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# Fundamentals of the Chinese Labor Movement

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CHINESE conceptions of social progress have recently undergone significant changes which have paved the way for the rise of the Chinese labor movement in its cultural aspects. Old China used to consider manual labor undignified, as she had an abundant labor supply, and only the poor people were constantly engaged in common toil. Gradually, modern ideas of democracy, of social equality, and of educational enlightenment for the masses, were introduced from the Occident, producing marked influence upon the thinking Chinese.

## CULTURAL FACTOR

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, certain idealists in China were enthusiastically advocating social changes, including the emancipation of women and the awakening of labor. Just then, a number of books which had profoundly influenced Europe were successively translated into Chinese. Thus, J. S. Mill's *On Liberty* was translated in 1899, Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* in 1902, H. Spencer's *Study of Sociology* in 1902, and T. Huxley's *Essay on Evolution* in 1905. These works furnished intellectual food for the Chinese intelligentsia, who were already engaged in a daring campaign against the ancient customs and for the gradual adoption of social reforms in China.

Liberal-minded Chinese were becoming more and more interested in the welfare of the common people, and some became champions of the labor movement. At the National University of Peking (now Peiping),

then the nation's capital, a group of progressive professors organized and published a weekly in Chinese as an organ to expound their modern views on political, educational, and social questions. *La Jeunesse* was a militant magazine which fearlessly attacked the antiquated social usages and frankly advocated radical changes relating to the family and the working classes. As many of its articles were written in the vernacular, the magazine reached thousands and thousands of the families of the common people.

According to one of the editors of this magazine, the year 1916 should be considered the pivotal year for all the social developments of China. In that year, Yuan Shih Kai's secret plots for reestablishing himself as the emperor under the sham republic first met the vigorous opposition of the liberals, then brought about his speedy downfall and finally his disgraceful death. In 1916 the same editor urged the Chinese woman to forsake her traditional position "of being conquered" by men and to assume her new position "to conquer," in order to gain certain social and civic privileges which rightly belong to her. In the same year the workers were advised to organize and fight for a just position in Chinese society.

In 1916 the literary renaissance began to attract the attention of Chinese reformers, and an increasing volume of literature was published in the simplified Chinese. The simplified language met the particular needs of the working people, as the majority of them were poor and could not devote much time to learning the classical Chinese. When,

in 1919, Chinese students all over the country started a crusade against the classical language and the ancient customs, they especially urged the laborers to obtain an elementary education when opportunity presented itself. Modernized industrial and commercial establishments in China now frequently provide rudimentary education for their employees, some trade unions maintain schools for adults and also for children, and a number of strikes have included the privilege of education among their principal demands.

It is fair to state that the ability to read has increased and is increasing among the rank and file of labor, and that the workers today are relatively more intelligent than were many of their comrades at the beginning of the Republic about nineteen years ago. The level of their intelligence is somewhat raised, with a corresponding increase of wants. The persistent desire to satisfy some of these wants on the part of the intelligent workers has been one cause of social unrest in recent years.

#### POLITICAL FACTOR

In addition to the cultural factor as above outlined, the Chinese labor movement gains impetus from the political propaganda of the Kuomintang. Although the party has a history of about forty years, it was a secret organization before 1911. Since then it has become an open political party, but it has been at times under persecution by the government in power and also by military authorities.

From the time Dr. Sun Yat Sen became party leader, he persistently urged the Chinese laborers and farmers to join the party in order to complete the revolution. As laborers and farmers constitute probably over eighty per cent of the total population, Dr.

Sun plainly realized the importance of enlisting the allegiance and the assistance of these groups. If he could win a considerable number of them over to his cause, the success of the revolution would be assured. Therefore in his lectures in South China in 1923 and 1924, he repeatedly persuaded the laborers and the farmers to join his party, and in turn he promised to improve their economic and social status. In 1924 his views were more systematically expressed in the platform of the Kuomintang. Relating to domestic policies, the party, in Article 10, pledges to reform village organizations and to improve peasants' living conditions. In Article 11, the party resolves to enact labor laws for the improvement of the worker's life, to protect labor organizations, and to assist in their general development.

Many laborers and farmers responded enthusiastically to Dr. Sun's pleas and became loyal supporters of the Kuomintang. Before 1925, when the party was powerful only in South China, its labor activities were limited to Canton and vicinity. The labor section of the party took charge of all matters affecting labor. In case of a dispute between capital and labor, or of the organization of a new union, the laborers often went to the labor section for counsel. From time to time the party also issued orders, which the workers usually obeyed. In the headquarters of the Kuomintang there was also a special section on farm labor, which looked after the interests of the farmers. Party agents were frequently sent to villages nearby to organize farmers' leagues. In outlying districts where communication with headquarters was more difficult, the local farmers enjoyed relatively more freedom in organizing their leagues, after they had received definite instructions from the party agents. Thus, both in the cities

and in the rural communities, the emancipation of the workers was carried on under the direction of the Kuomintang. This policy is being continued to the present day, when the Kuomintang is in power and its influence extends to the entire country.

The farmers' leagues, which grew out of a serious economic and social condition in rural China, are probably vanguards of an agrarian revolution in the near future. Economically, the Chinese farmers have long been suffering from high rent, high taxation, and high rate of interest. Socially, they have been desperate in organizing the self-defense corps to protect themselves from bandits. Today, city and rural labor is joining hands for a common struggle against economic oppression. In the years to come, undoubtedly the farmers' leagues will have a much stronger development, as the agrarian problems are far more fundamental to China than is the labor situation in the cities.

#### SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTOR

But this is not all. Industrialization in China is also creating new opportunities for labor. The processes of industrialization in some commercial and industrial cities are fairly rapid, forcing upon the working classes a sense of consciousness and impelling them to organize and agitate. This is another important factor in the growing labor movement in present-day China.

Take the cotton industry for illustration. Next to the United States and India, China is the largest nation in the world for the production of raw cotton. But cotton spinning and weaving as a modern industry is of relatively recent growth in China. In 1888 the first Chinese cotton mill was established in Shanghai. Keen competition has come from British merchants who

opened their first large cotton factory in Shanghai in 1895. Since 1918, Japanese cotton mills in China have also increased quite rapidly. In 1929 there were in all China 120 cotton mills, of which 73 were owned by the Chinese, 44 by the Japanese, and 3 by the British. The total investment of the industry is estimated to be about \$360,000,000 Chinese currency; and the total number of spindles is about 3,700,000.

Although the cotton industry has recently suffered a depression, its growth and expansion within a short period of time is truly phenomenal. The most rapid increase of the cotton mills in China occurred during the European War, when excellent opportunities were given to the Chinese for developing their industries at home.

One major economic effect of industrialization is the increase of wages for the workpeople. Recently, money wages in some cities have shown increases, but whether real wages have shown corresponding increases is open to question. As far as Peiping is concerned, the workers today seem to be worse off than formerly, as revealed by the real wage index numbers of the city. In 1900, the real wage index number for Peiping was 130, but in 1925 it was only 102. This decrease has naturally worked great hardship upon some laboring classes in Peiping and its environs.

Following the increase of wages in some industries is the rising standard of living of the workers—the desire to gain additional commodities for consumption and enjoyment. This struggle takes the form of a demand for social and occupational equality between the sexes. In the old days, Chinese girls and women were secluded in the households and were not engaged in gainful occupations outside of their homes. Strict regulations were imposed upon them by the guilds and by

social usage. Today, however, these restrictions are less rigid, and female laborers are increasingly common. They are working in the cotton mills, in silk filatures, in commercial pursuits, and in professions such as teaching, medicine, and social work.

In this way, the workpeople, male and female, are gradually increasing their usefulness in the community through gainful employment. In a sense their economic position is strengthened, and the desire to attain a higher level of living has stimulated some to more restless activities, as seen in labor demonstrations, labor organizations, and strikes. Between 1918 and 1926 there were 1,232 important strikes in all parts of China, and about forty-seven per cent of these were due to economic pressure. This clearly shows the deplorable economic situation in which a large number of Chinese workers have found themselves. The socio-economic situation in China therefore furnishes fertile soil in which the seeds of labor unrest are naturally sown.

These three factors—cultural, political, and socio-economic—appear to be the fundamental causes of the Chinese labor movement.

#### THE RÔLE OF WORKERS' ORGANIZATIONS

Active labor organizations have sprung up in the principal commercial and industrial centers, such as Hongkong and Canton in South China, Shanghai in Southeastern China, Hankow in Central China, and Tientsin and Tongshan in North China. It is not possible to sketch even briefly the outstanding labor organizations in these cities. Suffice it to say that they have been very influential in arousing the workers in other cities to a closer coöperation among themselves for the common struggle between capital and labor.

The prime movers of these organizations have come from various groups, including members of the Kuomintang, radicals, students, and leaders from the rank and file of labor. Some labor organizations are essentially modeled after the labor unions of the West, while others are reorganized from the guild system of old China. To illustrate the growth of the labor movement as seen through the rise of labor unions, the labor activities of the Hongkong-Canton and the Wuhan regions are here outlined. The former is taken to show the conservative and constructive side of the movement, and the latter the radical aspects of the labor organizations in China.

#### CONSERVATIVE GROUPS

In South China, Hongkong and Canton saw the beginnings of labor organizations towards the end of the Manchu Dynasty. The Mechanics Union in Hongkong, which is one of the most progressive unions in South China today, started as a workingmen's friendly society in 1909. Just then, the revolutionary party under the leadership of Dr. Sun Yat Sen could not openly carry on revolutionary activities either in China or in the British colony of Hongkong. But secretly, the party had branches in the colony where it quietly coöperated with the Chinese workers.

In November, 1908, when a certain Chinese laborer at the Taikoo Dockyard, a British concern, was maltreated by a British overseer, he reported the case to a secret agency of the Chinese revolutionists. Similar cases were soon reported, and the intelligent leaders among the Chinese mechanics felt the necessity of organization. Early in 1909, the Chinese Engineers Institution was organized. During the first years of its existence, this Institution laid special emphasis on establishing



evening schools for the mechanics and their children, on giving relief to the poor in Canton and neighborhood, and on rendering financial assistance to members in case of unemployment, sickness, or death.

In recent years, when the cost of living in Hongkong was steadily rising, the Chinese mechanics found it impossible to live decently upon the meager wages they were receiving. They demanded an increase of wages from the British employers, and upon the latter's refusal, the Chinese workers in 1920 declared a strike and won it. Their wages were increased 32.5 per cent over the prevailing rates in the colony.

This was the first significant strike in South China. It demonstrated the importance of organization to the Chinese laborers and convinced them of the need for a united labor movement. It brought the Chinese mechanics in Hongkong and Canton closer together, for the strikers returned to Canton to live in the mat-sheds on the headquarters of the Mechanics Union in Canton, which was then under construction. For the construction of this building, the Hongkong mechanics had given financial help and had acted as agency for soliciting funds outside of China. During the shipping strike in 1922 and the Hongkong-Canton strike in 1925, the Mechanics Union of Hongkong also took a sympathetic and conservative attitude, and cooperated with the strikers in the most loyal manner.

The General Mechanics Union of Kwangtung made its start in 1910, when representatives came from Hongkong to plan the establishment of an organization of the mechanics in Canton so that the Chinese workers in these two cities might have closer cooperation. Largely with the financial assistance of the mechanics in Hong-

kong and in the South Seas, the headquarters of the General Mechanics Union of Kwangtung was completed in 1923.

This union has a membership of over twenty thousand, comprising the mechanics in Kwangtung and also members in Hongkong and the South Seas. It now has a magnificent office building and a library. It owns a printing plant and a recreation center for the amusement of the members. Its dormitory provides fairly comfortable accommodation to members from other Chinese ports or abroad who come to visit Canton.

In recent years when the labor movement in Canton has shown violent changes and its direction has been somewhat uncertain, this union has taken a conservative attitude and has thus exerted a stabilizing influence upon the workpeople of Canton and vicinity. It has adopted a definite policy toward improving the workers' economic, social, and industrial conditions, and has been divorced as far as possible from politics. It has taken a rather firm stand against radicalism. It has successfully combated radical activities in the mint, the arsenal, the Canton-Samshui Railway, and the Canton-Kowloon Railway. During the Communist uprising in Canton in December, 1927, the mechanics of Canton were actually engaged in a two-day fight against the Reds in the city. The mechanics of Canton and Hongkong are therefore among the conservative labor groups in South China and are constructive forces toward the economic and social improvement of their members.

#### RADICAL GROUPS

Manifestly different from that of Hongkong and Canton, organized labor in the Wuhan region presents one of the most radical situations the country has

ever seen. How much of this radicalism was tolerated or supported by the Hankow government which was in power in 1926-1927 is difficult to ascertain; but certainly their stand was too extreme for the right wing of the Kuomintang which later established itself in Nanking, and its split with the Hankow group brought about the downfall of the latter.

Prior to the arrival of the Kuomintang in the Wuhan center in the Fall of 1926, the labor unions in that region were inactive and reactionary, because they had long been under the suppression of the military authorities, especially since the unsuccessful strike of the Peking-Hankow railway workers in 1923. But within three months after the Kuomintang government was established in September, 1926, about two hundred unions sprang up in Hankow, Hanyang, and Wuchang, following a series of prolonged and uncompromising strikes in the principal trades and industries there. Many of their demands were excessive. Sabotage was in vogue. Intimidation and violence were fairly common.

Radical and uncompromising, the Hankow General Labor Union was frankly the central organization of labor for the propagation of communistic ideas in Central China. It openly stood for class war between capital and labor. It advocated and practiced the dictatorship of the proletariat. It encouraged the leadership of the artisan and farming groups in matters affecting labor and the civilian population.

Between September and December, 1926, there were thirty-six important strikes in the Wuhan area. Judging from the demands of these strikes, the political phase predominantly overshadowed the economic and social phases, which latter were characteristic of many strikes in China prior to the

activities of the left wing of the Kuomintang in Central China.

Radicalism reached its climax in May, 1927, when representatives of organized labor of the most radical tendencies in eight countries came to the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Congress in Hankow. They claimed to represent about fourteen million workers in Great Britain, the United States, France, Japan, Korea, Soviet Russia, Java, and China. The Conference formulated its economic policy which embodied demands on modern industry and handicrafts, outlining drastic changes in the wage system, working hours, employment of women and children, and the system of apprenticeship.

At the conclusion of these meetings, the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Secretariat was created as a permanent organization, and the *Pan-Pacific Worker* as its official organ. Since the collapse of the Hankow government in 1927, the headquarters of this organization have been moved to the International Settlement in Shanghai and their activities have been carried on quite secretly.

#### LABOR AND COMMUNISM

From the foregoing it is clear that Chinese labor in recent years has been somewhat influenced by radical propaganda. But radicalism did not begin with the activities of the Soviet agents in China. In fact toward the end of the Manchu Dynasty, teachings of St. Simon and Louis Blanc had gradually found their way to China from French Indo-China. French utopian Socialism appealed to some of the Chinese thinkers and furnished the idealistic background of certain types of revolutionary literature. The content of this literature was later made more practical by insistence on the study of the living conditions of the poor. This

viewpoint was undoubtedly due to the influence of scientific Socialism of the German school, which was soon brought into China following the introduction of French Socialism.

Although the teachings were carried on secretly, the Socialists in China were strong enough to organize the Socialist Party in 1911. It stood for the nationalization of public utilities, universal education, and high wages for labor. As these ideas were too advanced for the new-born Republic, the party was soon dissolved and its leaders fled to foreign countries for their lives. During the student movement, when the country was on the verge of a social revolution, noted Japanese socialists came to visit China, and active coöperation between Japanese and Chinese socialists resulted.

These early efforts of socialistic propaganda prepared the way for Russian communistic activities in China, which began with the visit of Popoff to Shanghai in 1919. In 1920 the Chinese Communist Party was organized, which was soon affiliated with the Third International. The left wing of the Kuomintang watched the growth of communism in China with enthusiasm, and in 1921 coöperated with Soviet agents in successfully persuading the party to admit Communists as members of the Kuomintang. This greatly strengthened the position of the Chinese Communists.

When Borodin came to Canton in 1923, he found the social environment most favorable for communistic propaganda. Borodin's chief contribution to the Kuomintang was his insistence upon organization and propaganda. He exerted tremendous influence in introducing the committee system to the party and to the government, in organizing the Whampoa Military Academy, and in organizing labor unions and farmers' leagues. His methods of

propaganda consisted principally of popularizing slogans for the masses and of publishing literature favorable to the revolution for readers in China and abroad.

Between 1924 and 1927 the ascendancy of radicalism in parts of China was astonishingly rapid. Its influence was first noted in the rise of labor unions. In Canton, for example, there were only about eighty unions in 1922, but in 1926 they had increased to more than three hundred. Strikes also increased. In 1923 there were in all China 47 recorded strikes; but the number was increased to 56 in 1924, 318 in 1925, and 535 in 1926. The character of the strikes also changed. Before 1924, the workers' demands were chiefly economic and social; but between 1924 and 1926, the political and patriotic demands began to assume importance.

Then, too, both Dr. Sun and M. Borodin urged the joint movement of laborers and farmers, giving strength to the further spread of radicalism. In the cities, radical propaganda was seldom carried on in the open. But in Swatow and Canton, the Reds ruled for very short intervals. During these days, parades were frequent, strikes were common, and the proletarian dictatorship was in part enforced. In certain farming districts, land was forcibly taken away from the owners and confiscated. The wealthy were compelled to leave their homes and their land was distributed to the poor. The ownership of land by the poor was thus increased in certain sections of the country. But the poor could not till the land freely, for they had to attend to multifarious duties imposed upon them by the Communists, such as military drill, mass meetings, and occasional raids on the aristocrats who still remained on their estates.

Red propaganda was officially sup-



pressed in April, 1927, when the Manchurian war lord, Chang Tso Lin, with the consent of the foreign legations in Peiping, raided the premises adjoining the Soviet Russian Embassy in that city, and found a list of the names of Chinese Communists, the program of Red activities, and an account of the assistance which China had received from Soviet Russia in recent years. Soon afterwards, the Soviet Consulate in Shanghai was also put under police surveillance by order of the Nationalist Government in Nanking. These moves helped to suppress communistic influence in China at least outwardly, and helped to check the most radical tendencies of the Chinese labor movement.

#### LABOR AND GOVERNMENT

The check of radicalism in China is the declared policy of the Nationalist Government in Nanking. To this Government due credit should also be given for the formulation of a definite policy toward labor, which, though necessarily experimental, is constructive and relatively more consistent than earlier governmental efforts in China. The Government's attention was first drawn to labor problems when it seriously attempted to cope with the indiscriminate use of the strike as a weapon in the struggle between capital and labor. The result was the Arbitration Act of April, 1928, which was promulgated by the Government as the first national legislation along modern lines dealing with the adjudication of disputes between employers and employees. The act provides for a Board of Conciliation and a Board of Arbitration. If the workers on a public utility contemplate a strike, before the strike is declared the dispute must be submitted to the Board of Conciliation for investigation. If conciliation fails, the case must go to the Board of Arbitration,

which will undertake to investigate the dispute more thoroughly. While the dispute is under investigation, neither a strike nor a lockout is permitted.

In November, 1929, the Nationalist Government of Nanking finished the preparation of the Labor Union Law of China. By virtue of this law, male and female workers of the same trade or occupation may now organize a union to increase their knowledge, skill, or productive power, or to improve and maintain their standard of living. However, workers of the government, of public utilities, and of the army and navy, are not allowed to organize unions. No strike is allowed until the dispute is referred to arbitration. Arbitration failing, the workers concerned may declare a strike if two thirds of those present at a mass meeting vote by secret ballot in favor of the strike.

Towards the end of 1929, the Factory Law was also promulgated. This law provides that children under fourteen years of age are not allowed to work, that the working hours for adults are limited to eight hours per day as a principle but may be lengthened to ten under certain conditions, that wages are to be paid on the basis of the cost of living of the workers, that benefit and compensation are to be given to the workpeople in case of injury, sickness, or death and to female workers before and after childbirth, and that a system of employee representation is to be introduced into modern factories.

Are these laws based upon the industrial, economic, and social need in sufficiently large sections of the country so that they can be enforced in the immediate future? Space does not allow exhaustive discussion on these points; but these laws are frankly experimental and China's experience in industrial legislation is admittedly new. The territory of the country is

so vast and local conditions are so different that the effective enforcement of these laws is not to be hoped for within a short time.

#### OBSTACLES TO ENFORCEMENT

The major obstacles to uniform enforcement are both internal and external. Internally, China is unified only in name. Some war lords still ignore the orders of the Central Government in Nanking. Local conditions sometimes prevent the provincial authorities from enforcing national laws. When the writer was traveling in the commercial and industrial centers in China in 1929, he observed that the Arbitration Act was not enforced in the Provinces of Kwangtung and Fukien.

External obstacles arise from extraterritoriality, which, as a diplomatic and international political issue, has already attracted wide attention in China and abroad. But the relationship between extraterritoriality and the enforcement of labor laws needs elucidation. It is clear that the existence of concessions in China places foreign employers in these areas beyond the reach of Chinese law and thus makes it impossible for the Chinese Government to enforce labor laws there.

As an illustration, the work of the Bureau of Social Affairs in Shanghai may be cited. This is one of the efficient bureaus of the Chinese Government, and is engaged in collecting, organizing, and publishing data on industrial, economic, and social questions. It is also in charge of the administration of the Arbitration Act so far as Shanghai is concerned. But in disputes arising between foreign employers and Chinese laborers in the International Settlement in Shanghai, the employers or their representatives seldom appear. In addition, when the

Bureau seeks information on disputes and strikes, or on wages and cost of living, for compilation and publication, only a small number of foreign employers are willing to cooperate.

Evidently, the pioneer endeavors of the Bureau of Social Affairs in Shanghai may open up possibilities for the scientific study of social economics in China. Yet extraterritoriality is a great hindrance toward the effective materialization of such a program.

This explains in part the view of China's delegates to the twelfth session of the International Labor Conference which was held in Geneva, 1929, when they urged the abolition of extraterritoriality in China as a condition antecedent to the universal enforcement of the labor laws throughout the country.

#### CONCLUSION

The assemblage of facts as above given suggests certain tentative conclusions. The significant causes of the Chinese labor movement are cultural, political, and socio-economic. But the movement is also being pushed ahead by the rise of the workers' organizations, the initiative of such organizations having come from the members of the Kuomintang, from radicals, from students, and from leaders of the rank and file of labor. Radicalism in China is in some measure responsible for the radical tendencies of the labor movement. With the suppression of radical propaganda, the labor situation in China today becomes relatively more quiet. Then, too, the Kuomintang in its platform has definitely pledged to improve the conditions of city and rural labor, and it has rather consistently carried out its promises in certain directions. Under the guidance of the party, the Nationalist Government in Nanking is endeavoring to enact and enforce labor laws which

tend to stabilize economic and social conditions for a more wholesome industrial development. Although the city workers have heretofore been the prime movers in causing general social unrest, yet the farmers today are gradually making their grievances widely

known. As Chinese farmers far outnumber the laborers in the cities, the agrarian situation will soon be more serious than the urban situation. Therefore, students of economics and sociology should pay more and more attention to farmers' problems in China.