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SOVIET PRESS DISCOVERS INTEREST IN WORKERS' PARTICIPATION

Khrushchev's visit to Yugoslavia has not taken long to bear fruit. In terms of both ideology and democratization, its high point was reached on August 21st, when Khrushchev, referring to the workers' councils, told the staff of a Belgrade factory:

"I like this form of organization. This is a progressive institution. Your workers' councils are not those which were formed ten years ago - the form has changed and it is better. However, it could lead to violations of the Leninist one-man command principle... Our situation is now ripe for democratization of the management of factories. There is too much bureaucracy. We are looking for forms that would not violate the Leninist principle of unity of direction."

Khrushchev's words were not printed in the USSR, and consequently some Western newspapers (e.g. the Guardian) mistakenly assumed that his motives were political and diplomatic rather than ideological. It now seems more probable that he was in fact being cautious, not wishing to commit himself too far in advance of the report of the Party and Trade Union Commission which he is sending to Yugoslavia to study the problem. But there is little doubt that the Commission will be instructed to report in terms which, on balance, are favorable rather than hostile.

The reason for this more positive judgement of his attitude is that towards the end of his stay in Yugoslavia and since his return the Soviet press has discovered a new-found interest in workers' participation. On September 1st Pravda published the whole of a Tito speech on its front page, in which two paragraphs were devoted to an eulogy of workers' self-management. This was made particularly significant by the fact that on the previous day, August 31st, Izvestia had also carried a front page article entitled "Workers' Assembly". Written by the First Secretary of the Chelyabinsk Industrial Oblast Committee, it described workers' meetings at "many factories" in the context of the development of "socialist democracy". Held once or twice a month these assemblies at present discuss primarily production problems, but also political affairs and living conditions. At this point the meetings

can clearly begin to be of interest to the workers as human beings, and not merely to the management and workers as production units.

Izvestia emphasized the point by asking:

"What questions were discussed apart from purely production matters?"

The answers include summer vacations for workers and their families, further education, the attitudes of foremen to young workers, and the upbringing of the workers' children. Certainly at present the assemblies have only a consultative role (as Khrushchev had suggested in his speech to the November Plenum in 1962) but clearly they are a beginning. C'est le premier pas qui coûte.

A still more important article appeared in Pravda on 17th September, two weeks after Khrushchev's return to the USSR. It is by the First Secretary of the Leningrad City Committee of the CPSU, G. Popov, and it deals with the "production committees" which were founded on Khrushchev initiative in January 1963. In Popov's words:

"At the November Plenum of the CC, CPSU it was stated that the time had come for further expansion and extension of the democratic principles for the management of factories... At the beginning of this year production committees were formed as an experiment in several Leningrad factories... They were elected at general meetings of the workers. And although not much time has passed since then, they have already succeeded in demonstrating their best aspects..."

A typical "production committee" consists of 23 men, but this figure includes engineers, heads of shops and some chiefs of services. Popov demonstrates how in one factory the committee succeeded in drawing up recommendations to eliminate "shturmovshchina", the pernicious Soviet practice whereby half the output of the plant is produced in the last ten days of the month at the cost of excessive overtime, while early in the month the workers and machines are underemployed. Undoubtedly this discussion was of value to the management and the Party, but it was also unquestionably in the interests of the workers, whose home life and normal leisure are frequently disrupted by the long hours and unnecessary fatigue stemming from "shturmovshchina".

All this is still a far cry from genuine profit-sharing, an influence on wages, or an executive voice in management. But it represents a beginning, and perhaps the thin end of the workers' councils wedge. Moreover the timing of these articles suggests Khrushchev meant business when he was discussing

"democratization" of management, and that in this limited form it is slowly coming about. His speech to the November Plenum in 1963 is likely to go further in increasing slightly the proportion of "democratization" and correspondingly reducing the present excessive ratio of "one-man command" in the authoritarian management structure of the Soviet factory.

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