.