

The Industrial Heroes of “Don Bas”

What we saw in the Ukraine

By IVON D. JONES

WE have heard a great deal about the new economic policy of Soviet Russia. We have heard how the “Communist Motherland” has been compelled to call a retreat in the march to the great objective. We have heard gloatings of capitalists and bourgeois penny-a-liners over our forced concessions to the decadent bourgeois world; and even faithful Communists have shaken their heads in dismay at the bigness of the retreat.

What do the workers of Russia think? The Russian proletariat does not think that it is retreating. It has not been sufficiently made clear, to the masses outside of Russia, that the new economic policy has two aspects—it is simultaneously a retreat and an advance. In the streets of the city it looks like a complete re-instatement of the bourgeoisie—shops and traders everywhere. In the factory, however, *a big step forward towards Communism has been made in the last two months.* Our foreign comrades have heard too many alarmist reports of the alleged decay of the Revolution. Let us give them the other side of the picture for a change.

We went down to the Donetz Basin to see this new advance, and on the way called at Kharkov. We had already read the returns from all parts of Russia, published within the last month or two, of how the production of Don Bas coal was increasing by leaps and bounds; how the salt mines were producing four-fold; and the factories and workshops were catching the general contagion for

work. But these figures gave no idea of the heroism and the revolutionary effort which contributed to make up the results. Why did production sink so low from April to August, and why the sudden upward bound with the introduction of the new economic policy? The factory workers were not thereby turned into private traders, just the reverse. . . .

At Kharkov we went to see the locomotive works. There were also tanks for repair, and Diesel engines on the stocks, designed and made there complete. We first went into the "latcheka" office. This is the office of the works branch of the Communist Party. What a change from the capitalist world! The Party office is an inevitable section of every factory office. Workers were going in and out. We were told that this Branch had over a hundred members. The comrade who took us round his department of the works also carried with him a bundle of "*Pravdas*" and Union papers to give out at the benches. Bolshevism, which started in the factory with leaflets, and then was found in meeting halls, and then in street demonstrations and the barricade, and then in the battle field with the Red Army, has now finally settled down in the factory, building locomotives, etc., in spite of Lloyd George's sneer that it cannot do it. And how enthusiastic this Communist was over the new spirit of work which they had found, how they were producing four times as much as a few months ago! How proud he was of the fact that they had turned out six brand new locomotives last month, every plate and rivet made on the spot. And there were already three more on the stocks. What was the secret of this new enthusiasm? Before going to Don Bas I had better explain one aspect of it as it has been given to me from various sources.

The Collective Wage

Owing to the exigencies of the civil war a kind of petty Communism was established wherein all had to work, and each received his ration or "payok" direct from the centre. Lenin had made it clear that this Military Communism was enforced by the terrible demands of the conflict, and was in reality a departure from the original line of development as marked out. And so it was that everybody got his payok, worker as well as loafer. There was no time to be too particular. The enemy was at the gate. During the Imperialist war, in the time of the Czar, thousands of petty agents and traders flocked to the munition factories to escape being sent to the front. Since the Revolution this process has continued. Large numbers of non-proletarian elements have thronged "to work" in order to get a "payok." These elements were incapable of work, and not imbued with the proletarian spirit; for a proletarian is not made in a day. And their influence upon the general tone of the factories and the workshops was an extremely demoralising one. Instead of the tens of thousands of fiery and revolutionary proletarians, aglow with the spirit of the revolution, who left the factories for the field of battle never to return, and whose place was taken by masses of non-proletarian and non-revolutionary elements too great in number to be properly

absorbed in a time of crisis. Thus the proletarian worker lost heart. He saw around him strangers drawing "payok" and loafing. A remedy had to be found.

I think it was found by a Moscow tailoring factory. These Moscow tailors said: "Here we are, all half starving and doing very little work. Half of us could produce double the quantity of clothes if we were permitted to organise the factory and sack the loafers. Give us the total 'payok' for this factory, and we'll divide it among the workers, and deliver the goods, yes, double the goods." "Agreed," said the Soviet. And so it was done. The number of workers were reduced from 1,400 to 700, the production jumped three-fold, the pay of the workers became higher, and the cost of production to the Soviet was reduced by 26 per cent. This is how increased production operates under the Soviet system.

And the idea spread everywhere. It is called "the collective wage." In a sense it is the abolition of wages, an advance from the previous system, for it is a contract entered into by a body of workers to produce a certain minimum for a certain quantity of goods or money. Here we have all that is meant by Workers' Control. The full implication of this new idea cannot be realised except on the spot. It is self-government in the factory. The workers in a plant have suddenly become a collectivity, that "association of free individuals" referred to in the closing chapter of the *Communist Manifesto*.

And who is the "Blackleg" to-day? In Soviet Russia the blackleg is the "won't work." And the Workers' Committee have now no hesitation in asking the "won't work" to quit their groups. To-day this régime, where a scab is a loafer, once considered by the revolutionaries a vision of the distant future, is in full vigour in the proletarian province of Don Bas.

Donetz Basin

And so to Don Bas over the treeless steppes. The province of Don Bas spreads over a considerable stretch of country, and has been especially created by the Soviet régime to include not only the coal, but also the metallurgical and chemical industries, in order to make the political boundaries co-extensive with the economic ones. Bakhmyt is the administrative centre. Here are located the Central Trade Union Office under Comrade Briskin, the Metal Workers', and the Mineworkers' Union Offices under the control of the Chairman, Comrade Kalni, a brawny miner with Australian experience, and therefore able to speak English. Here, too, are the big pile of offices of the C.P.K.P., letters of great import in Don Bas, for they represent the central management of the coal and metal industry of the region.

Under Comrade Briskin's guidance we went the round of the mining groups of Kadivka, Pavlovka, and Briansk. Here we came into touch with the proletariat of Don Bas, in class consciousness and proletarian spirit second only to Petrograd. Here we heard stories about . . . WORK. Work, and how to do it was the

topic of all conversation. And there was a pervading sense that the workers spoke as the conscious owners of the industry. And there were deeds of heroism recorded to us. In those dreary months from April to July, when Don Bas only received twenty per cent. of its food supply, and people were flocking out of the region, how valiantly the proletarian fighters stuck to the work. Comrade Kalni, the Chairman of the Union, related to us how they had to fight the rising water in the mines, and save them from destruction. Hundreds literally collapsed at their work, and had to be carried away, to return again to the struggle in a day or two. There were two thousand such cases, we were told, and next month a festival will be held to honour a first batch of three hundred of them. In the hall of the C.P.K.P. a big notice board was displayed, half black and half red. Above the red stood the word "Heroes," and above the black "Deserters." Comrade Kalni said that there was no mine where heroes equal to any found in the field of battle were not to be found.

Much was also told us of how the Don Bas workers made Denekin's life a misery, and eventually contributed to turn him out. When the Germans came to the Ukraine after Brest Litovsk, the Kadivka Secretary told us, they proceeded to take away the stocks of coal lying there. The Don Bas workers went on strike, because, they said, the coal belonged to their Soviet Republic. However, the Germans paid for the coal, and deported 300 of the agitators to Soviet Russia!

Everything is proletarian in Don Bas, so it seemed to us. The very generals are from the working class. Verishiloff and Permakoff, and other brilliant leaders of the Red Army are justly claimed by the Don Bas workers as their own sons. The manager of the biggest mine at Briansk was a proletarian who had shown a genius for management. By the way, we had our meal at his house before the meeting, and I could not help remarking what a bad lot of Amsterdammers we were having dinner there with the Boss. But the tables were now turned. Comrade Briskin now represented the owners, the workers themselves, and that in no mere theoretical sense either.

I have already mentioned one or two aspects wherein Labour after the Revolution reverses its slogans. Comrades Briskin and Kalni emphasised another. The Unions are trying to limit the hours strictly to eight owing to the intensification of the work, but many "Workers' Committees" are continually breaking the rule and working ten and even twelve in the eagerness to make up the program.

In the summer months, owing to the conditions stated, the production did not exceed nine million poods. In October, the total quantity of coal produced was 35 million poods; in November, 43 million poods, besides a Voshkrasnik (Communist Sunday) for the famine relief in the Volga. In December, they hope to reach the 50 million pood mark.*

* The actual returns were 51 million poods.

In September, the programme for the *Allianza Rayon*, for example, was fixed at 75 per cent. of the pre-war standard. The workers did so well that in November the norm was put up to 100 per cent. of the pre-war figure. This means that to get the same pay the workers are prepared to try and reach a mark one-third higher up. Henceforward, says Comrade Kalni, the objective will be to reduce the hours to six, for in many parts the production per head is equal to that of pre-war in spite of the twelve-hour day and the capitalist whip then prevailing. In short, Don Bas is a magnificent demonstration of the truth that Communist production can beat capitalist production to a frazzle. The secret has been found how to combine individual incentive with the principle of each for all and all for each. And this is the collective wage.

It must not be supposed that everything is smiling now in Don Bas. Transportation is bad, housing is wretched after the long years of war and banditry, the region is threatened with a bread shortage in January, Comrade Kalni told us. It is a hard struggle. But the workers have found new heart for the struggle, and Kalni thought that in four or five years Don Bas would build itself up into a great industrial machine second to none in the world.

The Labour Army

The Don Bas proletariat turns every one into its own image. It communicates its spirit to the nondescript and to the peasant recruit. A novel feature of the Don Bas coalfields is the Labour Army. This Labour Army is now very different to that which volunteered for the Labour Front after the civil war. It numbers 12,000, soon to be increased to 20,000 by new drafts from Moscow. Comrade Kalni informed us that it is now mainly composed of semi-proletarian elements and unsuitable material found in the Red Army and drafted out. Young men whose characters are intractable to the cultural agencies of the Army are drafted here. The idea is that nothing but a course of training to be an industrial proletarian can save these boys from criminality, and the idea works magnificently. At Pavlovka, there was a regiment of 2,000, whose commander, a member of the Union Executive, presided at our meeting. Let it not be supposed that there is any militarisation of Labour in the system. At work they are Union men, the officers are Union officials, or take part in production. The military formation is preserved, and the educational work of the Red Army is continued. They soon become proletarians, for in Don Bas a proletarian is nothing less than a revolutionary worker. The figures of production of this unit and its efforts for the relief of the famine are a splendid testimony to the revolutionary contagion of the Don Bas proletariat. Comrade Kalni mentioned 4,000 Black Sea sailors and others sent up for schooling to Don Bas. At first the task seemed hopeless, he said, they were such a wild, truculent, anti-social crowd. Now they have become splendid workers, and in the school of revolutionary trade unionism are learning the dignity of a proletarian.

What strikes one in Don Bas is the complete absence of watertight compartments. Each institution melts into another. The

Labour Army is controlled by the Union, the Union is led by Communists, the C.P.K.P. is indistinguishable from the miners and the metal workers, who compose or appoint the directors. Comrade Kalni himself is one. The C.P.K.P. is organising mine farms in the coalfields to provide food for the miners. Fifty-nine farms with 20,000 hectares were started last year, and this year double the area will be worked. In a few years it is hoped to produce all the necessary food for the miners. Tired workers and women are sent to work these. Here, again, the management of this section, though run by the C.P.K.P., is part of the Union offices.

This great coal region is being organised by the workers into three or four big State Trusts. What our comrades in Russia mean by a State Trust is an organism, for instance, of coal, metal and chemical plants, such as they are building in Don Bas, each feeding and depending upon the other, more or less self-governing as far as control from the Supreme Council is concerned, which sees to the food supply, and the exchange of the products, and appointment of managers through the local organs, and, of course, technical equipment.

In short, Don Bas aspires to become quite a self-supporting unit, a Republic of its own, although the workers are anything but parochial in their outlook; as witness their paper, which they are careful to name "*The All-Russian Stokehold*" (Boeressiski Kechigarka).

The example of this glorious proletariat deserves to be made known to all the world's workers. Its heroism, its revolutionary ardour, and its devotion through every trial—that is the guarantee for World Communism. Comrade Meshkin, the Miners' Secretary at Kadivka, whose drawn face told of the long struggle, speaking to us on behalf of the miners assembled there, desired us to take their greetings not only to the revolutionary workers of the English movement, but to the backward and misguided ones as well.

Anyone who wishes to be re-baptised with the revolutionary faith, let him go to Donetz Basin!

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