

LIFE IN CHINA ...



ON THE LINE recently interviewed Steve Graham about his trip to China last March. For a long time Steve has been a student of China and the development of socialism there. He lives and works in St. Louis and has been active in many groups trying to build more power for working people.

I am a member of the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars (CCAS), which as a group has contact with the People's Republic of China. Through these contacts a group of fifteen CCAS were allowed to travel in China a year ago.

When they returned, they wrote a book, made nationwide tours and reached a lot of people. The Chinese appreciated the value of their spreading person to person information about China to the American people, so they wanted to have more of us come. National CCAS chose thirty of us to go to China last March.

First we met in Hong Kong in February to discuss the trip, the political emphasis and to decide on where we wanted to go. Mainly we wanted long stays in a few places--a week in a city, a week in a peasant home and a week in the home of either a worker or a student.

We wanted this kind of experience so we could be close to the lives of people in everyday ways, and so we could see what life was like for working people in a socialist country.

For the first two weeks we travelled through the larger cities, touring and seeing historical sites, but we felt that we wanted to spend more time in one place. It was arranged for us to stay for a few days in a rural commune and then a few days in Shenyang, an industrial city of four million in the Northeast.

In Shenyang, after a short stay in an old Japanese hotel and a round of sightseeing, we stayed in workers' dormitories and spent most of our time in the transformer factory where they worked.

WORKERS' POWER

It was there that I began to understand workers' power. I was impressed with the amount of control on the job workers had. The group I was with worked on the shop floor, talking to workers and trying to determine how the shop was run. It was an important plant, one of two or three of its kind in China, so it was responsible directly to the Ministry of Heavy Industry in Peking. It had to fit into the overall State Plan.

The State Plan is the general plan for the amount and kind of goods to be produced that year by the country. It

is based on what the people need rather than on the profitability of making certain goods. In a capitalist society like the U.S., if a factory owner can make more profit producing autos than by producing prefabricated housing, he makes autos even if housing is needed more.

He then would advertise his product trying to convince people that they need automobiles more than houses. This kind of waste occurs a lot in a capitalist society.

In China, the decision is made based on what people really need. In general, the State Plan is designed to put the needs of the society first so that people are working to develop a society that benefits *them* rather than a profit-maker.

This is how shop workers fit into the Plan. The State proposes a plan about the amount of production to come out of that plant. Work teams in each shop then put together their own plans of production capability. It is some measure of the vigor of the society that the work team plan often exceeds the proposed State Plan.

Negotiations then take place between the Ministry and the factory over problems or differences in the plans. The plans eventually reflect the capability of the shop--there are no real imposed quotas because each shop works according to its own knowledge of its own best speed.

For example, we saw no assembly lines in the shops we visited. Instead we saw plants where people picked items off the conveyor belts and worked on them at their own speed, not at the speed set by the line. In this plant, conveyor speed had been worked out by the workers there, who thought it efficient but not too pressured or fast.



a st louisian's impressions



Every worker in the plant is on a work team, which is also a study team. Each day there are hour long team meetings. One day they will be about health and safety, the next may be about political education, the next on culture when they may practice songs to perform at the Cultural Palace.

INNOVATION

You've got to remember that China is less developed technologically than the U.S. because of former exploitation by foreign countries and Chinese ruling classes. One solution to this is the reliance on the creativity of workers to make up for the lack of technical equipment.

In each shop there is what is called a "Three in One" Committee. It is made up of technicians, workers, and politically advanced workers who make all innovations. The Committee takes on ideas that are suggested to make work more efficient or safe, and it tries to solve technical problems as they arise.

Any innovation they work out is made totally in the factory--new machines are made there out of the knowledge they have gained in their work experiences and the experiences of others in the plant.

DIRECTION

In each shop there is a director and staff. All the directors are chosen by the workers in the shop, from discussing and deciding which workers they think are most capable.

The directors coordinate production, safety in the shop, ordering of supplies, etc. The directors are also full-time plant workers, so the decisions that come out of the office really come out of the work teams.

At every level up from the work group, decisions seem to be popularly determined, except that the plant must produce the goods that are required by

the State Plan; that is, the factory must produce transformers, but everything else is up to the workers.

WORKERS' LIVES

The work day is eight hours, in three overlapping shifts which are rotated. The unmarried workers' dorms, where we stayed, have TV, games, music, cards, and crafts for the men and women who live there. Nearby there was also housing for families.

In fact, the whole area was like a city within a city--with its own schools, markets, parks and housing.

The workers in the factory have a lot to say about the way their communities function--for instance they have housing committees made up of workers and clinic committees of workers meeting with doctors.

Contrary to reports brought back by some journalists, China is not boring and drab. We went to the workers' Cultural Palace in town where there were

stage shows, rifle ranges, music lessons, Korean and other minority cultural classes, courses, and athletics. The cost is only a couple of pennies and it's a fun place to be. There are also many bars and movies.

The average worker's salary is about \$65 a month. About \$11 is used for good food. 90¢ is for rent. Clothing costs are negligible since work clothes are provided. So people have 80% of their salaries to consume or save.

And there was a lot to buy--in each town we saw a large department store where all sorts of things were available. Items that were considered necessities were priced lower than luxury items even though they may have cost more to produce.

People saved to buy bikes and sewing machines, and everyone had watches and radios. Everyone agreed that life in China is an awful lot better than it was 25 years ago before the revolution.

A lot of Americans ask me about personal freedom in China, with the idea that there isn't much there. But I always ask them what they think personal freedom is. For some people it is their privilege at the expense of other people. For some it is survival or knowing you don't have to worry about surviving.

For people in China, as for working people here, the important kind of personal freedom has to do with the latter and with having control in a society that is run according to the needs of working people.

For instance, China has decided that it needs more doctors of medicine and not so many doctors of philosophy. So there isn't complete personal freedom about deciding to become a Ph.D. because that's not as clearly to the benefit of all the people at this time in China's history.

And if someone wants to be a doctor of medicine that's not just his decision alone. He can raise the idea, but it's all the people in the community who will decide by discussing his qualifications--his skills but more importantly his attitudes towards service.

The idea that individual benefit has meaning only within the context of the needs of everyone is basic to socialism.

