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CHINA'S COMMUNES FORMING LABOR ARMIES

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SUMMARY: Press reports from mainland China are stating that all Chinese peasants are to become members of communes -- super-collectives with an average of 20,000 to 40,000 members -- within a few months. This article describes the economic reasons behind the commune drive -- Peiping's desire to have a tightly-organized, mobile labor force, and the Communists' wish to control peasant food consumption. Mess halls, nurseries, a wage system, and grain rationing are intended to add more women to the labor force and make the peasants eat less.

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by Nils Stefansson
(Historian and Writer on Communist China)

China's 500 million peasants will soon be organized into "people's communes" -- enormous collective farms with 20,000 to 40,000 members.

This was announced by the Peiping People's Daily, official organ of the Communist Party, which said on October 1, 1958 that "by the end of September ninety per cent of the peasant households in China had already joined people's communes."

China's peasantry is being transformed into a rural proletariat. Peasants are ordered to join large labor groups. They are to work for wages, not a share of the crop, and must go where they are assigned -- to factories or mines as well as to the fields.

Wives of commune members are also being forced to join labor groups. Children are being placed in communal nurseries. All families are to eat in communal mess halls.

The communes are used as the basis for "labor armies." The People's Daily reported on August 15, 1958 that in Shansi province the party "is in the course of forming more than 3,650,000 people into a labor army which performs the roles of workers, peasants, and soldiers...."

According to the People's Daily, "this labor army is to be formed with peasants of both sexes from 16 to 55 years of age in the province.

It constitutes a hard-core force."

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This remarkable drive was inaugurated in Honan province in April 1958. In August the Communist Party's Central Committee issued a resolution directing that communes be established all over China.

As the mention of "labor armies" implies, the principal function of the communes is to provide China's economic planners with a closely supervised, politically reliable, flexible and docile labor force. Equally important, the commune system is also supposed to ensure that commune members eat only as much as the state decides they shall eat, and no more.

The official Peiping theoretical magazine Red Flag said in its September 1, 1958 issue that "To make full use of labor power, to enable women to play their full part in field work, and to ensure that there is no waste of the labor time of men and women, the farm cooperatives (collectives) must not only be organizers of production but also organizers of the way of life; not only do they have to collectivize labor further, but also to organize the collective way of life."

Red Flag went on to say that "On the basis of this urgent need, public messhalls, nurseries, kindergartens, tailoring teams, etc., are being formed in large numbers. All this demands that the agricultural producers' cooperatives take an additional step forward -- to transform themselves into people's communes."

The men and women "freed for production" in this way are sent to work in industry as well as in the fields. Some work in backyard factories being set up by the communes themselves.

Many, however, will be assigned to work away from home. An NCNA despatch of September 1, 1958, praised the "East Wind" commune in

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Tsinghai province, which "was able to allocate 800 people to help with iron and steel smelting in nearby countries on the very next day after it was founded."

The People's Daily reported on August 15 that in the Yutzu administrative district of Honan province, "more than 1,700 'reserve workers' have been drafted to help in the construction of factories, mines, and railways."

A June 7, 1958 article in the same newspaper stated that factories in the city of Chungking made labor contracts directly with communes.

"On the expiry of a contract," the People's Daily explained, "whether the workers will be retained by the factories or released for participation in agricultural production in the countryside will be decided in accordance with the production needs of the factories, so that rational use can be made of labor and so that relations between industry and agriculture can be tightened further."

The People's Daily also said that peasant-workers provided by the communes are paid less than prevailing wages and receive fewer welfare benefits. In other words, the communes involve a form of indentured service operated by the state for its own benefit.

In its September 1, 1958 report the NCNA stated that in seven administrative districts of Honan province preliminary statistics show that "the opening up of mess halls there has enabled 6.9 million women to take part in production."

The August 29 directive of the Central Committee urged the communes to adopt a system of payment which serves two ends: it advances

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the "proletarianization" of the peasantry and facilitates control of food grains.

Wages are to be fixed by the communal managers. About 25 percent of the wage fund will be reserved for bonuses.

The People's Daily declared on August 21, 1958 that "collective members receiving bonuses should possess the following qualifications:

(1) being obedient to leadership and positive in work; (2) actively participating in production and fulfilling or over-fulfilling production assignments; (3) protecting public property and constantly struggling against wicked persons and evil things; (4) being advanced in thinking...and (5) working at least 28 days a month."

Communal managers will also determine each family's requirements of grain for food. Grain tickets will be issued in place of all or part of money wages earned. Tickets can be redeemed only at the communal mess halls. Peasants with any surplus money wages cannot use them to buy food grain, and most other foods are also rationed.

Grain supply has always been a serious problem for the Communist regime. When the peasants farmed as individuals they usually ate better if they had a good crop. Forty percent of China's exports to the Soviet Union consist of food grains, and Peiping has sought ways to increase grain collection.

The ordinary collective farms, set up in 1955-56, were intended to enforce a tighter control on peasant food consumption. But they had only a few hundred member-households. Small work-teams composed mostly of

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neighbors and acquaintances could cheat the collective and put some produce aside for their own use.

Furthermore, peasant families cooking in their own homes could also save grain. The farmers disliked seeing their produce taken away from them; hoarding and black-marketing were common, even after the collectives were set up.

The September 1957 issue of the Peiping magazine Political Study admitted that hoarding "has even become a common practice; people ridicule those who positively fulfill the state's grain purchase quota."

Under the commune system, however, all grain will be tallied in and out by the commune staff, which will literally keep track of every bowl of rice. The state will decide whether the bowl will be full or empty.

On August 18, 1957 the People's Daily pointed with satisfaction to a typical effect of the commune system: "Yin Fu-yuan, a member of the No. 2 cooperative, and his family formerly consumed eight catties and two taels of grain per day; now in the mess hall they consume only seven catties."

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