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THE WORKING CLASS**



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE

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TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN BY D A V I D S K V I R S K

HOW THE WORKERS LIVED AND FOUGHT UNDER TSARISM

Forty years have passed since the day the workers and peasants of Russia, led by the Communist Party, overthrew the tsarist autocracy, for ever destroyed the rule of the capitalists and landlords, and set up Soviet power, the power of the people. Great October called forth a deep-going revolution in all spheres of life: economic, political, ideological, and cultural, and in the traditions and life of the working people.

The tsarist autocracy was the bitterest enemy of the peoples of Russia. The long and inexorable revolutionary struggle against tsarism, the bourgeoisie and the landlords for social, national and political emancipation forged ever closer bonds of friendship between Russians and the non-Russian peoples whom tsarism was oppressing.

The tsar and his satraps ruled the country with no other interests than those of the landlords and capitalists at heart. The tsar promulgated laws, appointed officials, and spent the people's money as he saw fit. The people had no voice in the administration. V. I. Lenin called the tsarist autocracy a system of the absolute rule of officials and the police where the people had no rights whatever.

Employment was not guaranteed. Hundreds of thousands of workers wandered about Russia seeking jobs.

Arbitrary rule reigned supreme. The workers were tyrannized, and because they had no rights, Russian and foreign capitalists devised all sorts of ways of mercilessly exploiting and robbing them. Wages were cut wherever possible: the working day was lengthened; the money the workers earned by their sweat and blood was paid out irregularly, usually on the eve of "big holidays"; the workers often received bonds instead of money and the only place where these could be redeemed was at the factory shop that was stocked with inferior goods which it sold at exorbitant prices; frequently less was paid than what was earned; fines were imposed for every, even the slightest "offence"; tens of thousands of rubles were withheld from the workers' wages annually.

The working day at the factories was unreasonably long and wages were pitifully small. The labour conditions were deplorable. If a worker was injured he was thrown out into the street. Medical assistance was rendered only for a high fee and was therefore beyond the reach of the working man. Neither the capitalist nor the government paid old age or disability pensions.

Here is what Lenin wrote in 1899 about the lot of the working class: "...look at the industries where the workers have not secured the protection of the law and cannot oppose the capitalists, and you will see an immeasurably long working day, sometimes extending for as much as 17 or 19 hours, you will see children of five or six doing work beyond their strength, you will see a generation of people who are constantly hungry and who are gradually dying off from hunger."

One of these was the coal industry.

Work in the mines entailed a terrific risk, especially at steeply inclined coal seams where timbering was an

extremely complicated business. The hewers had to do everything themselves, but not all of them had the necessary experience. Mechanization was out of the question altogether.

The labour of the miners, who had to work with a pick hunched up in their burrows in semi-darkness and oppressive heat, was painfully heavy. Only a flickering wick in a tin with kerosene lighted their way. With bitter irony, the miners called this wick "a light from God," and the mines—burrows, holes, rat-traps. The lot of the sledge-pullers (they were also called haulers) was no better. Most of them were juveniles. At the command "Off you go!", they would hurriedly go down on all fours and slowly, straining all their strength, pull their loaded boxes. To prevent their feet from slipping on the wet stones, the heavy boots of the haulers were studded. When they crawled about the mine, their studded boots made a metallic sound which was like the clatter of horses' hoofs on a paved road.

Owners of factories, plants and mines willingly hired children to do the work of men. In their eyes, women and children had a special value as a more tractable and submissive labour force. In tsarist Russia, every third worker began his career at the age of ten or twelve.

Not all parents managed to "apprentice" their children. To do this, they had to coax and bribe foremen. Working men's children went to work in the workshops and factories emaciated and weakened by disease. The dark, damp premises doomed them to premature disability.

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Under tsarism, life was a stern teacher for Ivan Korobov, veteran blast-furnace operator and head of an emi-

nent family of workers. His mother died when he was only eighteen months old. Poverty drove his father out of a remote little village in Orel Region to find employment in the Donbas. As a lad he became an apprentice in a blast-furnace shop where his job was to crush ore.

Whenever there was a minute to spare, the lad would run to the blast-furnace shop to watch what was being done and help the operators. In this way he gradually learnt their trade. He respected the old, experienced workers and gave heed to what they said, and they, in their turn, treated him in a warm, fatherly way.

Ivan Korobov also worked as a hauler. Formerly this meant pulling a two-wheeled trolley with a heavy load. More often than not a hauler would be ready to swoon from fatigue before reaching the end of the run. Many years passed before Ivan was able to transfer to a blast-furnace and become an operator in the shop.

The workers lived in damp and dirty barracks with two or three tiers of bunks ranged along the walls. These were the homes of family men and bachelors, the healthy and the sick.

In the Donbas, besides these barracks, there were what were known as cabins—low dug-outs with roofs scarcely to be seen above the surface of the ground. There were a large number of these cabins along the Kalmius River. A staircase cut into the earth led down into each cabin. In it the picture was invariably of a woman in rags sitting on the earthen floor of the dark, damp and musty room and mashing cooked potato peelings—the meal for her family. There would be emaciated, rickety children crawling about at her feet. The family would be waiting for the father, its only breadwinner, to return from work.

Most of the bachelors did not have even this, and rented a "corner." In the barracks, the entire space was filled with beds, and, as a rule, the landlords let each of the beds to two tenants, one for the day, the other for the night. Juveniles could not pay even for such a "corner" and slept at the workbenches, having neither pillows, bedclothes nor blankets.

Prior to the Revolution, the workers of the town of Ivanovo-Voznesensk lived in suburbs that had such expressive names as Yamy (Holes) and Golodaikha (Starvation). The town itself was dirty and dreary. The local mill-owners made tremendous fortunes on the blood and sweat of the workers but never spent a single kopek on housing, schools or amenities. There was some talk in the municipal council about laying water mains, but when Sipyagin, the Minister for the Interior, heard about it he suggested that a new prison be built instead.

The working class of Russia was oppressed not only by Russian but also by foreign capitalists, who controlled nearly three-quarters of the iron and steel, coal, and metal-working industries. The oil-fields, railways, metal-working and metallurgical factories were in the hands of the British, French, German, Belgian and other capitalists, whose sole aim was to pump as much as they could out of the country.

Neither the Russian nor the foreign capitalists had any intention of improving the conditions in which the workers lived and laboured. They knew that thousands and tens of thousands of unemployed were always on hand to take the place of the workers who were killed, maimed, or too exhausted to carry on. Back-breaking toil took a great toll of workers' lives. The huge cemeteries near each of the mines in the Donbas stand in mute

evidence of the horror of those days. The hundreds of crosses show the price at which the fabulous profits of the Russian and foreign capitalist oppressors and enslavers of the working people were made.

* * *

The Russian worker could not dream of giving his children an education. That was the privilege of the rich. In Europe, Lenin wrote, "Russia is the only remaining country where the masses of the people are so savagely robbed of education, light and knowledge."

A guide entitled *Cities of Russia*, published in 1910, tells us that Moscow had 15 theatres, 16 libraries, three "public clubs," and a circus. In addition, there were 416 churches, 46 chapels, 62 belfries, 247 state-operated wine shops, 291 taverns, 360 wine cellars and 789 beerhalls.

Tsarism shackled the workers' striving for enlightenment and was afraid to make education accessible to the common people. We know of a case where a peasant woman sent a petition to Alexander III, asking him to give her son the opportunity of going to high school. The resolution of the tsar read: "It is shocking that a muzhik should want to go to high school."

The "public clubs" and temperance societies were among the instruments with which the Russian bourgeoisie suppressed the class-consciousness of the workers and distracted them from the revolutionary struggle.

Like education, recreation was the prerogative of the privileged classes—the capitalists, landlords, merchants and so forth.

The exploiters did all they could to keep the popular masses in ignorance and darkness and in absolute submis-

sion. Indeed, what recreation could the workers think of when their families, which usually consisted of five or six persons, had to live on 30 or 50 kopeks a day? That was hardly enough for rye bread and salt.

Here is how Maxim Gorky described the cheerless leisure of the workers in his famous novel *Mother*:

"The young people went to the taverns or to their friends' houses, where they played the accordion, sang ribald songs, danced, swore and got drunk. Worn out as they were by hard work, the drink quickly went to their heads, and some unaccountable irritation rankled in their breasts, demanding an outlet."

Factory owners, agents of the management and the bribed police set the Russian workers on the Tatars, and the Tatars on the Ukrainians, and mass fights were staged on every holiday. Jewish pogroms broke out not infrequently. This was another means by which the factory and mill-owners hoped to distract the working people from the struggle against the tsarist autocracy, against the exploiters.

The extraordinarily difficult position of the Russian workers spurred them on to begin an organized struggle against the capitalists already in the seventies and eighties of the last century. Agreeing among themselves, they presented demands to their employers or staged strikes. These strikes were called because of the inordinate fines, the swindling that was practised in the payment of wages, and the efforts to lengthen the already long working day. During some of the first strikes, the workers, driven to exasperation, smashed machinery and damaged offices and shops.

The Russian proletariat had no political rights, not even the most elementary of civil freedoms. Meetings, pro-

cessions and demonstrations were prohibited. Workers who went out into the streets to demand political freedoms, employment and bread were dispersed by the police and troops, sometimes with bullets.

In 1897, by their self-sacrificing struggle, the workers forced the government to promulgate a law setting the length of the working day at not more than eleven and a half hours. But even then the autocracy remained true to itself: the same law gave factory and mill-owners the right to compel workers to work overtime without any limit. In effect, the situation in which the capitalists could arbitrarily lengthen the working day was not changed.

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In the long years of struggle against oppression by tsarism, capitalists and landlords, the proletariat of Russia gave the world an example of solidarity, courage, heroism, and unbounded loyalty to the interests of their people.

But until the working class gave birth to its own organization in the shape of a revolutionary party, this struggle neither was nor could be successful. It was only in the course of the revolutionary struggle of the Russian proletariat under the leadership of its party that the conditions were created for uniting the scattered, separate national-liberation movements into a far-reaching general democratic movement headed by the Russian working class, which was the most progressive, consistent and resolute champion of democracy, socialism and freedom of all the oppressed peoples of tsarist Russia.

The Bolshevik Party rallied all the workers and brought organization into the strike movement, into the struggle

of the entire working class. It taught the workers that freedom and a better life could be won only by an organized struggle aimed at overthrowing the rule of the exploiters and establishing a dictatorship of the proletariat.

In the plan Lenin drew up at the close of the 1890's for building up a party of the working class, special importance was attached to setting up an organization of professional revolutionaries. Here is what Lenin wrote in the first issue of the illegal newspaper *Iskra*:

"No class has ever achieved supremacy without putting forward its own political leaders, its foremost representatives, able to organize the movement and lead it. And the Russian working class has already shown that it can put forward such men: the widespread struggle of the Russian workers in the past five or six years has shown what a tremendous revolutionary force lies latent in the working class and that the most out-and-out persecution by the government does not reduce but increases the number of workers aspiring to socialism, to political consciousness, and to political struggle."

The history of the revolutionary movement in Russia contains the names of many outstanding workers who became champions of the people. Courageous and selfless, these men instilled in their comrades a will to fight for justice and freedom. They explained the situation to their fellow workers, taught in workers' circles, set up organizations at factories and plants and in towns and villages, worked as type-setters and printers in secret printshops, wrote leaflets and proclamations, guided political strikes and demonstrations, and were in the vanguard of the popular masses during revolutionary uprisings.

The revolutionary working-class movement of Russia produced remarkable leaders, fearless fighters for the

workers' cause. In 1878, two of these men, Stepan Khalturin and Viktor Obnorsky, organized the Northern League of Russian Workers in Petersburg. The programme of this League stated that its ultimate aim was to bring about a socialist revolution—"the overthrow of the existing, unjust political and economic system of government."

The consciousness that the social system was unjust, the incredibly difficult conditions of labour, and the monstrous fines induced Pyotr Moiseyenko, a leading worker who was formerly a member of the Northern League of Russian Workers, to undertake to organize and head a strike at the Morozov Mills in Orekhovo-Zuyevo in 1885. A man with revolutionary experience, Moiseyenko gathered together a group of workers and, jointly with the more class-conscious weavers and dyers, presented the mill-owner, Morozov, with demands in behalf of all the workers. Troops were called out. Hundreds of strikers were arrested and scores were arraigned before the tsarist court.

Another outstanding working-class revolutionary, Ivan Babushkin, helped to organize strikes, convene meetings of workers' representatives, draw up demands, and write appeals to the workers.

People like Babushkin were called national heroes by Lenin. They were men, who had devoted themselves body and soul to the struggle to emancipate the working class, men who did not waste themselves on futile acts of terrorism, but worked doggedly and steadfastly among the working-class masses, helping to develop their class-consciousness, organization and revolutionary activity.

Many real revolutionaries were reared on the eve of the first Russian revolution by the Bolshevik Party,

which was created by the great Lenin. They headed the armed class struggle against the tsarist autocracy when the crisis advanced, when the revolution broke out, when millions and millions of people joined in. All that was won from the tsarist autocracy was the result of the struggle waged by the popular masses under the leadership of the working class's genuinely revolutionary party, the party of Bolsheviki.

Through participation in the struggle, the workers acquired revolutionary experience and prepared themselves for the first Russian revolution of 1905. The revolutionary movement of the working class activized the peasantry as well.

The tsarist police imprisoned and exiled revolutionary workers, peasants and students. But repressions could no longer halt the approach of the revolutionary storm.

In 1905, together with their fathers and elder brothers, the progressive youth shared in the strikes and in the clashes with the police and troops, accumulating experience in the class struggle. Young workers, men and women, who joined underground Bolshevik organizations displayed courage and selflessness in the fight against the tsarist autocracy. Subsequently, many of them became prominent in the affairs of the Communist Party.

The Soviets, a new form of government in which the power is wielded by the proletariat, came into being in the revolutionary years of 1905-07. On May 12, 1905, the weavers of Ivanovo declared a general strike. They elected their deputies to the City Soviet, which was one of the first Soviets in Russia. Two-thirds of the deputies were Bolsheviki.

Like the Paris Commune, the Ivanovo-Voznesensk Soviet functioned for 72 days. The workers were not de-

feated: hunger compelled them to call off the strike. But the struggle went on.

The Bolsheviks led the toiling masses of Russia through the blaze of three revolutions—from the barricades of 1905 to the February bourgeois-democratic revolution of 1917, which put an end to the autocracy, and then to the great October storm, which established the rule of the Soviets.

The exploiting classes, which wielded power in Russia prior to the October upheaval, fettered the strength of the people, dooming them to poverty, and the whole country—to backwardness. They gave foreign capitalists control over the most important branches of the national economy. The criminal policy of the tsarist autocracy and then of the bourgeois Provisional Government, which continued the imperialist war against the will of the people, brought Russia to the brink of catastrophe. The country was saved by the working class, which, led by the Communist Party, seized power for the first time in history.

THE WORKING CLASS—THE MAKER OF SOCIALIST ECONOMY

Taking the political power into their hands, the working class headed the labour campaign of the people to eliminate Russia's backwardness and poverty and create the economic foundation of the new, socialist state.

The first decrees of the Soviet Government—the decrees on peace, on land, and others—conformed with the aspirations and hopes of broad masses of the working people. Private ownership of land was abolished without

compensation on the very same day that Soviet power was established and the land was handed over to the peasants for their free use. Soon the banks, railways, and enterprises of the iron and steel, oil, coal, machine-building, textile, chemical and other major branches of industry were nationalized.

Lenin called upon all workers, all citizens of the Land of Soviets to guard as the apple of their eye all that from then on belonged wholly to the people—the land, factories, plants, and the transport. In order to put down sabotage on the part of hostile elements, the Council of People's Commissars put all the factories under the control of the workers. Without the permission of its representatives no factory or plant could be closed down and no change could be made in the production processes. Control was exercised by men and women workers elected at general meetings.

In the period from the close of 1917 to the middle of 1918, the Soviet Government took steps to break the economic power of the bourgeoisie. The old state apparatus, which had faithfully carried out the will of the capitalists and landlords, was destroyed, and a new, Soviet apparatus was set up. A Supreme Council of the National Economy was created to manage industry. A decree was issued on the creation of a Red Army and Fleet, and the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for the Suppression of Counter-Revolution and Sabotage was organized. The result of these and other measures was that Soviet power consolidated its position within the country.

At that time the country was in a state of war with Germany and Austria. Before the independence of the Land of Soviets could be fully consolidated, it was necessary to end the war and the accompanying devastation,

and to give the people the conditions for peaceful, constructive labour.

In accordance with the wishes of the popular masses, the Council of People's Commissars offered the belligerent states immediately to stop military operations and to conclude peace without annexations and indemnities. The Entente (Britain, France and other countries) declined the offer, with the result that the Soviet Government entered into independent peace negotiations with Germany and Austria-Hungary.

However, because of Trotsky's obnoxious treachery the peace negotiations were broken off and German troops invaded the Soviet Republic and threatened Petrograd.

In response to the appeal of the Communist Party, the working class urgently raised units of the Red Army. The advance of the enemy against Petrograd was stopped thanks to the staunchness and courage of the gallant defenders of the Soviet Republic. The German invaders received a decisive rebuff near Narva and Pskov. The day that happened, February 23, 1918, is regarded as the birthday of the valiant Red Army.

The defeat of the German invaders by the Red Army made it possible to complete the peace negotiations. In order to strengthen Soviet rule and create powerful armed forces which would be able to defend the country, the Party and the working class were compelled to accept the severe terms of the Brest peace.

The Brest peace gave the Communist Party, the working class the opportunity not only of preserving but also of strengthening Soviet rule and of retaining the support of the peasant masses and raising them to the struggle against economic ruin.