BOOK REVIEW


This book deals with labor problems in The Modern Soviet Union. The author is a specialist of the Soviet economy. It consists of seven chapters.

1. Planned Economy and the “Labor Market”
2. Supply Structure of Labor Power
3. Definitive Factors and Structure of Labor Demand
4. Wage System and Problems of Incentive
5. “Peripheral Labor” Problems
6. Labor Market Policy in the USSR (1)
7. Labor Market Policy in the USSR (2)

The author discusses at first about the new situation of the development of Perestroika and the labor problems as follows. "Now, the storm of the Perestroika is blowing in politics, economies, and in society in general. The malicious ministers are forced to quit, the real number of exploding TV sets is published in weekly magazines (the number of fires from TVs was 18400 in 1980-85, the number of the dead was 927), and the rehabilitation of Bkhalin is discussed publicly ("There is no empty place in the history of the USSR"), the demonstrations of the Tatars go on the Red Square. The top leader himself publicly declares the situation as being just before the crisis", and articles which criticise the Soviet official statistics are published in the magazines. Now the real truth is appearing in front of us about the Soviet economy which was long covered in a dense mist." The author points out that the
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whole system is sick, so the problem is not defined in every sector or part of
industry, and at the bottom of the sickness lies the “Human Factors”. But
the author acknowledges that Perestroika is not so advanced in the fields of the
economy as it is in the fields of literature and history, so he approaches the
economy from the “Labor Problems”.

Generally speaking, labor shortages are widely experienced in the Soviet
economy, but “Truly, the problems is not the shortage but over employment ...
... at least 10 millions are over employed persons out of the total 130 millions
in the national economy as a whole.” “Out of the 20 million workers in the
fields of agriculture 15 million, that is three fourths are manual laborers.”
The author characterizes the labor situation in the following terms, “Aggres-
sive work at the end of the month (shtormofshichina)”, “vicious equality”,
even in the superior firms, about two thirds of laborers are lazy”, “ineffici-
cency of the administrative method of the management of economy”, “the
number of the laborers who changed his jobs are about 25000 thousands (so
in average four weeks are jobless in a year for every worker)” etc.

Is it true that only labor is not a commodity under socialism? The author
has this question. In the USSR, labor resources are balanced number of
persons and by labor time, but, only ex post facto reports are possible (p.17).
The author classifies the real form of the distribution of labor under the fol-
lowing three types: (1) distribution by the state, by the direction of govern-
ment, (2) distribution by citizens by market mechanism, (3) distribution by
guiding and mobilizing method. He concludes that in the modern USSR, the
second type is most widely recognised although all types are present. He
points out that the difference between major industries is very big, and that
the difference between big-superior firms and others is very big, too. He
also says that labor market is divided by sexes (pp. 32-33).

In the second chapter the author deals with population, relation of labor
to population, labor time, system of labor training, women laborers, youth la-
obers and so on. Every year about 5 million new workers are supplied to
the labor market through the educational channel (p. 55). Analysis of “na-
kartoshke”, that is part-time workers from city to agriculture is interesting.

Chapter 3 contains the problem of the assistant laborers (it is said that
only about 9 million of such workers were in the industry in 1979 (p. 85)),
and mobility of labor in relation to the urbanization. “Unplanned migration
of labor aggravates the imbalance of labor supply" (p. 94). Regarding the "pendulum laborers" the author points out that my forecast (that I made in my book "The Situation of Agriculture in the USSR", 1981) is not correct, and their growth is now weakened (p. 102). I had a chance to discuss this with the specialist of this problem in Moscow in 1988, Mr. Dadashev whose name appears on page 122 in this book. He said to me that lately about 700 thousands come every day to Moscow to work and at the same time 50-60 thousands go out from Moscow. So I agree that the growth of pendulum laborers is a little weakened and stabilized. The biggest factor is the problem of transportation. Many of these laborers travel one and a half hours one way (p. 99), and also a new law regulating the inflow of such laborers has been in effect since 1987.

In this chapter the author also deals with rationalization in firms. We have the impression that a very big number of workers were forced to quit in the "shichokino" experimental enterprises, but in reality 50-70% of them were only moved from their posts within the firms" (p. 115).

Chapter 4 begins with the analysis of the so-called "tariff-system", that is the wage system of the workers. In the USSR about 7000 types of work in 160 categories are defined on the state level into six grades (p. 131). And the "norma" of the work is the base of the wage. "So the "norma" is the key problem of the relationship between managers and laborers in the USSR" (p. 134). If the laborer works beyond the norma, he can get a bonus and special additions to the theme. But these are 16.6% and 6% to the ordinary pay so the bonus is not so big in the USSR (p. 138). Mr. Ohtsu analyses that the gap in the wages of engineers and simple workers is diminishing lately and the Economic Reform in perestroika intends to widen it (p. 148). He also analyses peasant earnings and individual earnings from the plot. The new system of contracts in the collective farms widened by only 20% (p. 157), or not as much as has been reported in the mass-media. He can not be so hopeful about the future of the Economic Reform because "there is almost no change in the mentality of managers", "mass workers are accustomed to be directed from above" (p. 166).

Chapter 5 is very unique, because the author attempts to analyse the problem of peripheral workers (about 10% of the all workers, that is 14 million), workers in the home, students workers, side jobs and 9 million pensioners.
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These fields have not been investigated enough even by the Soviet economists.

Chapter 6 and 7 consist of the issues of labor policy in the USSR. The author uses the concrete investigations of workers by sociologists in the USSR, and reveals a major miss-match between supply and demand of specialists, and unofficial work “shabashiniki”. Almost half of all construction is done with these unofficial laborers, and finally he analyses the flexibility of the labor policy under perestroika in these fields.

All in all, the book shows us the new movement and new moments in labor problems and in the Soviet society in general. Definitely there are new winds blowing. But at the same time the book points out that there is no evidence of diminishing power of the bureaucracy and centralised directive mechanism built in the 1930s notwithstanding the many discussions on this issue. Far from it, the ABC-system (Administrative-Bureaucratic-System, C is S in Russian) is growing more and more powerful. The author shows us very concretely from the stand point of labor the two sides of these problems.

Hiromasa NAKAYAMA
(Meijigakuin University)

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For two decades some Japanese specialists of Russian literature, history and social thoughts have been doing research in the fields of Russo-Japanese cultural relations. In the course of the research, they became aware of some hitherto neglected aspects of Japanese acceptance of European cultures, name-