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A LITHUANIAN MODEL FOR MECHANIZING PRIVATE PLOTS

The need to mechanize farm work on the private plots so as to rationalize the utilization of the labor force in agriculture was advanced by a Lithuanian agricultural official. Apart from the originality of the proposal itself, it is of passing interest that it originated in a Soviet republic which includes considerable pre-war Polish territory.

Writing in the official Party monthly of Lithuania, V. Yanushkyavichyus urged that, in view of the importance of the private plot sector in the national economy, it was essential that measures for the mechanization of the work be introduced.¹ The proposal, by Soviet standards, which lag behind other Comecon countries, is nonetheless an ideological innovation.

Moreover, it is not surprising that the suggestion originates from one of the Baltic states where agricultural science and productivity are the most developed in the Soviet Union. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania bask in the glow of the highest yields in livestock production, enjoy the top labor productivity returns, and pay the highest wages for farm labor in the nationalized sector. In addition, the private plot sector is particularly powerful in the grassland-livestock agriculture of the Baltic states. The above-cited writer attributes almost one-half of the gross agricultural product and over half the livestock products produced in Lithuania during 1965 to the private plots of collective farmers and employees. In policy innovation the Baltic states have also led the way in several fields: they introduced guaranteed monthly wages for collective farmers, they have the most liberal private livestock

1) Kommunist Litvi, No. 1 1967.

regulations, and they persisted in advocacy of their grass-land agriculture in the face of Khrushchev's subjective schemes, such as the forced plow-up of meadows. Essentially, however, the agrarian progressivism of the Baltic states dates back to their heritage of national enlightenment and democratic institutions.

The main thrust of Yanushkyavichyus' paper is the rational distribution of labor resources to ensure expanded growth in industry and agriculture. In Lithuania, he cites, 38 percent of the labor force is engaged in agriculture, much of it underemployed. In the past five years over one hundred thousand people have moved out of agriculture to other sectors of the national economy. The rational distribution of labor resources within the economy, the author holds, must consider the continued shift of the underemployed farm workers into industry and into other non-farm employment. He cites the over-strength of Lithuanian farm labor: one-fourth of the collectives with one-third of the labor force have less than 6 hectares of all farmland to one able-bodied member. As 40 percent of the kolkhozy already operate 8 hectares of land per farm worker, the author contends considerable excess labor could be diverted into the non-farm sector if labor productivity could be raised. Among the measures advocated are greater mechanization and rationalization in the socialized sector, more specialization in production, reduction of the seasonal demands for farm labor, and finally, mechanization of the private plot sector.

While Yanushkyavichyus advocates the application of power to the private plots, the specifications of his plan leave much to be desired. Nowhere does he mention the purchase, hire, or use of garden type tractors such as the Hungarians plan.² Instead, he suggests a beginning be made in the planting and cultivation of potatoes and root crops. As an example he cited a state farm and some other units where the land sown to grain by the private plotters was pooled into one large tract and the sovkhos supplied the power for seeding and harvesting. This is similar to a Latvian plan in which the plot would be split into a small vegetable garden alongside the house and a larger area consisting of the balance of the private plot land which had been consolidated and on which kolkhoz machinery could be used for a fee.³ In Lithuania, the author admitted, this method had been tried out but did not become popular because not enough study and encouragement had been

- 2) RFE Research report "Power to the Private Plots - a Hungarian Innovation" 2 February 1967.
- 3) Sovetskaya Latvia, 11 November 1965.

devoted to its economic impact on the farms and the peasants concerned.

The essential feature of the Baltic plans is that the farms own the machinery and rent them out where the peasants have pooled their private holdings of major crops into one large tract of land. The harvest would be divided according to the land-labor inputs contributed by each peasant, with the farm making a share of the crop for machinery costs.

This plan is quite similar to community garden projects which Khrushchev advocated in the late fifties, particularly for state farms. Such cooperative ventures were generally failures because the peasants were unconvinced of the impartial distribution of the harvest and preferred their own individual methods of farming. The appeal of personal incentives in the communal undertakings was largely negative.

Soviet tractors are of the larger power unit types and not adapted to private plot farming, even when the plots are combined into larger fields for row crop farming. A distinct feature of the Hungarian plan was the importation of 500 garden-type tractors for use on the household plots. The concept of garden-type tractors owned or used by collective farmers as power units for their private plots is singularly missing in the Soviet proposal. The history of collectivization shows at best that output and earnings in agriculture are not maximized through forced cooperative farming. In all the Communist-ruled countries the private sector has demonstrated its superior productivity and unrivalled incentive for the collectivized peasantry to function as effective food producers. The addition of small power tractors to the household plot economy would have a powerful multiplier effect on agricultural output in the Communist countries of Eastern Europe and could conceivably put an end to the recurrent farm problem.

Apart from Hungary, none of the other East European regimes where collectivization is extensive has provided the private plot sector on the socialized farms with its own power, much less mechanization. This vital sector has been consigned to a hand and hoe technology while the state and collective farms are favored with all the machine resources available to the state. It is a credit to the Hungarian regime that they have recognized one of the decisive issues in Communist agriculture -- the problem of supplying power mechanization to the private sector.

Yugoslavia is the one country where a full complement of tractors and machinery may be owned by private operators. In fact, this spring state enterprises are to import 1,000

small tractors and other machinery to be sold to self-employed farmers. On the other hand, in Poland, where private farming is still the dominant structure in the countryside, the sale of second-hand tractors and even worn out units to private owners is prohibited. However, if a farmer can legally obtain foreign currency, tractor sales are permitted. In the Soviet Union, after 35 years of full collectivization, the anti-power policy is still essentially Stalinist in its rigidity. It is a horseless, hand and hoe economy.

Nonetheless, the Lithuanian plan is a bold beginning for the Soviets. Of elemental political importance is that it recognizes the need to mechanize the power-starved sector and from this germinal point new directions in agrarian policy may yet develop.

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