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A SMALL STEP TOWARDS INDUSTRIAL DEMOCRACY?

From the Kremlin's viewpoint the heresy of the Yugoslav workers' councils has always been that, in theory at least, they elect the managing board of their plant, appoint the chief executives and take broad policy decisions. They thereby undermine the principle of "one-man command," and have to be greeted with implacable hostility by all good Soviet communists.

Yet now, down in the Ukraine (where Libermanism started), a prominent party magazine has suggested the adoption of a first cautious and tentative step on the slippery slope towards industrial democracy. And its proposal goes a good deal further than the Krasnoyarsk experiment in the spring,¹ which only permitted the workers to make recommendations, leaving the decision as to whether to act on them to the factory director.

Kommunist Ukrainy (No. 7, 1967), the main theoretical journal of the Ukrainian Party, carries an article by F. Rudich which advocates greater public participation in production. He explains that because of the economic reform "one-man command" must be properly combined with "collective forms of administration," and must be no longer identified with administrative rule alone. Since the center of gravity is now supposed to be shifting from administrative to economic methods of management, greater worker participation is required.

At present the "permanent production meetings" are the device used by the Party to give the semblance of industrial democracy without conceding its essence. But they have never

1) Soviet Rossiya, 25/3/67.

achieved any real importance, partly because they are mainly concerned with raising output, partly because they are mainly led by establishment men from the Party, the trade unions, the Komsomol, etc., and partly because, as in Krasnoyarsk, their "decisions" only carried the weight of recommendations. Now Rudich states that:

It would pay to give juridical² force to the decisions of the p.p.ms on a number of questions, an act which would significantly raise the effectiveness of worker participation in the administration of production.

His next proposal has more bite in it. It reads:

It is advisable to give workers' collectives the right to recall certain officials from public organs, and to establish their periodic election. This will aid the elimination of formalism and bureaucratism in the work of public bodies and the attraction of broader strata into production matters.

Rudich does not specify which officials he thinks the workers should have the right to remove, but the suggestion itself is novel enough in the Soviet context. At present the "workers' collective" has no right to do anything more than express opinions, most of which seem to go unheeded.

But the major novelty proposed by Rudich is the idea that it is high time elections began in the USSR for certain low-level posts in factories. The neo-Stalinists say that such elections would:

contradict centralized administration and influence negatively the implementation of one-man command.

In this view they are naturally supported by those who fear they may lose their jobs, but opposed by the "liberals" who think that elections would help to bring fresh talent to the surface and eliminate conservatism and bureaucracy.

A poll has already been taken on the issue in Kiev where 101 people were questioned, including directors, chief engineers, party secretaries, chairmen of trade union committees and apparently precious few workmen.

2) Emphasis supplied.

72 of them thought that at present elections of "leading officials" would be unwise. They argue that there are not enough qualified specialists available for elections to succeed. Secondly they say that "the level of understanding of democracy among many production officials lags behind the complexity of the problems of management which now have to be solved, and that therefore they will not be objective in their approach to elections."

But 29 of those polled thought that the principle of elections should be introduced by stages, starting with the lowest rungs of the industrial ladder (i.e., brigade-leaders, foremen, heads of shops and departments). Only their own subordinates would participate in these proposed elections.

Rudich himself takes the minority view, and thereby commits Kommunist Ukrainy to support for a cause which most of the Ukrainian industrial establishment, to judge by the poll results, believe to be unsound. He concludes that while the election of directors is "premature" (note that he does not exclude it in principle), elections of lower-level factory officials "would aid the promotion of young specialists who display initiative and would further develop democratic methods in the management of factories."

Obviously there will be a major outburst from the neo-Stalinists if Rudich has his way. Even if these posts are only low-level and even if the elections are as questionable as a communist national election, a principle would have been introduced which makes a curtesy towards industrial democracy, concedes by implication that the Yugoslav workers' councils have much to be said for them, and makes it necessary for the non-commissioned ranks of industry to be liked and respected by their subordinates rather than merely feared.

On this occasion Rudich and the minority are clearly right (after all the poll sample was heavily oriented towards the establishment, many of whose jobs were - and are - at stake). If the Ukrainian Party can eventually push this reform through, despite the entrenched opposition of the conservatives in industry, it will make a contribution on the social scene worthy of Liberman's on the economic.

In the West, of course, voices will be heard arguing firstly that it will never happen, secondly that even if it does it will be meaningless because the Party will rig the elections, and thirdly that this is only a means whereby the Party (by getting its own men elected) takes over the running

of industry from the Government. But all the same noises were made about the Yugoslav workers' councils in their early years, and yet by now the most cautious observers have begun to admit that Tito's party has gained a degree of public support unknown elsewhere in East Europe by introducing its imperfect form of workers' democracy. Those who proclaimed that the Liberman experiment would never get off the ground now know better. Rudich's proposal can be called rudimentary, hesitant and cautious by Yugoslav standards, but he has had the courage to put it forward (with the backing of the Ukrainian C.P.) and he may yet win his point.

r.r.g.