

Trade Unions And Human Rights In The USSR

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April 5 — The 16th Congress of the Soviet Trade Unions, which has just ended in Moscow, provided another chance to look at the human rights issue from the Soviet point of view, despite the West's claims that it has a monopoly on this perspective.

Ironically, the Moscow Congress was dominated by the question of what are the best ways to enlarge the role of the Soviet trade unions in social progress and human rights. On one hand, this is an organization which represents those who work, and on the other, it is a school of production management belonging to all the Soviet people collectively.

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Do an individual's rights stand before society's or does society stand before an individual? Many Congress delegates agreed that the answers to these questions are not necessarily opposite. "The more you do for society, the more society returns to you" was one of the keynotes of their speeches. If a social system proves it can ensure essential human rights, realizing them in keeping with the Constitution and the laws of the country, no better way can be expected. Conversely, any human rights which do not rest on a constitutional foundation guaranteed by society and are not reinforced with the advancement of the material and social base make no sense.

Hence the different approach to the two international covenants on human rights — the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, both drafted in 1966 — becomes more clearly defined. For the Soviet Union and many other socialist countries of Europe, the signing and ratification of these covenants was only natural, since everything contained in them was already guaranteed by the development of socialist society. However, the USA delayed their signing and ratification, and when President Carter stated his intention to begin ratifying these covenants, he did not conceal the difficulty of his decision.

The difficulty is that these additions to the Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 not only proclaim ideals, but also demand guarantees of their realization, especially

regarding the essential rights to work, to free education and to social maintenance in old age and in case of disability. But the level of ensuring these rights does not only mean what actually exists at the moment. One of the aspects of Soviet reality is that the dynamics of its development inspires confidence in the future.

All of this was discussed at the Trade Union Congress. The guaranteed right to work is backed up by the growing scope of the short and long-term economic development plans. In fact, the planned and steady growth of production is the best guarantee of employment but it also brings about a difficulty for society, because the society can't always keep pace with these plans due to the demographic situation and because the shortage of labor is growing. Dismissing a worker is one of the most difficult problems for a manager because the dismissal can be effected only with the consent of the trade union. The right to a guaranteed wage or salary, equal for both men and women, is ensured both by legislation and the growth of the gross national product. It was said at the Congress that 31 million workers will have their pay increased by an average of 18 percent in the next few years.

The right to education concerns not only the free 10-year program for children but also includes the right of adults to improve their professional skills. As a result, one-third of the Soviet population is studying.

The right to social maintenance? Social insurance does not require any payments from the working people, while it provides sick benefits (up to 100 percent for workers with a long record of work) and old-age pensions as well. The minimum pensions are regularly increased and the total social insurance fund, which is at the disposal of the trade unions, now amounts to 28 billion rubles.

Leonid Brezhnev stressed at the Congress that what is being done by the trade unions in the sphere of production, in involving more and more working people in management through workers' meetings, production conferences, collective agreements and so on is only one manifestation of socialist democracy. "Being an influential social force, the trade unions play an important role in our entire political system and in promoting socialist democracy. The pivotal thing for us is that there has been and will always be what is literally expressed in the word democracy," the General Secretary of the CPSU Central Committee explained, citing what Vladimir Lenin said about genuine self-government by the people, which lies in the working people's participation in running state and social affairs.