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USSR/79
COMMUNIST AREA

•USSR: Agriculture

16 June 1969

THE HAPPINESS OF THE SOVIET FARMER

Summary: The pros and cons of the recently published new draft state for kolkhozes are currently being discussed in the Soviet press. While the debate appears to be somewhat manipulated, it reflects nevertheless to a certain degree the true mood and the real wishes of the farmers, especially in letters to the editor and interviews. The discussion has only just begun but it is already evident that the kolkhoz farmers want increased rights and would like to see more democracy at work in the kolkhozes. Following are excerpts from some of these comments.

"Shchastie krestyanina" - the happiness of the farmer - euphoric phrases such as this serve as headlines for some of the articles published on the draft statute for Soviet kolkhozes which is to be adopted at the upcoming congress of kolkhoz farmers. "Shkola kommunizma" for farmers is a new invention of the party bureaucracy, a variation of Lenin's well-known phrase "trade unions - school of communism." This formulation also appears in the new statute. The articles which are sponsored by the party claim that the entire peasantry of the Soviet Union considers the draft statute a "new proof of the concern of the party and the government for the working people on the farms, for their lives, their work and their living conditions."

All thoughts and hopes of the working people on the farms revolve around what is most important - the general strengthening and development of the kolkhozes, the necessity of intensifying production

in the interest of the social economy and thereby raise the sales of agricultural products to the state, an increase in productivity through chemicals, complex mechanization and meliorization. (1)

This is by far not the only article in this style. They all stress the obligations of the farmers toward the state in the traditional bureaucratic jargon and talk mostly about increasing productivity and raising production.

On the hand, articles and letters have appeared in which kolkhoz farmers or representatives of the agricultural intelligentsia are discussing urgent matters or human problems. A kolkhoz woman notes with satisfaction that the new statute finally grants certain privileges to the women. When these rights have been confirmed, the kolkhoz women will "show their gratitude by making special efforts." (2) The statute is most often praised for its old-age pension plan and the social insurance clauses it contains. (3) The kolkhozes will now be legally obligated to help the members with the private keeping of livestock. (4)

The draft statutes increase the importance of the kolkhoz assembly. Up to now, the assembly was only called once a year and treated as a formality. The papers are now disclosing what tricks were used to keep the people at the proper distance from the management. Instead of a general assembly, meetings of brigadiers were held, at which delegates for the annual conference were elected. These "ersatz" conferences usually were ill prepared and no minutes were taken. In letters to the editor, several kolkhoz farmers express satisfaction that these practices are to be changed. They demand even more rights for the general assembly. (5)

Since 1935 the managements of the kolkhozes have been elected by show of hands. The new statute provides for a vote by ballot as well as by show of hands. There are voices protesting against this ambiguity and demanding a secret ballot as a matter of principle. They want the first paragraph of point 56 of the draft statute to be changed in accordance with the will of the kolkhoz farmers. (6)

Kolkhoz members in many letters express their concern that a problem, as important as the material liability of kolkhoz workers for damage done to the collectives, has

(1) Sovetskaya Belorussiya, 16 May 1969, leading article.

(2) Selskaya zhizn, 17 May 1969.

(3) Ibid.

(5) Ibid.

(6) Pravda Vostoka, 14 May 1969.

not been settled satisfactorily. This is a very touchy problem which is of great importance especially to the technical cadres in agriculture. Not all damages are due to faulty handling of machinery. In most cases other factors are involved which are not taken into consideration. Even in the columns of Pravda this question is being discussed. (7) Kolkhoz mechanics, it is said, receive four coupons during one season. For each violation of the agro-technical regulations they have to return one coupon, which means they lose one fourth of their bonuses. With the second violation they lose half, with the third all of their extrapay plus some of their basic wage. This system is being praised because in contrast to arbitrary deductions it offers some possibilities of control, but letters to the editor are demanding an improvement of the control and the introduction of objective criteria for wage deductions.

In many kolkhozes a competitive wage system is used. Letters are demanding that the kolkhozes be supplied with the necessary technical equipment for evaluating work so that wages can be determined accurately instead of haphazardly. (8) Several letters criticize the rigidity with which the number of privately owned livestock is fixed. A kolkhoz chairman remarks quite correctly that large families with many children should be entitled to keep more animals than small families. (9)

This debate clearly reflects the existence of two interest groups: the party bureaucracy on the one, and the kolkhoz farmers and workers on the other hand. The party representatives are only interested in one angle (in agriculture as well as in industry): more work, more output. To label this as the "interest of the state" might be tolerable but to see in it the core of all "thoughts and hopes" of the farm workers is conscious hypocrisy and betrays a basic indifference towards the real problems of the peasantry which have been neglected for decades. Some of its troubles become evident from the small sample of "voices from the people" appearing in mass media. What other points might come to light if the discussion was conducted freely and openly is a matter of speculation. The working people happen to be less interested in raising productivity through further mechanization than in their liability for mishaps which they did not cause. That the state wants to buy more agricultural produce may be interesting from a macro-economic point of view; the kolkhoz farmer is primarily concerned with feeding his own family. The divergence of public and private interests cannot be bridged with resounding phrases.

(7) Pravda, 6 May 1969.

(8) Ibid.

(9) Kazakhstanskaya Pravda, 15 May 1969.