

The Autonomous Industrial Colony “Kuzbass”

An experiment in industrial autonomy and international solidarity of the
workers (1922–1926)

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In the 1920s in the USSR, an intensive formation of an administrative command system took place — the real embodiment of state socialism under conditions of hostile encirclement. Yet under these conditions other variants of socialist development continued to exist.” Among these were the ideas and centers of nongovernmental self-organization and industrial self-management, such as the so-called anarcho-syndicalist deviation in the Bolshevik party, voluntary labor cooperatives, and Tolstoyan communes. One of the sharpest expressions of non-governmental self-organization of workers industrial self-management and international proletarian solidarity was found in the Siberian Autonomous Industrial Colony (AIC) “Kuzbass”, which had national significance and international resonance.

The initiator of the creation of an Autonomous Colony was the prominent activist of the international labor movement, the Dutch engineer C. J. Rutgers.

Sebald Justus Rutgers (1879 — 1961) a Dutch internationalist, was a member of the Left Social Democratic Party Of Holland from 1909. He was a hydro-technical engineer. He lived from 1915 — 1918 in the USA, where he became close with immigrant Bolsheviks, and took part in the activity of the international “League of Socialist Propaganda” With the mandate of the League, he went through Japan to Vladivostok. He met with V.I. Lenin and was named the general inspector of waterways. He took part in the work of the first congress of the Comintern, was the secretary of the Anglo-American group of the Bolshevik party, and a member of the Communist Party from 1919 (His party term of service was set from 1899.)¹

Rutgers drew up a project for the organization of a major industrial association comprising the Kuzbass and Nadezhdinski factories in the Urals. The skeleton of the cadre for the project was to be the American Union “Industrial Workers of the World” (IWW), which was built on anarcho-syndicalist principles.

¹ The Civil War and Military intervention in the USSR — Encyclopedia, Moscow, 1987. Page 526

The “Industrial Workers of the World” (IWW) arose in the USA in 1905 as a counter-balance to the American Federation of Labor (AFL), which was conducting a policy of class collaboration. Traditional socialists as well as anarcho-syndicalist elements joined the IWW, but the latter soon came to predominate. The IWW considered moderate (_____) “direct action” the basic method of struggle — sabotage, strikes, and the general strike. The last was a particular article of faith for the union. The IWW considered that after the victory (with the help of the general strike) the working class would immediately move to the organization of a new free industrial society, in which the management of all economic life would take place in industrial unions. The union refused traditional political struggle, including electoral politics.²

Lenin took part in the decision to create the Autonomous colony. After meeting with the initiator, Rutgers, and with Bill Haywood and G. Calvert, he wrote a letter on 19 September 1921 to V. Kuibyshev in which he spoke about their intentions and plans, and turned his attention to the fact that “something on the order of an autonomous state trust of workers associations” was planned.³

In a 12 October memo to V. Molotov, accompanied by a draft decree of the Politburo on the question, Lenin expressed some doubts:

“The question is difficult:

Pro: if the Americans fulfill what they have promised, the value will be gigantic. Then we will not regret the 600,000 silver rubles.

Contra: Will they complete it? Heywood is a semi-anarchist. He’s more sentimental than businesslike. Rutgers has fallen into leftism.

Calvert is the arch talker. We have no business guarantees. These are entertaining people. In an atmosphere of joblessness, they form a group of “prospectors of adventure” which ends in a squabble. But then we lose part of the 600,000 silver rubles that we have provided them.”⁴

On 22 June 1921, the Council of Labor and Defense (STO) published a decree about the American industrial emigration, point 1 of which stated:

“The development of individual industrial enterprises or groups of enterprises by means of turning them over to groups of American workers and to industrially developed peasants on a contractual basis, which guarantees them a certain degree of autonomy, is recognized as desirable.”⁵

On November 1921, a contract was concluded between the STO and the American workers organized by the group (Heywood, Rutgers, Bayer, Barker), concerning the utilization of a series of enterprises in Siberia (in the Kuzbass and Tomsk) and in the Urals (Nedezhdenski Factory)⁶

² History of the Second International. — Moscow, 1966. — v.2.- pp.160–162; 299–300

³ Lenin, Works (5th Russian Edition), v. 53, p. 203–204.

⁴ Lenin, *ibid*, v. 44. pp. 141–142

⁵ — : . (With Lenin in our heart: Collection of Documents and Materials) rovo, 1976. — p.40

⁶ *Ibid*, p.57

Bill Heywood, “Big Bill”, (1869 – 1928), a miner, was active in the workers’ movement in the USA and in the international workers’ movement. From 1901, he was a member of the Socialist Party, and later one of the leaders of its left wing. He was one of the founders and leaders of the IWW. He spoke out against militarism and war, and welcomed the October revolution. In order to escape political persecution, he left the USA. From 1921 he lived in Russia, actively participated in the creation of the Autonomous Industrial Colony (AIC) “Kuzbass”. He worked in MOPR (_____ – International Organization to Help the Revolutionary Fighters), and was active as a journalist.⁷

In the course of establishing AIC Kuzbass from January 1922 to December 1923, 566 foreign citizens were brought into the workforce. The American cell of the Bolshevik party had 73 members. About 250 of the colonists who came to Kuzbass were members of the IWW, or were non-party.⁸ Thus quite a few non-party persons found themselves under the influence of anarcho-syndicalism. Even among those colonists who were party members, many fell under the influence of anarcho-syndicalist principles. The communist leadership of Kuzbass recognized that the anarcho-syndicalist ideology of the IWW even more strongly influenced many who were declared Bolsheviks.⁹

The noted anarcho-syndicalist Vladimir Shatov was authorized by the STO to direct AIC “Kuzbass” in 1921–1922.

Vladimir Sergeivich Shatov (1887, Kiev – 1943) was active in the revolutionary movement from 1903. In 1907 he immigrated to the USA, where he was a member of the IWW in charge of the Russian section.

In 1917 he returned to Russia, and took active part in the revolutionary movement and in the civil war. He remained an anarcho-syndicalist, and assumed responsible posts in the Red Army, in industry and in transport. He was repressed in 1937.

At the same time in New York a special committee was formed for the transport of workers to Soviet Russia. Representatives of the Communist Party (Raize) and of the IWW (Cullen and Calvert)¹⁰ were members of the committee. The Americans who arrived in Russia met a warm reception from social organizations and the soviet people following on all the roads from Petrograd to Kemerovo. The colony received a great deal of local help from the very beginning of the organizational work. In Rutgers’ words, they were able to make progress in the work “thanks to the sympathy of the local workers, but mainly, of the party and soviet organizations.”¹¹

The majority of the colonist members of the IWW came to the USSR with a sincere yearning to realize their ideas and lives there. Anarcho-syndicalist principles were introduced into the Autonomous colony as well. For the first time, the anarcho-syndicalists established an egalitarian system of wages in the enterprises, “speaking out against motives of material interest.” Some of them spoke constantly for equalization of wages not in money, but in kind. When, according to a decree of the STO and the Siberian Workers and Peasants Inspection (rabkrin), piece-work was gradually introduced, it was strongly opposed by the members of the IWW. They saw in the action

⁷ History of the Kuzbass Part 1–2, ____rov_, 1967. – p.348; Lenin, Works, 5 ed. – v.44. – pp. 655–656

⁸ Center for documentation of recent history of Tomski Oblast(CDRHTO); History of the Kuzbass. – Part 1–2. – p. 347; Outline of the history of the party organization of the Kuzbass. – ____rov_, 1973. – p.186.

⁹ CDRHTO. The complicated process of eliminating anarcho-syndicalist ideas from part of the colonists and the transition to communist positions is sketched in T. Dreiser’s story “Ernita”.

¹⁰ History of the Kuzbass, p.347

¹¹ Ibid., p.350

the repudiation of the principles of social justice. Another cause of dissatisfaction among the anarcho-syndicalists was the approach to “workers’ democracy” in the colony. In the beginning the colonists tried to institute it. The advocates of “Industrial Democracy” in particular demanded that decision making on all questions be turned over to the workers’ assembly, and repudiated the principle of one-man-management.¹² In such ways the anarcho-syndicalists attempted to change the Autonomous colony into a self-managed anarcho-syndicalist association. Member of the management of the AIC, head of the émigrés of Kemerovo Bauer said:

Thus we will demonstrate to your communists how it is possible to avoid “dictatorship”, since in our relations in the future colony we assume the principle of “industrialism”, subjecting ourselves, of course, to the communists and not attempting to violate the laws of your proletarian state.”¹³

In a letter to V.I. Lenin on the first results of the work of the AIC “Kuzbass” in October 1922, Rutgers turned his attention to the view that “great care is needed in the establishment of qualifying and keeping current the workers who arrived from America. In addition, it necessary to direct special attention to the struggle with the conviction that direction of work in Russia can and will be realized by groups of workers through mass assemblies and commissions.”¹⁴

As a result of the enthusiasm for work among the colonists, who were supported by the assistance of the central and local authorities, there was a notable increase in the productivity of labor. The Commission of the STO, which was monitoring the activities of the colony, confirmed that the enterprises of the AIC colony achieved a higher productive yield on labor than did the mines of the Kuzbass Trust.

In the Kemerovo mine the extent of fundamental work was expanded. Growth in coal output continued. From 9,000 tons in February, output rose to 12,000 tons in August of 1923. On 23 October Gosplan (the State Planning Agency) dedicated additional resources to the development of the Kemerovo mine and coke factory. The management of the Autonomous colony rebuilt the furnace of the factory and installed a new pump, coking equipment and reservoir for benzol. In January of 1924 new electrification was prepared for launch, a laboratory was built as well as mechanical shops. On the 2nd of March the coke factory was put into service. The collective for the factory was composed primarily of soviet workers. In November of 1924 STO approved a decision to provide the AIC “Kuzbass” with the Kolchuginski, Prokolevski, and Kiselevski mines. Towards the end of 1924 the mines of the Kuznetski basin were recognized far beyond the borders of Siberia.

Contracts were negotiated for the colony to provide the Ural factories, the Baltic Fleet and the Port of Archangel. In March of 1924 a contact was concluded with the Urals regarding the supply of the Kemerovo coke factory.¹⁵

The anarcho-syndicalist colonists reacted negatively to the measures of the Soviet government providing Russian enterprises on concession to foreign capital. Thus one of the Americans, Schwartz, declared at a meeting of a Bolshevik cell, that “to give concessions to private

¹² Yu. A. Ivanov. Questions of the history of development of black metallurgy of the Kuzbass in the memories of contemporaries. _____rov_, 1970. — p. 206; E.A. Krivosheeva From the history of the forming of the “Autonomous Industrial Colony of the Kuzbass in From the History of Western Siberia, Issue 1. _____r_v_, 1966. — p.225.

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¹⁴ With Lenin in Our hearts, p. 88.

¹⁵ History of the Kuzbass — Part 1-2. — p. 353

entrepreneurs is a harmful thing, since this means new chains of slavery for the workers, who will no longer interest themselves in the state and politics, will not support the Soviet power, but will go into the trade unions – the only place for them.”¹⁶

A part of the colonists defended the organization of their own separate unions. The Bolshevik party organization of the Kuzbass, on the other hand, took the line of bringing the American and Russian workers closer together, and for the entry of the foreigners into the Russian unions. However both the difference in nationalities and the difference in ideas impeded this approach between the communists and the anarcho-syndicalists. At that time a compromise resolution was reached, that those members of the IWW, who could not agree to join “the Russian unions, had the right over the course of some time to take part in the work of the unions without official membership in them, so that they could have some advance acquaintance with their work.”¹⁷

The application of anarcho-syndicalist principles in life, the autonomous status of the colony, the alternative character of the anarcho-syndicalist idea of socialism – all this created a certain uneasiness in the state party apparatus. Thus, one of the members of the Central Committee of the Profintern (the Trade Union International) expressed the apprehension that “the organization of the colony on a free foundation might lead a situation where those ideas of the American group, which protected and supported comrade Trotsky, compel us to send a military unit to suppress an uprising of the ‘IWW’, if Kemerovo is occupied by the Lumpenproletarian members of the ‘IWW’.”¹⁸ Similar concerns were also expressed by one of the communist leaders of the Kuzbass, who thought that Kemerovo might turn into an anarcho-syndicalist stronghold of the Kuzbass.¹⁹

The facts tell us, that between the communists and anarcho-syndicalists in the territory of the AIC “Kuzbass”, a normal struggle of ideas was conducted, during simultaneous political and economic cooperation.

The forces in this struggle, however, were unequal: behind the local communists (both Russian and American) the state and the complex administrative command structure stood ready to help.

The ideas of state socialism and its practical application eventual triumphed. Part of the colonists returned to their homeland for this reason. The practice of Stalin’s industrialization and “state of emergency” (_____) could not fail to drive them out of the USSR.

On the other hand, the principles and the special status of the AIC “Kuzbass” ended the arrangement of Party-State management. Under the new conditions of general industrialization in the country, STO of the USSR on 22 December 1926 declared the contract with the AIC “Kuzbass” nullified. Surviving successfully for more than 4 years, the Autonomous colony was liquidated from above.

Part of the colonists went to the USA, another part remained to work in the enterprises of the Kuzbass.

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¹⁶ CDRHTO

¹⁷ History of the Kuzbass – Part 1–2. – p. 353; E.A. Krivosheeva p.224–226

¹⁸ CDRHTO

¹⁹ Ibid.

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