

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

ADB - 1952 - 10
Conscript Labor and Public Works

15 Peak Road (Small House)
Hong Kong

October 15, 1952

Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, N. Y.

Dear Mr. Rogers:

The dynamics of Communist revolution in China are both destructive and constructive. On the one hand the Chinese Communists are attempting to destroy the old pattern of society. At the same time, however, the energies released by the revolution are also being directed into some constructive channels.

Under Communist rule, for example, China has undertaken the development of many public works projects involving the mobilization organization, and regimentation of literally millions of workers. These projects, the largest of which are in the fields of water conservancy and transportation, have been dramatically publicized by the Chinese Communist regime. They have made a deeper impression on some people, including non-Communist visitors from other parts of Asia, than the police-state, totalitarian aspects of the regime.

Recently I had a long talk with a man who worked on one of these projects, the Chungking-Chengtou railway in the Southwest China province of Szechwan. Mr. Wu, who arrived in Hong Kong less than two months ago, was in charge of a construction group on one section of the Chungking-Chengtou line.

Mr. Wu is a quiet, soft-spoken man who, like a great many Chinese, appears to be basically non-political in his outlook, despite the fact that he has been caught in the whirlpool of politics in China throughout his whole life. Under the Nationalist regime he worked as an officer in a railway-engineering unit of the Nationalist army, but, he was never involved, he says, in Kuomintang politics. Although he is a northerner, from Manchuria, the revolutionary sweep of the Chinese Communist armies overtook him in Southwest China in 1949. For a short while after the Communist takeover he was unemployed. Eventually, however, the authorities got around to registering him and suggested that he go to Szechwan to work on the Chungking-Chengtou line. He was not actually forced to go, he says, but he had no alternative and accepted without any particular objections to, or enthusiasm about, the job. At the same time, in various other parts of the country, hundreds of men with technical qualifications of various sorts

were similarly recruited and sent to Szechwan to take part in railway construction.

Work on the Chungking-Chengtu line had been started many years earlier, and some progress was made by the Chinese Nationalists. When I visited Szechwan in 1948, and travelled by road along a route paralleling the projected railway, part of the roadbed had been laid, and a few bridges were standing, but no work was currently going on. Construction was in a state of suspension due to a shortage of rails, lack of adequate finance, poor organization, and the general apathy and inertia which characterized the last days of Kuomintang rule on the mainland.

Soon after the Communists took Szechwan, however, work on the railway was quickly started again. Thousands of workers were organized. Technicians were collected from all over the country. And needed equipment and supplies were rushed into the province.

Between June 15, 1950, and the summer of this year, work was pushed at a rapid pace, and on July 1st service on the line was officially inaugurated with great fanfare. The Communists hailed this event as an important symbol of their drive toward national construction, stating that "in a little over two and a half years after the liberation of all Szechwan Province, the People's Government has completed a task which past regimes failed to accomplish in decades".

Over 100,000 civilian laborers eventually took part in the work on the Chungking-Chengtu railway, but construction was first started in June, 1950, with a nucleus group of 25,000 soldiers from the Chinese Communist army. This has often been the case in large-scale public works initiated in China during the past three years. Non-combat troops provide a large reservoir of organized labor available for work on state projects. As a matter of fact, Government plans in 1950, before the Korean War, called for diversion of a significant portion of inactive military personnel into productive activity, including agriculture as well as public works. The Korean War, with its heavy drain upon Chinese military manpower, has changed the situation, but army personnel is still used on many projects, particularly during the first stages when a civilian labor force is being locally conscripted and organized.

In time, the soldiers who started the work on the Chungking-Chengtu railway were replaced by civilian laborers requisitioned from the countryside through which the line passes. According to Chinese Communist propagandists, "100,000 emancipated peasants answered the government's call to work on the construction of their own railway". In actual fact, these peasants were drafted from the villages of Szechwan and organized into semi-military work groups.

Mr. Wu describes the overall organization of the main civilian labor force on the railway as follows. Apart from the regular Railway Bureau, responsible for general administration of railway affairs, a special Railway Construction Commission was established in Chungking, directly under the Southwest Mili-

tary and Administrative Committee, supreme local government body ruling Southwest China. Subordinate to this commission, a People's Labor Supervisory Department, responsible for organizing the railway construction force, was set up.

Under the People's Labor Supervisory Department, four Subsidiary Supervisory Departments were organized, each with jurisdiction over one of the four Administrative Districts into which the Chinese Communists divided the large province of Szechwan. In North Szechwan, to which Mr. Wu was assigned, there were five large working groups under the local Supervisory Department. Sub-divisions of these groups corresponded roughly to military units, from regimental to platoon levels. These units comprised the general labor force. Technical personnel were organized separately and were assigned to certain segments of roadbed. The entire 530-kilometer length of the Chungking-Chengtu line was divided into several general sections, and each of these was subdivided into three sections, which were in turn split up into three or four branch sections.

The usual method of distributing the labor force along the line was to assign a work unit equivalent to a regiment to a branch section for a certain period of time, and then to move it on elsewhere.

Mr. Wu was in charge of one of the branch sections of the Chungking-Chengtu railway—a two-kilometer stretch near the western end of the line. Theoretically, his branch section should have had three engineers and three surveyors, but when Mr. Wu took over one of the engineers had just been sent to a penal Labor Reform Group and the other fell sick; due to the shortage of technical personnel, Mr. Wu then assumed full responsibility, despite his lack of university training in engineering. The work unit assigned to his section consisted of about 1,000 men, divided into various sub-units along military lines. Overall leadership was exercised by a commander, vice-commander, and political officer, and the headquarters included an educational-cultural officer who was a woman. Some of the group leaders at various levels, according to Mr. Wu, were military personnel, while others were hand-picked local civilians, who accompanied the workers from their home districts. The commander was a member of the hsien government in a nearby district, while the vice-commander and political officer were professional military men.

Recruitment of the 1,000 men in this unit, according to Mr. Wu, was accomplished as follows. Orders, sent under the authority of the Southwest Military and Administrative Committee, went out to all the hsien governments in the region assigning quotas of workers which they were required to produce. The hsien government then set about the job of obtaining the specified number of "volunteers". This was not too difficult. The Chinese Communists are skillful at manipulating public meetings in which men are indirectly forced to "volunteer" for all sorts of activities and duties. The process is really one of disguised conscription. In this case, furthermore, the drafting of workers was facilitated by the fact that economic conditions in many villages

in the region were poor, and the prospect of work and food was enough to attract some men without a great deal of government pressure.

After selection, the men were put into small groups in their home districts, and they then walked, some of them from 25 to 35 miles, to an organization point along the rail line, where they were grouped into regular units. The workers brought with them their own personal effects and simple tools, including bamboo carrying poles and small pick-axes. Larger tools, such as hammers to break stones, were provided by the authorities, although the workers were responsible for any damage or deterioration.

Most of the work on this section of the railway consisted of pure manual labor, namely excavating earth and depositing it on the roadbed. The workers were paid according to the amount of work done, and the pay per-day was usually just sufficient to maintain a single person. Payments were made periodically, by groups. For example, earth-moving was paid for according to a standard of so-much per two and half cubic meters of earth; this was estimated to be what an average worker could move in a day, and compensation was set on the basis of what the authorities calculated was required for one man to support himself for a day. Once a month the engineer estimated the amount of earth moved by a particular group, by measuring the size of the pit from which the earth had been taken, and a lump sum payment was made to the group. At first the workers received seven and a half cattles of rice per work-day unit (worth about \$9,000 in Chinese Communist currency), but later this was changed to \$7,000 per unit, paid in paper currency (this is equivalent to roughly US\$0.25 a day).

From their pay, the workers had to purchase their own food and clothing, both of which they obtained from government sources. At first they were quartered in local houses, but later mat-shed barracks were built by the workers themselves, and they had to pay for the materials required for these sheds.

Despite the low pay, Mr. Wu says that some of the workers felt that they were not too badly off; they ate rice regularly, which many would not have been able to do in their home villages. But two factors created a good deal of psychological dissatisfaction. In the first place, the pay did not provide any surplus to send home to their families. And secondly, the pace of work was considered unreasonable. The authorities were eager to rush the railway through to completion, and labor competitions were constantly fostered to increase the volume of work accomplished. As a consequence, the red flowers given to model workers and the red flags presented to model units became symbols of physical exhaustion rather than badges of merit.

As construction work on the railway progressed, the authorities picked out the healthiest and best workers and organized them into a permanent Railway Engineering Corps under the Railway Bureau. This group did much of the later work involving some technical skill, such as rail-laying and bridge construction. Mr. Wu believes they will also be used on future railway construction in Szechwan and probably elsewhere. Most of the other

workers were sent back to their home villages when the job approached completion; many of them had been away from their families for over a year, however, by the time they returned home.

In addition to this primary labor force of conscripted local peasants, two other supplementary sources of organized labor were tapped by the authorities for work on the Chungking-Chengtou railway. One consisted of the forced laborers in local Labor Reform Groups.

Every hsien in Szechwan, according to Mr. Wu, has a Labor Reform Group, consisting of from 200 to 600 men sentenced to varying periods of penal labor, under the control of the local hsien Public Security Bureau. Most of these men are former landlords or military and political officials of the old regime, and they work on many sorts of state projects. When there was a manpower shortage at a certain point in the Chungking-Chengtou line, nearby hsien governments were requested to provide groups of laborers for temporary duty. Mr. Wu says that although these men were generally given the same sort of treatment as workers in units under the People's Labor Supervisory Department, the work was much harder on them, since the majority were men who had not been accustomed to manual labor before the Communist takeover.

One additional source of labor was provided by an organization called the Unemployed Workers Group, consisting largely of former members of the Nationalist military forces. Mr. Wu knows little about this organization, since he did not have any personal contact with it, but he says men from it were used principally during the early stages of work, along with Communist soldiers, and were later replaced by civilian groups.

The various types of conscript labor organized to work on the Chungking-Chengtou railway may not be the same as those used on many public works projects elsewhere in China, and treatment of the workers in other places may be either better or worse; it is difficult to generalize the particular in China today. But it is clear that the Chinese Communists are mobilizing conscript labor of many sorts on a scale which may be larger than anything seen in China since the imperial dynasties which constructed huge public works such as the Great Wall and Grand Canal. The Chinese lack equipment and supplies, but the Communists are maximizing use of their primary resource - manpower.

In one sense, almost all of this labor is "forced labor" but it would be a mistake to assume that all people in China have the same reaction to this term that people in a contemporary Western country would have. It is true that the widespread organization of political opponents of the regime into penal work units such as the Labor Reform Groups is something new even in China, but there are numerous traditions for corvee labor of a less drastic or punitive sort in Chinese history. Drafting of workers has, in fact, been a standard method for obtaining labor for the construction and maintenance of public works, and even under the Nationalist regime a system of labor obligation to the state was in effect. (See my Institute newsletter on

local government in Szechwan, June, 1948.) The reaction of most Chinese, therefore, to the Communists' conscription of large labor groups can be expected to be based less on the principle of conscription itself than on the question of how the laborers are actually treated and how great a burden the system places upon the people (principally the peasantry) in practice.

Mr. Wu had some significant remarks to make about the quality of work on the Chungking-Chengtou railway, as well as about the labor force, and to the extent that the facts he describes are typical of public works elsewhere in China, they indicate that the speed of Chinese Communist accomplishments in the field of public works may be more impressive than the quality and durability of their accomplishments.

"In five or six years", Mr. Wu estimates, "there will be a need for many major repairs on the Chungking-Chengtou line". In his opinion: "The quality of the work was very poor. Rigid time limits, and a system of holding all personnel responsible for arbitrary plans, forced everything to be sloppy. Speed of construction was the most important thing in the eyes of the authorities. Repair work", he reiterates, "will be tremendous in the future".

In Mr. Wu's opinion: "The reason for the emphasis on speed is probably the fact that projects of this sort really impress many people. They are good propaganda". This is undoubtedly one explanation. It is true that huge public works, and all the propaganda fanfare accompanying them, do impress many people. It is also probably true, however, that the Communists attach considerable economic, strategic, and political importance to the Chungking-Chengtou line, and wanted to finish it rapidly for this reason. The line links the hinterland of one of China's largest and most productive provinces with cheap water transport on the Yangtze. The fact that Szechwan is a major rice surplus area, one of the few in China, is important too.

Strategically, a railway in Szechwan greatly improves the area as a possible base in the event of war. The Communists undoubtedly haven't forgotten that the Nationalist Government was able to hold out in Szechwan against the Japanese for seven long years; any Chinese government planning for the contingency of war and foreign invasion would regard Szechwan as an important potential rear base. Furthermore, Szechwan has long been an area with strong local feelings of regionalism, and often it has exercised considerable de facto autonomy. Improved transportation makes it easier for the central authorities to impose controls over this rich and remote province and to keep it under their unified administration.

Despite all possible explanations for the premium placed on speed in the construction of the railway, however, the poor quality of work may mean that the Chinese Communists will be plagued by rapid deterioration, and will face the necessity for constant repairs, in the not too distant future.

During the construction of the railway, the Chinese Commu-

nists gave their usual tributes to Soviet assistance, advice, and "advanced techniques". Soviet help on this project was negligible, however, in Mr. Wu's opinion. Although he heard that there were Soviet advisors attached to the Railway Bureau, he himself never saw one of them. Two construction techniques of reputed Soviet origin were used, but Mr. Wu does not feel that they made any spectacular contribution to the building of the railway. The simplicity of these two "advanced Soviet techniques" is interesting, however. The Soviet advisors are said to have made a study of Chinese stone bridges and then to have advised that, due to the shortage of steel, all small bridges on the line should be built of stone. The Soviets also taught the Chinese a new technique of earth filling and beating. This method involves building up the roadbed in layers of three centimeters, which are then beaten down to two centimeters, by workers using simple stone pounding blocks, before the next layer is added. This technique, it is alleged, results in a stronger roadbed and saves time in comparison to the old method of building the roadbed in its entirety and then letting it settle over a longer period of time. These new methods, like most of the reported Soviet technical advice to the Chinese, are concerned primarily with means for saving materials and time. No equipment was received from the Soviet Union; at least Mr. Wu did not see any, and no claims were made to this effect even in the Chinese Communist press. The locomotives and rolling stock on the Chungking-Chengtou line were old ones collected from other parts of the country, and steel rails came from expanded production in Chungking itself as well as from other industrial centers in China. The Soviet advisors, in short, merely passed on to the Chinese their own experiences in coping with the problems of an economy of scarcity. (Actually, Western experts sent to Asian countries might well devote more of their attention to the technical problems of making the best of available equipment and resources; sometimes Western technicians propose methods which are not locally practicable and which require equipment or supplies not locally available.)

China's main resource for the public works completed or initiated by the Communists during the past three years has been manpower, and the primary technical skill displayed has been in the field of social organization. In China, relatively little machinery or equipment is required for conservancy works, and even on projects such as railway lines the Chinese Communists have met the requirements, in part at least, by spreading, and obtaining full use of, existing equipment. Chinese Communist success in the public works field does not necessarily imply, therefore, that the regime can achieve equal success in its plans for industrialization, because industrial development requires a certain minimum of capital equipment which may not be available. But there is no doubt that the Chinese Communists will be able to carry out significant development schemes in the public works field, with a maximum use of labor and a minimum use of equipment, and the schemes already completed or under way are fairly extensive in themselves.

In the field of railways, for example, by mid-1950 the Chinese Communists had almost completed rehabilitation of China's pre-war lines, and they then proceeded with construction on three

major new lines: the 420 kilometer Laipin-Chennankwan line to the Indo-China border and the 347 kilometer Tienshui-Lanchow line stretching into China's Northwest, in addition to the Chungking-Chengtou link. The rate of progress on each of these lines averaged about one kilometer per day, and during 1951, 771 kilometers of new line were laid in China. By the end of 1951, the Laipin-Chennankwan line, which was of urgent strategic importance to the Chinese, was completed, and work on the other two lines, both of which have considerable economic and political as well as strategic importance, was finished this past summer. Altogether, a total of 1,255 kilometers of new rail lines had been completed by August of this year. According to all reports, from objective observers as well as from Communist propagandists, efficient management of the railway system as a whole is one of the most impressive things in Communist China today. Construction of new lines, furthermore, has not slowed down with the completion of the above-mentioned lines. Work on the Lanchow-Tihwa railway, which will link the capital of Chinese Turkestan with the rest of China (and ultimately will undoubtedly connect with the Turk-Sib line in Soviet Asia), and the Chengtu-Tienshui line, which will reach between Southwest and Northwest China, is already underway. Surveying is known to be in process along the Lanchow-Paotow route, and there are scattered reports, of uncertain reliability, about preliminary work on various other lines, mainly in the remote interior provinces. Most of these railways have been included in Chinese development plans ever since Sun Yat-sen wrote his visionary book on railway construction, but during the years of war and civil strife in China actual building came to almost a complete halt, and many existing lines were destroyed or deteriorated. But the Chinese Communists are now pushing ahead on construction with full steam.

In terms of what can be accomplished with manpower alone, the Chinese Communists' conservancy schemes are perhaps even more impressive than the railways. For example, a nationwide plan of river control was drawn up in late 1949, and in the ensuing three years, according to Chinese Communist claims, "the total volume of earthwork alone has reached 1,700 million cubic meters, ten times as much as was involved in building the Panama Canal or 23 times the Suez Canal". The number of peasants mobilized and organized for this work has been in the millions.

During 1950, the Communists first concentrated on restoring and strengthening about 42,000 kilometers of old river dikes ruined by the floods of 1949 and earlier years. Since then they have embarked upon a number of mammoth new schemes. The largest is the Hwai River project, scheduled to be completed by 1955, which calls for construction of 13 storage reservoirs and 17 water detention basins, irrigation of 3.3 million hectares of land, and the erection of numerous locks. The whole project affects an area which is populated by over 50 million people and is watered by one of the most complex river systems in China. Another major project is going on at the Chinkiang section of the Yangtze River, where the Yangtze has periodically burst out of its gorges to flood the Hupeh plain. Other projects have involved improvement of the banks of the Yellow River ("China's Sorrow"), irrigation schemes in Ningsia and Suiyan, and control of the Yi

and Shu Rivers in southern Shantung and northern Kiangsu, to mention just a few.

In regard to results, the Chinese Communists claim that, using 1949 (a bad flood year) as an index base of 100, the area inundated by floods in China was reduced to 60 in 1950, 21 in 1951, and 8 up to September 1952, and that during the same period 3.3 million hectares (over 8 million acres) of land have been irrigated by new channels. These claims are impossible to check, but even if the true figures are lower than the claims there is no doubt that much has been accomplished.

Examples could be cited in numerous other fields of public works also, not only large national projects but also small-scale local public works. Almost every refugee from China, for example, reports that in towns and cities all over the country many projects of road building, construction of public buildings and housing, development of waterworks, and similar activities are going on.

As stated earlier, these accomplishments, and the revolutionary energy behind them, have made a deep impression on a considerable number of people. To the extent that one can judge Chinese "public opinion" from Hong Kong (which is very difficult), however, the majority of Chinese feel that the price paid for such accomplishments - ruthless disregard of the individual, thought control, regimentation of society, etc. - is too high. Mr. Wu, for example, believes that most people in Szechwan are bitterly dissatisfied with the Communists, despite the Chungking-Chengtou railway and other development projects now being carried out. He himself decided over two months ago that, although he occupied a fairly advantageous position as a technician under a regime which glorifies technicians, he did not want to continue living in the oppressive atmosphere which the Chinese Communists have created. He decided to leave his country for the first - and conceivably the last - time, and he is now a "White Chinese" refugee in Hong Kong.

Sincerely yours,



A. Doak Barnett.