

## CHAPTER VIII

### *The Industrial Worker and the Plan*

Managerial authority established—The continuous working week introduced—A blow at family life—The growth of 'shock brigades'—Their unpopularity—Bad workmanship made a criminal offence—Difficulties of grain transport—Temporary employment of forced labour authorised for this purpose.

IT has been shown that the speeding-up of the Plan in the summer of 1929 meant the introduction of forced labour, for the poorer peasant in the *artels* and in the forests for the *kulaks*. Its influence on the conditions of labour of the industrial worker was no less definite and far-reaching.

In January 1929 regulations had been issued by the Supreme Economic Council, recognising the manager of a factory as sole head of the undertaking, with power to inflict disciplinary punishments on workers and all salaried employees. These regulations were strengthened by further orders issued in March by the Council of People's Commissars and the Commissariat for Labour, though Comrade Ouglanov, the Commissar, had shown himself dubious of their probable effect, pointing out that trade unions were now powerless to protect the

workers.<sup>1</sup> Stalin's *coup* in May was followed by an order issued in July by the Council of People's Commissars, directing the Supreme Economic Council to see that managers alone chose the technical and administrative staff, and admonishing trade unions to ensure that when collective agreements were drawn up, no pressure was put on managers to renounce this right.<sup>2</sup> In June a decree of the Central Executive Committee of the Soviet Union had empowered employers (i.e. in State undertakings the managers) to withhold wages up to 33 per cent. for damage due to neglect, breaches of regulations, or failure to obey the employers' orders.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, on September 7th the Central Committee of the Communist Party published an order laying down 'formal principles' both for managers and trade unions. Managers were to be solely responsible for carrying out the 'production and budget plans' and were alone authorised to 'give orders with regard to production, whether to officials, salaried employees or industrial workers. The latter must strictly obey the orders given them, irrespective of the position they occupy in the Communist Party or in the trade unions. When a worker is engaged, transferred or dismissed, the decision of the director cannot be altered merely because the Communist nucleus or the trade union

<sup>1</sup> Zagorsky, p. 25, quoting *Ekonomicheskaja Jisn*, March 3rd, 1929.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> *Industrial and Labour Information*, September 30th, 1929, p. 444, quoting *Izvestia*, N.K.T., 1929, Nos. 28-29.

organisation (works' council) holds a different opinion. All that these bodies can do is to point out the difference of opinion to the higher Communist, trade union, or economic authorities.<sup>1</sup>

Works councils were, therefore, directed to 'collaborate to the best of their ability in putting into force all measures for increasing production, and for carrying out plans.'<sup>2</sup>

This order, in effect, put an end to the 'triangle' of manager, workers' committee and Communists which had hitherto controlled factory management. It also deprived the worker of the right to appeal against discharge, until now jealously preserved to him by his union. Those who objected to the change were denounced as playing into the hands of the *kulaks*.<sup>3</sup>

The next step taken to speed up production was the introduction of the continuous working week, proposed by 'Gosplan,' on the ground that it would increase the value of industrial output by some 15 thousand million roubles during the next five years. The Commissar for Labour opposed it, emphasising that it would be unpopular in that it would mean the abolition of Sunday and of religious festivals. A further objection, he pointed out, was that much plant was in bad order, and that repairs were usually done on Sundays. The change, therefore, would inevitably reduce output. He was promptly rebuked for failing to realise that the continuous week would serve two most desirable ends, the

<sup>1</sup> Zagorsky, pp. 25-6, quoting *Izvestia*, September 7th, 1929.

<sup>2</sup> Zagorsky, pp. 26-7.

<sup>3</sup> Colton, p. 146.

reduction of unemployment and 'combating the religious spirit.'<sup>1</sup>

A Decree of the Council of People's Commissars was therefore issued on August 26th, 1929, requiring the uninterrupted week to be introduced, as from October 1st, in coal-mining and peat-cutting, the production of building materials and electric power, railway and road construction, the most important heavy industries, all loading and unloading work, all wood-working undertakings, all State commerce, wholesale and retail, the co-operative movement, and such factories as could be provided with sufficient quantities of raw material and fuel.<sup>2</sup>

At the time of publication of the decree the number of working days in a week varied from seven to three. A Decree of the Council of People's Commissars, published on September 24th, required a working week of four days of work and one of rest 'in every undertaking which is to adopt the continuous working week, except constructional undertakings and those in which work is of a seasonal nature.'<sup>3</sup> The eight national holidays were reduced to five, all revolutionary anniversaries; no religious festival might be a holiday, and a full day's work instead of six hours was required on the day before holidays and rest days. Where a six-hours' day had been established, seven hours were now to be

<sup>1</sup> *Industrial and Labour Information*, September 30th, 1929, pp. 442 *et seq.*, quoting *Izvestia*, August 17th, 1929.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 443, quoting *Izvestia*, August 27th, 1929.

<sup>3</sup> *Cmd.* 3775, pp. 98-100.

worked (including a break of half an hour). This lengthened the day for clerical workers.<sup>1</sup>

Where less than a six-day working week was instituted, Sunday obviously vanished as a day of rest, and variations in the length of a working week made it impossible for members of a family to spend their day of rest together.

The continuous working week and alteration of the weekly calendar considerably extended the system of multiple shifts.<sup>2</sup>

The activities of the 'shock brigades' must next claim our attention. The special efforts of Communist nuclei in factories had already been directed towards organising 'Socialist competitions,' the purpose of which was to speed up work, and reduce the cost of production. These results were to be achieved by factories within an industry formally signing agreements to conform to given standards of quantity and quality of output in order to inspire others.

By the spring of 1929, we learn that, thanks to activities of this kind on the part of Young Communists, the 'commitments' in factories were becoming more 'precise.' 'Exact figures' of production had been inserted, and in some undertakings workers had proposed reduction of piece-rates or increase of individual production, not, however, without some 'discontent' on the part of their fellows.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Haensel, 'Labour Under the Soviets' (*Foreign Affairs*, April 1931, p. 390). Many miners had been working an hour or more beyond the six hours fixed for them. (Baikoff, p. 41, quoting *Pravda*, May 19th, 1928.)

<sup>2</sup> Colton, p. 140.

<sup>3</sup> *Industrial and Labour Information*, July 8th, 1929, p. 54, quoting from *Trud*, May 24th, 1929.

The Central Council of Trade Unions in its spring session showed itself nervous on the subject, and advised workers to refrain from signing competition contracts until 'a favourable atmosphere has been created.'<sup>1</sup>

All hope of this more 'favourable' atmosphere vanished with the issue of the Communist Party's Order on September 7th, and in spite of continued indifference on the part of trade unions, and the hostility of some managers, 'shock brigades,' usually of Communists, were formed, first in Lenin-grad and later in Moscow and elsewhere, to 'super-  
vise the carrying out of the competition contracts.'

By the end of the year these brigades were said to exist in almost all large undertakings, and it was claimed that they had reduced absenteeism and cost of production. But trade unions were still lukewarm, and technical staffs often showed indifference 'verging on hostility.' Workers, too, it was said, were often kept ignorant of the objects of the competitions. Skilled workers had objected to the pooling and equal division of wages as between skilled and unskilled which the brigades had established in certain factories, and had sometimes left them in consequence. Enthusiastic delegates to a conference of the brigades were therefore urged on behalf of the Central Council of Trade Unions not to apply these Communist methods too hastily or indiscriminately.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., December 9th, 1929, p. 368.

<sup>2</sup> The Conference was held at Moscow on December 5th, 1929. Ibid., January 13th, 1930, pp. 36-8, quoting *Pravda*, December 6th-14th, 1929.

But the same conference was informed by Comrade Kuibisheff, President of the Supreme Economic Council, that under the programme laid down for 1929-30, State industrial production must be increased by 33 per cent. and individual output by 25 per cent., and that costs of production must be decreased by 11 per cent. This task could only be carried out with the help of shock brigades, 'whose intense and conscientious labour would enable them to serve as models to the other workers.' The brigades, therefore, continued their efforts, but that these were straining the endurance of some workers to the breaking point was shown by some attempted murders of over-enthusiastic members.<sup>1</sup> Large numbers of the workers were paid on piece-rates, and the activities of the brigades, by forcing up standards of output, in effect reduced pay.

Another drastic form of pressure was the issue of a Decree of the Central Executive Committee and the Council of People's Commissars of the U.S.S.R. on November 23rd, requesting the Executive Committees of the Allied Republics to provide in their criminal code that workers guilty of the systematic or mass production of inferior goods should be deprived of liberty for not more than five years, or sentenced to forced labour for not more than one year. For failure to observe the standards laid down, the penalty should be deprivation of liberty for not more than two years, or forced labour

<sup>1</sup> Hoover, p. 267, note, quoting from *Za Industrializatsiju* (i.e. *For Industrialisation*), January 18th, 1930.

for not more than one year.<sup>1</sup> Thus poor workmanship became a criminal offence.

Some weeks earlier, however, an even more ominous step had been taken.

As the summer of 1929 advanced, great difficulties were experienced in transporting and storing the supplies of grain in process of extortion from the peasants. Under the programme fixed, 80 per cent. of the crop to be handed over to the State agencies was to be stored before the end of November 1929. Compulsory cartage had been instituted in July to carry the grain to railway or river steamers. But railways and ports were blocked with traffic, and there was a shortage, not only of rolling-stock and boats, but of warehouses, of local transport, and of sacks, both for grain and flour.

Under these circumstances the Central Council of Trade Unions on October 24th appealed to all workers in the Soviet Union 'to give their services free on Saturdays and Sundays for the loading and unloading of grain and boats, to search in all towns for any available premises which might be used as warehouses for grain, to collect empty sacks for grain and flour, and in general to collaborate with "shock brigades" of Young Communists wherever an extra effort was needed to carry out the programme of grain storage.'<sup>2</sup>

But before this appeal was drafted the Government had decided that, 'if necessary,' the 'local authorities might have recourse to forced labour for

<sup>1</sup> Cmd. 3775, p. 145.

<sup>2</sup> *Industrial and Labour Information*, December 9th, 1929, p. 367.

the loading and unloading of trains carrying grain, up to February 1st, 1930.<sup>1</sup> The trade union appeal was probably a desperate attempt to 'make it unnecessary' for local authorities to use the power entrusted to them.

Thus the total inadequacy of the arrangements for transport and storage of the huge quantity of grain extracted from the peasants at the cost of expropriation, starvation, and bloodshed, was made good by the conscription of labour authorised under the Labour Code of 1922.

<sup>1</sup> Decree of the Council of People's Commissars of the R.S.F.S.R., dated October 5th, 1929. Cmd. 3775, p. 144.