

"BIG LEAP" FALTERS BECAUSE OF MISMANAGEMENT

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When, in April 1958 Mao Tse-tung's Chinese Communist regime heralded to the world that a sensational "great leap forward" in Communism was to be achieved in China through the introduction of the communes, Peking appeared satisfied that a panacea to the country's economic ills had been found. However, the economics of any country is a system of delicate balance and cannot be settled by the invention of a slogan or even by the use of untold millions of pairs of hands.

The idea of the people's communes was launched to enable China to leap forward into twentieth century industrialization. Since April 1958, 98.2 percent of China's half-billion population has been swallowed up in the semi-militarized communes in the interests of the new slogan. The underlying motives for the introduction of the communes have been made abundantly clear by the Party's theoretical journal Red Flag which has written: "We must undermine the capitalist type of social living built on the basis of the class exploitation system and at the same time we must also undermine the family built on the basis of the class exploitation system. Individual domestic labor is also a remnant of the family under the conditions of individual production. In the socialist society individuals will no longer have to worry over their inability to establish or to maintain a most simple family. In the socialist and communist collective body everybody takes up labor with joy and all jointly and reasonably share the fruits of labor."

But labor alone is not enough; it is its effects that must be studied. It must not be forgotten that throughout history China, with its huge population to feed, has always been forced to wage a not too successful battle to fill the rice bowls of its people. Seemingly forgetful of this, the Communist regime suddenly ordained that China was to make a giant stride forward in industrialization and that all possible efforts were to be concentrated on the production of iron and steel.

Throughout the country people were set to work building "back yard" blast furnaces. They toiled turning out thousands of tons of pig iron which, according to Peking,

resulted in the doubling of China's steel output last year, although it was of doubtful quality since the country had to import more than half a million tons of high grade steel from Western Europe.

This abrupt switch from agricultural pursuits to metallurgy appears to have been more than the precarious food balance of China could stand. The metallurgical statistics may have looked very good but they were achieved at the price of less food. Now, a little belatedly, the master planners have realized that without food nothing can be achieved. By trying to press forward too precipitously into industrialization, Peking has surrounded itself with a tremendous problem--industry versus food.

It has now become apparent that Peking's agricultural program has been forced to undergo a rigid re-evaluation in a series of national agricultural conferences since December. The Communist hierarchy has been forced to recognize that a state of imbalance exists in the economy and that the agricultural program as it stands at the moment is not sound.

It is evident that last year's spectacular iron and steel drive brought about a considerable dislocation in China's rural economy and in October 1958 absorbed more than 25 percent of the labor force needed for pressing harvest and planting tasks. There has been no attempt to disguise the fact that there is a very real labor shortage, although misuse of existing labor would probably be a more accurate term. The manpower shortage has been widely publicized in China and speakers have pointed out that the big problem is one of distribution of men and draft animals. They admitted that in the light of the fantastic production claimed in some economic sectors, the demand for labor in others rose to a point where there is actually an acute shortage of labor, even in over-populated China.

The Party newspaper Jen-min Jih-pao confessed that "the big leap has brought a situation where manpower is needed in all fields, and where a shortage in such manpower is increasingly noticeable." In one large collective in Kweichow, the newspaper said, there is a lot of good land available, but trouble arose when it was found that there were no men available to handle the agricultural machines. This points to a grave miscalculation on the part of the government which,

while, proclaiming itself infallible, manifestly does not possess the talent for organization and foresight demanded by an operation of the gigantic scope such as the "great leap forward."

It is quite apparent that the effort has been far too much even for China's labor-rich economy. Crops lay unharvested in the fields and normal transportation and distribution channels were disrupted. Peking, therefore, has been constrained to dilute its heady propaganda and now says that its iron and steel program in rural areas is one which is destined to produce "more and better iron and steel with less manpower." Given the rudimentary equipment in the hands of the producers, it is difficult to see just how this is to be done.

The ill-considered industrialization drive has had another disadvantage of considerable magnitude in that it has siphoned off manpower from the badly needed water conservation projects which were so highly publicized last winter. The same applies to the deep plowing campaign which the regime now finds expedient to restrict. Peking says that it will be satisfied if deep plowing--which in most instances has meant manual digging of the soil to a depth of several feet--is completed on only one-third of the cultivated area and to a depth of one foot or only seven or eight inches.

Through this series of retreats rural manpower is to be released for employment in tasks directly connected with actual cultivation and at least one-half of a commune's labor force is to be devoted to work in the fields. One quarter of the manpower is henceforth to be put to work on the production of fertilizer and more attention is to be paid to what Peking describes as "sideline" occupations, such as forestry, fishing and the production of meat and vegetables. This diversification is being urged on the communes and the regime has even suggested that they should look to these sources for higher incomes.

While Peking plainly realizes that the "great leap" forward" was too large a bite for the country to swallow, it is definitely not abandoning its plans for a bigger and

better leap forward in agriculture this year. Labor activity is to be increased, not only by lengthening the work day, but also by an attempt to improve tools and organization. However, it is apparent that the immense labor requirements of this year's leap forward will not be met by such measures alone and that the ultimate burden will be on the backs of China's enslaved people from whom more and harder work will be demanded.